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**Malalay's Sisters:  
Women's Public Visibility in  
'Post-war/Reconstruction' Afghanistan**

Julie Billaud



Girls doing their make-up, National Women's Dormitory, Kabul University. © Julie Billaud

**European DPhil**

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As part of the European Doctorate, this work has been simultaneously submitted to Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris (EHESS) and the University of Sussex. I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University than Sussex and EHESS for the award of any other degree.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

“Will it be we, the women living in the Muslim city, who will pay the price, we who bear the boundary against desire tattooed on our bodies?”

Fatima Mernissi –  
*Islam and Democracy*

## Abstract

This thesis investigates the modalities and conditions of Afghan women's reappearance in the public domain following the downfall of the Taliban regime. Based on a twelve-month ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2007 among different groups of women (women MPs, women's rights activists, female University Students) mostly based in Kabul, I study women's responses to various social anxieties that have emerged as a consequence of this new visibility. I argue that while the current 'reconstruction' project has opened new possibilities for women and created new imaginaries pertaining to their role in society, the ideological framework (i.e liberal notions of equality and human rights etc.) on which it is grounded together with the strong military presence of foreign troops, have fuelled tensions at different levels of the Afghan society. Pressurized by their community to remain faithful to their 'culture', 'religion' and 'tradition' on one hand, and encouraged to access the public and become 'visible' by global forces on the other hand, women have been left with little choice but to adapt and find alternative ways to preserve a sense of autonomy. I describe these tactics as 'oppositional practices of everyday life' (De Certeau 1984), i.e complex practices of dissimulation which under the necessary appearance of compliance and conformity allow women to reconfigure social norms and create new spaces for themselves. More generally, this work engages with issues such as nationalism, Islam, gender, veiling, modernity, agency, rights and the public sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> Pictures reproduced from an official publication of the Afghan Ministry of Planning. *Afghanistan, Ancient Land with Modern Ways*. Kabul: Government of Afghanistan, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Images reproduced from an official publication of the Government of Afghanistan. *The Revolution Continues*. Moscow: Planeta, 1984.

## Introduction

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A few days before the first bombs were dropped on Kabul, I was sitting in a small NGO office in Paris, watching on my computer screen news releases announcing the formation of a coalition of Western nations getting prepared to launch a war against a country that few people had heard of before. For many Westerners, Afghanistan kindled fantasies of deserted landscapes, bearded tribal warriors and *burqas*. The NGO for which I worked was born with the Afghan conflict and had remained in Afghanistan since 1979, when the first French doctors were sent to the Panjshir valley to care for war-wounded ‘freedom fighters’. It was with a mixture of anxiety and deep sadness that the NGO’s emergency unit was now organizing the repatriation of the expatriate volunteers that worked in Afghanistan. But to my astonishment, the Afghan staff would have to stay in the country and ‘endure freedom’, as the name of the US military operations ironically phrased it. A page of history was being turned before my eyes and I struggled to make sense of the flow of images and information I received. How to reconcile bombardments of already impoverished people and the war against terrorism? What was the rational in the discourses that defended the war in the name of women and human rights? How could women be liberated through bombs and massive killings<sup>3</sup>?

This research originated as a result of dissatisfaction with the way the Muslim world had been talked about following the events of 9/11. These dissatisfactions have to do with the way Muslim minorities living in Western countries have become the object of constant public scrutiny, the way the US and their allies have used women’s rights to justify their occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and finally the way Afghan women have been depicted as powerless victims in need of rescue from their controlling men in the international press.

When the US began bombing Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, the oppression of Afghan women was used as a justification for invading Afghanistan and overthrowing the Taliban regime. Five weeks after the first bombings, America’s first lady, Laura Bush,

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<sup>3</sup> According to Prof. Marc W. Herold’s (an economist at the University of New Hampshire) extensive database, Dossier on Civilian Victims of United States’ Aerial Bombing, between 3,100 and 3,600 civilians were directly killed by U.S. Operation Enduring Freedom bombing and Special Forces attacks between October 7, 2001 and June 3, 2003. This estimate counts only “impact deaths” - deaths that occurred in the immediate aftermath of an explosion or shooting - and does not count deaths that occurred later as a result of injuries sustained, or deaths that occurred as an indirect consequence of the U.S. airstrikes and invasion. Herold’s database relies upon a variety of aggregated web-based sources collected inside and outside the US. Cf. <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mwherold/dossier>

triumphantly announced: 'Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.' (Bush 2001) Laura Bush was soon followed by Cherie Blair, who launched a campaign using similar arguments to support her husband's decision to go on war, despite massive demonstrations in the streets of London. In November 2001 Colin Powell, the US secretary of state, insisted that: 'The rights of women in Afghanistan will not be negotiable' (Powell 2001).

This degree of attention to women's condition in Afghanistan was certainly welcome, given that the issue had been barely covered by the media or even publicly discussed by policy makers in the past. Yet this focus on women's liberation, when seven years later Human Rights organizations report continuing violations of women's rights including state sanctioned discrimination, women's self immolation and various forms of violence against women (UNIFEM 2008; Amnesty International 2005; UNDP 2007), appears as little more than a cynical political strategy to sell the war to the public. As the 'War on Terror' continues and the perspective of a time-honoured peace for Afghanistan has faded away, the use of women and their 'human rights' as justification for US aggression needs to be interrogated (Gul Khattak 2002, Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002).

Prior to the fieldwork on which this thesis is based, I had worked in Afghanistan for a period of twelve months between 2003 and 2004 as a humanitarian worker in a small medical NGO specialized in training of medical staff. This experience had deeply challenged some of my prior assumptions on the Afghan society as a whole and on Afghan women in particular. At that time, NGOs were still facing difficulties to recruit local female staff but the few women with whom I spent time had little in common with the ones depicted in the international press.

Women in *chadari*, what the Western press calls the *burqa*<sup>4</sup>, were slowly going back to work and lifting the veil was definitely not their priority. They were willing to participate in the reconstruction of their country and they had things to say about the ways in which such a task should be achieved. I learned more from them than they could ever learn from me as a poorly experimented humanitarian worker. While money was anarchically distributed by the donors' community for 'women's empowerment' programs, no one asked Afghan women what they really wanted for themselves and for their country. I left Afghanistan with a bitter feeling that time and money was once again wasted on humanitarian activity, serving international political agendas rather than the

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<sup>4</sup> I use here the Afghan word *chadari* in order to refer to the full covering garment commonly referred to as *burqa* in the press. The word *burqa* is an Urdu term and is rarely used in Afghanistan.

people and with this statement of one of my male colleagues stamped in my head: 'Tell your people there in Europe that Afghan men are not bad to their women'.

This research is an attempt at unveiling the complex local and international dynamics that have shaped the modalities of women's re-entry in the public domain after the downfall of the Taliban regime. While interrogating some of the analytical categories traditionally used to evaluate the state of individual freedoms and human rights in the transition of 'Third world states' towards democracy (individual/family, private/public), it looks at how new social imaginaries and social practices have emerged out of Afghanistan's encounter with the West over the past century. I take the issue of gender as an entry point to these broader questions because the 'conflict' between Afghanistan and the 'West' has historically crystallised around the woman's question. I look more specifically at the veil, under its most varied forms (*burqa* or *chadari*, *chader*, *hijab* and fashionable veils), in an attempt to evaluate what it conceals and reveals, for women's covering practices are informed by relationships and discourses produced at the local, national and international levels. This research is therefore as much about women as it is about spaces where identity, subjectivity and agency are remoulded, refashioned and redefined according to a wide range of opportunities and constraints born out of this complex web of interactions.

I am concerned with the global vision that emerges from the particular. For this reason, I chose to study these questions from below by looking at how they affected women on the ground. In order to get a vision from the grassroots level, I conducted a 12 months ethnographic fieldwork in various women's groups in Kabul and some other Afghan cities. The choice of ethnographic fieldwork as a research method was informed by both ethical and strategic considerations. Ethnographic fieldwork, compared to other research methods used by social scientists, provides greater opportunities to gain knowledge through experience and therefore to recapture the voices of those who are generally silenced by journalists. On the other hand, the validity of the data is guaranteed not only by the trust and relationships the researcher manages to negotiate with informants, but also by the fact that living among them helps the researcher develop a sense of empathy towards 'others' that no other research methods can achieve. This responsibility that arises out of this intimate encounter carves the ethical basis of this study (Amit 2000).

## 1. Women in the public sphere

This thesis looks at ‘public’ women who are at the frontline between the local and the International and whose position represents a potential for redefining gender roles and power hierarchies. Like any classic ethnography, it aims at identifying who these women are, what they are trying to achieve, how they think they can achieve it and what is the price they have to pay for it.

Against commonplace ideas that defend with certainty the theory of a ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington 1993), this thesis argues that culture is politically constructed and can therefore be de-constructed. A close look at women’s everyday practices shows that, even in the most difficult circumstances, women demonstrate a high level of creativity and ingenuity when it comes to negotiate the norms that directly impact their lives. Women’s bodies are not simply passive symbolic recipients of religion, politics or the market but also tools women themselves are using to convey paradoxical meanings and reinvent their position in the world. This research pays homage to everyday acts of women’s resistance, under their most complex and invisible forms, in an attempt at unveiling conflicts over meanings and values that have emerged in the context of foreign military occupation. These micro forms of resistance, as marginal and symbolic as they may appear, should not be trivialized since they reflect the very narrow space for agency in which women under the current circumstances have to operate.

The women I met during this research neither shared a common feminist agenda, nor a common understanding of Islam. They came from various ethnic, social and educational backgrounds. Some were married and had children and were therefore responsible for maintaining a family, others were single young professionals or students, trying to reconcile their professional and personal ambitions with the aspirations ‘others’ had for them, at the ‘private’, local and international levels. What these women had in common, however, was a new form of ‘visibility’ in the public domain that had been carved out of Afghanistan’s violent encounter with global forces: NATO troops, foreign diplomats and policy makers, NGOs, Western feminists and the newly emerging market economy.

I qualify this encounter of violent because the current ‘democratization/reconstruction’ exercise in Afghanistan, far from following a progressive transition from chaos to order – contrary to the original plans of modernization theorists - is facing increasing resistance. This resistance is partly due to the fact that the ‘reconstruction’ project is not value-free and bears the seeds of

important social changes that more and more Afghans perceive as alien to their 'culture'. The way this 'resistance' is imprinted on women's bodies, through legislation, market liberalisation, 'religious' prescriptions and community politics is what makes the study of Afghan women particularly enlightening of the post colonial dynamics that frame the modalities of Afghanistan's 'reconstruction'.

Indeed, debates that are currently taking place in the political arena are predominantly focused on women because women, as symbolic reproducers of the nation and collective identity, have social responsibilities towards the 'culture' to which they are expected to belong. Considering the endemic social problems Afghanistan is currently facing, discussions at the National Assembly around the necessity to re-establish the Ministry of Vice and Virtues and to ban Western consumption goods such as cosmetics and fashion may appear as totally inappropriate and somewhat trivial. However, the recurrence of these debates underlines the broader social anxieties and moral panics around issues of national identity that have emerged in the context of foreign occupation.

This study aims to highlight how women, from various social positions and religious and ethnic backgrounds, 'resist' these anxieties in both overt and covert manners. It focuses on the 'public domain' as the stage on which ideological battles are taking place around 'culture' and 'religion' and where actors are obliged to perform various identities according to various audiences. I therefore concentrate on women's bodywork (and in particular veiling practices), women's use of language and religious repertoires as well as women's emotional performances, as these 'everyday practices' represent in themselves a potential for social transformation.

In addition, 'difference' is not a term to use only for drawing attention to dissimilarities between 'Muslim' and 'Western' ways and views. It is also a useful term to note the contrasts among the ways and views from Muslim societies. In addition, Islam is only one factor that impacts on the ways gender relations are shaped in society. But Islam is not all there is to know. Gender arrangements also vary according to policies, legislation and practices, which represent the diverse cultural complexities Islam encounters. Therefore, the position of women in Muslim societies must be grounded in a detailed examination of the political projects of contemporary states, their historical transformation and the broader geopolitical context in which they occur. This study attempts to historicise the 'women's question' in Afghanistan while taking into account contributions of political scientists and thinkers of International Relations.

Finally, although this thesis is primarily based on empirical fieldwork, it also aims to speak to lawyers interested in constitution-making processes and rule of law enforcement that are part of ‘democracy-building’ exercises in Third World countries. While providing a critical analysis of these legal developments grounded on empirical evidence and a review of the academic scholarship, I highlight the inconsistencies, impasses and ambiguities that arise when ‘democracy building’ is accompanied by military occupation. I emphasise on the discrepancies between official reforms and the reality of justice for ordinary Afghans and I underline how such reforms impact on women’s lives, their subjectivities and their capacity to ‘resist’.

## **2. Chapters outline**

The first chapter of this thesis sets the methodological and theoretical frameworks of this study. I give a general overview of the geography of Kabul as a primary field site and I describe the constraints attached to conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a war-torn country. I define the scope of my research and I explain the strategic and ethical choices I had to make in order to reach my informants and research participants. Finally, I sketch the themes and the body of literature with which I engage in this study.

The second chapter is a historical account of the fashioning of the Afghan Nation through the lenses of gender. I argue that the ‘woman’s question’ from the reign of King Amanullah in the 1920s up to the rise of the Taliban has been central in defining national identity. I show how the modern history of Afghanistan is marked by a constant focus on women’s bodies, as either sites upon which the State strove to apply the stamp of ‘modernization’ or on the contrary, the stamp of a reinvented ‘tradition’. Afghanistan wounded relationship to the West (and to modernity) is illustrated through a socio-historical analysis of State policies relative to women and their position in society, taking into account broader geopolitical developments that have influenced these policies.

In chapters 3 and 4, I explore the contemporary ‘post-war/reconstruction’ process and the political agenda set up for women after the fall of the Taliban regime. Chapter 3 focuses on the justice sector, as the most prominent locus for the emergence of new discourses on women’s rights. I underline some historical continuities between previous foreign influences in the internal affairs of the country, especially during the Cold War and the current ‘state-building’ project. I argue that the current judiciary system, as designed in Bonn and later on during the Constitutional Loya Jirga relies on a

similar exogenous transplant with no solid local roots. I show how ‘women’ have become the primary targets for modernizing the Afghan society and how the focus on women’s rights has awoken reactionary readings of the *sharia*, which challenge the emancipatory potential of the Constitution. The result of such a political development is that the entire judiciary apparatus suffers from a lack of legitimacy that renders the struggle for women’s rights extremely precarious.

In chapter 4, I further develop this argument by taking a closer look at the actors and discourses of social change. I aim to demonstrate that the ‘reconstruction’ project in Afghanistan can be assimilated with another attempt at ‘modernizing’ the country, which bears many similarities with earlier modernization attempts carried out under King Amanullah, King Zaher Shah and later on, the Communist regime. The current efforts to include women in politics and to promote women’s rights are integral parts of the ‘modernization’ project. However, despite attempts at presenting these reforms in technical terms, their content is not value free. I take the example of a ‘gender empowerment’ training programme carried out by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs as part of its broader ‘gender mainstreaming’ mandate, to illustrate how certain ideas pertaining to modern state building and citizenship are being infused in the Afghan society.

The chapters that follow are exploring micro practices of resistance through the prism of embodiment and performance. Chapter 5 is an ethnographic account of the responses of female students at the University of Kabul to moral panics that have emerged in the national and local press as a result of the apparition of certain commodity and cultural products such as cosmetics, fashion and Indian soap operas on the local market. These panics flagged the threat of moral dilution and cultural pollution and urged policy makers to react in order to re-establish social order. Taking these social anxieties into account, I explore how dormitory girls from various social and ethnic groups struggled to position themselves in a new life environment, away from their families. I argue that girls’ everyday practices revealed a constant tension between the necessary fulfilment of different roles as dutiful and modest daughters and as young urban educated women, aspiring to present themselves as ‘modern’ and yet Muslim.

In chapter 6, I aim to characterize new meanings attached to women’s veiling in an Islamic public space, drawing from ethnographic data collected among various women’s groups in Afghanistan. It is argued that while the *chadari* has become the ultimate symbol of women’s oppression for Western audiences, it is necessary to take a closer look at its multiple and often contradictory uses and to contextualise the reasons

for its maintenance, despite the downfall of the Taliban regime. The ethnographic data I collected among women's rights activists and women MPs demonstrate that women who are attempting to access public spaces have developed creative strategies of dissimulation to get public recognition. They have become visible under the veil and have sometimes been able to challenge gender hierarchies behind the appearance of compliance and conformity. These findings challenge liberal ideas according to which women's visibility in public spaces is a necessary guarantee for their emancipation and their agency. In the context of foreign military occupation and increased insecurity, the control by the state of women's appearance in public settings is to be understood as a means to assert sovereignty and to preserve a sense of national autonomy. As in earlier colonial encounters, an area of cultural resistance has developed around women's bodies that constrain the modalities of women's re-entry in the public sphere. As a result, women have been left with no other choice but to adapt and find alternative ways to make their voice heard. This means, in practice, that veiling and bodywork in general are to be read as feminine performances destined to manage others' impressions and not as mere acts of obedience to religious prescriptions.

Chapter 7 investigates women's emotional performances and discourses of feelings and affects. It argues that these distinctive feminine expressive forms are used by women to maintain relationships, honour and gain public recognition. This analysis of the poetics and politics of emotions among Afghan women aims to highlight the relationship between expressions of affects and ordinary social life in which cultural notions and values orient individuals' actions and interactions. I pay a particular attention to feelings of suffering, since those were recurrent in women's speeches. I show how these ambiguous communicative tools serve to make commentaries on social relations and gender hierarchies without totally disrupting the honour code and the ideal of female modesty. I also analyse how more dramatic gestures, such as suicides, can be read not as mere signs of despair, but also as non discursive communicative acts that constitute part of women's broad repertoire of what I identify as 'rituals of resistance'.

## Chapter 1

### Entering the Field of Interpretation: Women, Modernization and Resistance

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Fatana Gailani speaks for International Day on Violence Against Women, Jalalabad, November 2007 © Julie Billaud

In January 2007, four years after my first journey, I landed in Kabul for the second time. Little had changed in the city except that now stifling traffic jams, abundant advertisement billboards and beggars in rags had become part of the urban landscape. Electricity and roads were as scarce as before. On the airport's main entrance wall, the same giant portrait of Commandant Masood was hanging. *Shar-e-Naw*, the city centre, was exhibiting a few shopping malls made of bricks and glass, chaotic copies of Dubai's modern buildings as well as luxurious hotels, which remained empty during most of the year.

Like any research conducted in highly unstable political environments, this study has been accompanied by many constraints, which have deeply influenced the design and methodology of my work. Unable to settle in one single site location in the manner classic ethnographers traditionally work, I was forced to adapt and navigate in different circles, according to the opportunities that arose out of my encounters. I became a

‘mobile ethnographer’ (Marcus 1995: 96), pushed and pulled according to circumstances over which I had little control.

However, my position as a slightly odd and out of place character in the chaotic context of the ‘post-war’ was not specifically due to my being a foreigner. The intense conflict and economic hardship that have marked the past thirty years have forced many Afghans to either seek asylum in Iran, Pakistan, India or further afield or to move from one province or village to another. According to the United Nation Humanitarian Commission for Refugee’s statistics (UNHCR 2009), about six million Afghans have left the country from the 1980s until the US military intervention in 2001. Altogether, almost a third of the population has been displaced. In 2007, over 350,000 refugees were repatriated from Pakistan under the UNHCR’s voluntary repatriation programme (UNHCR 2007). Most of my research participants, in the National Assembly, at the Women’s National Dormitory and in women’s organizations, were to different degrees displaced or uprooted. The dormitory girls were coming from different provinces of Afghanistan and many of them had lived abroad during the civil war and the Taliban regime. Some of them, who had grown up in Iran in a relatively secure environment, confided to me that they felt like foreigners in their own country. The women’s rights activists I met at the Afghan Women’s Network and in other women’s organizations had repatriated their activities from the refugee camps located in Pakistan or in Iran to Kabul, where the community of donors had settled after the military intervention. As women who had emerged in public, they suffered from a double form of displacement: as returnees and as women working in men-dominated arenas. My own displacement as a white single non-Muslim woman not involved in ‘reconstruction business’ mirrored, to some extent, their ‘uprootedness’. It was not rare for me to hear: ‘you understand, because you are a foreigner’ or other comments that implicitly acknowledged a certain level of complicity and mutual understanding.

The external perception of vulnerability that was projected on my persona allowed me to gradually gain the trust of the women I met. As a ‘loose cannon’, I inspired a mixture of admiration, oddness and a sense of responsibility. The dormitory girls welcomed me among them because they felt that it was neither appropriate nor safe for a girl (including me) to live on her own away from her family. My access to political women was somehow facilitated by the fact that I had made a long journey to talk to them. Many of my informants valued knowledge and intellectual work in general and demonstrated high respect when I told them I planned to write a book on ‘culture and Afghan women’.

It was not without a pinch of suspicion, though, that they accepted to share their experience with me. There were very few independent researchers in Kabul and 'research' was often equated with intelligence gathering activity. In order to overcome this reluctance; I often found it more rewarding to be introduced by other participants with whom I had developed some relationship than to contact individual women independently. However, the 'snow-balling' technique did not necessarily lead to the results I initially anticipated, i.e being allowed to shadow a woman in her daily activities or being offered the opportunity of a second interview. I quickly realized that I had some valuable skills that could be exchanged against their knowledge and insight: I could teach languages, write funding proposals and give them some visibility through my writings. The services I offered in the Dormitory, in the Afghan Women's Network and other women's organizations opened spaces from where to conduct research. They also addressed some of the ethical dilemmas and concerns I experienced while researching women who were, as women, in vulnerable positions. Because I was able to contribute modestly, I felt the inequality between the researcher and the researched was somewhat reduced.

## **1. Methodology**

Because of the difficulties of conducting independent research in a country still at war, I had found myself a position in a Communication Agency specializing in social marketing and public information. I worked there as a Project Manager/Researcher for a few months until I had managed to develop enough contacts in the women's groups I was interested in studying to continue the fieldwork on my own. My position within the company allowed me to conduct research in the Ministry of Women's Affairs, where the company was in charge of running the Public Relations and Information Department as well as in other public administrations and organizations where female staff were employed (Independent Human Rights Commission, police stations, Attorney General Office etc.).



Kabul city, a view of the 'Titanic' bazaar along the Kabul river – October 2007 © Julie Billaud

At the same time, I had recruited a translator/Dari teacher, Lutfia, who supported me in my conduct of interviews, translations and in building contacts among women MPs, female students and activists. Lutfia was a 22-year-old University student, originally from Kapisa province, where her family was still living. She boarded at the Women's National Dormitory, on Kabul University campus. Thanks to her advocacy with the Dormitory's director, I was offered a room among female students in return for English and French lessons. I lived there for four months, sharing girls' daily activities, improving my Dari while getting an insight into what made up their everyday lives: worries, dreams, gossip, Indian soap operas, poetry, music, make-up and of course, studies. My relationship to Lutfia gradually moved towards friendship. I did not only benefit from her linguistic skills but also from her patience and kindness in explaining to me the complex rules of the Afghan etiquette. Our daily discussions helped me question and challenge my knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which gender relations were constructed, negotiated and challenged by the changes the Afghan society was facing in the 'post-Taliban' period.

Naturally, the girls to whom I became the closest were predominantly among Lutfia's friends. Besides sharing Room 42 on the dormitory's ground floor, these six girls had lots in common, in spite of their diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. All of them had grown up abroad, in Iran or in Pakistan and as a result of this experience, they considered themselves as more 'modern', urban and progressive than the other girls who

had always remained in the country. The way they spoke Dari with a slightly foreign accent, the way they dressed and their general attitudes distinguished them from the other girls who called them, with a touch of contempt and jealousy, '*kehaliji*' (foreigner) or '*Irani*' (Iranian), for the ones who spoke Farsi, the Persian from Iran. Many of these girls studied foreign languages and were hired in part-time jobs. They were more or less financially autonomous and were able to purchase consumption goods such as mobile phones and fashion accessories that were part of the attributes of a certain social class to which many dormitory girls aspired to belong. The six girls of room 42 introduced me to some of their friends and relatives, and I was often used as a token of their cosmopolitanism and open-mindedness. I was introduced as the '*dokhtar-e Fransawi*' (the French girl) who had come to Afghanistan to study 'women and culture'. Altogether, I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews in the dormitory but the most valuable data was gathered through observation and informal conversations.

I also volunteered for a few months at the Afghan Women's Network, a network of women and women's NGOs, helping them with proposals, reports and fundraising. I was introduced to the network through Hossai, a student in Sciences, who became my translator when Lutfia obtained a scholarship from the French embassy in Kabul and left to study at the University of Rennes. Hossai's mother worked for AWN and my offer to volunteer for the NGO was received with great enthusiasm. I taught English to the staff and in return for my services, I was introduced to the women's organizations working under the umbrella of AWN. Thanks to this new connection, I managed to collect in-depth semi-structured interviews with thirteen women's rights activists in Kabul and Herat, where AWN had recently opened an office. I also followed for a few weeks two renowned women's rights advocates who ran programmes in rural areas, in Nangahar and Hazarajat.

My initial aim was to conduct research among political women exclusively. I thought, a bit naively, that female MPs and women employed in the highest levels of public administrations would be quite accessible and would be willing to share their experience with me. As an anthropologist, I was interested in getting a greater understanding of women's political participation in the context of 'post-war/reconstruction'. But it soon appeared that Afghanistan was neither in a post-war nor in a reconstruction stage, as international organizations stubbornly asserted. Regular suicide attacks in the country's major cities, daily NATO bombings in rural areas where Taliban's presence was suspected together with the poor achievements of the

reconstruction process proved that Afghanistan was still at war and that, as a consequence, development was simply not taking place.

The political context itself made it difficult for political women to talk freely. The 2005 Legislative Elections had brought former *jihadis* and conservative political leaders back in power, creating a general climate of distrust that deeply challenged my ability to gain the confidence of my participants necessary to collect valid and reliable data. My interviews in the National Assembly often started with this statement: ‘You know that we cannot talk about everything, don’t you? There are some topics we should avoid.’ My participants shortened interviews as soon as I tried to engage them in giving their views on more politically sensitive issues. Very few of them accepted to be interviewed more than once but I nevertheless managed to conduct twenty semi-structured interviews with women MPs, either directly in their houses, or in the journalists’ room of the Parliament.

Talking to foreigners could indeed turn into a life-threatening act, since the insurgency targeted in priority individuals involved in any kind of transactions with them. Kidnappings, life-threats and murders were the plight politicians willing to challenge the status quo had to face. Female public figures were the favourite targets of fundamentalist groups. In February 2007, I was given the opportunity to interview a female MP who belonged to an important pro-*mujahedin* group in the National Assembly. I was told to come to her house directly so that we could enjoy more privacy. Three men armed with Kalashnikovs guarded the entrance gate of her house. Lutfia and I were directed in the modest *maman-khana* (guest room) where the MP’s husband was waiting for us. The man was turning the pages of a family photo album and pointed to a photograph of his daughter, a beautiful young woman dressed in army clothes and riding a horse. Today was the one-year anniversary of her death, he explained, and his wife was not feeling very well. ‘She is the one who should have died on that day. The murderers were targeting my wife. They shot my daughter by mistake’ (Fieldnotes 23/02/2007). Sadly, as I progressed in my research, stories like this were recurrent.

Fieldwork in such an environment necessitated a high degree of flexibility. My navigation in different circles was dependent upon the willingness of the women I met to open up and on the quality of the relationship I managed to develop with them. There was no guarantee that the doors that were opened one day would still be opened the next day. As a result, opportunism was the only strategy I found relevant. I shadowed a woman activist in her activities for a few days here, conducted participant observation in a women’s organization for another few days there, eagerly jumping on each opportunity

that presented itself. Planning was a useless exercise. I ended up following a metaphor, an idea, rather than the specific informants I had initially thought of.

In spite of all my efforts to get some kind of insight into the space I was interested in, it is undeniable that my particular position within that space profoundly affected the nature of the work I could do. My informants had some valid reasons for showing suspicion towards my ultimate intentions: there were very few independent researchers in Kabul, I was not representing any particular institution and I was an ‘unaccompanied’ Western woman. As a result, it was not rare for me to be taken for either a spy or a journalist.

I was concerned not to follow the footsteps of some autodidact anthropologists such as Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad who wrote *The Bookseller of Kabul*, shortly after the ‘liberation’ of Afghanistan. Her work presented many of the ethical problems caused by the structural constraints of her profession: a lack of understanding of the social, historical and cultural context of the society under study and a weak mastery of local languages, eventually leading to the reproduction of Western preconceptions about the oppression of women in Islam. Not only had she betrayed the confidence of the Afghan family that had generously opened its door to a ‘foreign guest’, but she also received, through her book, a visibility and a public recognition that the bookseller, the ‘subject’ of her story, would never be able to get, despite his desperate attempts at suing her in the tribunals of her own country<sup>5</sup>.

In order to preserve the anonymity of my informants, I have sometimes changed their names and used pseudonyms. I have systematically anonymised the women I interviewed at the National Assembly, since their high visibility makes them more vulnerable to attacks and threats than any of the other women I have researched. I just mention whether they are coming from rural or urban areas (since it is a significant distinction that involves a radically different position), but I have coded their interviews and removed biographical elements that may make them too easily identifiable. I did not do it for the character of Malalai Joya (MP of Farah province) since she is internationally renowned and has made herself famous on the global scene by giving interviews, participating in documentary films and, recently, writing her own biography. I also kept the original names of the women activists who were willing to gain some public visibility

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<sup>5</sup> I met the Bookseller of Kabul myself during my fieldwork. Following the publication of Seierstad’s novel, his wife had sought asylum in Canada and he had published his own response to the Norwegian writer under the title: ‘Once Upon a time, there was a bookseller in Kabul’, which I hastened to purchase. The novel starts with this sentence: ‘Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad parachuted into Afghanistan and told the West exactly what it wanted to hear about that nation’s women. The truth, as usual, is more complicated.’ I kept the bitter statement of the Bookseller in mind during the entire length of my stay in Afghanistan.

through my writing. All the women who have shared with me some intimate stories, which I have used to support and inform my argument, have been given pseudonyms.

Without the contacts I had built with some women during my first journey in Afghanistan, it is doubtful that I would have been given a chance to see above the surface. It took a lot of energy to get around the Afghan rules of politeness that predispose people to please their 'foreign' guests with answers they believe are appropriate. My status as a 'returnee' and as a student (i.e knowledgeable and educated in local understanding) together with my modest command of Dari helped me to overcome the initial reluctances I faced when I first introduced myself.

This was also for me a sort of embodied discovery of what living in a climate of fear exactly meant. I understood that the purpose of my work was less about finding the most efficient way of interpreting the deeds and thoughts of the Other, than having to face the existential problem of living in a moral universe that was being pulled asunder and rendered meaningless (Hoffman 2003; Nordstrom and Robben 1999). Research in an insecure context corrodes the fundamental assumptions of ethnography: social stability, bounded and coherent communities, and the possibility of engaging in significant human relationships. The fragmented nature of my fieldwork and the fragile relationships I managed to develop were somehow the reflection of the fragmented relationships the social landscape in which I operated was made of. I was there as a witness, manipulated, influenced by my emotions, always confused by rumours that circulated around me. This experience was however crucial to get an understanding of the complex dynamics of these spaces and to incorporate into my 'witnessing' knowledge of cause and implication unavailable to observers who were not as much immersed in the daily life of ordinary Afghans.

The National Women's Dormitory was, in a sense, the safe haven I, as an anthropologist, had dreamed of. Open in 2004 thanks to US funding to accommodate female students coming from the different provinces of Afghanistan, this place represented more than a simple student accommodation. For most of these girls, it was their first experience of living outside of their families' homes and getting to mingle with girls from different regions, ethnic, religious and social backgrounds. The dormitory was, with the Women's Garden, one of the rare places in Kabul exclusively reserved to women, a place where these young women could consider their own. As the only Westerner living there, I was as much interested in getting to know them that they were

in getting to know me. The time I spent with the dormitory girls will remain in my memory among the most pleasant and genuine moments I spent in Afghanistan.

## **2. Fieldwork and field sites**

Most of my fieldwork was conducted in Kabul, even though I travelled to other regions on several occasions. Various considerations informed this choice. First, Kabul is one of the most important humanitarian scenes in the world. The visible presence of the international community, military forces and institutions of power make it a particularly interesting site of study. I was particularly keen to observe how the transition towards ‘democracy’ was going to be negotiated and how women would be involved in this process. The women of Kabul were the ones most exposed to the new possibilities and dilemmas created by the ‘reconstruction/democratization’ effort and were therefore particularly interesting for me to study. Second, Kabul was the place where most women’s organizations were located and where they were the most active. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Kabul was considered as the most ‘progressive’ city of Afghanistan, which represented a valuable asset for an independent researcher.

More generally, the city has often been the setting where changes in gender relations first occur. As Rieker and Asdar Ali put it in their study of urban spaces in the ‘Third World’: ‘the city emancipates women far more than rural life or suburban domesticity’ (Rieker and Asdar-Ali 2008, 1). While the city also creates new hierarchies of power and domination, it remains the locale from where women may experience new forms of mobility and gain some visibility. My focus on Kabul as the centre of power was influenced by the idea that it represented a site of relative personal autonomy and political possibilities for women, a site where modern citizen-making was being processed while, in the meantime, notions of corruption and pollution remained deeply associated with that space in the collective imagination.

Shaped by colonial encounters with the West from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kabul remains today ‘modernization/reconstruction’ shop’s window (Suhrke 2007). As such, it is an enclave. Contrasts that one can notice in other Third World capital cities here reach extremes. Wealth rubs elbows with extreme poverty. Infrastructures are inadequate to meet the needs of an exponential population growth. Since the downfall of the Taliban regime and the arrival of international aid agencies, Kabul has attracted a massive number of rural migrants and returnees from neighbouring countries, in search for job opportunities and humanitarian assistance. According to World Bank’s estimates,

between 1999 and 2002 the city's population grew at 15% per year and counted 3 million inhabitants in 2004 (World Bank 2005, 2). Informal settlements shelter about 80% of Kabul's population and cover 70% of the city's residential lands (Ibid. 2). UN, international organizations and NGOs' staffs occupy the city centre with its comfortable and spacious houses guarded by private security guards behind compound walls and barbwire. Here, like in *Sherpur*, a district of Kabul grabbed by former militia commanders to develop a pompous complex of Pakistani-style villas rented to internationals, private generators provide electricity and water is never lacking. The crisis of housing and the freeze on land allocation does not apply to the wealthy, the well connected, the commanders or the drug lords (Constable 2003).

The spectacle of an import-dependent consumption boom in Kabul coexists with deep impoverishment and destitution. Shopping malls, the mobile-phone boom, huge Toyota Land Cruisers - the chosen vehicle of the donor community - jostling for space on narrow pot-holed streets, the five-star luxury hotel, the Kabul Serena, rising sphinx-like in the centre of town courtesy of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN)... Symbols of Western-style liberalism and modernity are growing in the middle of poverty and chaos. Supreme Market, on Jalalabad road and other places where alcohol is available, are reserved for foreigners. 64,500 ISAF<sup>6</sup> troops and private mercenaries protect the wealthy occupiers and the government they support.

Kabul's landscape is very telling by itself for what it reveals about the political economy that is guiding the reconstruction. *Sherpur* with its cream cake villas constructed on top of confiscated lands inscribes in the urban geography the brand of the new Islamic Republic. Most of the buildings that have sprung up in the capital city are funded by opium money: it is 'narcotechture', in expatriates' language (Loyd 2007). Seven years after the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan has turned into a narco-state with a flourishing criminal informal economy, a sadly recognizable feature of neoliberal globalization. The general climate of impunity is favourable to widespread criminality financed by the revenues generated by the opium trade.

If the Taliban banned poppy cultivation in 2000 and put a halt to opium growing in the 2001 season, it is the US-led war that ousted the Taliban in 2001, that prompted Afghan farmers to plant the opium poppy again over tens of thousands of hectares. As a result, the opium cultivation has doubled between 2005 and 2006. The Vienna based UN

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<sup>6</sup> The International Security Assistance Force was established by the UN Security Council at the end of December 2001 to secure Kabul and the surrounding areas. NATO assumed control of ISAF in 2003. By July 23, 2009, ISAF had around 64,500 troops from 42 countries, with NATO members providing the core of the force. The United States has approximately 29,950 troops in ISAF (NATO/ISAF 2009).

Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that the 2007 harvest has been of the order of 8,200 tonnes, 44 times its production levels in 2001 under the Taliban government (UNODC 2007, iii). The UN estimates that for 2007, the contribution of the drug trade to the Afghan economy is of the order of 4 billion USD, an increase of 26% over 2006. These records have placed Afghanistan at the top of the list of opium producing countries (93% of the global opiates market) (Ibid. iii). More than 95 percent of the revenues generated by this lucrative contraband accrues to business syndicates, organized crime and banking and financial institutions. This illegal economy has re-empowered drug barons and former militia commanders, who hold positions in the highest government offices (Felbab-Brown 2005).

Additional data were collected through ‘shadowing’ participants involved in women’s rights activities in Jalalabad and in Hazarajat. I also spent a few weeks in Herat where I conducted interviews among different women’s NGOs. In comparison to Kabul, border cities such as Herat, in the West, are far more organized and developed. Under the grip of powerful warlord Ismael Khan, tax revenues made from trade with border countries have been invested in the maintenance of Herat’s infrastructures: roads and electricity are not lacking. However, the continuation of conservative politics, with the reintroduction of the moral police conducting virginity tests on women venturing in the streets with unrelated men (Kristof 2004), made women’s re-entry in the public domain less easy. Ironically, the iron hand of Khan also provided the majority of Herati women with an important asset: security, making Herat the city where the greatest number of girls accessed education (IRIN-News 2007). These short trips to other Afghan cities helped me to contextualize and evaluate the scope of possibilities open to women in the ‘reconstruction’ period, while making me realize the variety of situations according to geographic locations.

## **2. Women’s political participation and the conflict in Afghanistan since 2001**

The issue of women entered the political agenda mostly through the insistence of the US feminist movement (the Feminist Majority<sup>7</sup>), which had developed strong links with Afghan women activists on the ground, mostly from the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) founded by Meena Kishwar Kamal in 1977. According to Hafizullah Emadi (2002), RAWA is the women’s section of the Afghan Maoist movement, which had as its primary objective to make women participate in the

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<sup>7</sup> See the Feminist Majority’s website: <http://feministmajority.org/>

struggle for national liberation against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. RAWA has been instrumental in fuelling Western media with ‘Orientalist notions of veiled Afghan women living in seraglios, jealously guarded by bearded Muslims wielding scimitars’ (Azerbaijani-Moghaddam 2004, 101). RAWA members have indeed developed efficient communication strategies<sup>8</sup> and have been particularly resourceful in publicizing women’s rights abuses under the Taliban, reporting through an ultra emotive framework, with little analysis, exactions committed against them to journalists greedy for horror stories. RAWA has also been highly critical of the US military invasion and continues to report on exactions committed against women and civilians under the current occupation.

However, in spite of this intense lobbying, very few concrete actions were taken to include women in the decision making process following the downfall of the Taliban regime. In spite of the UN Resolution 1325 that urges member states to ‘increase representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict’ (UN Resolution 1325, art. 1), very few women took part in the Bonn conference. The Bonn Agreements that took place in December 2001, was the initial series of agreements intended to re-create the State of Afghanistan following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Only three Afghan women were invited to Bonn, all of them chosen from the ranks of those who were politically inexperienced and therefore, who would not challenge the patriarchal status quo (Azerbaijani-Moghaddam 2004, 107). This ironical outcome had to do with the contradictory political decisions taken by the international community, which, on one hand, had given its military support to the conservative *mujahedin* in order to fight against the Taliban, and on the other hand, had used the rhetoric of women’s emancipation to gain public support in the war effort.

The Bonn Agreements together with the new Afghan Constitution have recognized the principle of gender equality within society while making Islam the official State religion. The new constitution states that ‘In Afghanistan, no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam’ (Article 3). This language leaves matters where there is no specification in the Constitution or law to adjudication by religious laws, rendering women’s rights vulnerable to conservative interpretations of Islam (ICG-Asia 2003). However, The Afghan Constitution also obliges the government to ‘protect human rights’ and to ‘abide by the UN charter, international treaties,

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<sup>8</sup> See RAWA’s website: [www.rawa.org](http://www.rawa.org)

international conventions that Afghanistan has signed, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (Preamble). Afghanistan acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on March 2003, without reservations. These efforts have undeniably prompted women's re-entry in the public domain: a Ministry of Women's Affairs is in charge of 'mainstreaming gender' in the Afghan institutions, women benefit from a 25% quota in the *Wolesi Jirga* (House of the People), half of the seats appointed by the president to the *Mesbrano Jirga* (House of the Elders) are also reserved to women and Women's Organizations sponsored by international donors have mushroomed in Afghanistan's major cities. In addition, the 2005 Electoral Law guarantees one quarter of the seats to women in the Provincial Councils (Shah 2005: 248).

As a result, the 2005 legislative elections saw 68 women join the *Wolesi Jirga* and a woman run for the Presidential elections for the first time in the history of Afghanistan (Wordsworth 2005). In the meantime, over half of the elected deputies were previous militia commanders or associated with the old *mujahedin* parties. Some of them are accused by human rights organizations of having been involved or/and of still being involved in human rights abuses and crimes. They have rapidly taken control over the presidency as well as the parliamentary committees. The *jihad* party leaders, commanders and supporters still closely associate themselves with the *jihad*, politically and ideologically. They generally share a conservative outlook on social, cultural and religious affairs and many have a shared objective of 'defending the *jihad*' and establishing a more conservative Islamic state governed by Islamic laws (Wilder 2005, 6). Their strong foothold in the parliament represents a challenge to the advancement of liberal reforms and to the promotion of women's rights.

Some of the women who have joined the National Assembly have, for strategic and political interest, associated themselves with some of these groups. This is for instance the case of the Head of the Women's Affairs Committee who is openly affiliated with an important pro-*mujahedin* group defending conservative gender ideologies within the *shura* (Parliament). Very few women have managed to remain independent from political parties, which are dominated by men and constructed around ethnic and religious divisions. As a result, female representatives within the Assembly, like their male counterparts, have tended to engage in identity politics and stress the specific suffering and plight of their ethnic or religious group, while dismissing that of others (Wilder 2005).

The few women who continue to work outside of party politics are originally from Women's Civil Society Organizations. Their isolation deeply challenges their capacity to sustain an alternative and more progressive stand on issues related to women's rights. For example, Masooda Zaryab (pseudonym), a women's rights activist and independent MP, told me: 'When your own women, who have a little bit of experience and could talk, are not supporting you, it becomes very difficult to do something positive for women. These tough women are on the side of mullahs, extremists and commanders...so fighting in this kind of atmosphere can be extremely depressing' (Interview – MP3, 16/09/2007).

The sectarian nature of Afghan politics considerably narrows the possibility for non-sectarian initiatives by women's groups. In addition, the context of foreign occupation has helped to create an intensification of conservative gender ideologies, which are promoted not only among insurgent groups but also political parties in government. Attacks against girls' schools, women's rights activists and other female public figures have become common events. In April 2009, Kandahar city councillor Sitara Achakzai, a fervent advocate of women's rights, was shot in front of her house as she returned from a meeting at the provincial council. In September 2008, Malalai Kakar, the first woman of Kandahar to have joined the Police, was shot by the Taliban in front of her house (BBC-News 2008b). In June 2007, Zakia Zaki, owner and manager of Peace Radio in Afghanistan, was gunned down in front of her 8-year-old son inside her house in northern Parwan province (Daily Mail 2007). Zaki had been critical of local warlords, who had warned her about the station's content. The same month, Shokiba Sanga Amaaj, a newscaster for private Shamdhad TV, was shot in the back inside her house in Kabul. In September 2006, Safia Ama Jan, the southern provincial head of Afghanistan's Ministry of Women's Affairs, was shot dead outside the front gate of her Kandahar home as she was walking to her office. Ama Jan was known for being an active proponent of women's rights and education. In May 2005, Shaima Rezayee, 24, who replaced her *burqa* with Western-style dress and became a host on an MTV-style music show, was shot in the head at her Kabul home (AP 2007). The perpetrators of these crimes have never been arrested and prosecuted and the list of their victims continues to expand on a regular basis.

Many women activists have left the country or have simply abandoned their positions after receiving death threats from armed groups. The ones who remain in place fear for their lives and those of their families. The official police force and the government have done little to protect women (Amnesty International 2005). Indeed,

because of widespread corruption, many Afghans have no trust in the police and in the national army to provide security to common people. Obviously, this impacts tremendously on the ability to sustain women's activism. Indeed, women activists emphasize the ongoing conflict as a major barrier to their activities, especially in the Southern provinces of Afghanistan where fighting prevents NGOs' access. Women activists see different reasons for the violence, including regular civilian casualties resulting from NATO bombings that reinforce popular support to the insurgents, the conflict between different militias under the command of warlords, the ineffectiveness of the police and the Afghan National Army, the poor socio-economic conditions that drive young men to join armed groups as well as the terrorism perpetrated by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda-led foreign fighters. All these sources of violence are interlinked, as the invasion and occupation have created the conditions for the growth in power of communally based political groups who use conservative gender ideologies in the process of asserting their authority against rivals, as well as the widespread availability of small arms, high unemployment and deteriorating humanitarian conditions (Oxfam 2008).

### **3. Public visibility and 'counter-publics'**

This study looks at everyday practices of public women in an attempt to evaluate the degree of agency they are able to exercise in the context I have described above. I provide a critical analysis of Western understandings of the 'public' and underline the creative ways in which Afghan women have created spaces for themselves. Indeed, the distinction between private and public in Afghanistan, as this study will show, does not totally convey the same meanings as in the West. The public/private dichotomy does not capture for instance the complex inter-relations and interpenetrations that exist between the two domains. As Nancy Lindisfarn-Tapper (1991) has shown in her study of a Durani Pashto community from Northern Afghanistan, women are often able to influence public affairs notably through lobbying their husbands and other male relatives. Negotiations that take place in the household have a direct impact on what is decided in public place.

The 'public sphere' has been defined by Jürgen Habermas (1989) as the locus of 'communicative action', i.e as a site where cooperative action is undertaken by individuals based upon mutual deliberation and argumentation. Individuals engaged in such dialogic transactions are making full use of rational reason in order to reach a consensus, which, in turn, guarantees the protection and defence of 'the common good'. The formation of

(inclusive and rational) public spheres in Western societies has been instrumental in establishing democracies and in producing citizens. Western classical liberalism has presumed the universal necessity of differentiated public/private spheres for the development of citizenship, civil society and democratic nation/statehood.

However, feminist scholar Nancy Fraser (1990) has criticized this idealized definition of the public sphere and has underlined the hegemonic and exclusive elements that are inherent to its constitution. She writes that the public sphere was initially conceived as ‘the arena, the training ground and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men who were coming to see themselves as a “universal class” and preparing to assert their fitness to govern.’ (Fraser 1990, 60). In Western societies, white men have dominated the public domain, forcing other groups (women, ethnic minorities) to form their own ‘subaltern counter publics’, i.e ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs’ (Fraser 1990, 67).

We can add to Fraser’s feminist critique, a post-colonial critique of Habermas’ definition, which challenges the possibility of using the ‘public’ as a universal principle. In the context of Afghanistan, the ‘public’ domain, far from being a site of dialogical negotiations, is better understood as a stage for performance. I borrow this idea from Nilüfer Göle (2006) who explains how, in the context of voluntary modernization policies in Turkey, the public sphere has been conceived as a place of performance. She writes: ‘Because the public sphere provides a stage for performance rather than an abstract frame for textual and discursive practices, the ocular aspect in the creation of significations and the making of social imaginaries becomes of utmost importance’ (Göle 2006, 177). Göle’s insistence on the performative dimension of non-Western public spheres, especially in countries where the process of State formation has been shaped by unequal interactions with the West is, I think, key to understanding the nature of the political debates around ‘women’s issues’ that have emerged in Afghanistan following the fall of the Taliban.

This study explores those spaces forged and created for women and by women, these ‘counter-publics’ where new gender identities are negotiated and transformed through the tensions that shape women’s experience with ‘modernity’. It criticizes the universality of abstract categories such as public/private, family/individual and demonstrates how the boundaries between them are in fact fluid and porous. Because all boundaries and categories are sites of struggle, focusing on these spaces allows one to

make a broader diagnostic of power while evaluating the room for manoeuvre that women, of different classes, religious and ethnic backgrounds, have managed to create for themselves in the 'reconstruction' period. As Sullivan (1995, 128) observes, 'The demarcation of public and private life within society is an inherently political process that both reflects and reinforces power relations, especially the power relations of gender, race, and class.' My purpose is therefore to suggest a culturally and historically specific analysis of the new forms of visibility women have gained as a result of 'democracy building', while locating this process in the broader power relations at stake in the context of foreign military occupation.

The interest of studying female public figures inheres in what the tensions created by women's public visibility reveal about the broader social and political context in which the 'transition towards democracy' is taking place. These tensions have to do with the fact that in a country where Islam represents a central and essential part of people's everyday life, women represent the cornerstone of communal and national identity. Women overriding socially accepted hierarchies and stepping into spheres traditionally occupied by men are potentially threatening as they put into question norms and values that are key to social order and to identity. The woman question has become even more sensitive now that military occupation is broadly experienced as a form of cultural pollution (see chapter 5).

In such a context, the formal rights ensured in the new Constitution and in the different international treaties that Afghanistan has signed following the Bonn Agreements (CEDAW, UN Convention for the Elimination of Violence Against Women) have had little chance to be enforced. On the contrary, I argue that the public face of justice in Afghanistan is disconnected from the social reality of ordinary Afghans and is therefore perceived as an instrument of acculturation (chapter 3). In political circles, a battle is currently taking place between conservative forces that view international instruments designed to protect women's rights as 'foreign' and 'un-Islamic' and a more liberal minority that is struggling to promote an interpretative approach to *sharia* law. As the insurrection is intensifying in rural areas with a government failing to deliver basic services to the population, the former approach is currently dominant. This development leaves women involved in politics with no other choice but to strengthen the status quo by defending essentialized versions of 'culture' and 'religion' in order to keep the support of their communities. The nationalist backlash that emerges as a natural response to military occupation has blocked any possibility of 'communicative ethics' (Habermas 1990) within the public legal domain. As Jane Cowan (2008: 16) points out in

her writings on ‘culture and rights’:

Vigorous public debate within a cultural group among all kinds of persons affected by a policy — in multiple forums of public and, indeed, private space — does have the potential to transform the terms of culture — at least, its explicit terms — quite fundamentally. Such an approach is not only vastly superior analytically and theoretically but also politically more enabling than the liberal choice: to either live “according to the culture’s terms” or leave.

An analysis of the Constitution-making process (chapter 3) demonstrates that although it could have represented a major opportunity for Afghans to collectively redefine the terms of ‘culture’, the ‘vigorous public debate’ which Cowan advocates did not take place. On the contrary, new laws and reforms were quickly drafted, under the pressure of exogenous forces, to bolster the idea of reconstruction for the Western public. One of the negative effects of this missed opportunity, besides the broader silencing of Afghans’ own aspirations for the future, has been to produce discourses about the ‘authentic Afghan culture’ defining itself in radical opposition to ‘Western values’. This thesis explores how externally imposed legal reforms have turned the debate on women’s rights into a cultural battle over ‘national identity’ in which the control of women and their bodies has become the symbolic marker of national sovereignty. While engaging with the post-colonial legal literature on ‘gender and rights’ (Kapur 2004, Menon 2004), I provide empirical evidence for the ambiguities, contradictions and impasses that are inherent to efforts at ‘building democracy’ from outside instead of from within. This study should therefore speak to a public of lawyers interested in the practical aspects of indigenous struggles for women’s rights.

The presence of women at important decision-making levels remains a highly controversial issue. This is because, as Nilüfer Göle phrases it, ‘women are the touchstone of the Islamic order (...), the *trait d’union* between identity and community’ (1996, 21). In the case of Afghanistan, the issue of women’s public visibility is all the more problematic in that over the past thirty years Afghan collective consciousness has been marked by a double trauma: the Soviet occupation on one hand and Islamic fundamentalism under its most radical form: the Taliban, on the other hand. In both cases, the reshaping of the Nation was achieved through policies aiming at ‘remaking’ women and controlling their public visibility. While the communist regime forced women to unveil and to become exposed to the public gaze, rules imposed by the Taliban pursued a diametrically opposed objective, i.e making women disappear from the

‘public’ (Emadi 2002). The impact of these policies has been particularly traumatic for women, whose ‘bodies’ have been instrumentalized in order to assert power and define the terms of national construction.

In the history of Afghanistan (see chapter 2), women have been at the centre of various modernization projects initiated by the different regimes that have succeeded one another (King Amanullah, King Zaher Shah and later on, the Communist regime). History also shows that all these attempts have been defeated by strong resistance movements that emerged in rural areas under the control of powerful conservative leaders. Resistance from the countryside increased in intensity when the foreign footprint on modernization became more obvious (Roy 1985).

The current ‘reconstruction’ project can be identified as another modernization attempt, but this time, with a stronger international footprint and a greater financial and military involvement. The recrudescence of the insurgency when seven years earlier the coalition forces had won victory in a matter of a few weeks tends to confirm that the country is taking a similar path as in the past. Western-style modernity, imposed with little cultural sensitivity, together with poor material improvements in the lives of ordinary Afghans, has opened spaces for new forms of resistance to emerge. The ‘Taliban’ in 2008 is no longer a unified movement but a conglomerate of various nationalist groups with contrasted politico-religious views and external supports, which only have in common their opposition to a corrupt government ‘sold’ to its foreign supporters (Weber 2008). The rapid military gains made by the Insurgents since 2001 tend to demonstrate that more and more Afghans share the view that ‘democracy’ is nothing else but an ideological instrument of Western domination. At the political level, the fuelling of moral panics and popular fears around ‘cultural loss’ has contributed to reinforce these views (chapter 4). The systemic frauds registered during the last presidential elections and the cancellation of the second round run off vote between president Karzai and his main rival Abdullah Abdullah have added an extra layer of scepticism towards the central government and its capacity – and will – to serve its people.

Whereas Afghanistan is once more facing the threat of political and ethnic fragmentation, the reappearance of women in the public domain is more than ever the object of intense controversies. Caught between a discursive struggle portrayed as simply a matter of human rights on one hand, and ‘local’ political discourses that defend with absolute certainty the terms of ‘culture’ on the other hand, Afghan women’s capacity to remain in control of their own lives has been extremely constrained and limited. As this

study demonstrates, women's public visibility in such a context cannot be interpreted straightforwardly either as evidence for their public agency or as a feminist consciousness. Women who have entered in politics have had limited opportunities to defend a feminist agenda, whether in the Western sense, or under an indigenous form. In most cases, they have had to develop alternative public spaces, or 'counter-publics' to use Nancy Fraser's (1990) expression, in order to renegotiate their position at the margins of society only.

#### **4. Resistance, subjectivity and social transformation**

This research engages with theoretical debates dealing with issues of subjectivity, agency and power taking into account not only indigenous understandings of 'culture' but also the broader geopolitical context in which such developments are occurring. Through meticulous descriptions and analysis of public women's practices, I try to distinguish between those practices that are part of the 'habitus'<sup>9</sup> and those that can be read as more subtle forms of resistance, both conscious or unconscious.

Indeed, the aim of this research is to investigate how transformation is actually taking place despite women's incapacity to straightforwardly challenge 'indigenous' politics at a moment when foreign military occupation threaten to trigger a nationalist backlash. One methodological stance is to highlight the inherently ambiguous and complex ways in which women respond to gendered system of domination. My decision to engage with ambiguity (and as a natural methodological consequence, with descriptive thickness) was informed neither by an overly optimistic stance that wants to see 'agency' everywhere, nor was it motivated by a fear of falling into theoretical extrapolations that tend to fix constantly shifting realities. Rather, it is because resistance cannot be summarized by actions solely taking place within organized forms of opposition to power that 'complexity' becomes a necessary tool of analysis. Attempting to come to grips with complex and ambiguous forms of 'resistance' requires more than simply reiterating a post-modern statement about the constantly shifting nature of social realities in a globalized world. It requires an analytical stance that is also a moral and ethical posture in which the 'victimization' of subaltern groups is rejected and their creative

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of 'habitus' developed by Bourdieu (1977, 77) refers to ways in which representation explains behaviour through 'a whole body of wisdoms, sayings, common places, ethical precepts and at a deeper level, the unconscious principles of the ethos (...) which determines 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' conduct for every agent'. These differences are never spoken about or taught.

ways of achieving the expression of discontent, even in the most oppressive and brutal circumstances, is acknowledged. In Sherry Ortner's words (1995, 187):

(...) The question of adequate representation of subjects in the attempt to understand resistance is not purely a matter of providing better portraits of subjects in and of themselves. The importance of subjects (whether individual actors or social entities) lies not so much in who they are and how they are put together as in the projects that they construct and enact. For it is in the formulation and enactment of those projects that they both become and transform who they are, and that they sustain or transform their social and cultural universe.

Ortner's insistence on the concept of 'project' is, I think, useful as it helps to foresee how the practices of particular individuals carry in themselves a potential for broader social transformations. The everyday oppositional practices of individual Afghan women are revealing of this potential. When a female student practiced Kung Fu in an underground club, when a woman's rights activist wore *chadari* to talk to religious leaders in rural areas or when a female MP refused to appear on TV in order to have free hands for backstage political negotiations, all these women struggled to transform their social and cultural universe and to create new spaces for themselves.

Since the late 70s, a body of feminist literature (Rosaldo 1980, Moore 1988, Strathern 1987) has been concerned with the ways anthropology has traditionally represented women and culture. This work has encouraged feminist anthropologists to study historical processes through which women contest, resist and manipulate social structures and cultural representations. Many of these studies have however tended to analyse agency in terms of 'strategies', or 'negotiations' rooted in individual 'consciousness' (Nelson 1984). These formulations are problematic for several reasons. First, the underlying assumption is that 'post-modern' actors are objective-driven, rational, and individualistic. Second, this model tends to work with the view that power asymmetries are monolithic instead of multidimensional. Finally, this approach does not account for more subtle and ambiguous forms of resistance through which women 'trying to get the better of a repressive system, may in other ways be acquiescing to it' (Cowan 1990: 15). The women I present in this work belong to different ethnic, social, generational and religious groups. If as women, they all must, to various degrees, engage with certain cultural ideas of womanhood, they neither share a common 'political consciousness', nor a common experience of 'oppression'.

I share with Sherry Ortner (1995), Abu-Lughod (1990) and other feminist anthropologists (Cowan, 1990: 14) the view that in order to take 'resistance' seriously, a

theoretical move away from the oppression/resistance dichotomy and a more problematized approach to 'agency' are necessary. In this sense, the work initiated by Michel Foucault (1977; 1976) is an important step towards a more critical analysis of power. Foucault argues that far from being unidirectional, power is instead asserted through dominant discourses (particularly the humanistic discourse of Enlightenment that enabled the emergence of the human sciences) as well as a set of non-verbal disciplinary techniques that form what he calls a 'microphysics of power'. For him, subjectivity is the product of this power/knowledge combination: what one feels, thinks or desires is filtered through discourses intimately linked to practices of power as well as disciplinary technologies which combined together, give shape to 'docile bodies'. In addition, 'as Foucault's work on sexuality (...) suggests, relations of domination can be expressed in the midst of pleasurable activities, with the apparent consent of the dominated' (Cowan, 1990: 16). What Foucault does not consider, however, is how the discourses and practices that forge subjectivity do in turn get transformed by the varied subjectivities they produce. Foucault provides an interesting insight into the socio-historical production of subjectivity but he fails to explain the mechanisms through which historical change occurs (Benhabib 1992, Fraser 1989).

Political thinkers such as Williams and Femia (quoted in Cowan, 1990: 14) have counterbalanced the Foucauldian pitfall by proposing to look at power through a more dynamic approach. In her ethnography of 'dance-events' in Northern Greece, Jane Cowan (1990: 15) uses Williams and Femia's re-readings of Gramsci to define the multiple power dynamics that shape everyday gender practices, especially in the context of pleasurable social activities such as dance parties. She argues that the Gramscian concept of 'hegemony' has too often been understood as the maintenance of domination through the cultural manufacturing of consent among subaltern groups, when it actually encapsulates more subtle possibilities of resistance as well as accommodation. With Williams and Femia, she sees 'hegemony' as a process that 'powerfully penetrates individuals' senses and their senses of themselves, yet it is never total or totally determining' (1990: 15). The work of 'hegemony' involves the implicit and embodied production of meanings that are known and felt but not necessarily articulated.

Along similar lines, Scott argues that hegemony is never total and that subalterns retain a critical perspective on their domination. In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott (1985) explores secretive verbal and practical acts of resistance in contexts where the 'weak' cannot afford to openly confront power holders. He does this by carefully listening to subtle criticisms, parodies, jests, and so forth, embodied in expressive speech and

folkloric performance. This is methodologically important, since it widens the range of evidence for detecting actions that go against the will of superordinate groups.

Scott's account of everyday forms of peasant resistance shows how relations of power are characterized by a dual transcript (1990). The 'official transcript' asserts and legitimizes the position of superiors and strengthens the mechanisms by which subordinates are controlled. These mechanisms are enacted through face-to-face interactions between subordinates and superiors. However, all 'official transcripts' have their invisible counterparts, what Scott calls 'hidden transcripts'. These transcripts are realized 'back stage', where dissenting voices can safely express themselves. Only in situations of despair do the 'weak' resort to open rebellion or revolutionary activities. Most of the time, the 'weak' use hidden transcripts as a safer coping strategy.

Another important contribution Scott makes to 'resistance' studies is to demonstrate that dominant and subordinate discourses are mutually constructed. The 'weak' are not the passive victims of their superiors, but they actively negotiate their position vis-à-vis those who are more powerful. Those who dominate are constrained by the hidden transcripts of their subordinates. Most importantly, situations of domination are never static; the negotiations that take place in any social interaction alter both official and hidden transcripts.

While Scott brings essential nuances to earlier studies of power by highlighting the relational and co-dependent dimensions of relations between superordinate and subaltern groups, he tends to 'romanticize' resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990) by detecting agency in each and every act of subordinate groups. Scott seems more invested in identifying heterogeneous practices of resistance than in explaining the social meaning and theoretical status of such acts. What is somehow lacking in this analysis is a deeper engagement with the different layers that constitute subordinates' subjectivities which limit or, on the contrary, enable them to act in specific ways. By assuming that all subordinates are able to strategize, challenge and negotiate their position, Scott depicts the figure of a rational peasant who stands outside the field of hegemonic effects. Such a picture not only tends to essentialize the 'subaltern' by producing an image of a homogenous and fixed group but it also ignores other forms of protest, dissent or opposition that do not necessarily involve calculated manipulations. His concept of 'double transcript' is somehow too neat and rigid to account for more subtle and more multiple forms of resistance.

De Certeau's notion of 'oppositional practices of everyday life' is close to Scott's 'everyday forms of resistance', yet I find the former much more illuminating than the

latter. Indeed, De Certeau is less interested in detecting agency in everyday practices than in analyzing them as potential sources of social transformation. He therefore distinguishes between *strategy*, 'a calculus (or the manipulation) of relations of force which becomes possible whenever a subject of will and power (a business enterprise, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated' (1980, 5) and *tactic*, 'the calculated action which is determined by the absence of a proper place' which he identifies as 'the art of the weak' (1980, 6). Tactics, according to De Certeau, are utilised by individuals to create space for themselves in environments defined by strategies. In his view, the everyday life works by a process of impinging on the territory of others, recombining the rules that already exist in culture and society in a way that is influenced, but never wholly determined, by those rules. De Certeau's interest is more focused on the workings of transformation, the openings and foreclosures of social space for political intervention, the subtle change of meaning in dominant discourses, than it is focused to the expression of 'agency' among the subalterns, as it is the case in the work of Scott.

The difference between Scott and De Certeau might sound minor, but I find it important for a study of resistance that is careful to avoid both 'ethnographic refusal' (Ortner 1995) and 'the romance of resistance' (Abu-Lughod 1990). I understand the women's practices I have presented in this work as occupying precisely the complex space created by these marginal forms of opposition. When some dormitory girls walked the narrow alleys of *Kute-Sangi* bazaar with colourful square veils and make-up, when women's rights activists wore *chadari* to travel to rural areas and talk to religious leaders, or when female politicians reclaimed the rhetoric of the *jihad* for themselves, they all struggled to reconfigure the rules that influenced their lives. But by doing so, they also experimented with the boundaries of the social order and explored the possibilities of social transformation. These direct and indirect acts of defiance, far from being heroic gestures motivated by the broader political agenda of a given formal social movement, were everyday 'tactics' (in the sense of De Certeau) utilized by women to create space for themselves. However, the extreme ambiguity and complexity of these tactics reflects the narrow scope of possibilities opened to women in the 'post-war/reconstruction' era. I would ultimately argue that the sole description of these micro-practices says as much about the 'system' itself as it reveals the inner subjectivities of these ordinary women.

The question that remains to be formulated in the context of such an observation is how does transformation occur within a system that tends to reinforce gender hierarchies? To ask this question is to ask if women's capacity to open themselves to new

worlds and imaginaries is a strong enough inclination to actually achieve change in the 'real' world. It is also to ponder the possibilities and limits of feminist transformation.

Poststructuralist scholars such as Derrida (1978), Foucault (1972) and Lacan (1966) have associated the formation of subjectivity with the acquisition of language. Language, they argue, gives meaning to who we are in the world by rooting subjects in a symbolic order that forms the very ground of culture and social relations. We may wish to make our language our own, but we must first recognize that we are moulded into speaking subjects by language and that language shapes our perceptual world. The categories produced by discourses, Foucault argues, are the fundamental instruments of regulatory regimes. For poststructuralist feminists (Cixous 1976, de Lauretis 1984), because culture and ideology are shaped by language, traditional forms of discourses are necessarily modulated and codified by patriarchal cultural values. Since language fails to acknowledge women's experiences and dispossesses women of their own subjectivity, women's relation to language is inherently wounded. As subjects, i.e. as beings capable of discourse, women can only speak through the disruption of language, through gaps that point to what is silenced and suppressed in dominant male representations.

This being said, to acknowledge the structural limitations and constraints to women's political expression does not amount to rejecting all the other transformative possibilities that language offers. Since language is not a stable object, which exists outside its realization by a subject, to speak means that one is constantly in the process of comparing signifiers in order to give them signification. As much as our interactions are shaped by language, language is also transformed by interaction. Even in the context of neo-colonial Afghanistan, where gendered discourses are overdetermined by the exclusion of women, individual women are able to disrupt dominant representations and alter the meanings of dominant discourses.

The idea that language reveals as much as it conceals is the standpoint from which feminist theorist Judith Butler has started to explore the possibilities of gender transformation. Because speech is fundamentally 'performative' and 'excitable', i.e. vulnerable to subversive appropriation and re-citation (Butler 1997), it may be wrested from its prior contexts and cited against its utterer's intentions and expectations. Transformation therefore occurs in the 'unanticipated future of signs', through the ever sliding of meaning. In this thesis, I attempt an ethnographic analysis of how these processes are accomplished in everyday practice. I show how women shake up mainstream conventions from within and manoeuvre around social expectations of women's silence by writing up poetry, mobilizing emotional repertoires, making different

uses of their bodies and reclaiming narratives of martyrdom and *jihad* (chapter 7). These practices are significant precisely because they are displayed within a shared universe of meaning and because their iterability triggers new forms of representation and knowledge.

## 5. Veiled performances

Afghanistan is a strongly patriarchal society in which men's control over women is a matter of honour. Honour's code therefore imposes rights and duties to both men and women. A woman preserves her family's honour by observing '*pardab*' while a man's honour (*namus*) is preserved by his ability to control women. A man unable to exercise such a control over female members of his family is pointed at as '*be-namus*' and a woman breaking the rules of '*pardab*' is called '*be-pardab*', both terms meaning: 'without honour', the worst insult an Afghan can ever receive (chapter 6).

If the code of honour is universally followed in Afghanistan, its modalities vary greatly according to various factors. Veiling practices in general, and the wearing of the *chadari* in particular, present many variations. Western representations of the *chadari* as an instrument of women's subordination have negated the complex and various meanings it acquired when used by women from different regions, ethnicity, age and class. Originally used by urban upper class women to differentiate themselves from working-class women, the wearing of the *chadari* has been made compulsory for all women by the Taliban in an attempt to institute an 'authentic' Islamic state.

Turned into a symbol of women's oppression after the Western invasion of Afghanistan, the 'first fashion show after the Taliban' organized in a luxury hotel in Kabul in July, 2006 showcased a model under a *chadari*, lifting her veil at the end of the catwalk. The designer was an Afghan woman from the Diaspora in exile in the States recently returned to Kabul, all the models and most of the audience were foreigners. The image was strong and the event soon made the headlines of Western newspapers (BBC-News 2006), journalists making comments on the important sign of progress and 'normalization' the fashion show represented in the war-torn country. The commonplace idea that associates women's public visibility with progress and normality was again reiterated, despite the fact that for 'security' reasons, no Afghan woman had come forward on the catwalk.

The work of social scientists who have studied Muslim societies shows that the issue of the veil cannot be discussed out of context, without taking into account, in

addition to the particular ‘culture’ in which it appears, the social, political, historical and personal developments that give meanings to women’s covering. Nilüfer Göle (1996), among other academics who have researched this topic, encourages us to locate debates around the ‘veil’ in the specific history of Muslim societies’ encounters with colonial powers. These encounters, she argues, implied complex negotiations and struggles between local and foreign elites, often resulting in policies aiming at reshaping the social landscape under a more ‘modern’ fashion. However, social engineering was rarely achieved through simply copying the West. Oftentimes, these negotiations gave birth to hybrid and locally processed versions of ‘modern’ models of social organization and practices.

Afghanistan did not escape this rule. The history of the veil in Afghanistan is a product of its involvement with the West; it had never been considered as an issue that required public discussion before this encounter. Under the rule of King Amanullah (1919-1929) women for the first time in Afghan history were encouraged to unveil and follow the model of Queen Soraya, the first Afghan Queen to appear unveiled in public (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003). But even under these circumstances upper class women of that era utilized the veil to accommodate their cultural beliefs. In elite circles, veils became smaller or women started wearing hats to cover their hair, while adopting some elements of Western fashion like skirts falling under the knee as opposed to the long tunics over large trousers than women traditionally wore. Similar practices were encouraged under the reign of Zaher Shah. Those fashions were symbols of class distinction and could be



observed among a very small segment of Afghan urban elite. At the same time, the cosmopolitan background of the elite was key to the move towards more Western style codes of dressing (Dupree 1973).

Under the Soviet military occupation, the process of unveiling women turned into a large-scale operation, no longer confined to the urban upper class. It was accompanied by forced secularization and compulsory enrolment in literacy programs. Women’s bodies became more than ever before sites of political struggle (Zulfacar 2006). The Russian occupiers used the argument of the ‘civilizing

mission' as one of the justifications to invade the country and include it into the Soviet Union. In this context, the veil was seen as a sign of backwardness and it was therefore considered as a priority to encourage women to take it off. In a political book published by the PDPA in 1984, Babrak Kamal, general Secretary of the PDPA Central Committee, states: 'Now, men and women are working side by side to defend the gains of the Revolution and extract the country from its backwardness' (Government of Afghanistan 1984). The statement is illustrated by a photograph of a female factory worker, unveiled, wearing make-up and a dress of Western fashion (see picture page 43): the embodied symbol of a country that had reached modernity.

Such a discourse naturally fuelled feelings of humiliation and was soon to produce its opponents. In the countryside, women displayed resistance by keeping their veil and using it to support the *jihad*. The veil became an instrument to hide weapons, to carry strategic messages to various *mujahedin* factions and to distribute anti-soviet publications. In Kabul, women's veiling became a sign of protest against the occupation (Zulfacar 2006, 39). Even during the same time period, the veil carried different political meanings according to women's varied positions. For instance, in the refugee camps under their control, the *mujahedins* enforced women's total covering under *chadari* in an attempt to establish strict Islamic rules. Religious decrees imposed on women by the Taliban were only a step further in the march towards the establishment of a 'true' Islamic State, free from Western imperialism. The meaning of women's veiling cannot be fully understood without taking into account the unequal power relations that marked Afghanistan's encounter with the West as well as the contrasted social positions of individual women.

This study aims to examine the new meanings of women's covering in the current political climate. Afghan women are once again positioned at the interface of three forces: personal aspirations, social expectations from both Islam and the Western occupiers and material realities. In addition to those forces, the manoeuvring of their public appearance is also shaped by the memory of a double trauma: the Soviet occupation and Islamic fundamentalism. For most women, the anonymity provided by the *chadari* is currently of paramount importance to ensure personal safety. This is the reason why when, in 2005, hundreds of Kabul war widows demonstrated against the kidnapping of Italian aid worker Clementina Cantoni, it was a flock of blue *chadari* that invaded the streets (BBC News, 2005). In the same way, many female MPs continue to wear *chadari* when visiting their home province. They stress safety and convenience as the major reasons for their covering. 'I was one of those women who advocated against the

compulsory wearing of *chadari* under the Taliban', a female MP once told me, 'and now I tell women from my province to wear it again to protect themselves (against commanders' militias)' (Interview - MP5, 10/03/2007).

But despite the very volatile political climate, pockets of admissible spaces have started to appear in Kabul. In the shopping malls and beauty salons of *Shar-e-Naw*, on the University campus, in the residential areas of *Qala-e-Fatullah*, a few women have started to appear wearing square veils tied up under their chin or *chadar* of various colours. Younger ones have adopted blue jeans and knee-length black blouses of Iranian design. The arrival of fashion products from Iran and India on the local market has created opportunities for women to experiment with their public appearance. However, the women who are the most attentive to fashion are the younger educated ones, who have lived in exile during the Afghan wars and who have not experienced the double trauma of older women. For these young women who have recently returned from Iran or other countries from the Middle East, displaying a 'modern' persona is of utter importance. Female University students who have lived abroad and have brought with them new fashion items and consumption habits do not want to be associated with the girls who dress up more traditionally and whom they jokingly call 'Taliban'. Displaying a fashionable yet Muslim self is for them a way to keep the independence they have gained abroad. By contrast, for the girls who have experienced fear under the Taliban, fashion and cosmetics are seen as tools to attract men's attention; they are therefore a challenge to non-make-up-wearing girls' credibility in their claim to deserve the same education as boys (chapter 4).

The complex body politics that shapes women's veiling practices underlines that women's covering is situational and mostly voluntary. Veiling is part of negotiations of power between women and men but also among different women. Choices of veils are the result of processes by which women evaluate, negotiate and weight the appropriateness of their appearance according to the different circumstances they encounter. It is as much a work of impression management as it is a work of self-construction. In Nilüfer Göle's words, 'veiling is a discursive symbol that is instrumental in conveying political meanings' (1996, 6). Looking at women's discourses around the veil and women's bodywork is key to understand the negotiations taking place at the interface between Islam and the West in the 'post-war/reconstruction' context.

## 6. Modernity and its discontent

### *a. Modernization and the West*

Modernity is not a new word in the Afghan political culture. It refers to particular moments of the Afghan history when modernization theory exercised a powerful influence on the Afghan intelligentsia and political elite. The word has no Dari equivalent but is endowed with a particular aura in intellectual circles especially among the more cosmopolitan ones that have been directly or indirectly exposed to other modernization projects conducted in the region - in Iran, Syria or Turkey. Modernization refers to a set of values derived from the Enlightenment according to which people are part of a natural order. In this view, workings of human society are subject to natural laws that can be discovered by scientific enquiry; society can then be moulded for the benefit of individual men and women. Historical progress can be universally achieved through technological innovation, the ultimate outcome of rational reason.

In the 1920s, the presence of Afghan intellectual Mahmood Tarzi in the close entourage of King Amanullah Khan was critical in initiating major reforms that would conduct Afghanistan on its long journey towards modernization (Gregorian 1967). However, unlike in Europe where modernization was the result of endogenous processes of industrialization, production and class conflict, Afghan modernization was the result of exogenous influences exercised by the elite. For these early modernizers, social engineering through women's emancipation from the traditional Islamic way of life was pivotal in making Afghanistan 'catch up' with more modern and developed countries. However, social reforms initiated by Amanullah Khan on his return from his trip around Europe in 1928 in a country still not united as a nation, were received with great resistance in rural areas where tribal leaders felt challenged in their authority. For these segments of society, modernization was synonymous with the corruption of the values, principles and morals that were constitutive of *Afghanyiat* (Afghan-ness) (Dupree 1973).

Despite the more careful manner with which King Zaher Shah continued the agenda of reforms initiated by Amanullah, the model chosen remained similar. Institutions, ideas and manners that the King promoted were the reflection of his overt admiration for 'modern' Europe (Cullather 2002, 521). In Kabul National Theatre, comedians performed Shakespeare and Moliere's plays to the great delight of the royal family and Kabul upper middle class. In social gatherings as well as at the workplace, segregation of the sexes and women's veiling started to disappear (Interviews – Makai-Shah 12/09/2007, Seraj 07/10/2007). As the lifestyle of the urban working-class

gradually tended to copy the West, life in rural areas remained largely untouched by these developments. Kabul and to a lesser extent other cities, became isolated islands in a society that remained predominantly rural. In the countryside, the government and Kabul inhabitants who received the greatest benefits from the reforms and the modest industrialization were seen as morally corrupt (Emadi 1991, 229).

The Red Army's invasion of Afghanistan in 1981 was seen as the concrete evidence of the corrupt nature of the ruling class (Dupree-Hatch 2001). Here, as in other countries under imperial domination, Russians used the argument of the necessity to civilise and modernize a tribal society to justify their military intervention. Afghanistan's violent encounter with foreign occupiers revealed that its relationship to the 'developed' world had never been based on equality. Reforms conducted by the Communist government, such as secularization and women's emancipation, placed the West as a reference point of modernity. The Revolution's objectives had to do with extracting the country from the inherent 'backwardness' in which it had been kept by tradition and religion. Individual men and women's forced enrolment in literacy programs and Defence Committees of the Revolution while regime opponents were tracked, arrested and tortured turned the experience of modernization into a painful experience of humiliation (Barry 2002).

The resistance that emerged in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan and in Afghanistan's rural areas is to be understood in the light of these developments. *Mujahedin* groups were not simple 'freedom fighters' supported by the US in the context of the Cold War. Far from the romantic caricature of mystical holy warriors untouched by modernity Western journalists made of them, the *mujahedins* were on the contrary pure products of modernity. To get a greater sense of the insidious exchanges that existed between the resistant groups in Peshawar and the rest of the world, the work of earlier anthropologists such as Pierre and Micheline Centlivres (2007), Nancy and Louis Dupree or David Edwards is worth re-reading. In an article of *Cultural Anthropology* published in 1994, Edwards makes an interesting account of his first encounter with the *mujahedins* from the 'interior'.

It is cool in the mountains, cool enough that the few people I pass wear their shawls wrapped tightly around their shoulders. Climbing a short hill on the outskirts of the village, I see a mullah with a billowy white turban seated in the chair of a two-barrel Dashika antiaircraft gun. The Dashika is a Soviet design, but markings on the gun indicate that it is of Chinese manufacture. These guns are shiny and new and only recently arrived by camel caravan across the Pakistani frontier. The mullah is young-late-twenties-and he scans the sky for signs of Soviet MiGs. Only a

few weeks before, mujahidin gunners had brought down a MiG-23 not too far from here, and there is fighting going on not too far away; so the mullah is keeping careful watch. As he does so, he listens to a cassette on his Japanese tape recorder of an Egyptian muezzin chanting verses from the Qur'an.

Later in the day, I meet another ex-soldier, a Persian-speaking Tajik from the Kohistan region just north of Kabul (...). Unlike most of the other mujahidin I have met, he has little time for Islam and openly admits to me that he had been a follower of a famous leftist guerrilla leader named Majid Kalakani who had been captured and killed by the government some years before. He talks proudly of his time with Kalakani and tells me of the American sniper rifle that he used to own. It had a scope on it, and once he killed four Soviet tankists as they drove in a convoy down the main road toward Kabul. The beauty of the American rifle, he says, is its small bullets and its silent action. (Edwards 1994, 347)

The Egyptian muezzin singing on a Japanese tape recorder, the Dashika anti-aircraft gun designed in the USSR and manufactured in China, the American sniper rifle...the material details Edwards provides in his description are revealing of the complex global dynamics in which the resistance movement was entangled. Descriptions like these show that the *Mujahedins* stood at the crossroads of modernity, technological innovation and global conflicts. The policies some of the most radical *Mujahedin* groups implemented in the refugee camps they ruled were a direct reaction to 'Westernization'. Constraints imposed on women's movements and public appearances in the camps directly answered to State-sponsored women's emancipation programs taking place in the country.

### *b. Identities for Sale*

As Nilüfer Göle (1996, 12) argues, 'as Western experience and culture basically define the terms of civilization, attempts at modernization in a Muslim country centre around Westernization'. The current 'reconstruction' project, in this sense, presents similar trends with the modernization project conducted under the Communist regime: a focus on centralized instances of governance to carry out important social reforms with the military support of foreign troops. In this project, like in the Communist one, women's public visibility is the benchmark upon which 'progress' is measured. Despite the fact that the political jargon used to foster 'modernization' is apparently less ideologically connoted, the neo-liberal agenda associated to it is far from being value free. Modernity in the post-modern world is associated with individuals' capacity to consume products available on the global market. Becoming a consumer is part of the experience of building a modern identity.

However, the distinction between the Islamic world and the West has too often been monolithically explained in terms of ‘culture’ vs ‘consumption’. As Yael Navaro-Yashin rightly argues (2002, 78), this perspective ‘imagines “culture” to be manifested originally outside political economy, or, that perceives economy to be an ensuing appendage upon an interruption of a formerly pristine domain of culture’. Trans-national economic exchanges in Afghanistan are not a new phenomenon. Located on the Silk Road, Afghanistan has been since around 100 BC an important market place for goods produced in the region (Christian 2000, 14). Historical figures like Alexander the Great, Marco Polo, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane were all familiar with the Silk Road. As merchants and other travellers traversed the Silk Road, they also carried with them culture, art, philosophies and beliefs.

Islam came to Afghanistan on the Silk Road and Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Confucianism all had their itinerant proselytisers (Whitfield 1999, 8). The famous Buddha of Bamyan, the Zoroastrian sanctuaries of Balkh and the Marco Polo Hotel in Kabul are the symbolic reminiscences of these various influences that placed Afghanistan at the crossroads of cultures. If luxury products such as silk and spices were available on merchants’ arrays, so were other products that were consumed as symbolic markers of these different identities.

The history of the origins of the *chadari*, the heavy tent-like veil, is also revealing of the fundamentally hybrid nature of the Afghan culture. According to Lederman (2002: 50), the practice of wearing *chadari* started with upper-class Christian women of the Ottoman Empire. For status, safety and comfort, they were frequently carried about in curtained sedan chairs, which were similar to the sedan chairs of the Hindu aristocracy or European royalty. The chairs enabled riders to avoid the mud of rough roads that would sully their finery. Lederman believes that the complete covering used by women in Afghanistan and in some parts of Pakistan was originally an imitation of upper-class Ottoman women’s style rather than a religious requirement. It is through economic exchanges accelerated by the opening of transport and communication infrastructures that practice such as women’s veiling changed over time.

In his anthology of Afghanistan, Louis Dupree (1973) explains how in the late 1920s King Amanullah Khan made the wearing of Western clothes compulsory in Kabul. Bazaars around the capital city started to sell suits and bowler hats to provincials who wanted to enter the city. In Afghanistan, like in other countries of the Middle East under the influence of ‘Western’ ideas, the elite perceived the wearing of these clothes as a status symbol, a public display of a modern self.

Taking these historical elements into account, the extraction of ‘culture’ from the commodification domain is intellectually artificial. The recent attempt by the National Assembly to ban the use of cosmetics and the wearing of Western clothes shows that ‘culture’, far from being static, belongs to the political domain and is a constant object of contestation. With the arrival of new commodities such as cosmetics, soap operas, mobile phones and Internet on the local market, an area for a redefinition of cultural identity has opened. Besides the traditional *chadari* shops, other shops are now offering a wide choice of veils imported from India, Pakistan and elsewhere. The availability of these products has created opportunities for experimentation among the urban working-class.

In Kabul, young educated women have started to wear bright coloured veils imported from India, trying to model their appearance on the Indian actresses starring in their favourite television series. For them, there is no contradiction between their Muslim faith and their interest in fashion. By wearing fashionable veils, these young women try to answer contradictory social expectations to behave in accordance with Islamic principles and personal aspirations to be read as ‘modern’. The complex body work in which they are engaged is an attempt at reconciling Islam and modernity. Practices of this kind prove that if confrontation between Western and Islamic value regimes seems to be the norm, processes of inter-penetration and hybridity are in actuality prevalent wherever this encounter occurs. Kaka, a taxi driver I often used to travel in the city, was proud to show me the ‘Allah Akbar’ ring tone his son had downloaded for him on his new mobile phone. Each time his phone rang, Kaka caressed his ears and beard with both hands and murmured ‘Bismillah’<sup>10</sup> before answering the call. And I could not help smiling each time I witnessed this scene.

In this thesis, I explore the complex and subtle ways in which women accommodate contradictory expectations relative to their bodies. I specifically insist on the performative and symbolic nature of their engagement with discourses on modernity and tradition, to uncover the processes of social transformation they are able to initiate ‘under the veil’. I also examine how these ambiguous forms of ‘resistance’ participate in the creation of alternative public spaces for women while allowing them to receive a certain degree of public validation.

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<sup>10</sup> Opening phrase of all suras in the Koran, Bismillah means ‘in the name of God’. The short form of Bismillah is used as a part of daily language, normally as a way of underlining sincerity and honesty.

## Chapter 2

### Queen Soraya's Portrait: Making Women, Making the Nation

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Official portrait of Queen Soraya Tarzi © [www.afghanistan-photos.com](http://www.afghanistan-photos.com)

In December 2001, a few days after the Interim Government was officially appointed, the Ministry of Information and Culture opened on its ground floor a hall for press conferences. On the large walls of the conference room, paintings of the different kings of Afghanistan, Timur Shah, Abdur Khaman, Habibullah, Amanullah, Nadir Shah and Zahir Shah were displayed in chronological order. Only on one painting did the king appear with his wife. The painting was a replica of a famous photograph of King Amanullah and Queen Soraya Tarzi. However, the Afghan authorities had slightly modified the original picture of the Royal couple. A veil had been painted over Soraya, a

very large veil in the manner of wedding veils going all the way to the floor, a veil that did not appear on the original photograph.

The addition of such a garment to the portrait of a Queen is more than a simple anecdote. By doing so, the authorities had deliberately rewritten one of the most important pages of the Afghan history. In her wedding veil, the eminent political role Soraya had played during the rule of her husband in the 1920s was simply denied while her wife status was re-emphasized. Her solitary feminine presence in a portrait gallery dominated by masculine political figures could no more be read as a symbol of women's participation in politics.

In the epigraph of his famous novel *1984*, George Orwell wrote: 'Who controls the past, controls the future. Who controls the present, controls the past'. The way history is written and taught influences the way we envision the future. Historical distortions, once discovered, tell a lot about the nature of political regimes and the national projects they support. In the aftermath of September 11, and the downfall of the Taliban regime, the veiling of Soraya's portrait can be understood as a symptom of the critical and contested role women are meant to play in the reconstruction of the Afghan nation.

The need for norms of behaviour and traditional practices to be continually re-invented through the rewriting and reinterpretation of Afghan history hints both at the precariousness of cultural homogeneity within the national community and at the centrality of gender in articulating and perpetuating a sense of national belonging. Somebody has to invoke and perform the 'rituals' that reinforce these norms and to inculcate them into the next generation in order to ensure historical continuity. This 'somebody' is woman-as-mother-of-the-nation (Peterson 1994). Her body is a site of political struggle.

In the portrait gallery of the Ministry of Information and Communication, History pays homage to the great male Afghan leaders who have conducted soldiers to the battlefield against foreign invaders or national development projects to modernize their country. However, little is said about their fellow women. Yet, these untold women's stories bring another layer of understanding to the Afghan past. If Afghan women have endured wars and have suffered from it in a specifically feminine way, as mothers, as wives, as daughters, their life stories show that they were neither simple victims nor agents of resistance. These stories reveal how Afghan women have creatively and actively adapted to rapidly changing situations, in times of war and peace, with pragmatic decisions to ensure survival. Wartime women have struggled to sustain their

families while the infrastructures were reduced to ashes. They have resisted political oppression. Sometimes, they have directly or indirectly participated in the conflict. Under the different reigns of the Afghan kings, women have occupied various positions as housewives, as women's rights defenders, as factory workers, as teachers and nurses.

What did Afghan women do under the different political regimes and during the Afghan wars? Why did they do it? How do they reflect on their past experience? Has war shaped a particular consciousness that informs the way they envision the future of their country? And most importantly, what do these stories reveal about the nature of state-building in Afghanistan?

With Nadje Sadig Al-Ali (2007), I share the opinion that all histories are constructed and therefore, the result of a process by which the narrator selects and reconstructs memories that are by nature, fragmented, partial and subjective. 'Experience, memories and truth do not necessarily overlap' (Sadig-Al Ali 2007, 3). The purpose of telling these untold women's stories is less to reveal the truth about a particular event or social context than to show how different women have experienced different historical moments in different ways. This alternative historical account should bring nuances to the deeply homogenizing discourses on the 'plight of Afghan women' that emerged in the media post 9/11. The women I talked to were from different generations, from different political, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Some of them had left Afghanistan after the *Saur* revolution that brought the communists in power and had recently returned to their home country after the fall of the Taliban regime. These women kept a nostalgic memory of the 60s and 70s and viewed this period as the 'Golden Age' of Afghan history. Some others had been affiliated with the People Democratic Party of Afghanistan and had supported its proactive gender policies. The experiences of these middle and upper middle class women were in sharp contrast with the lives of the rural women who had witnessed the violence with which the government had attempted to enforce its policies. These women's narratives reveal contrasting views towards the different regimes. And as these women recalled their past and tried to make sense of it, they also revealed their visions for the future of Afghanistan.

In this chapter, I explore four major periods of the Afghan history: the emergence of modern monarchies (1920-1973), the communist regime (1979-1992), the civil war (1992-1996) and the Taliban period (1996-2001). I look at these periods from the standpoint of women in order to underline the ways in which the different political regimes have used the 'woman question' in order to articulate ideas about national identity and to develop a vision for the society. Gender politics, expressed in debates

around the importance of ‘remaking women’, to use an expression of Lila Abu-Lughod (1998), were at the core of each of these respective historical moments.

I also relate the ‘woman question’ to the broader process of nation building and the particular relationship between tribal and central institutions of power. As Kandiyoti (2007, 4) points out, ‘issues surrounding the position of women in the Afghan society need to be placed in the context of evolving state-society relations, where the place of Islamic law and practice has been central to political contestation’. The birth of the Afghan state can be dated to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when a confederation of Pashtun tribes was created in order to administer lands they conquered. Because of the paradoxical relations between tribes and state, the Afghan state has mostly remained peripheral (Tapper 1983). Indeed, the creation of a modern State is largely the product of competing imperial influences in the region, providing financial subsidies and arms to the ruling elite in Kabul in an attempt at asserting their own control over the country while providing the State with the means to impose its will on the tribes (Roy 1985).

Indeed, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Afghanistan was under the influence of two imperial powers: Russia in the North and England in the Indian sub-continent. It was the threat of the expanding Russian Empire beginning to push for an advantage in the Afghanistan region that placed pressure on British India, in what became known as the ‘Great Game’. The Great Game set in motion the confrontation of the British and Russian empires — whose spheres of influence moved steadily closer to one another until they met in Afghanistan. It also involved Britain’s repeated attempts to impose puppet governments in Kabul. Afghanistan gradually fell under British control (1880) and was eventually used as a buffer state to prevent the expansion of Russia, until the country obtained its independence in 1919. King Amanullah whose political legitimacy got strengthened by his victory in the struggle for national liberation, engaged the country in a vast program of reforms aiming at modernizing the country (Barry 2002).

### **1. Modern monarchies: 1920-1973**

Often described as the Ataturk of Afghanistan, the entourage of King Amanullah was composed of liberal and nationalist intellectuals whose political views were influenced by modernization reforms conducted in neighbouring countries such as Iran and Turkey. The reign of Amanullah is characterized by a continuous effort to radically transform the face of the Afghan nation (Zulfacar 2006, 30).

Amanullah’s modernization programme was undeniably inspired by the liberal ideas of Mahmud Beg Tarzi, father of Queen Soraya, Amanullah’s wife. Educated in

Syria and Turkey, son of the famous poet Gulham Mohammad Tarzi, Mahmud Beg Tarzi is one of the most influential intellectual and nationalist figures of his time. The Tarzi family was forced in exile by Amir Abdur khaman Kan after Gulham Mohammad broke with the Amir over his strictness and brutality towards his enemies (Dupree 1973, 437). The Tarzi family only returned to Afghanistan in 1903. In 1911, Mahmud Tarzi founded a modernist-nationalist newspaper, the *Siraj-ul-Akhhbar-I Afghan* (The lamp of the news of Afghanistan). His writings, influenced by modern interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence, advocated for modern education while denouncing western imperialism together with the timid liberal reforms initiated under the reign of Habibullah (Dupree 1973, 440).

Exposed to the new gender policies implemented in other Middle Eastern countries where he had travelled during his years of exile, Tarzi became a strong supporter of women's rights in his own country. He believed in women's ability to participate in public life, claimed that fully 'educated women were an asset for future generations, concluded that Islam did not deny them equal rights' and that women should be therefore entitled to become full citizens (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003, 4). One section of his newspaper was dedicated to women's issues under the title 'Celebrating Women of the World' and edited by his wife, Asma Tarzi (*Ibid* 2003, 3). But in spite of its liberal approach towards the position of women in society, authoritarian modernism to maintain the monarchy, creation of a centralised state, and safeguarding the independence of the country constituted the core themes of the newspaper.

#### *a. The Reign of Amanullah: 1919-1929*

As soon as the independence was achieved, Amanullah recruited Tarzi, his influential father-in-law, as his Minister of Foreign Affairs. Soraya Tarzi was King Amanullah Khan's only wife, which broke centuries of polygamous tradition. Her presence in the Portrait Gallery reveals that she was more than the wife and the daughter of eminent politicians. Indeed, Soraya played a central role in redefining the position of women in the Afghan society, at a major moment of social change and nation building.



Queen Soraya and King Amanullah in England, 1928 © www.afghanland.com

When the prince became Amir in 1919 and subsequently King in 1926, the Queen had an important role in the evolution of the country, always close to her husband. He had her take part in all national events. He once said, 'I am your king, but the minister of Education is my wife, your Queen.'<sup>11</sup> Queen Soraya was the first Muslim sovereign to appear in public together with her husband. She participated with him in hunting parties, riding on horseback, and in some Cabinet meetings. She appeared in the King's lodge during Military Parades.

King Amanullah Khan publicly campaigned against the veil, against polygamy, and encouraged girls' education not just in Kabul but also in the countryside. At a public function, Amanullah said that "Islam does not require women to cover their bodies or wear any special kind of veil." (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003, 4). At the conclusion of the speech, Queen Soraya tore off her veil in public and the wives of other officials present at the meeting followed her example.

Throughout her husband's reign, Queen Soraya, wore wide-brimmed hats with a diaphanous veil attached to them (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003, 4). This exhibition of modern feminine fashion, inspired from Europe, became part of national rituals aiming to symbolically bolster the idea of progress and modernization. For instance, the Queen's visit to Turkey in 1929 made the headlines of *Cumhuriyet*, an Istanbul daily paper sympathetic to the goals of the new Republic's modernizing regime, in which photographs of her wearing a sleeveless summer dress, with hair, face and shoulders

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<sup>11</sup> Mahmud Tarzi official website. <http://www.mahmudtarzi.com/MahmudTarzi/InAfghanistan.asp>. Accessed in March, 2008.

uncovered were displayed (Holly-Shissler 2004, 113). The circulation of images of upper-class women dressed in Western clothes and their public visibility at official ceremonies represented a radical step in a society where most women had historically been segregated from men and preserved from the gaze of outsiders. However, the introduction of women in public space and public life was undertaken to serve ends other than the development of each woman's autonomy. According to Zulfacar (2006, 31) corruption and governmental injustices practiced in rural parts of the country rendered these public ceremonials outrageous to villagers.

Many women from Amanullah's family publicly participated in organizations and went on to become government officials later in life. For instance, the *Anjuman-i Himayat-i-Niswan* (Association for the Protection of Women) was established in 1928 by Seraj al-Banat and Queen Soraya to encourage women to demand the rights provided by King Amanullah's reforms of marriage customs and restrictive social practices, and advocacy of women's education (Dupree 1973).

With the help of Queen Soraya, women were encouraged to get an education and in that attempt, 15 young women were sent to Turkey for higher education in 1928. Soraya was very instrumental in enforcing change for women and publicly exhorted them to be active participants in nation building. In 1926, at the 7th anniversary of Independence, Soraya delivered the following message in a public speech (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003, 4): 'It (Independence) belongs to all of us and that is why we celebrate it. Do you think, however, that our nation from the outset needs only men to serve it? Women should also take their part as women did in the early years of our nation and Islam. From their examples we must learn that we must all contribute toward the development of our nation and that this cannot be done without being equipped with knowledge. So we should all attempt to acquire as much knowledge as possible, in order that we may render our services to society in the manner of the women of early Islam.'

These societal reforms were further accelerated following a six months trip around Europe Soraya and Amanullah made in 1927-1928. On this trip Soraya and Amanullah visited Rome, Paris, Brussels, Bern, Berlin, London and Warsaw. They received honorary degrees from Oxford University. The Queen spoke to a large group of students and leaders. She was photographed dressed up in Western clothes, without a veil, dining with foreign men and having her hand kissed by the leader of France.

On their return, the Royal couple initiated a programme of new reforms, including the creation of a constitutional monarchy, an elected assembly, a secular judiciary, and most significantly, compulsory education for both sexes and plans for co-

educational schools. Amanullah also encouraged women to unveil and asked his wife Soraya to show the example, by officially appearing without a veil during the *Loya Jirga* (Grand Assembly).

However, the European tour of the Royal couple was received with hostility in their own country (Alimajrooh 1989, 94). While Soraya and Amanullah were touring Europe, conservative forces at home began a campaign condemning their personal life and their modernization programs as anti-Islamic. Images of the Queen, unveiled and wearing Western clothes, presumably distributed by the British eager to destabilize a regime that had defeated them during the third Anglo-Afghan war, circulated in the tribal regions of Afghanistan (Ahmed-Gosh 2003, 5). According to Dupree (1973, 452), ‘Amanullah stuck at the roots of conservative Islam by removing the veil from the women, by opening co-educational schools and by attempting to force all Afghans in Kabul to wear Western clothing’.

As the reform increased in momentum, resentment grew among conservative religious leaders. The revolt, probably helped by the British smarting from the defeat in 1919, quickly spread and a tribal army moved on Kabul, recruiting supporters on its way. The King’s neglect for the creation of a national army to support his programs at a moment when Afghanistan was barely united in a sense of nationhood left him disarmed, with no choice but flight (Dupree 1973, 450). Despite his last minute attempts to negotiate with tribal leaders and his efforts to tackle public discontent by withdrawing some of his reforms, Amanullah was finally overthrown and replaced by a new generation of Kings who avoided pushing the women’s agenda to the detriment of tribal rules. Habibullah II, who ruled for a period of nine months after Amanullah, totally abrogated gender equality laws. Nadir Shah, who ousted him, introduced cautious rights for women. After the reign of Amanullah, it took another thirty years before any further significant moves towards women’s emancipation occurred.

#### *b. The reign of Zahir Shah and the decades of Daoud: 1953-1973*

By the mid-century, massive foreign and technical assistance from the Soviet Union pushed Afghanistan forward on its journey towards modernization. Women were encouraged to participate in the economic effort in order to support the country’s development goals. The 1940s and 1950s saw the first women nurses, teachers and doctors (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003, 6).



The original caption says: 'Rural nurse from village clinic near Kabul' (Planning 1969, 56)

The *Muassasa-i Khayriyya-i Zanan* (Women's Welfare Association, WWA), established by the monarchical state in 1946, was founded by Zaynab Inayat Siraj and Bibi Jan, both members of the royal family. Its members consisted of liberal upper- and middle-class activists. Although it tried to promote unveiling, the emphasis of WWA was to encourage income-generating activities and to modernize women by providing literacy, family planning, and vocational classes. In 1953 it established the journal *Mirman*. In 1975 WWA became institutionally independent and changed its name to the Women's Institute (WI). The WI had branch offices in ten provincial cities and grew to 8,000 members. However, Parvin Alimajrooh (1989, 95) notes that despite its attempts at reaching out rural women by opening offices in the provinces, the organization failed to

take steps outside elite social classes. Kubra Noorzai, the institute's director, was nevertheless elected to the National Assembly under President Daoud, and the organization began to promote gender equality through the state's modernization policies (Emadi 2002, 91–2).

In 1959, the government of King Zahir Shah formally announced the voluntary end of female seclusion and the removal of the veil. However, it was left to individual families to decide how to respond to these greater freedoms and, outside the major urban centres, life for most women remained largely unchanged (Zulfacar 2006, 33). Nevertheless, in the following years, some gradual changes did take place, including the introduction of girls' schools and medical facilities for women, where they could receive training in both nursing and administration. The constitution of 1964 accorded significant rights to women, including the right to vote. The overall participation of women in politics remained however extremely low.

As a result of the slow process of modernization initiated in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the capital city, changes began to take shape in urban areas. With new education and employment opportunities available, the urban population became more stratified. This period saw the emergence of an educated middle class in the major cities of Afghanistan. Women who found employment in the public administration began to develop new viewpoints and expectations. According to Moghadam (1994, 863), 'Many urban women remained illiterate or undereducated, and their activities were restricted to household work. But the situation was different for the daughters of civil servants and other professionals, as they had the possibility of secondary and higher education and work outside the home. In the 1970s the stratum of urban elite women began to grow; these women had (and have) very different lifestyles from those of rural women, working alongside of men in professional, technical and support functions in government services and the private sector.'

In 1965, the people's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a soviet backed socialist organization was formed. The same year, the first women's group, the democratic organization of Afghan Women (DOAW) was created. Its main objectives were to eliminate illiteracy, ban bride price as well as forced marriage.

However, Hafizulah Emadi (2002) notes the reaction that even these limited reforms produced amongst religious conservative. Violent demonstrations took place in the country's major cities, especially in Universities where unveiled women wearing short skirts had acid thrown at them. Conservative religious reactions to women's education

and emancipation were a key feature of the anti-government protests of the 1970s, which finally resulted in the leftist coup d'état of April 1978.

### *c. Cultural and artistic life*

Kabul was a thriving cosmopolitan city with its vibrant artistic, intellectual and cultural life. There were poets, musicians, and writers. There was also an influx of western culture, art, and literature in the 60s and 70s. We had private house parties in *Wazir Akbar Khan*<sup>12</sup>. In our houses, young men and young women got together, listened to the music and talked. On Fridays, we were going for picnics to *Gargha* lake or to *Paghman*<sup>13</sup>. Girls were wearing short skirts. We had movie theatres. We had concerts. We had nothing to make us envy the West.' (Interview - Seraj, 07/10/2007)

The vivid description of Kabul's cultural and artistic spirit by Maboubha Seraj, the niece of King Amanullah resonates with the stories and impressions of the Afghan women who shared with me their experience of the 1960s and 1970s in Kabul. For urban, upper and middle class women, this was a period of openness and freedom. Afghanistan was at peace. Located on the hippie trail, Kabul attracted tourists from Europe and Northern America, searching for spirituality, adventure and cheap drugs. In Kabul, Chicken and Flower streets had shops, cafes, guesthouses and restaurants where Afghans and foreigners met, exchanged and sometimes made friends.



The original caption says: 'Phonograph record store, Kabul' (Planning 1969, 145)

<sup>12</sup> District of Kabul that used to accommodate Afghan high ranking civil servants as well as foreign diplomats in the 60s. Wazir Akbar Khan is now the district where UN and ICRC staff lives.

<sup>13</sup> Gargha Lake and Paghman are located a few miles West of Kabul. These two places still remain today the most favourite picnic spots of middle and upper class families at week ends.

Radio Television Afghanistan broadcasted foreign movies in which new lifestyles were promoted. With the creation of the first national film production company *Afghan Film* in 1965, the Afghan film industry blossomed. It produced documentaries and news films highlighting the official meetings and conferences of the government before it started to produce its first feature films in the 70s. *Radio Kabul*, later on renamed *Radio Afghanistan*, the State owned radio, hosted a whole generation of modern Afghan artists such as Ustad Mohammad Hussain Sarahang, Ustad Farida Mahwash<sup>14</sup>, and Ustad Mohammad Hashem Cheshti (Baily 1988, 81). These master musicians were revered not only in Afghanistan but also in India, Pakistan, and the entire Middle East. King Zahir Shah also promoted dramatic art by creating the National Theatre Company and building Kabul National theatre, today deserted, roofless and in ruins.



The original caption says: 'Radio Kabul announcer during one of the station many daily news program' (Planning 1969, 110)

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<sup>14</sup> Farida Mahwash remains the only female singer in Afghanistan to have received the title of Ustad. This title was awarded by the Ministry of Information and Culture. This was a controversial step, as this honorific title is normally reserved for men. The 1960s and 1970s were the golden age of music, the heyday of *Radio Afghanistan* and Kabul as a cultural centre. Farida Mahwash is remembered as the greatest woman singer of the time. She came from a highly respectable Kabul family. Her mother was a teacher of the Holy Quran, and she started work at the radio station as a typist. Her wonderful voice and exceptional musical abilities were discovered by *Radio Afghanistan's* director of music, and her career as a radio singer was launched.

Gul Makai Shah is a former actress. She left Afghanistan in the Seventies and returned to Kabul in 2001, to become the new director of Kabul National Theatre. She was promised the Theatre would be rebuilt and she would be allocated a budget to launch a new programme. None of these promises were kept. She spent the first two years of her return living in two rooms that had been renovated inside the destroyed theatre, waking up every morning with the dream of seeing this place alive again. As we walked together in the empty rooms of the building, across the stage, Gul Makai Shah recalled the creative atmosphere that characterized the place. Here used to be the dressing room, there a portrait gallery of famous actors and actresses, a bit further, the rehearsal room.

The theatre started in the 60s in Afghanistan, under President Daoud. It used to be a wonderful place. We had a huge audience. Once we had a performance that got fully booked for three months. 700 hundred spectators, every night, for three months. Can you imagine that? The public used to bring me flowers after the show...good things (dreamingly). A beautiful stage. Very professional. Actors were employed by the Ministry of Culture. They received monthly salaries from the Government. (Interview - Makai-Shah, 12/09/2007)

Gul Makai Shah showed me some old photographs of the theatre as well as press articles of this period. When I asked her whether it was socially acceptable for women to be actresses at that time, she laughed and said:

Look at this picture. Here was the lodge for the king's family. And this is King Zaher Shah. The performance was "Mother-in-Law" and I was acting the daughter-in-law in. Next to me is the actress who was playing the mother-in-law. You can see our dresses. We had short sleeves. Now we have to wear *chadari*. At that time we wore maxi, mini, medium and short sleeves. The king's family was coming to see the performances. It was not a problem to recruit actresses. It was...How to say? It was very free! (Interview- Makai-Shah, 12/09/2007)

Gul Makai Shah's narrative certainly provides a good picture of Kabul in the Sixties and Seventies. The capital city always remained a world apart in the Afghan landscape. The lighthearted and liberal atmosphere has obviously disappeared nowadays, but in comparison to rural life, Kabul keeps on exhibiting a vague impression of modernity. However, the Kabul Gul Makai Shah and Mahbouba Seraj remember might have been accessible to a minority of middle and upper middle class women benefiting, as we said earlier, from government's reforms and development programs.

This image of 'modernity' the different governments, from Amanullah to Zahir Shah and later on Daoud and the communists, tried to impose remained largely alien to the majority of the Afghan population. Inspired by Turkey, Europe, the USSR, the agenda of reforms, especially on the women's question, kept a foreign taste for the poorer class excluded from the process. This reconfiguration of Afghan identity around values and lifestyles considered as 'foreign' did not help unite the Afghan population and indeed achieved the opposite. The absence of communication and mutual incomprehension between the ruling class and the vast rural majority were largely caused by the secular criteria for modernisation. They meant cultural alienation for those who felt threatened by these new norms, a situation which became acute when a Marxist modernizing elite started to exert its influence within the government from the mid 1960s onwards.

## **2. The Communist regime: 1979-1992**

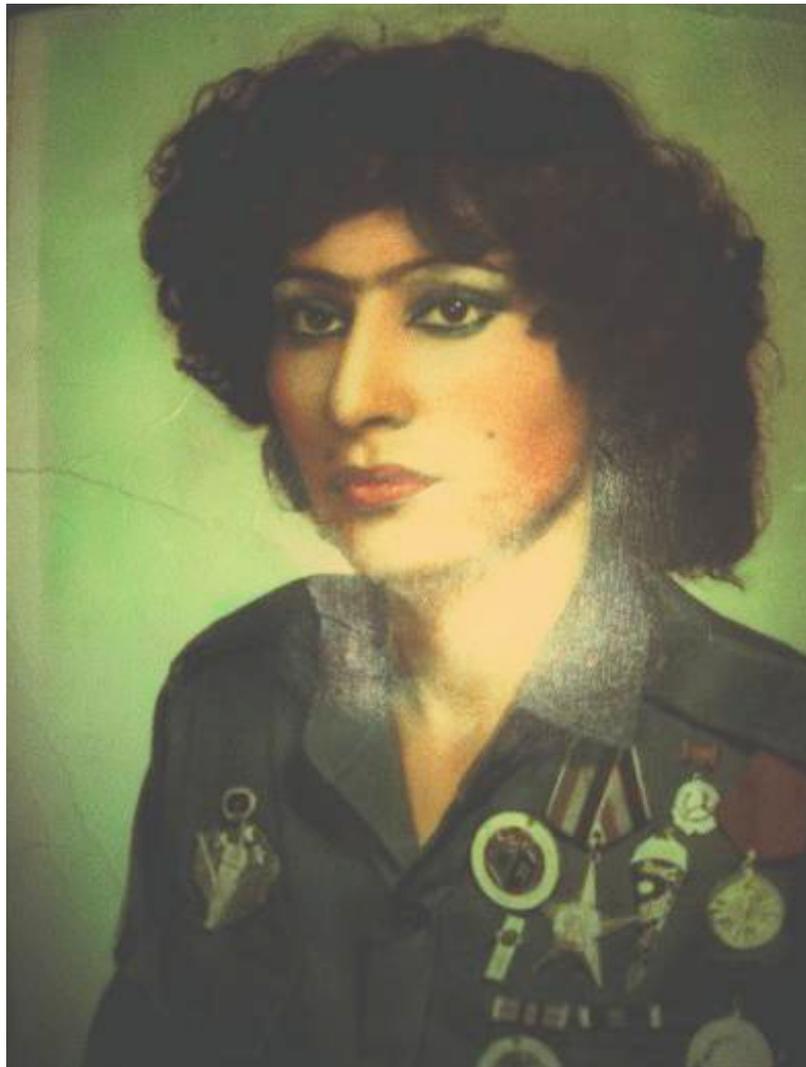
In 1965 the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was formed, a pro-Communist group which may have helped Mohammad Daoud to seize power from his cousin King Zahir Shah and declare Afghanistan a republic in 1973. He was toppled in turn by his former PDPA allies in April 1978 during what is known as the *Saur* Revolution.

The period of the communist government was marked by a proactive approach toward the implementation of gender policies. Decrees were introduced as part of a programme of social and political reforms intended to effect the rapid transformation of a patriarchal society (Moghadam 2004, 454). For instance a decree banned the payment of bride price and gave greater freedom of choice to women in respect of marriage. Another one raised the age of marriage for women to 16 years. In addition, the government launched an aggressive literacy programme aimed at educating women and removing them from seclusion (Alimajrooh 1989, 90). In the city, each family accommodated aspects of modernity compatible with their general lifestyle, which generally meant a certain degree of compliance with patriarchal demands and norms when it came to important decisions regarding female mobility and above all marriage. Such intimate family matters belonged then as now to personal space (*mahram*) and suffer no interference in urban and rural families alike.

During this period, women were present in all major government departments, as well as in the police force, the army, business and industry. Women taught, studied and acted as judges in the Family Court, dealing with issues related to divorce, custody of

children and other family matters. They comprised over 75% of teachers, 40% of medical doctors and almost 50% of civil servants, all of them city based (Emadi 2002). According to Moghadam (2002, 24), in 1980, women represented 65% of the students in Kabul University.

Women were also present in the different ranks of the party and the government, with the exception of the Council of Ministers. The *Loya Jirga* (parliament) counted 7 female members in 1989. The Central Committee of the PDPA, included Jamila Palwasha and Ruhafza (alternate member), a working-class grandmother and ‘model worker’ at the Kabul Construction Plant, where she did electrical wiring (Moghadam 2002, 24). Women were working in security, intelligence, the police. They were employed as logisticians in the Defence Ministry. In 1989, all female members of the PDPA received military training and weapons.



General Khotul Mohammadzai, 1970s (photograph from her photo album)

General Khotul Mohammadzai joined the air force in 1984. From an educated Kabuli family background, she remains the first and only female parachutist in Afghanistan. She views the communist period as a moment when many opportunities were offered to women to start new careers, including in domains that were traditionally reserved to men. In comparison to the civil war and the Taliban regime during which she lost her husband and many other male members of her family, the communist era was for her a period of grace. From her small apartment located in *Makrorayon*, an area of Kabul made of concrete blocks built by the communist government to accommodate civil servants and members of the party, General Mohammadzai turns the pages of an old photo album. On the black and white photographs, she appears in uniform covered with medals, delivering a public speech during a national celebration day, or with her parachutist equipment, stepping in a military plane. She comments:

Everyone in my family was educated. My father never objected to my wish to join the army and to become a parachutist. He even encouraged me because he knew I liked sport and I wanted to serve my country. There were few women in the army at that time. We had a women's organization within the military. But I was the only woman parachutist. (Interview - Mohamadzai 08/04/2007)

The true innovation of the People Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) lay in the women's group, the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW), also founded in 1965 which set about to address specifically every aspect of women's condition, not just limited to marriage, with the aim of turning women into citizens and partners in an egalitarian secular society (Moghadam 1994).



Women's March<sup>15</sup> (Government-of-Afghanistan 1984)

Nevertheless, the distance between reforms on paper and actual practice was considerable. DOAW and its supporters were generally sophisticated cosmopolitan middle to upper-class women with a foreign education- just like the progressive circles around Kings Habibullah or Amanullah with equally limited connection to the rural majority. According to Nancy Hatch-Dupree (1984, 317), women's activists under the communist regime were totally co-opted to 'the purposeful manipulation of the women's movement as an appendage to national politics'. As a result, no strong and well-organized women's movement emerged from this period.

Throughout the various political changes that marked the late 70s and 80s, many of the women I interviewed appear to have been enjoying active and varied social and cultural lives. This was mostly true for the upper-middle-class women whose families had seen some kind of benefits from economic development, either in terms of employment

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<sup>15</sup> Nancy Hatch-Dupree (1984) mentions that the enrolment of women in grand marches was one of the Party's favorite political rituals to foster ideas of progress and women's emancipation. She writes: 'Frequently, these grand marches ended in 'volunteer clean-up' sessions, and the people of Kabul were treated for the first time to the sight of girls wielding brooms, sweeping the streets in public in the company of men' (1984, 318)

or in terms of education for their children. These women associated this period with the liberalization of social relations, dress codes and gender relations as a result of economic policies implemented by the communist government. At that time, Farida, a woman who ran a clandestine school in her apartment located in *Makrorayan* during the Taliban rule, was a teacher in a high school. Her parents worked as civil servants in Ministries. She recalls:

Women, like me, who came from educated and liberal families, stopped wearing the veil. At that time, the Russians built many factories, many infrastructures. We had constant electricity in Kabul. This made a great difference in people's lives. I think that if men have access to jobs, they stop bothering about what their wives and their daughters wear. (Interview - Farid and Farida, 30/01/2007)

However, these women were part of the urban minority who enjoyed a relatively wide range of career opportunities and freedom of movement. In the countryside, the imposition of compulsory education for both boys and girls, the forced enrolment of men and women in 'detachments for defence of the Revolution'<sup>16</sup> and the coercive secularization attempts provoked strong resentment and resistance. In general, the gender policies implemented under the Soviet Occupation were imposed with little sensitivity for local codes and practices, often using heavy-handed tactics to implement programmes.

Oliver Roy (1985) and David Edwards (2002) have maintained that the PDPA coup of 1978 met with violent opposition not so much because of its progressive ideology but because of the brutal way of putting it into practice, which cost the lives of thousands of Afghan citizens. Roy and Edwards argue that the problem was that instead of presenting the reforms in a pragmatic, technical manner, they were given a Marxist packaging that alienated the pious traditionalist population who would have been the principal and not unwilling beneficiaries.

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<sup>16</sup> Detachments for the Defense of the Revolution were created short after the *Saur* revolution. As resistance against the Soviet occupation grew all over the country, in cities as well as in rural areas, the government recruited 'Volunteers' who were given weapons in order to fight against the 'enemies of the revolution perpetrating acts of sabotage'. They took part in guarding industrial enterprises, public buildings and maintaining order (Government-of-Afghanistan 1984, 187).



The original caption says: 'Volunteer detachments for the Defence of the Revolution include urban and rural workers, men and women, middle aged people and young patriots of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Their country has given them arms to fight the enemies of the Revolution and they are defending it without thought of their own life' (Government-of-Afghanistan 1984)

If women like General Mohamadzai or Farida recall the communist period with a sort of nostalgia, other women living under different circumstances, especially in the countryside, have had a drastically different experience. The social reforms imposed by the government caused concerns among the mullahs and tribal chiefs. They viewed compulsory education, especially for women, as going against tradition, anti-religious and a challenge to male authority. As Ahmed-Ghosh points out (2003, 6) this lack of regard for religious and societal sensitivities resulted in massive backlash from the rural population.

The war against the Soviet occupation had a devastating impact on Afghanistan's economy. An estimated five million people fled to Pakistan, Iran and further afield. As a result of the war, social services provided by the government became largely limited to the urban centres. Both the human and economic costs and losses of the war were enormous.

#### *a. Jihad*

Armed by the United States, the different *mujahedin* factions organized resistance from the refugee camps in Pakistan to their villages of origin. Village women participated

in the movement in various ways: by transporting weapons under their *chadari*, installing landmines around their village, looking after the wounded, cooking for the combatants (Hatch-Dupree 1984). An ex-*mujjabin* from Jalalabad who retired from politics when the civil war began, explained to me how he received once a letter from a group of village women asking for weapons in order to be able to participate in combats. Seating next to the fireplace, staring at the dancing flames, he recalled:

I saw some women setting blankets on fire with kerosene and throwing them at the Russian tanks passing by. In Kabul, we used women as messengers. Some of them carried weapons under their *chadari*. Women were cooking for us, baking bread, hiding us in their homes. Without their support, we would not have made it through this war. (Fieldnotes - 13/10/2007)

Naheed Sultan (pseudonym), now a representative of an Eastern province at the National Assembly, is the widow of a commander who participated in the *jihad*. Attached to a *mujjabin* faction under the command of Mojadidi, her husband disappeared when the Taliban took control of the country, leaving his wife and his daughter abandoned to their fate in a Pakistani refugee camp. For her, the period of resistance against the Soviet occupation represents a moment of her life when she was given the responsibility to serve a noble cause.

I am illiterate. I never went to school. I didn't write down about my experience but I learnt a lot of things from life. My best memory is my work beside my husband. I cooked food for 50 to 60 *mujjabin* every day. I saw planes in the sky bombarding our villages. Working with my husband is my best life memory. On one side I had my husband, on the other side I had the *mujjabin* and I was very happy with them. They respected me a lot. (Interview - MP2, 11/09/2007)

Women did not only support the *jihad* but they also encouraged their husbands to go to war. Of the time of resistance against the Soviets, Nancy Dupree (1986, 10) writes: 'During the *jihad* one would often see men coming home from the war to rest with their families in the Pakistani camps. If they were a little slow about going back to the battlefield, the women would push and shame them into doing their duty for the *jihad*. The women therefore played a vital part in the war, for it was their strength that motivated men to keep fighting.'

Women's influence on men to participate in combats can also be found in the pieces of oral poetry Pashtun women exchanged in the Pakistani refugee camps. Women brought in their exile the tradition of *landay*, popular poetic improvisations, brief songs celebrating nature's beauty but also honour and courage. *Landay* is the Pashtun version of

Japanese *haiku*, traditionally written by women. In *Songs of Love and War*, the dissident poet and philosopher Sayd Bahodine Majrouh has assembled some of the *landay* refugee women used to recite in the camps. Many of them are inspired by nationalist and patriotic feelings, encouraging men to take arms against the ‘Infidels’. In the one below, the love of the homeland is the ultimate condition for conjugal love to be realized (Bahodine Majrouh 2003, 45):

*If you truly love me, my love, go off and liberate our land!  
My exquisite and tender mouth will belong to you forever.*

These terse verses summarize a militant women’s perspective on the years of war and exile. They demonstrate how some women got involved in the war and likewise bring out the nostalgia and heartbreak of the refugee experience.

But if resistance was mostly conducted in rural areas where the government had always had a limited access, some urban women also resisted and protested against the Soviet occupation. After the invasion by the Red Army on December, 1979, the great demonstration of April 1980 was organized by women. Girls from the elementary and secondary schools of Kabul, students of the university, teachers, workers, and even homemakers and mothers went out into the streets heading for the government’s palace. Russian tanks broke into the crowd and dozens were killed and wounded. Nahid Sahed, one of the women who had coordinated the protest march, called out at the parchami<sup>17</sup> officer who had his gun on her (Majrouh 2003, 39): ‘Hey, you coward! Since you are incapable of defending your honour you are not a man anymore. Here, take my veil, put it on your head and give me your weapon. We women will be better at defending this country than you are.’ The officer fired and Nahid, mortally wounded, fell. Since then, she has become, with Malalay who conducted Afghan soldiers to the battlefield against the British invaders, the symbol of women’s resistance.

From their participation to the resistance movement, women developed a sense of pride and usefulness. In recognition for their participation in the war effort some of them were given political positions once the *mujahedin* government took over Kabul. Masooda Hamidi (pseudonym) now MP for Kabul province, and member of the United National Front –the most influent political party in the current parliament- wrote *shabname* (clandestine political poem) to support the *jihad*. In 1992, she was appointed

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<sup>17</sup> Member of another faction of the Afghan Communist party.

head of *Shura-i-Zana* (Women's Assembly), an organization in charge of women's affairs, when the troops of Commandant Massoud took Kabul. She explains:

I was a student when the Red Army invaded our country. I was quite young but I remember this period very well. I was writing patriotic *shabname* to denounce the occupation and to encourage people to support the *mujahedin*. Already at that time I was convinced that women could work beside men to defend the country. And indeed, without women's support, the *mujahedin* could not have won this war. (Interview - MP11, 27/06/2007)

### *b. Pul-i-Chakhi*

But conducting such clandestine activities was not without risk. Repression was severe, systematic and merciless. Political opponents were tracked by the secret services, arrested, tortured and executed. Located just east of Kabul, the prison of *Pul-i-Charkhi* became one of the blackest holes in the last quarter-century of Afghanistan's war-torn history. During the years of Soviet and Communist control, hundreds of thousands of prisoners passed through the solid stone walls and into the dark concrete cells, and unknown thousands never came out alive, victims of nightly executions on the military range beyond the prison walls (Barry 2002).

Maboubha Seraj, an Afghan woman recently returned to Afghanistan, is a survivor of *Pul-i-Chakhi*. She left Afghanistan in 1978, a short time after the *Saur* revolution. She and her husband were just married when they were arrested and jailed. After their release, the couple fled Afghanistan and sought asylum first in Germany and finally in the United States, where they lived for more than 20 years. Maboubha's mother was the daughter of the Afghan ambassador in Japan. Her father was King Amanullah's brother, but he never really took part in politics. Her link to the Royal family was sufficient enough for her and her husband to be considered as potential opponents to the Party. Mahboubha describes the *Saur* revolution and the Soviet invasion that followed, as the end of what she now perceives was the 'Golden era'.

I was not particularly pro Monarchy, if you like. As a University student, I was quite attracted to socialist ideas of justice and equality. Students in general have leftist tendencies. I knew there were some problems with Monarchy. Knowing the story from the inside, I was aware that some of the Afghan kings had made irreparable mistakes. But when President Daoud sold our country to the Russians, it became clear that there would be no end to war and suffering. My 20 days of detention at *Pul-i-Chakhi* will remain my worst life experience. (Interview - Seraj, 07/10/2007)

Another woman, Soraya Perlika experienced the similar twist and turns of Afghan politics when the *Khalq* faction of the communist party threw her in the notorious prison. In 1978, when the communists came to power in a coup, Parlika was a member of the new ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, PDPA. She had studied in the Soviet Union in the Seventies and she still speaks quite passable Russian. Accused of fomenting underground sabotage activities with a group of women she had formed, Parlika survived 18 months of brutal treatment until December 1979, when a second coup, backed by Moscow, ousted the *Khalqis* and replaced them with the PDPA's *Parчам* faction. From her months of detention, she keeps the scars of cigarette burns on her arms. However, this horrifying experience did not convince her to leave the country, like most of the other intellectuals who got jailed in *Pul-i-Chakbi* did when they were eventually released.

My father always told me I should help the poor people of my country. I felt this was my mission. So when the government offered me to become the head of the Women's section of the party, I felt compelled to accept. I felt I had to struggle for women's rights. And this is what I have done up to now. (Interview - Perlika, 03/07/2007)

What happened behind the stonewalls of *Pul-i-Chakbi* reflects the dark side of the PDPA's political agenda. Modernization projects conducted under the Communist government were a means to convey an ideology, a particular idea of what new Afghan citizens, men and women, should be like. The social engineering conducted by the regime under the banner of development was meant to gain people's consent for the country's occupation by the Red Army. But the re-moulding of the Afghan nation along secular lines alienated the peripheries and brought out a wide range of tensions associated with social changes perceived as threats to the Afghan culture. In obedience of the Islamic principle to leave lands occupied by 'infidels' millions of Afghans sought refuge in Iran and Pakistan.

### *c. Life in refugee camps*

During this period, Afghanistan became the battlefield upon which the US conducted a proxy war against the Soviet Union (Mackenzie 2001). The Afghan resistance movement was organized around US sponsored conservative Islamist groups under the rubric of the *mujahidin*. The very first refugee camps were probably extensions of military training camps that the Pakistani government built for the opponents of the

left wing and pro-Soviet elements in the Afghan government. Since 1973 (nearly six years before the Soviet intervention) Hekmatyar, Massoud and Rabbani, leaders of the fight against the Soviet army had fled to Peshawar to build up support with the help of the Pakistani government. A number of camps, military in origin, may have been conceived as rallying points around specific warlords with strong fundamentalist leadings, not just as neutral gathering places for refugees (Mann 2005, 8).

According to former CIA director Robert Gates (quoted in Stabile and Kumar 2005), aid to the *mujahidin* began in June 1979, months before the Soviet invasion. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser, in a now famous interview, explained this funding and support prior to any act of Soviet aggression in the following terms: 'According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the *mujahidin* began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan [in] December 1979. But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise: indeed, it was July 3, 1979, that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to 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 was going to induce a Soviet military intervention (...). The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war.'" (Stabile and Kumar 2005, 767).

As in Chile, Guatemala, Indonesia and Congo, the US supported opponents to the pro-Soviet regime, without any regard for their violations of human rights or their reactionary social goals. Warlords such as Gulbudin Hekmatyar, who later became a fervent supporter of the Taliban and who received substantial financial support from the US, were considered by the US as 'freedom fighters' and were trained in military camps in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. "The US not only armed and trained the Islamists, they also poured money into the region: some US \$3 billion, more than any other aid program to insurgent groups, was spent on this effort." (Stabile and Kumar 2005, 768).

Unlike other liberation movements elsewhere, the Afghan *Mujahedin* never encouraged the active participation of women in *jihad*. Women in Peshawar who criticized the politics of the *Mujahedin* were threatened and sometimes killed. This is what happened to Meena, founder of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, who denounced the gender discriminatory policies of the fundamentalist groups together with the Russian occupation of Afghanistan (Moghadam 1994).

Attacks against women did not begin with the Taliban. In the *mujahedin*-ruled refugee camps in Pakistan, women had to face constant restrictions of movement and

life threats. In 1989, a *fatwa* (religious decree) was promulgated against women who worked for humanitarian organizations. Women were also requested to wear the *hijab*, a black garment that covers the whole body. According to the *fatwa*, 'women were not to wear perfume, noisy bangles or Western clothes. Veils had to cover the body at all times and clothes were not to be made of material which was soft or which rustled. Women were not to walk in the middle of the street or swing their hips, they were not to talk, laugh, or joke with strangers or foreigners' (Moghadam 2002, 25). A year later, girls were forbidden to attend school. The US never reacted to these decrees and simply abandoned the Afghans, once their proxy war with the USSR was over.

Farida Azizi was born in Kabul but grew up in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan where her father, a military doctor, was forced to flee with his family after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. She has worked for international NGOs in refugee camps in Pakistan and in Afghanistan and is now the Special Advisor for Afghanistan and the Middle East in the non-profit Vital Voices, a Washington-based group that promotes progress for women in politics, economics and community affairs worldwide. The way she describes the situation of women in the camps reveals many similarities with their situation under the Taliban regime:

My family left Afghanistan in 1980 to seek refuge in Pakistan. The living conditions in the camps were very difficult. We were living under tents; there was no water, no electricity. After a while, when people understood they would not be able to return to Afghanistan soon, they started to build mud houses. People were scared that their young daughters would be kidnapped and raped. That's also the reason why they started to build mud houses. At the beginning, there were no schools, no doctors. Sometimes some Pakistani doctors conducted some vaccination campaigns but that was all. Little by little, people started to move to other cities. In 1983 I think, the first school was built with the support of some NGOs. But the extremists were controlling the camps and they were threatening girls and women who left their houses to attend school or other activities. Each camp was controlled by one party. The camps that were controlled by Heykmatyar, Sayyaf...these men who are now sitting in the parliament, were the worst for the women. They were warning and threatening girls in the streets (...).

The *mujahedin* called themselves 'holy warriors' but in fact they were fundamentalists who were threatening women. Our University was also a political site. Rabani was teaching there. The president of the University forced us to wear hijab, the Arab black covering. They taught us mostly religious topics. They shared the same ideas as the extremists. They taught us the theories developed by their Ulemas. We had to learn these things. We were taught by some Arabic women who did not even know our language. We had to learn verses of the Koran by heart, all in Arabic. Later on, I started a network of activists for peace. We were publishing a magazine called 'Rainbow' with peace messages for school children. Because I understood that the school system in the camps was killing people. You know, during the Soviet regime, in schools children were

learning how to count with bullets and Kalashnikovs. These books were funded by USAID and the University of Nebraska. In our math books, we had to add bullets, rockets and Kalashnikovs. 2 Kalashnikovs plus 2 Kalashnikovs equal four Kalashnikovs. That kind of things. In our history books, we learnt that the *mujjabedin* were good and that the Russians were bad. And I felt this hate for the Russians myself, in my heart. Because I had learnt this hate. But many Russians did not want to be in Afghanistan. They were sent by their government to fight in Afghanistan. They did not want to be there (...).

On the other side, Saudi Arabia had done the same. Saudi Arabia promoted their own version of Islamic law through the schools they supported. We had to learn verses of the Koran in Arabic even though we did not know this language. We had to write in Arabic. We were all brainwashed and we were discouraged because we could not get good marks with exams in Arabic. In the camps, each school had different curriculum, depending on the parties and the support they could get from the different countries. So I became aware I was being brainwashed. I myself felt like killing Russians. We were taught that we had to kill Russians (...). Everyone is using us. We are used because we are illiterate. If we had been educated, we could have defended ourselves. Mullahs can control us because no one has knowledge of Islam. The Iranians are doing the same with the Shiah. Everyone has a responsibility in the long war that has ravaged this country. (Interview - Azizi, 23/10/2007)

As this description demonstrates, the treatment of women served to erase all the differences between modern Islamism and the tribal code. Under *Mujjabedin* control, the camps provided laboratory conditions to experiment with modern forms of gendered repression. The rigorous separation of the sexes was reinforced through the mobilization of men to the cause of *jihad* and military operations. Separated from their male relatives, women were rooted in the camps, under the control of religious and fundamentalist leaders (Olesen 1996). Therefore, the fundamentalist attitude to women could be summarized as a vindictive application of *sharia* within the context of a political programme aiming at the establishment of a totally Islamic state, justified by a literal interpretation of the Koran. Traditional appeals to modesty and self-effacement were turned into systematic persecution of any visible kind of expression of femininity interpreted as anti-Islamic. These policies were implemented by the *Mujjabedin* when they took control over Kabul in 1992, and further reinforced when the Taliban came to power.

### 3. The Civil war: 1992-1996

During the years of Soviet occupation, Kabul had been perceived as the origin of all the country's misfortunes. For the conservative rural-based *Mujjabedin* opposition,

which had been supported by the United States during the Cold War, Kabul and other cities were perceived to be the centres of ‘sin’ and ‘vice’ precisely because of the high visibility of educated, emancipated, urban women. There was a widespread perception that the population of Kabul had collaborated with and had been therefore corrupted by the Soviet regime. Many *Mujaheddin* groups shared the idea that the people of Kabul should be ‘punished’ for their ‘immoral values’ (Kandiyoti 2005). As Tamin Ansari (2002) puts it: ‘When the Mujaheddin finally toppled the last Communist ruler out of Afghanistan and marched into Kabul, it wasn’t just the triumph of the Afghan people against the foreign invaders, but the conquest, finally, of Kabul (and its culture) by the countryside’.

One of the first orders of the new *Mujahbedin* government was that women should be veiled in public. In August 1993, the Government Office of Research and Decrees of the Supreme Court went a step further by issuing an order to dismiss all female civil servants from their post. The decree stated that: “women need not leave their homes at all, unless absolutely necessary, in which case, they are to cover themselves completely; are not to wear attractive clothing and decorative accessories; do not wear perfume; their jewellery must not make any noise; they are not to talk gracefully or with pride and in the middle of the sidewalk.” (Emadi 2002, 124).

The decrees promulgated under the Taliban regime presented the same recommendations. The Taliban did not introduce a radically new regime but officialized dressing codes and social conducts for both men and women, which were anyhow followed by the majority of the population under the different *Mujahbedin* governments, for fear of repression.

The high hopes that greeted the arrival of the new *Mujahbedin* government were quickly dashed as conflict erupted between the different factions in the coalition. Most of Kabul was reduced to rubble, as ceasefires were agreed and then broken and alliances changed, so frontline shifting within the city. There were widespread reports of women being raped, as different factions wrested control of opposing neighbourhoods of the city. Women, who represented the majority of trained teachers and nurses, lost their employment due to the closing and destruction of most infrastructures.

Farida Azizi who had returned to Kabul in 1993 with her family, recalls how the civil war had turned Kabul into a battlefield.

One month after my return, big fights started in *Makrorayan*, the district where I was living. *Makrorayan* became the front line between Dostum and Massoud. Everywhere around the blocks there were dead bodies and scattered body parts. Fighting was going on from one street to

another, between blocks. Some block apartments and some houses got completely destroyed. We could see impacts of rockets and bullets on the walls. A lot of people died at that time. I remember, in Makrorayan 3, in one day we received more than 70 rockets. We had to stay in our block basement all night and day because it was the only safe place. We ate nuts and some people brought their *bokhali* (stove) to heat the place. On that night, all the inhabitants of our block decided to move. At 2 o'clock in the morning, we all left. We walked for the entire night to *Khair Khana*, where my cousin lived. Then a few days later we went back to Pakistan. I remember that on that night, I walked on dead bodies. My trouser was red with blood. Everyone lost a family member on that night. (Interview - Azizi, 23/10/2007)

Many Afghan women do not make any distinction between the *mujjabin* regime and the Taliban regime. These two periods involved brutality, seclusion and economic difficulties. This point was underlined by Orzala Ashraf, deputy director and founder of Humanitarian Assistance for Women and Children of Afghanistan, an NGO providing shelters and vocational training for women victims of violence in Kabul. The Taliban are gone but women's shelters are still operating secretly since the current government is not able or willing to provide security to the women who escape from their abusive homes. During our interview, she insisted on the fact that women's suffering had to be understood not only as the result of Taliban policies but also as the outcome of long years of war during which extremism developed solid roots in an impoverished society.

To be honest, I think the Taliban were not the only cause of women's problems. If women were restricted, it is not as a result of the Taliban only. During the 30 years of war, women lost their husbands, their fathers, their brothers. Women were the first victims of war. They endured rape and the loss of their family members. I, myself, lost a great part of my family. War destroyed the systems that protected women. The *mujjabin* were not that much different from the Taliban. During the *mujjabin* time, women were raped, school girls were kidnapped. So what is the difference between the Taliban and the *mujjabin*? (Interview - Ashraf-Nemat, 26/09/2007)

The *mujjabin* rule was therefore the blueprint upon which the Taliban phenomenon could rise. Rather than a breach in policies the Taliban rule represented in many aspects, a continuity with the *mujjabin* government. Their success in getting control over the country was not the result of their fundamentalist ideology, generally perceived as excessive and unacceptable among the majority of the population, but rather as the outcome of a well trained and properly equipped military contingent.

#### 4. The Taliban rule: 1996-2001

The Taliban emerged in a political vacuum, created by the civil war and people's longing for security and the end of conflicts between the different *Mujahbedin* factions. The movement was created in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, where its major figures received religious and military education. Indeed in 1977, Pakistan's dictator, General Zia-Ul-Haq enforced an Islamic constitution, ostensibly to bring legal, social, economic and political institutions of the country in conformity with the Koran. He naturally backed the Afghans militants in Peshawar and financed the building of thousands of *madrassas* in the vicinity of refugee camps, with help from Saudi Arabia. Impoverished Afghan widows reassured by the promise of regular meals and a minimum education eagerly entrusted their sons to the care of the *madrassas*, which became the training grounds for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda supporters. Herded in decrepit boarding houses, cut off from contact with mothers and sisters, they were fed an extremely simplified messianic Islam, which was to become the Taliban creed (Stedman and Tanner, 2003: 83).

Three years after their emergence on the Afghan military scene, the Taliban had taken control of over 80% of Afghanistan. As they gradually consolidated their power, security improved in the cities, facilitating exchanges and circulation of goods and therefore, reviving the economy. Even in the Taliban-controlled areas, women continued to participate in the functioning of the local economy.

According to Nancy Dupree (2001, 151), the Taliban's decision to impose the strict curtailment of women together with their compulsory veiling under *chadari* in public was a means for the regime to 'send a message of its intent to subordinate the personal autonomy of every individual, thereby strengthening the impression that it was capable of exercising control over all aspects of social behaviour, male and female'. When the international community reacted against these measures and denounced what was soon labelled 'gender apartheid', the Taliban high authorities argued that their aim was to ensure their sisters' security in a period when the priority was the establishment of law and order. Whether or not the limitations imposed on women would have progressively disappeared had the Taliban totally eliminated their opponents and had been recognized by the international community, remains a difficult question to answer. However, the Taliban policies were marked by many contradictions and inconsistencies, which left an important room of manoeuvre for interpretations and accommodation at the local level.

The Taliban central government was far from functioning effectively. Its base of power lay primarily in a very young militia nurtured in the isolation of ultra-conservative *madrassas* where they imbibed ideas by rote without encouragement to reason. Most of them had never been exposed to urban living. The weakness of the central government allowed to a great extent decisions to be taken at local level. Women's condition therefore varied from one region to another, according to the degree of flexibility of local Taliban authorities (Dupree-Hatch 2001).

The management of local affairs was deeply reliant on local Taliban leaders, some of whom allowed a certain level of negotiation on their policies. For Sosan Sharifi (pseudonym), a gynaecologist and representative of a province currently under Taliban control, the security that marked the Taliban rule in her province was a precious asset for women. Compared to the present days, when combats between NATO troops and regime opponents are constants and continuous, the life of the women from her province was relatively easier:

During the Taliban, I worked in the hospital and I organized consultations for women in my house. Because they (the Taliban) needed me and I was the only gynaecologist in my province. So they did not create any problems for me, they even supported me very much. As you know, security at that time was very good. Once, a Taliban asked me to wear *chadari*. I told him: 'Show me the passage in the Koran where it is written that women should wear *chadari* and I will wear one on the top of the other. I am a Muslim and I swear, I will do it if you can show me that this is written in the Koran!' (she laughs). He never bothered me again afterwards. (Interview - MP10, 22/09/2007)

It is certainly in the cities, where women had traditionally enjoyed a greater degree of freedom and autonomy, that the rules imposed by the new regime appeared the harshest. As the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, they closed schools and Kabul University to female students and teachers. These policies had a devastating impact on both boys and girls' education as women represented an important proportion of teachers and University professors. Women's seclusion was announced on Radio *Sharia* on the same day. During the entire length of the Taliban rule, the regime would inform the population about new rules and regulations through this same Radio: "Women, you should not step outside of your residence. If you go outside the house you should not be like women who used to go with fashionable clothes wearing cosmetics and appearing in front of every man before the coming of Islam (...). Women should not create such opportunity to attract the attention of useless people who will not look at them with a

good eye. Women have the responsibility as a teacher and coordinator for her family. Husband, brother, father have the responsibility for providing the family with the necessary life requirements (food, clothe, etc).” (Rostami-Povey 2007, 24).

But men were not protected from the regime’s stronghold on their lives. The length of their beard and the appropriateness of their clothes were under the constant scrutiny of the religious police. The regime emphasized on punishing them for infractions committed by their female relatives, reflecting the acceptance of male responsibility for controlling women (Dupree-Hatch 2001).

In a matter of a few decades, Afghanistan had moved from a regime that in the 1920s, under the reign of King Amanullah, had imposed the wearing of Western clothes in Kabul to a regime that wanted to break away from any form of Western influence and return to what it perceived was ‘authentic tradition’. In both cases, ideas about modernity and tradition were translated in regulations targeting individuals’ physical appearance in public spaces. This ‘disciplining of bodies’, to use Foucault’s expression, and the specific attention put on regulating and controlling women’s bodies in particular, are symptomatic of the broader struggle between Kabul and the periphery, on one hand, and Western interpretation of modernity against reinterpretations of tradition under the name of Islam, on the other hand. Women’s bodies stood at the frontline of this ideological battle. The failure of the successive governments to carry out positive development projects in the peripheries together with foreign interference in internal affairs had produced a unique form of counter modernity.

As a social, ideological and political phenomenon the Taliban are indeed utterly modern. The origin of the Taliban movement, its military development and its political project can be considered as pure products of modernity. Their emergence on the Afghan political scene is not to be interpreted as a simple return to an authentic Afghan tradition. On the contrary, their hybrid characteristics provided the fertile ground from which tradition could be imagined, reinvented and reinterpreted. Their hybridity stands first in the influence of external Islamic sources on their political ideology. Educated in *madrassa*, the Taliban were introduced to the Deobandi school of thoughts by semi-literate Pakistani mullahs, associated with Pakistan’s *Jami’at-e Ulema-e Islam* (JUI) political party (Rashid 2002, 92). A lack of appreciation on the part of the mullahs of the reformist Deobandi agenda, brought the schools and its curricula closer to ultraconservative Wahabism (found in Saudi Arabia), which claims to teach strict adherence to the practices of the Prophet Mohammad and the Four Caliphs (Rashid 1999, 26). This interpretation of Islam provided the ideological framework from which

the Taliban formulated their opposition first to the Communist government and later on to the *Mujahbedin*, in cultural terms that were relatively efficient to rally rural masses, especially in the Pashtun South of the country. It is to be mentioned that Deobandi Islam had no roots in Afghanistan. It however provided a template for reinterpreting the Pashtun code of honour, codifying it through decrees and finally unevenly implementing it at the national level when they came to power. Second, the Taliban political project is quintessentially cosmopolitan. Armed by Pakistan, supported by the US and Saudi Arabia and trained by transnational Islamic mercenaries, the Taliban were well equipped to win on the military front. Their political agenda aimed at creating a pure Islamic State based on *sharia* law, a state that would protect people from the ‘polluting’ West. Ironically, the ones who called themselves ‘Taliban’ (literally, students in religion) were often illiterate and therefore unable to read a line of the Koran (Devji, 2005).

Most of them had had little contacts with women prior to entering the capital city. Like the young *Mujahbedin* who came to Kabul in 1992, they shared similar ideas about upright female behaviour: ‘good’ women stay at home, ‘bad’ women’ expose their faces (Dupree-Hatch 2001, 150). However, the policies that they implemented regarding women provoked adaptations that were far from their initial intent. As Nancy Dupree points out (2001, 160), women creatively adjusted to this political change by making their own fashion statement. Reporting on the forced veiling of women under *chadari*, she writes: ‘Burnt orange and forest green are fashionable in Jalalabad; various clear shades of blue accented by occasional canary yellow flit about Kabul; black was never usual, except among some groups in Herat. Made mostly of soft artificial silk, the veils shimmer and billow with a certain mysterious seductiveness’.

The Taliban enforced the total curtailment of women’s freedom to move, work and to be educated. Discrimination was officially sanctioned and pervaded every aspect of women’s lives. Girls were forbidden to attend school, even when provided at home. Women were denied the freedom to work and were forbidden to leave their homes unless completely veiled under *chadari* and accompanied by a male relative (*mabram*). Women faced draconian punishment for adultery. Such restrictions were particularly alien to women in Kabul and many were slow to comply. Confrontations between women and the religious police created by the Ministry for Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue, the most powerful arm of the regime, occurred daily until, paralyzed by fear, women finally complied. Women were beaten up in the streets, for wearing nail polish, white socks (the colour of the Taliban flag), shiny shoes or *chadari* not long enough (Dupree-Hatch 2001, 152).

These recent and traumatic events are strongly engrained in the psyche of urban women. The women I talked to keep a very vivid memory of the fear and the atrocities they experienced during this period. For many of them, like Orsala Ashraf, their personalities and their subjectivities have been deeply transformed as a result of these experiences:

You know, I grew up in this context where women were muted, I cannot be soft anymore. If I speak about these atrocities, it is because I have faced these atrocities myself. When I sleep, all my nightmares are about the Taliban discovering that I have books and arresting me. Every night, I have these nightmares. (Interview - Ashraf-Nemat, 26/09/2007)

Despite of their fear, many women often with the support of male family members started to organize underground activities and support networks. These activities helped them cope with the stress of their secluded life. By morally supporting each other and providing services for their community, women regained a sense of worth and usefulness. For Farida and Farid, who ran a clandestine school from their small apartment in *Makrorayan*, working side by side changed the gender dynamics within their own family. They explained to me how, thanks to the school, they got to know and respect each other more. When I asked them what had changed in their relationship, Farida smiled and said:

We became closer. When the school got discovered by the Taliban, Farid was imprisoned in *Pul-i-Chakhi* for six months. I was extremely worried. I was not allowed to visit him. I could not get any news from him. In the years following his return, we had two children. (Interview- Farid and Farida, 30/01/2007)

Most women who conducted such activities do not view their involvement as a political act but as a survival strategy, deeply embedded in the material conditions of their everyday lives. Leila, for instance, began to give private courses for girls under the Taliban. Her husband, who had worked as a military officer under the *mujahedin* regime, could not leave the house for fear of being arrested. Ironically, the arrival of the Taliban in power reversed gender roles within her family.

The Taliban years are the worst years of my life. When the Taliban took over Kabul, I was a student at the faculty of Chemistry and I was forced to abandon my studies. Because of the position he had occupied under the previous regime, my husband had to hide in our house and I had to find a way to make money to feed my family. In my neighbourhood, I found girls who

wanted to continue their education and I became their teacher. I was teaching them from their home, sometimes from my home or from my relatives' homes. We changed locations all the time in order to avoid being discovered. (Interview - Rashidi, 08/02/2007)

To be able to run such activities and keep a minimum of mobility, women had to develop creative strategies. Some of them recruited and employed fake *mabram* when male relatives were not available. Others mobilized other women from public spaces where women's presence was not suspicious, like mosques and *ziharat* (pilgrimages). During this period, the *chadari* became a protective device, a 'mobile home' which allowed women to circulate in public spaces without being questioned or threatened. Women used their *chadari* to smuggle books and stationary for their schools, the same way they had smuggled weapons during the *jihad*. Soraya Parluka, Director and founder of the Union of the Women of Afghanistan, explained to me how she informed other women about her activities from mosques and *ziharat* (pilgrimages), wearing *chadari*.

During the Taliban and the *mujahedin*, we were organising our meetings in people's houses and in mosques, during funeral ceremonies. We were attending women's gatherings in mosques. From there, we informed other women about our activities and we encouraged them to live and to be hopeful for the future, because many of them were so depressed and desperate that they were thinking of killing themselves.

We were encouraging women to resist the Taliban regime. We told them this situation would not last and things would change at some point. We told them we should be well prepared for the future because the regime would change soon. In order to prepare women for this change, we established English, computer, Koran, handicrafts and sewing courses.

No one knew who had established these courses. We had developed two strategies: one was *Nazer Málida*<sup>18</sup> and the other one was *Nazer charmarz*<sup>19</sup>. On these two occasions, women gathered in *Ziharat* (pilgrimages) and mosques. These women's gatherings provided us with the opportunity to meet other women and to let them know about our activities. We told them about our courses and our small businesses. No one could see our faces because we wore *chadari*. This technique worked very well and our network expanded day by day.

When our teachers migrated to other countries or to other provinces, they established courses there as well. Women who had worked in factories or for the government before and who became jobless started to make handicrafts from home. Through our networks, their products were sold in Pakistan. (Interview - Parluka, 03/07/2007)

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<sup>18</sup> Nazer Malida: When women have a dream or a wish, they prepare Nazer Málida, a mixture of bread, sugar and oil. For two or three days, the preparation remains untouched then women go to the mosque and distribute it to other women in order to have their wish fulfilled. This usually takes place on Thursdays.

<sup>19</sup> Nazer Charmaz: same as Nazer Malida except that it is made out of dried fruits and it takes place in *Ziharat* (pilgrimage) instead of mosques.

Thanks to these informal courses, many young women managed to continue their education and to escape from their total isolation. However, women could pay a high price if discovered. Orzala Ashraf, who was only 22 years old when she established her organization, first in Pakistan and then in Afghanistan, recalls how her activities were discovered by the Taliban a few days before the downfall of the regime:

Some Taliban women, sent by their husbands, were attending the classes. The Taliban women finally reported us to the Taliban headquarters and two of our teachers got arrested. We managed to get them released by bribing the police. These women were not like official spies of the Taliban. They were their wives, their daughters or their sisters. They had been in our classes for a long time and we did not know anything about them. But when they saw that I was filming the classes in order to document our activities and inform the West about Afghan women's lives, they finally decided to report us. (Interview - Ashraf-Nemat, 26/09/2007)

Listening to these women's stories, I was amazed by the extraordinary personal resources they had managed to mobilize in order to cope with the everyday. Women demonstrated a real sense of creativity and ingenuity in the face of particularly difficult economic and social conditions. However, contrary to Elaheh Rostami Povey (2007, 37), who argues that these events helped to develop a particular political consciousness among women, I don't think these strategies were politically motivated. Indeed, Povey insists that after the fall of the Taliban regime, some women, empowered by their experience of resistance to the Taliban rules, started to challenge patriarchal gender relations. What comes out of my interviews does not confirm this finding. Most of the women I talked to underlined the necessity to find alternative livelihoods and the importance of giving meaning to their lives as primary motivations for their involvement. Of course, some women became more politically aware as a result of these life experiences and even reached high political positions when the Taliban regime collapsed. However, the vast majority refused to be labelled 'political activists'. For most women, belonging to a network was a means to escape from boredom and to find moral support. By attending or running courses, women opened for themselves spaces where they could share their sorrows and exchange small services. These everyday small acts of resistance may have empowered women and enhanced their self-confidence. But this did not necessarily lead them to frantically challenge broader gender hierarchies, especially in a context where maintaining social relations was and is still perceived as vital. The material realism with which women like Orzala (quote below) make sense of their experiences underlines the rational choices that guided their actions:

I got money (for my organization) from strong political movements (in Europe). But they were surprised I was not political. You know, they were talking about the Women in Black and all these transnational women's organizations but I always told them HAWCA is apolitical. HAWCA is not political but we need your money. I am saying I am not political because we had such a strong dictatorship in my country and politics has always been about people killing each other, so as a woman, I felt I had to be more practical than political. (Interview - Ashraf-Nemat, 26/09/2007)

Orzala and other women's accounts demonstrate that the Taliban regime affected different women in different ways. The relative peace the Taliban brought in rural areas provided women with a sense of safety they had not been able to enjoy during the civil war. The stability they recovered during this period allowed them to participate in the local economy. In cities, however, the brutality with which they implemented their policies remains a traumatic experience for most women. The everyday acts of resistance in which urban women engaged reveal as much about the nature of the regime in terms of its structures and strategies as about the possible political awareness that would have motivated their action.

## **Conclusion**

The plight of Afghan women under the Taliban rule became largely publicised in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, as one of the humanitarian issues justifying intervention. However, the political context in which the Taliban movement emerged was hardly mentioned. Their gender discriminatory policies, which resulted in the social exclusion of women were mostly explained by misidentified expressions of local 'culture'. But the Taliban did not arise out of nowhere. In this chapter, I have tried to show how the emergence of religious fundamentalism in the region has been the result of broader geopolitical developments that included the interference of foreign countries such as the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia during the cold war period. I have also underlined aspects of their hybrid identity, which support the idea that as a political movement that presents itself as 'counter-modern', the Taliban are in reality pure products of modernity.

The addition of a veil over Queen Soraya in the portrait gallery of the Ministry of Information and Culture just after the collapse of the Taliban, while at the same time, images of women lifting their veils in the streets of Kabul were broadcasted on Western TV channels as symbols of 'women's liberation', underlines the complex position of

women as embodied symbols of the nation. Their bodies, at times veiled and hidden, at others displayed and unveiled, have been and still are the sites of political struggles over identity, citizenship and cultural 'authenticity'. As Zulfacar (2006, 28) summarizes it well:

The gender issue has been manipulated as a symbolic instrument serving to foster larger political ideals. The most significant state-initiated gender policies occurred during King Amanullah's reign (1919–1929) as part of his 'modernization' plan; the Marxist regime (1978–1989) as part of their 'revolutionary' political scheme; the Mujahidden/Taliban regimes (1992–2001) as part of 'pure-Islamization' of the nation; and the Interim and the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan (2002–present) with the establishment of the first ever Ministry of Women Affairs.

Furthermore, the history of women in Afghanistan shows how, in addition to gender, other sets of variables such as class and the urban/rural divide have to be taken into account in order to understand the variety of women's experiences. Although most of the women I interviewed were of urban background, their narratives and historical documentation provide evidence for the sharp disjuncture between urban and rural lives. Women in the countryside benefited neither from the expanding public services nor from the dynamic cultural and intellectual movements and events that made the period prior to the Soviet occupation exhilarating and inspiring for the older women I interviewed. Another immense rupture existed between social classes with the majority of women belonging to impoverished classes with no access to education or adequate health care facilities. The revolutionary changes and relatively liberal social values and norms experienced by educated middle and upper class women in the 60s and 70s stood in harsh contrast to the tribal and traditional patriarchal values shaping the life of the majority of Afghan women at the time.

Finally, the history of Afghanistan shows that reforms aiming at changing the status of women raised hopes and fears, expectations and resistance in the social arena. From the reign of Amanullah to the Taliban regime, the contested rights of women became a primary symbol of the new order. In the context of what may well be Asia's most tribal and patriarchal society, the resistance to Western modernization is unique in a country, which could have been, alongside Turkey, at the *avant-garde* of progressive Muslim nations as early as in the 1920s. All efforts by reformist kings from the early 20th century onwards were doomed due to their incapacity to incorporate the peripheries in their programs and to envision indigenous ways to achieve social transformation. When the communist government attempted to introduce an egalitarian society and implement women's rights under a secular framework and through coercion, acute civil strife ensued.

This generated full-scale war when their Soviet allies came to the rescue and the US, through their assistance to fundamentalist groups, turned this into the last conflagration of the Cold War. The failure of modernist reformers as well as the interference of foreign countries in Afghanistan's internal affairs has produced a unique form of counter modernity, that may well re-emerge in the near future if lessons from the past are not learnt.

I underline this trend in the following chapter by investigating the agenda for the enforcement of the rule of law in the new Islamic Republic. As the history of Afghanistan demonstrates, the battle between modernists and traditionalists has traditionally crystallized around the place of *sharia* law in society. In spite of an attempt at reconciling these tensions by inscribing Islam at the heart of the new Constitution, the political bargains behind the Constitution making-process and the bureaucratic framework supposed to put into effect the rule of law over the territory, present many similarities with earlier modernization attempts. The urge with which the West hastened to rebuild centralized state institutions, write laws and bring Afghans to polling stations in a country described by the Human Poverty Index as one of the worst in the world, tends to demonstrate that the agenda for reconstruction set up in Bonn was driven by imperatives of political visibility rather than a clear commitment to alleviate poverty and enforce justice. In such a framework, the visibility of women and the recognition of the gender equality principle 'on paper' were key to bolster the idea of reconstruction in the West.

### Chapter 3

## The Public Face of Justice in the New Islamic Republic

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Poster encouraging people to vote for the legislative elections - 2005 © Sayara Media and Communication

‘Law has been used not only as a site of empowerment, but also as a device for excluding the world’s Others, or including them on terms that are quite problematic both historically as well as in the contemporary context. These inclusions and exclusions have been produced in and through law, either by emphasizing the difference of the subaltern subject as incapable of choosing and contesting, and thus incapable of exercising rights, or as backward and uncivilized, to be redeemed and incorporated into the liberal project through the process of assimilation.’

Ratna Kapur, *Erotic Justice* (2004, 2)

In thirty-five years, Afghanistan has known a series of regime changes: a Constitutional Monarchy (under Zaher Shah), a Republic (under Daoud and the PDPA), an Islamic Emirate (under the Taliban), and finally an Islamic Republic (under President

Karzai). Each of these regimes has defended contrasted - and contested - interpretations of *sharia* law and granted it a different position within the legal apparatus, especially in areas concerned with family law. Family law reforms have constituted – and still constitute – one of the most conflictual sites of reforms between liberals and conservatives in Afghanistan. This is because, as Nancy Dupree (1984, 299) phrases it: ‘In Afghanistan, like elsewhere in the Muslim Middle East, the legal code relating to marriage and the family is based directly on the shari’a or canon law of Islam, and reforms in this area have typically provoked extreme reactions, explicitly in defense of Islamic principles’. As I have underlined in the previous chapter, despite his last minute attempts at reframing his reforms under an Islamic rhetoric, King Amanullah could not contain the eruption of the opposition among tribal and religious leaders. After his eviction in 1929, his successor Habibullah Ghazi insisted upon a return to reactionary customs regarding women. ‘He demanded that women remain behind the veil under strict male control and that girls’ schools, together with all other vestiges of the women’s movement, be suspended’ (Dupree-Hatch 1984, 319). Women had to wait for another thirty years before a new set of reforms were introduced, under Prime Minister Daoud. However, the non-binding nature of the laws produced during this period, together with the gradual development of the country and the tough repression of political opponents prevented any strong opposition from disrupting the progresses of women’s emancipation<sup>20</sup>. A few years after the Republic was declared in 1973, a Penal Code (1976) and a Civil Law (1977) were introduced, both of which following the constitutional injunction that ‘there can be no law repugnant to the sacred religion of Islam’ (Dupree-Hatch 1984, 320). These laws, however, maintained the ideal of patriarchal control and women were kept in positions that did not challenge their ‘honor’ and the one of their family. By contrast, during the Communist regime, the more aggressive approach to women’s empowerment and the secularist rhetoric that accompanied these reforms were decisive factors in the resistance that emerged in the countryside and that later on gave birth to the Taliban.

The Bonn agreements signed in 2002 showed a commitment to repair past injustices committed under the Taliban regime and to establish gender equality in the country. However, this commitment is subject to contested understandings of human and women’s rights, which are broadly perceived as instruments of foreign domination. Indeed, in December 2003, during the constitutional debate in *Loya Jorga*, its chairman,

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<sup>20</sup> Nancy Dupree however mentions occasional incidents of unveiled female students being attacked with acid thrown at their faces on Kabul University’s campus (1984, 311).

Sighbatullah Mojadeddi said to a woman delegate: 'Do not try to put yourself on a level with men. Even God has not given you equal rights because under His decision two women are counted as equal to one man' (Waldman 2003). A comment of this kind from an eminent member of the *Loya Jirga*, acknowledged religious leader and former president of Afghanistan, is revealing of the ideological struggles in which women's rights are currently entangled. It also highlights how discourses of 'women's rights' have tended to crystallise anxieties and feed a nationalist backlash.

The new Afghan Constitution approved by the *Loya Jirga* in January 2004 was broadly acclaimed in the worldwide press as a major step forward for the establishment of democracy<sup>21</sup> and for gender equality in Afghanistan. In this chapter, I interrogate this view and argue that constitutional engineering is of little significance for women's rights unless the Rule of Law is established in the country, security is guaranteed over the territory, human rights offenders are prosecuted and more importantly, a space for collective discussion around the common values that should be enforced through laws is provided. In recent years, scholars of human rights (Hart and Irving 2005; Chinkin 2003; Waylen 2006; Travis 2005) have started to argue that processes of constitution-making are key moments in peace-building, since they provide an opportunity for a national debate to take place and for citizens to collectively decide about their future. In the case of Afghanistan, the tight schedule allocated to draft the new constitution, the absence of nationwide consultation and the poor representation of the civil society in key debates demonstrate that the international community's interest laid more in producing a text that would bolster the idea of 'reconstruction' in the West than in setting up the conditions for participatory citizenship. As this chapter shall demonstrate, a closer look at the constitution-making process and the model chosen to establish the rule of law highlights the precariousness of the system as an instrument designed to enforce rights in general and women's rights in particular.

The first section of this chapter explores the political negotiations that formed the basis for thinking and designing the new State apparatus prior to the Bonn agreements. I provide a critical analysis of discourses on 'democracy building' by underlining how *realpolitik* instead of human rights was the guiding principle behind the US strategy in the country (section 1). I then move on to analyse the constitution making process and the content of the constitution itself in order to evaluate the legal framework

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<sup>21</sup> In an interview with New York Time reporter Carlotta Gall, Interior Minister Ahmed Ali Jalali commented: "The spirit of this constitution will provide an opportunity for the country to move on the path of democracy". Gall, C. (19/10/2003). New Afghan Constitution Juggles Koran and Democracy. The New York Times.

that is supposed to support women's rights in the 'post-war' period (section 2). Finally, I examine the institutions that have been set up in order to enforce justice and guarantee gender equality.

The central objective of this thesis is to explore the various ways in which women have had to improvise in order to find their own political expression and develop alternative forms of political presence. Their strategies to access the public cannot be understood without taking into account the backdrop upon which these practices have appeared. The purpose of this chapter is to question hegemonic narratives of 'liberation' used by the US administration to frame its post-September 11 military intervention in Afghanistan. Contrary to USAID policy reports on reconstruction (USAID 2002; USAID 2004), neither 'freedom' nor 'democracy' has reached Afghanistan yet.

### **1. Political bargains: Historical continuities**

The enthusiasm that came out of international press reports following the presidential elections in 2004 gave the false impression that Afghanistan had eventually joined the ranks of democratic countries. What greatly lacked in those reports was a deeper analysis of the political bargains that were made in higher instances of power prior to sending Afghans to the polls. The general disregard for these developments is all the more problematic in that it reduces exercises in democracy building to their mere technical and logistical dimensions, while negating the ideological framework that guide them.

It is therefore important to keep in mind that the US military strategy for its intervention in Afghanistan was driven by the political choice to keep a 'light footprint' in Afghanistan, using local commanders on the ground and supporting them with US airpower. As a result of this tactical choice, *mujahedin* factions that had been responsible for the destruction of the country during the civil war and that had been marginalized by the Taliban, reappeared as legitimate partners in the political negotiations that followed the war. The 'winners' were given important positions in the government, while keeping their stronghold in their bastions of origin.

The reasons behind the US' 'light footprint' strategy are certainly varied but one has to remember that the primary purpose of the intervention was to 'fight terrorism', not to install democracy, even though this argument was used later on as a rhetorical envelop to sell the occupation to the public. Indeed, the Afghan territory represented an important strategic military spot for the US: it was located at the doors of Iran (a

historical enemy) and Pakistan (a historical ally), it offered an ideal access route to gas from Central Asia and a perfect military base from which to reshape the map of the Middle East and reassert US strategic dominance. With the backup of the UN and the support of the NATO to ensure security, a government that would support US strategic interests in the region was installed, with little consideration for the legitimacy this government would be able to gain among the people it was supposed to represent. The 'light footprint' was nothing else than a means for the coalition to avoid being entirely held responsible for the reconstruction of the country. The concrete evidence for this is that the promised aid has fallen short by \$ 10bn (Norton Taylor quoted in Lindisfarne 2008) while total aid per capita per year in Afghanistan has been 4 times less than in Kosovo (Zia-Zarifi 2004). The US 'footprint' remained literally one: democracy on paper mostly.

As Barnett Rubin points out, the use by the United States of "terms such as 'peace building' and 'post-conflict reconstruction' displace these operations from their historical context" (Rubin 2006, 177). Indeed, the scenario that I have described above is in line with geopolitical developments that have recurrently marked the history of Afghanistan. During the expansion of Russian and British imperial aspirations at the end of the nineteenth century, the British – after several failed attempts to conquer the Afghan territory – used Afghanistan as a buffer State to protect the borders of the Indian Empire from Russia in an episode commonly known as 'the Great Game'. British financial aid enabled the Afghan Amir Abdor Rahman to 'stabilize' the country with a repressive state and unify its territory under a single kingdom. As the clear-sighted Amir explained to his successors: 'Afghanistan (was) only a goat between two lions' (quoted in Barry 2002, 190) and history proved that it would often be the case.

Indeed, during the Cold War, Afghanistan became the battlefield upon which the US and the USSR fought their proxy war. The battle initially consisted in competing foreign aid projects. In Kabul, the ruling elite around King Zaher Shah used the financial support it received from both sides to assert its power and engage the country on its journey towards modernization, which excluded and alienated large segments of the Afghan society, especially in rural areas. The US support shifted towards the various factions of the resistance when the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1980, throwing the country in a long war of independence and a civil war when the Soviet troops withdrew. It is only through the support they received from the outside that the ruling elites in Afghanistan managed to maintain their position. The process of State building during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was influenced by external forces attempting to assert their dominance over

the country. Thus, it is not surprising that once the great powers withdrew from Afghanistan in the 90s, the whole State apparatus collapsed.

The current political system, as designed in Bonn and later on during the Constitutional Loya Jirga relies on a similar exogenous transplant with no solid local roots. Its inherent fragility is the result of its lack of popular validation (see 2) and its extreme dependence on international aid and military support to sustain itself. According to Rubin, the whole system suffers from a crisis of 'dual legitimacy'. The double objective of eradicating 'terror' and democratizing Afghanistan has led to contradictory political choices, i.e the legitimating of warlords to get their military support on the ground while their very presence in the government and State institutions represents a major threat to democracy (Rubin 2006). International and local commentators have qualified the whole exercise of 'democracy building' as meaningless since the return of warlords in power represents the primary threat to peace and stability (Schneider 2005, 209). The US administration has defended its position by arguing that a strong presidential system would allow Karzai to keep warlords under his command. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz told the U.S. Senate in 2002: 'I think the basic strategy here is first of all to work with those warlords or regional leaders, whatever you prefer to call them, to encourage good behavior' (quoted in Ingalls 2004). Such *realpolitik* underestimated the fact that warlords were now given the opportunity to play a double game with the government: keeping military and political control over their bastions while sabotaging from within any attempt at reducing their regional power.

These contradictory policies have fuelled a general climate of impunity, which fosters increasing violence. In August 2008, for instance, the Afghan president has pardoned men convicted of gang rape, based on their affiliation with a powerful commander with whom the Government did not want to enter into conflict. The father of the victim, in an outburst of anger, threatened to become a suicide bomber if justice was not granted for his daughter (Clark 2008). Cases of this kind are not rare occurrences. During my fieldwork in 2007, women's rights activists systematically mentioned the corrupt nature of the government and the justice system as the main barriers to women's access to justice. Indeed, the main judiciary institutions have been staffed through clientelism and neo-patrimonial networks, affecting the quality of the services delivered and as a consequence, fuelling Afghans' reluctance to refer to them.

The few women employed as judges do not escape the rule. Interviews conducted in legal institutions demonstrate that most of them tend to reproduce

hegemonic interpretations of 'women's rights' in order to preserve their position. Hence the Head of the family Court's comment on women seeking divorce:

Our country is attached to its culture and its tradition. Most women dislike getting separated from their husbands even though they are beaten up. In our country, women know it is difficult for them to find a place in society after a divorce because divorce brings shame on them. Women know that their husband's house is a safe place for them. (Interview - Head of the Family Court, 23/09/2007)

At each level of the judiciary apparatus, from the courts to the General Attorney's office, the women I interviewed tended to defend conservative interpretations of *sharia* law. The ones who tried to use a more interpretative approach to *sharia* faced constant death threats and murder attempts. Many of them were being discouraged from continuing their work and were simply considering quitting their positions. Maria Bashir, the Chief prosecutor of Herat, explained to me how she helped women obtain divorce from their abusive husbands and sent the offenders to prison, a little revolution in a city renowned for its overwhelming cases of women's self immolations. But the lack of political support and protection made her feel extremely bitter about the new government. She said:

The situation of women working in the Judiciary is not good. As a result, Afghan women are not able to fully enjoy their rights. Our role here is symbolic. It is for the show...just to show people that we have a democracy. (Interview - Bashir, 13/09/2007)

With Drumbl (2004, 362), I agree that laws have an expressive potential and can deliver a message that shapes social norms. In the absence of law and order and with corruption now so deeply engrained in the judiciary system, the expressive function of the law is simply deactivated. As a result, the State apparatus is broadly perceived as an instrument of oppression in the hands of the West instead of an entity meant to protect human rights. This has created a climate of impunity favourable to the resurgence of violence against women.

Finally, these political developments have rendered the rights secured in the Constitution subject to conservative/orthodox interpretations. With the amnesty of human rights offenders and their reintegration in the political apparatus, the emancipatory potential of the Constitution has been drastically challenged. Afghanistan's

ratification of the Constitution and the Women's Convention has no real significance unless Islamic law dealing with women's rights is offered a space for re-interpretation, a process that may well be ignored by law makers, since the Supreme Court responsible for revising the laws has no female judge and is infiltrated with conservative Ulamas. The Constitution making process itself lacked popular participation and fair representation of women, which further limited its potential as a strategy for enhancing gender rights.

## **2. Constitutional engineering for whom?**

The new Constitution that officially came into force after the Constitutional Loya Jirga in January 2004 has generally been commented in the international press as a major success for the advancement of democracy and women's rights in Afghanistan. The inclusion of the gender equality principle together with Afghanistan's recognition of international conventions pertaining to women's rights have been broadly read as positive outcomes for women. However, if it is undeniable that these developments have an emancipatory potential, the extent to which this potential can be realized has to be further evaluated.

Institutional engineering has been a key component of the efforts to 'build democracy after conflict', most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan. In both cases, gender issues have been brought up to the drafting commissions by external forces, with little internal support to ensure continuity and with a naïve reliance on quotas, gender mainstreaming and women's machineries as preferred strategies to enforce gender equality. In Iraq, like in Afghanistan, the poor security and the tight timetable, prevented the process from being open to women's organizations campaigning for the inclusion of gender rights (Waylen 2006, 1218). It is therefore necessary to evaluate not only the content of the Constitution itself but also the process through which it was drafted, as issues of representation and democratic participation are key to democratic transition. As Waylen puts it, 'constitutional building processes are not a universal panacea that will enhance gender rights. They offer some opportunities but are only one strategy among others, and a limited one (...)' (Waylen 2006, 1219).

Georgina Waylen (2006) identifies three essential benchmarks upon which the success of Constitution making can be measured. First, women should be adequately and proportionately represented in the different instances in charge of drafting the constitution. Second, women from political parties and from the civil society should be able to develop strategic alliances and a common agenda in order to form a women's

national coalition or a women's movement that appropriately represent women's interests. This means that adequate time should be allocated to democratic debates and popular consultations. Third, women's lobbying and advocacy should be internally driven rather than the result of external constituencies. In the case of Afghanistan, the constitution was designed through a process that included few women, lacked transparency and from which many women's organizations felt marginalized and excluded.

#### *a. The constitution-making process*

In December 2001, in the midst of the US-led rout of the Taliban, the United Nations brokered the so-called Bonn Agreements – named after the city where the agreements were signed – creating a roadmap for the development of a new government in Afghanistan. The Agreements also stipulated that a new constitution would be adopted by a Constitutional *Loya Jirga*. A Constitution Drafting Commission composed of 9 members, including 2 women, was given the responsibility to draft a preliminary constitution while a Constitution Commission with 35 members (including 7 women) was established with the assistance of the UN to carry out public consultation. President Karzai appointed Vice-President Nematullah Shahrani, a prominent conservative, to head both commissions, a signal to many that the constitution would mandate strict religious law.

The Constitution Commission was attributed the responsibility to facilitate and promote public information on the constitution-making process during the entire period of its work and to conduct public consultations in each province of Afghanistan, and among Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan and, where possible, in other countries, to solicit the views of all Afghans regarding their national aspirations, and receive written submissions from those wishing to do so. However, despite the repetitive demands of the Independent Human Rights Commission (Schneider 2005, 191), the draft constitution was not made public before the consultation period, which rendered the whole exercise highly untransparent and problematic.

Popular consultation is pivotal to develop a sense of ownership and to ensure that the final text reflects a transparent and democratic process. However, due to the very volatile security conditions and the tight timetable set up by the international community, consultations that were initially planned in each province of Afghanistan were considerably limited. According to several human rights organizations' reports (Brunet and Solon-Helal 2003; ICG-Asia 2003), consultations lasted for a mere two

months and the meetings held in provincial centres saw very few women participants. The Constitutional Review Commission worked with the Ministry of women's Affairs and UNIFEM to organize educational workshops for women but in the end, only 19% of those who participated in the consultations were women (Oates and Solon-Helal 2004, 13). In South Africa, the consultation making process that was launched following the fall of the apartheid regime took two years and involved intense negotiations with women who were included in all the negotiating teams (Waylen 2006, 1214).

Women's rights activists had foreseen the window of opportunity opened by the *Loya Jirga* for channelling their demands regarding women's rights (Schneider 2005, 192). Small women's NGOs organized workshops on the Constitution in villages to encourage rural women to give their views and women in the government created the Gender and Law working group and passed their recommendations to the Commission and to the delegates of the CLJ. 'Closer to the CLJ, a broadly representative coalition of civil society groups compiled a list of more than 60 women, with 25 individuals prioritized, based on their progressive agenda for women's rights' (Oates and Solon-Helal 2004). The list was passed on to Karzai, who selected only 3 women from it out of the 50 delegates the president appointed to the CLJ. More generally, the demands of civil society Organizations were not easily channelled because of the recrudescence of conservative forces harbouring an agenda harmful to women's rights in the provinces (Waylen 2006: 1219).

Before the CLJ, warlords were already organizing themselves to push forward the recognition of special rights for former *jihadis* and limit civil liberties and the rights of women. This agenda dominated all aspects of political participation with warlords filtering the flow of information between the government and Afghans, both in terms of the messages Afghans wanted to transmit to Kabul and the ones Kabul needed to pass on to Afghans before consultations effectively started. Whereas the disarmament process (Demobilization, Disarmament & Reintegration programme) was making little progress on the ground, warlords were already regaining their control over their bastions of origin, perpetuating insecurity and hindering the meaningful involvement of civil society in the constitution making process in order to give priority to their own agenda (Goodson 2005, 89).

The ICG Report (ICG-Asia 2003) commented: 'The transitional administration and the UN are now heading down a well-trodden path in the Afghan history whereby a constitution is proclaimed but no one, let alone those in control of state power, have any incentives'. Such a situation presents many similarities with earlier Constitution making

exercises, notably the 1977 Constitution imposed by President Daoud (under the pressure of the USSR) that declared Afghanistan a Republic and that failed to quell chronic political instability in the country. In the same way, the government and the UN's inability to fulfil all the necessary conditions for consultation to take place at the national level represented a major limitation to the democratic process. By avoiding to engage in a fair debate with the Afghans, the interim Government missed a fantastic opportunity to empower itself by strengthening its authority through popular validation.

The President called the Constitutional *Loya Jirga* (CLJ) in December 2003 to review and agree on the text of the Constitution. The CLJ was composed of 500 representatives, 450 of which were elected members and 50 of whom were appointed by the President. Altogether, 64 women delegates (2 per province) were elected by women representatives of the 32 provinces, which represented 20% of the total seats reserved to women. According to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), women are considered as a central part of the solution to conflicts and therefore should be represented at all levels in decision making, especially during peace processes (paragraph 8, section b). UNIFEM suggests that women should represent 30% of the participants in all peace negotiations (Brunet and Solon-Helal 2003). The 20% quota allocated to them in the CLJ together with the lack of transparency of the CLJ's electoral process are revealing of the lack of measures put in place to ensure women's fair representation. According to reporter John Sifton (2004), "the majority of the 502 delegates to the *Loya Jirga* were members of voting blocs controlled by military faction leaders, or warlords. Some good people were elected, but they were outnumbered--and scared."

Some women's delegates at the CLJ complained of receiving threats and intimidations. There were also allegations of irregularities during the voting (Schneider 2005). When Malalai Joya, a delegate from Farah province, denounced the presence of warlords in the Assembly, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, Chairman of the Loya Jirga, called her an 'Infidel' and a 'communist' and expelled her *manu militari* from the tent where negotiations were taking place. Since then, Joya has received regular death threats and survived four assassination attempts. Following this event, female candidates did not dare expressing their views for fear of being bullied, threatened or expelled from the assembly (ICG-Asia 2003). These irregularities in the democratic process, together with the lack of time allocated for women to network and organize themselves, made the participation of women in the constitution-making process a mere symbol for democracy. As Vivien Hart and Helen Irving (2005) put it, for gender rights to be efficiently incorporated in a constitution, 'the democratic process should be participatory,

inclusive, accessible, open-minded, open-ended, and transparent and accountable'. None of these adjectives can be used to qualify the constitution-making process in Afghanistan.

In short, because of the general climate of insecurity and the re-emergence of conservative forces at the centre of the political arena, the Constitution-making process failed to be inclusive and participatory. As a result, the actual final product (The Constitution) represents a 'potential' for promoting women's rights through an Islamic framework but without proper representation of women dedicated to women's rights in key political institutions like the Supreme Court, the president's cabinet, the Ministry of Justice and the Parliament, conservative interpretations of Islam will necessarily tend to dominate.

This flawed procedure was premonitory of the current weaknesses of the State apparatus to enforce the rule of law and promote gender rights. Conservatism is already on the rise. The Vice and Virtue department has been re-established within the Ministry of religious affairs. The parliament has already examined legal proposals for banning cosmetics, long hair for men, jeans and other products and behaviours considered as 'un-Islamic'. In 2009, the parliament voted a law allowing men to starve their wives in case they refuse to answer their husbands' sexual needs (Coghlan 2009). These developments demonstrate that democracy building cannot be reduced to State institutions building. Without security, the rule of law and popular support, the Constitution may well suffer the same fate as the country's previous ones.

I share with Wilson (2001, 3) the view that 'a 'culture of human rights' cannot so easily be separated from classic communitarian forms of nation-building'. It is because, in the case of Afghanistan like in the one of South Africa that Wilson analyses, human rights talk is integrated within the nation-building project as part of its ideological legitimization that it is subject to conflicts and resistance. 'Contrary to the myth of legal neutrality, the law is always a form of politics by other means, as it is normative as well as merely formal, rational and self-referential. Legal meaning is always enmeshed in wider value systems, and is caught within other competing normative discourses, which are political, cultural, and more often than not, nationalist.' (Wilson 2001, 5). The content of the Constitution is in itself open to a variety of interpretations, which may have both reactionary and emancipatory potentials for women. However, the current occupation of the country by foreign military forces is reactivating conservative approaches to *sharia* law and silencing the voices of those that have a more liberal agenda for women.

### *b. Content of the constitution*

If the Constitution can be read as a fragile compromise between International Human Rights and *sharia* law, the international community and the Government should have paid more attention to the Constitution-making process itself and ensured that the final text was the result of a valid consensus (Schneider 2005, 206). Once limitations to fair, transparent and inclusive consultations are identified, the inclusion of gender equality principles in the Constitution together with the signing of International Human Rights Conventions tend to appear as mere concessions made in order to preserve the international community's support necessary to receive aid.

The constitutional commitment to human rights at national and international levels relies primarily on the National Independent Human Rights Commission (IHRC) and the observation of International Human Rights Standards. Both systems present major weaknesses (Niaz Shah 2005, 249). First, the IHRC's mandate is to monitor and observe human rights in the country. It receives complaints from victims of human rights violations and assists them in defending their rights. The Commission is also in charge of enforcing the UN Convention for the Elimination of Violence Against Women among other conventions Afghanistan has signed. However, the Commission is primarily an advising and assisting body with no effective power to declare human rights violations. During an interview with Soraya Sobhrang, a former gynaecologist who runs the women's rights department of the IHRC, the Commissioner mentioned warlords' proselytism and intimidations as major barriers to her work. She said:

They say we are not Muslims... that we are not from Afghanistan. But we keep on doing our job. Because we believe that there cannot be peace without justice. (Interview - Sobhrang, 17/09/2007)

Second, the constitution makes frequent references to the protection of human rights. The preamble declares respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Charter of the United Nations. The Constitution also abides by gender equality principles. Article 22, Chapter 2 mentions that: 'the citizens of Afghanistan – whether man or woman – have equal rights and duties before the law'. However, the document does not use any strong language to empower institutions to uphold those rights. Besides, Article 3 (chapter 1) states that laws cannot be passed that contradict 'the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam', leaving a large scope open for contested interpretations of Islamic laws regarding women's rights. The exact position will require

further clarification either by the new legislature or by rulings from the Supreme Court since only government or courts can bring the issue of review to the Supreme Court. But staffed as they are now, neither body looks like it will support an interpretative approach of *sharia* law that would enhance gender rights (Niaz Shah 2005).

Indeed, the Supreme Court was renowned for its conservatism until its previous Chief Justice, Fazil Hadi Shinwari, a cleric with no higher education degree, got removed from his position and replaced by the more moderate Abdul Salam Azimi, a University professor educated in the US. But despite Azimi's efforts at fighting corruption, the Supreme Court, with its well established council of clerics that reviews questions of Islamic law and very few of its members presenting a recognized degree in either Islamic or civil law, appears to be highly susceptible to conservative legal interpretations. No female judges are present in this institution that has been exclusively male dominated since its creation. Interviewed in August 2007, a female judge currently working at the Family Court confided to me:

I wish I could work at the Supreme Court one day but it's impossible in our society. Being a woman is always a disadvantage. (Interview - Judge at Kabul family court, 22/08/2007)

Despite these limitations, Article 84 (chapter 5, article 4) of the Constitution guarantees that women are represented in the Senate (50% of the seats are reserved to women in the *Meshrano Jirga*). Article 83 (chapter 5, article 3) also ensures that women are represented in the House of Representatives (25% of the seats are reserved to women in the *Wolesi Jirga*) as well as in the 34 Provincial Councils (at least 2 women per PC). Quotas have indeed been regarded as the mechanism of predilection to ensure the participation of women in the political bodies. However, as Chinkin argues (2003, 27), 'women's political participation cannot be addressed by quotas or other measures directed at representation alone. These must be accompanied by measures for identifying obstacles to women's participation, identifying and training women candidates, facilitating networking between women in politics and education of women voters'. The security of women candidates should also be taken into consideration.

Many women candidates to the parliamentary elections in 2005 ran their campaign putting their lives in great danger. This was for instance the case of Spozmai Rostami (pseudonym), a female candidate from a Northern province, who received four bullets in her legs while visiting on foot an isolated village of her province. A few days

before I interviewed her in her modest house in Kabul, she had received anonymous death threats. She said:

You know, these local strong men who ran for the elections felt threatened by a woman like me, who had no car, no money and no guns, because they knew that people could make the difference between me and them. Wherever I went, even in very remote villages, people welcomed me. So they (local power holders) felt threatened. That's why they tried to kill me. They spread the word that electing a woman was against Islam...that it was a blasphemy... and now that I am elected, they continue to intimidate me. (Interview - MP7, 23/02/2007)

All these developments collude to confirm that the Constitution in itself is of little significance for the advancement of women's rights unless more pragmatic steps are taken to tackle corruption, warlordism and insecurity and to ensure that appointments at key positions in the administration are transparent and provide candidates with equal opportunities. The description of the Constitution-making process I have made in this section underlines a general lack of will from both the government and the international community to address these urgent needs and an inclination for hastened and visible political decisions that render the whole process of democracy building a mere administrative exercise in which women's voices have been muted.

The reform of the justice system does not escape this general trend. Instead of building upon and including existing traditional structures into the judiciary more formally, the international community has opted for a total revamping of judiciary institutions. This has led to the marginalization of indigenous law through transplantation of Western civil and criminal codes, both of which are regarded with great suspicion in rural areas where traditional modes of dispute resolution still prevail.

### **3. Justice externalized**

Since the Bonn Agreements, the task of reforming the judiciary has mostly remained in the hands of the international community. Transitional justice in Afghanistan has mostly been a top-down exercise in democracy building with no participation from local Afghans on the ground. For example, the drafting of the new criminal code has entirely been realized by Italian jurists with the support of US military lawyers and with no input from the Afghans (Ahmed 2007). The final text, like the

changes made to the Constitution<sup>22</sup>, was adopted under strong foreign political pressure. Behind the rush of the international community to produce a new criminal code were beliefs in the necessity to develop standardized juridical practices in a country where wars had created a myriad of different jurisdictions over the territory. As Ahmed puts it (2007, 113): ‘the Italian criminal procedure code is part and parcel of a broader plan to professionalize and centralize Afghanistan’s judicial system by establishing district courts that will apply the same code’.

What was seriously lacking in this approach was a greater understanding of the complex relations between the central government and the peripheries where local power holders have always been very reluctant to endorse decisions taken in Kabul. By imposing such a system, the international community did not consider rural sensitivities and reinforced sentiments of alienation that had already emerged during the *Loya Jirga*. The resistance of the *ulama* (religious leaders) to an imposed foreign code complicates the efforts to build the rule of law based on a centralized judiciary and codified laws, especially given the profound influence and historically deep roots of *ulama* in social and political life in Afghanistan. This resistance is already sensitive in the intensification of attacks against governmental buildings such as schools and police stations in rural areas. Contrary to dominant analysis provided in the media, recent reports from human rights organizations<sup>23</sup> highlight that while attacks are predominantly attributed to the Taliban, the actual perpetrators are often independent local warlords who view the government encroaching upon their authority.

The present judiciary structure of state-run courts in Afghanistan includes a Kabul-based Supreme Court, provincial high courts of appeal, and local district courts dispersed in some of the major cities of the country including Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Nangahar and Balkh. Since the downfall of the Taliban regime, the international community has concentrated its efforts on rebuilding these structures and launched ambitious training programs for judges, prosecutors, defence attorneys and municipal police forces. These training programs have mostly been held by international experts employed by private contractors specializing in justice reforms in Third World countries. This is for instance the case of the PAE group, a global security company specialized in military equipment and technologies, but also running the US State Department sponsored Justice Sector Support Program (JSSP) in Afghanistan. In his Pakistani villa

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<sup>22</sup> Schneider (2005: p116) mentions that the consensus over a strong presidential system was reached ‘because of the UN’s special envoy and the US ambassador to Afghanistan who held closed-door negotiations with rival delegates on January 3, 2004’.

<sup>23</sup> See Human Rights Watch, Sept. 2004, *Rule of the Gun*

guarded behind barb wired walls by Nepalese DynCorp<sup>24</sup> security guards, a JSSP team member was feeling cynical. He explained:

There are three things the international community is interested in doing: writing the laws, giving training and building buildings. They appoint “experts” to give power point presentations. These experts are paid incredible salaries and most of them have no experience with the legal practices of this country. I remember one of these experts giving a presentation on an international Convention Afghanistan hadn’t even signed. This is how the money is going back to us. Take the example of the PAE group: we spent millions of dollars to train 20 police officers and 10 prosecutors. (Fieldnotes - 16/08/2007)

Following for a few days the activities of one ‘gender legal advisor/law enforcement officer’ working for the same group was in itself a very revealing experience. Brenda, a tall and slender American woman in her mid-forties wearing short leaved tunics, a helmet covered with a panther-print fabric and a bulletproof jacket, had worked in the Balkans before coming to Afghanistan. With her military equipment and her two bold headed and heavily armed bodyguards, she looked as if she had been directly recruited from a Mad Max movie. She was a ‘post-conflict’ specialist who had seen her share of human horrors since she had started her career. She had survived a suicide attack in Herat a few months before we first met and she was about to be sent to Iraq once her ‘mission’ in Kabul was over. As we crisscrossed the city in an armoured vehicle on our way to the Family Response Units located in the major police stations of the capital, she explained how she was given only a two-week ‘R&R’ (Relax and Rest) in a luxury hotel in Dubai after the incident. Brenda was ‘psychologically strong’, as she liked to say, and she felt the legal training of the Afghan policewomen she was in charge of was a very important responsibility (Fieldnotes – 01/08/2007)<sup>25</sup>.

In 2005, two American policewomen employed by DynCorp, working as police advisors in police stations in Kabul, took the initiative to set up the first Family Response Unit (FRU). The objective was to provide the four police women employed in the station in a variety of low-level, non-police duties with policing competencies while providing

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<sup>24</sup> According to Corporate Watch, DynCorp is ‘The world’s premier rent-a-cop business’. DynCorp ‘runs the security show in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the US-Mexico border. They also run the coca crop-dusting business in Colombia’. See <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?list=type&type=18>  
DynCorp mercenaries have been accused of various human rights abuses in their different countries of operation, notably in Bosnia where DynCorp police trainers would have been involved in scandals related to trafficking of women, weapons and passports. In Afghanistan, DynCorp is the principal contractor in charge of the police-training program.

<sup>25</sup> These data were collected on August, 1<sup>st</sup> 2007 during my visits with the JSSP women’s rights advisor (here called Brenda to preserve anonymity) to the Family Response Units located in Kabul. All the details were recorded in my field diary.

policing services for those women in the communities who were the victims of family violence. The four policewomen were trained on ‘family violence’ by the UNAMA gender advisor while police techniques were taught by the American police advisors attached to the unit. In 2007, there were 4 FRUs available in Kabul city and 9 FRUs available in the provinces (1 in Baghlan, 2 in Herat, 1 in Jalalabad, 1 in Kunduz, 3 in Mazar e Sharif and 1 in Takhar). Most of them had been installed in furnished containers given by UNFPA. It consisted of a reception, an office, a separate interview room and a washroom. Policewomen working in FRUs received on-job training and supervision by the DynCorp policewomen advisors while Brenda covered the legal part of their training.

Our car finally reached the first FRU located in Kabul Central Police Station. Our two bodyguards stepped out first and took position on each side of the container, anxiously screening the surroundings from behind their black shades. Behind the Formica desk, the policewoman in chief was glancing through a pile of reports. When she approached to welcome us, I felt a shiver running along my neck. I knew this face. I had seen this woman interviewed in a Channel 4 documentary on women’s rights abuses under the Taliban<sup>26</sup>. With her dark sunglasses, her blond dyed hair and the small white veil that could hardly hide her monstrous facial deformation, I could surely not be wrong. The little doubts I had left were swept away when she herself confirmed that she had worked for 10 years as the head of the women’s prison in Kabul before being assigned to the FRU when the Taliban regime fell. In the documentary, she explained how the detainees, including a woman who had been publicly executed on Kabul stadium in November 1999, had deserved their fate since they had disobeyed their husbands, a major infraction to *sharia* law ‘Taliban’ style. With regime change, masks had been replaced and from an officer in charge of implementing the inhuman Taliban policies, she had been turned into a women’s rights protector. After a short conversation, I understood that her new position did not mean much change to her. ‘I have a lot of experience’, she said with self-confidence. ‘I know how to handle family problems. If these women ask for divorce, they know that there will be nothing left of them. They may even end up in prison. So I encourage them to talk to their husbands and their relatives and to become reasonable’ (Fieldnotes - 01/08/2007).

Perplexed, I sat on a sofa and observed Brenda giving her ‘training’ to the few policewomen, some in uniforms, some others wearing their own clothes, present in the FRU. Brenda asked me to take pictures of the session to be later on inserted in her

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<sup>26</sup> *Inside Afghanistan: Behind the Veil*, Saira Shah, BBC, Channel 4, June 2001 (Saira Shah 2001)

weekly activity report. 'Here is the Constitution of Afghanistan and here is the Civil Code', she said while the interpreter simultaneously translated her words. 'You have to study these two books very carefully because I will come back and question you', she added. She pointed at sections of the books mostly relevant to the policewomen's task and concluded the session by asking questions related to the cases they had received over the past month. I discreetly asked Brenda whether all the police officers employed in the station were literate. Apparently, only the Policewoman in Chief was. 'That's annoying, commented Brenda worriedly, I guess the ones who can read will have to read the Constitution and the Civil Code to the ones who cannot' (Fieldnotes - 01/08/2007). Problem solved. We gave our goodbyes and jumped back into the car.

The FRUs provided a structure for women victims of family violence, but a lot remained to be done to make them work effectively. Interviews were neither conducted in a confidential environment nor in a non-judgmental manner. The few cases observed during my visit showed that many policewomen lacked empathy towards their clients and often advised them to return to their violent home instead of informing them about the entire panel of solutions at their disposal. Despite daily mentoring efforts, a conservative attitude towards women prevailed. In addition, policewomen appointed to work in the FRUs were regularly moved to other positions by their male superiors and were oftentimes deprived of access to vehicles to conduct their investigations. Turnover of staff was a major barrier to their training and to the good functioning of the Units, as follow up of cases could not be properly conducted. Sharing my concerns with Brenda, she admitted that there was little she could do to tackle these problems since political decisions were beyond her reach.

Despite this cynical stance on the way the reconstruction process was being held, very few internationals envisaged alternative ways to engage with reforms in Afghanistan. *Jirgas* and *shuras* that were effectively in charge of administering justice at grassroots levels were broadly denigrated, seen as backward, conservative and traditional entities not worth approaching and meant to disappear once the government were to extend its reach over the national territory. The dominant narrative was that Afghanistan's legal system had been totally destroyed by the war and was therefore inexistent. The imperative of establishing the rule of law, a leitmotiv in development discourses, was primarily understood as a matter of writing laws, building courts and training judges.

With Drumb (2004) and Ahmed (2007), I share the view that over passing tribal councils when these councils represent the only mechanisms of dispute resolution available and recognized in rural areas, is a major strategic mistake. 'Like Amanullah's

social and educational reforms in the early twentieth century, and similarly with Afghan Communist party policies in the 1970s-80s, the present attempts to impose centralization on local adjudicatory actors in the provinces are likely to crumble' (Ahmed 2007, 290). In the long run collaboration with tribal councils could be a more rewarding and sustainable option than transplantation of foreign justice delivery mechanisms that have no local appeal and are broadly perceived as forms of 'legal imperialism'. As Ahmed argues, 'international intervention in the law of another society, particularly when it relates to social and cultural norms, tends to only exacerbate internal conflicts by politicizing and distorting original issues' (Ahmed 2007, 300).

Afghan tribal councils are made of village elderly notables who resolve day-to-day disputes. They apply their own sophisticated canons of laws, often combining aspects of Islamic *sharia* law with local customary and tribal law. In the south of Afghanistan and in Pashtun-dominated areas, customary laws are operationalized through the *Pashtunwali*, the tribal code of honor. As Drumbl argues (2004, 350), *Pashtunwali* is 'politically contingent (and at the moment defined by patriarchal elites) instead of statically and immutably oppressive to women'. Scholars of Afghanistan (Dupree 1973; Lindisfarne-Tapper 1991; Kakar 2003) have indeed underlined the great variations that exist in local interpretations of the *Pashtunwali* between the different Pashtun communities that cohabit in Afghanistan, since *Pashtunwali* has no codified law but instead overarching principles that are few in number and vary from region to region. Besides geographic variations, one can also identify differences according to the socio-economic positions occupied by individual community members. For instance, different expectations apply to the *qalang* ('tax') group or the urban and large landowning Pashtuns, and the *nang* ('chivalrous') group, or the pastoral, nomadic, hill Pashtuns (Kakar 2003, 3). As a result of this diversity, the rules of 'pardah' (gender boundaries) remain fluid and subject to negotiations. This is mostly visible through the wide range of veiling practices observable among the women of the different Pashtun communities. As Kakar puts it (2003, 5), *Pashtunwali* is better described as a continuum rather than as a set of fixed and static rules. On one end of the spectrum are nomad Kuchi women who do not veil in public and are left for weeks alone at home while men are shepherding the flocks. In the middle of the spectrum are the women of the *nang* group, who partially cover their face when they leave the house or out of respect for elders. Men and women have separate headquarters and women are able to visit other women's headquarters within their neighbourhood. At the other end of the spectrum are the women from the *qalang* group who never leave the household compound unless completely veiled, or if they have not reached a

marriageable age yet or are too aged to be married or to challenge the honour of their family.

The council represents the legislative authority in *Pashtunwali*. It usually arbitrates on issues related to men's sphere of authority, i.e. disputes over lands, water and money. Council members are selected according to their records in applying *Pashtunwali* to the letter. In the *qalang* group, tribal leaders must also have wealth beside a honourable reputation. Women are usually not represented in the councils. This is because women have their own sphere of authority and intervene to legislate on issues related to household resources, marriage and family disputes<sup>27</sup>.

The ultimate goal of *jirgas* is to reach a consensual decision that is most acceptable for and in the interest of the entire community. This form of justice is primarily restorative: 'the point is not to exact retribution by punishing the offender or the offender's family, but rather to make the victim, victim's family, or clan whole in light of the injustice suffered' (Drumbl 2004, 384). As a consequence, the offender or his family is requested to pay back his debts by giving *poar* (blood money) and not by being sentenced to imprisonment, as it is the case in Western societies. *Poar* can include cash, services, animals and also the transfer of women. The transfer of women and marriage of girls within the victim's family is understood as a means to create a blood link between the two families, establish peaceful relationships between them and remove enmity.

Crimes against women can be accounted for by *poar* or by more severe retributive punishments. Sexual assaults against 'non-willing' women (refusal is proved by a woman screaming and struggling) are repaired by having the aggressor's ear cut off and requesting a large *poar* from him. The father of a woman who is physically abused by her husband can claim *poar* from the abusive husband in reparation. Adultery leads to the execution of both the woman and man. An unmarried girl running away from home with a boy can be stoned to death. All these examples show that *Pashtunwali* as it is practiced nowadays embed the subjugation of women. As a reflection of a patriarchal worldview, *Pashtunwali* is based on a misogynistic interpretation of Islamic and tribal law.

However, because of its reliance on local religious leaders, it benefits from a legitimacy that the State does not currently have. As Drumbl argues (2004), if better included in the legal system, *Pashtunwali* mingled with international law could be part of a bureaucracy of punishment more respectful of women's right in the long term. I agree with Drumbl (2004, 389) that 'neither the global nor the local offers magical solutions.

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<sup>27</sup> For a detailed account of women's spheres of influence, see Lindisfarne-Tapper, N. (1991). *Bartered brides: politics, gender and marriage in an Afghan tribal society*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Consequently, Afghanistan may be a fertile ground for consideration of hybrid mechanisms that borrow from the international and invoke the local while pluralizing the types of groups that contribute to the content of the local'. This hybrid mechanism already exists in practice, even though collaboration between courts and *jirgas* is not officially acknowledge. In matters related to family law, judges in Kabul tend to use *jirgas* as mediators in family disputes (Fieldnotes, 1-8/08/2007). Unfortunately, decisions taken by *jirgas* are often detrimental to women. The recognition of the *jirgas* at the State level could open spaces for negotiations on women's issues and gradually guarantee greater gender equity in the way justice is delivered. In the absence of dialogue between the centre and the peripheries, *jirgas* are more likely to stand on to conservative interpretations of *sharia* and customary law as a way to preserve their authority.

### Conclusion

The legal developments that I have described in this chapter demonstrate that the exercise in Constitution-making has mostly ignored cultural and religious notions that are dear to most Afghans. This is probably because, like in earlier modernizations attempts, 'culture' and 'religion' continue to be perceived by international actors and indigenous elites as barriers to progress and development. The problem with such a perception is that it tends to essentialize 'culture' and 'religion', instead of considering them in a more social-constructionist way, as sites of struggle and constant negotiations (Benhabib 1992). This refusal to engage with Afghans in a more productive dialogue on 'culture' and religious prescriptions such as *sharia* has created frustrations and anxieties towards a legal apparatus that is broadly perceived as 'foreign' and therefore, 'un-Islamic'. The Constitution-making process could have represented a major opportunity to collectively define the values on which to build the future Afghan nation. The interaction between State agents, Western lawyers, and Afghan citizens could have provided sites of contacts from where a culturally legitimate hybrid legal system could have taken roots.

Currently, three major developments are preventing women from accessing their rights. First, the political bargains Karzai – on the advice of his Western supporters - has engaged with local power holders who have been involved in the past in major human rights abuses and who continue to arbitrarily rule over their fiefdoms have severely jeopardized people's trust in state institutions. Second, the Constitution remains a highly ambivalent text that leaves open for discussion in the Supreme Court (an institution that

remains under the dominance of conservative *Ulamas*) any international laws perceived as contrary to 'Islamic principles'. The Constitution-making process failed to take seriously the call by the Security Council in its Resolution 1325 to 'all actors involved, when negotiating and implementing peace agreements, to adopt a gender perspective' (UN-Security-Council 2000). As a result, the Constitution continues to be seen as a foreign instrument of domination that contradicts Afghan 'culture' and Islam. Finally, the externalization of justice through the imposition of a centralized form of legal administration inspired from the West has negatively impacted on women's capacity to access justice, making them more vulnerable to arbitrary decisions of local *jirgas*.

The peace-building process could have represented an opportunity for women to advocate for their rights and embed them in the Constitution. However, the refusal to establish mechanisms to prosecute war criminals and the reincorporation of warlords in the political apparatus have seriously damaged the image of the State as an institution aiming to provide for people's needs and aspirations. The Constitution-making process is a good illustration of this lack of political will. If gender equality principles are mentioned in the final document, no strong language is used to empower specific institutions to transform this principle into reality. In the same way, if the international community can rejoice of the quotas reserved to women in the National Assembly, the Senate and Provincial Councils, representation of women alone is not sufficient to guarantee the advancement of a feminist agenda in political negotiations. Women have now the right to participate in public life but this right may well remain abstract if their security is not ensured, if the political system remains infiltrated by human rights' violators and if Western legal prescriptions continue to jeopardize the women's movement.

When the police, the courts and the legislature altogether have failed to enforce the rule of law in Afghanistan over the past seven years, rights secured in formal, constitutional and international documents appear as purposeful manipulation of human rights and women's rights discourses as an appendage to military occupation. The ratification of these texts rather than their practical application has been the central focus of the international community. The tight agenda for ratifying the Constitution and organizing the elections supports the thesis that at each step of the process, symbols had more value for policy makers than concrete actions that would have boosted popular participation and collective definition of the rules of engagement of the State with the people it is supposed to represent. The bureaucratic work undertaken by the international community aimed to symbolically grant Afghanistan's entrance into the democratic world and supply Western audiences with illusory narratives of progress. For

most Afghan people and for women, rights have remained on paper only. Like in other colonial encounters, constitutionalism in Afghanistan has inherited the propensity for violent social exclusion from the 'modern' (Menon 2004, 2). In denying the subjective and moral dimensions that are inherent to State-building projects, the entire process was driven towards the erasure of any kind of normative ethic that would diverge from the liberal Western version of Constitutionalism. These dynamics ultimately deprived Afghan women's rights activists from any capacity to defend on their own terms a common agenda for women.

The discrepancy between the public face of justice in the 'post-Taliban' era and the actual state of lawlessness that marks this period has increased Afghans' resentment towards the central government and opened rooms for conservative interpretations of *sharia*. The continuous loss of credibility of public institutions of justice delivery has meant in practice that local *jirgas* have become entirely responsible for delivering justice. These developments have rendered women more vulnerable to distorted versions of Islamic law while forcing them to develop alternative means of public expression.

The chapter that follows further explore these developments by taking a closer look at the model of social change and the actors and machineries involved in implementing this change. I use the case study of a gender empowerment training workshop ran by the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul to highlight the discursive framework that guides current efforts at enforcing gender rights in the country. I argue that like in earlier colonial encounters, current liberal discourses on women's rights have fuelled tensions around 'culture', 'tradition' and 'religion' at various levels of the Afghan society. These tensions have reinforced social expectations towards women and their responsibility to preserve national identity.

## Chapter 4

### Women under Cosmetic Transformation: The Making of Modern Afghanistan

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Woman's face erased on an advertisement billboard, Kandahar, 2007.

What surprised me perhaps the most when I landed in Kabul for the second time in 2007 was to discover that six years only after the eviction of the Taliban regime, billboards and commercials had anarchically reappeared in the streets of urban centres. This new phenomenon signalled a radical shift since the Taliban had forbidden the use and possession of cameras, video cameras and TV sets as well as all visual representations of human beings perceived as instruments of 'Westoxication'. Saraya Media and Communication, the firm for which I worked for a while at the beginning of my fieldwork, was one of the many advertising and communication companies that had opened offices in Kabul in the first days of the 'reconstruction'. Equipped with new white Macintosh computers, Saraya resembled any other communication agency that can be found in the West, a bit dustier but still a place full of trendy young people, badly shaved and wearing blue jeans under the local *kameez*. Saraya's employees had been recruited locally and internationally by a team of three Western managers in their early thirties. From behind their computer screens, graphic designers, video producers and project managers were designing the new face of Afghanistan.

This new visual culture is not only shaping the aspirations of the Afghan population but is also a powerful instrument in the hands of the government and the international community to promote new lifestyles and ideas about modernity and development. The emergence of the advertising industry and its overwhelming presence on TV and radio is also symptomatic of the broader shift the Afghan society under Western occupation is witnessing. In the Afghan context, where electricity and roads are seriously lacking, over half of the population is living below the poverty line (CIA 2008), and access to health services<sup>28</sup> (WHO 2008) and education<sup>29</sup> (UNICEF 2008) remains quasi inexistent, advertisement is the symbol of a pending reconstruction, a reconstruction taking place mostly on paper, TV screens and radio waves. The messages delivered through these different media outlets associate modernity with Western lifestyles and modes of consumption: the smiling young couple on the billboard sharing a biscuit on the picture above. However, the erasure of the unveiled (probably Indian) woman's face shows that this version of modernity remains highly contested and is a source of deep social anxieties.

Nilüfer Göle notes, for the case of Turkey under Kemal (Göle 1996, 15): 'Women's visibility, women's mobility, and women's voices were and continue literally and symbolically to form the stakes of the battle between the modernists and the Islamists in Turkey and elsewhere in the non-Western world'. Indeed, with the arrival of international development experts, Western feminists, diplomats, NGOs' workers and NATO troops, Western ideas and modernization policies are being imposed, not only through economic and cultural programs or by new urban conception, but also by changing the appearances of men, and more especially, women.

While images of women have reappeared on media interfaces, flesh and blood women have gradually disappeared from the streets of Kabul, as the security situation keeps on deteriorating. Women's faces show in quadric colour on the laminated covers of magazines. In the first episode of *Afghan Star* - the local equivalent of the famous TV show *American Idol* - broadcasted on Tolo TV, the first commercial TV station in Afghanistan, a young Kandahari woman called Lima Sahar sang her way to the top three

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<sup>28</sup> Life expectancy rates are among the lowest in the world (42 for men and 43 for women) and 25% of children die before their fifth birthday. WHO website last accessed on 19/06/08  
<http://www.who.int/countries/afg/en/>

<sup>29</sup> 'Thirty one attacks against schools, mainly torching schools and explosions were reported in all parts of the country during 2007 up to June. Deliberate attacks on girl students and women teachers resulted in at least 4 deaths and 6 injuries. Only in the four southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan and Zabul, out of a total of 740 schools, it is estimated that 262 (unconfirmed) of them are no longer providing education services to students'. UNICEF website last accessed on 19/06/08  
[http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan\\_31224.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan_31224.html)

finalists. At the same time, demonstrations against the caricatures of the Prophet Mahomet published in Danish newspapers were taking place in the streets of Kabul (AP 2008). To some extent, Afghanistan seems to have set its time on the global clock.

Since the invasion of Afghanistan, the reappearance of women in the public sphere has been the benchmark upon which the success of the democratization process has been measured. In the same way as the Communist regime appropriated the rights and visibility of women as the central symbol of modernity, the current government has been encouraged by the international community to increase women's participation in public life. As Surkhe points out (2007, 1303): 'The rights of women became a primary symbol of the new order and, given the Taliban's dismal record on this, an important post hoc justification for the intervention. Rapid growth of the independent media contributed to a sense of social liberation in the urban areas, above all in Kabul'.

The current efforts to include women in politics and to promote women's rights are integral parts of the reconstruction process. However, despite attempts at presenting these reforms in technical terms, their content is not value free. In this chapter, I argue that the current agenda for development supported by the international community contains the seeds of important social changes. In the absence of concrete material improvements in most Afghan people's lives, these reforms have created anxieties and tensions related to a form of social engineering broadly understood as foreign to Afghan 'culture' and 'tradition'. In the first section of this chapter, I illustrate how certain ideas pertaining to modern state-building are being infused in the Afghan society through a case study of a 'gender empowerment' training programme ran by the Ministry of Women's Affairs (section 1). I then move on to unpack the ideological framework through which 'reconstruction' is implemented while showing its historical continuity with earlier modernization attempts (section 2).

### **1. 'Live your best life! It is liberating!'<sup>30</sup>**

'I came to the United States with 50 words of English and \$50 in my pocket.' This is how 52-year-old Sonila Danaj, an American of Albanian origin employed as a

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<sup>30</sup> This scene was recorded during a 'gender-empowerment training' conducted at the Ministry of Women's Affairs in March 2007. I was introduced to the trainer, Sonila Danaj (pseudonym) through my friend Saber Perdes, an Afghan Medical Doctor working part time as a civil servant for the Ministry of Health and part time as a freelance translator for various organizations. I attended this training as a participant-observer. The discussions reported here were recorded with a tape recorder. I recorded participants' reactions in my journal. (Fieldnotes - 29/03/2007)

women's empowerment trainer at the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul, likes to introduce herself on her blog. Sonila is officially a life empowerment coach and gender adviser in the United States. Her employer, Walter International Speakers Bureau, is a firm specialized in 'helping Corporate and Association Meeting Planners find the PERFECT speakers and entertainers for their events'<sup>31</sup>. For a few thousands dollars a week, Sonila runs a gender empowerment training aiming at building the capacity of Afghan civil servants and political leaders. She is also one of the many advisers working beside the Minister of Women's Affairs, under a broader Gender programme funded by GTZ, the German agency for cooperation and development.

I met Sonila at the Ministry of Women's Affairs during one of her trainings. On the business card she gave me, she had written: 'Inside every person there are strengths that can help you achieve an amazing success and fulfilment in your life. LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE. Empower yourself and change the world. It is liberating.' In the meeting room, about twenty-five participants have gathered. These men and women are representatives of Provincial Councils<sup>32</sup> from Baghlan, Samangan and Jozgan. Some of them are *rish safed* (white beards) who proudly wear the turban and the *chapan*, a long-sleeved silk coat worn on shoulders, the traditional uniform of authority figures in Afghanistan.

Sonila does not speak a word of Dari but she wears a full covering Arabic style black hijab. Her training is simultaneously translated by two Afghan interpreters, who seem to struggle to find Dari equivalents for some of the concepts Sonila is using. My friend Saber, a Medical Doctor and part-time civil servant at the Ministry of Health, is one of the two interpreters. I ask him what he thinks of the training, thinking that I can rely on his opinion since he has worked with Sonila on several occasions. He answers, smiling: 'The Master is an un-married woman. She is living with her cats in America and she has no children. In Afghanistan, we are polite with our guests. We have to make her feel at home'. Unconvinced by his answer, I join the group and take a seat in a corner of the room.

The first part of the training is conducted by a local staff member of *Women's Campaign International*, an NGO promoting women's political participation in developing countries. She explains the concept of 'gender', its historical origin and why it is a

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<sup>31</sup> From Walter International Speakers Bureau official website. <http://www.walters-intl.com/index.html>. Accessed 2/04/08

<sup>32</sup> The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan stipulates in Article 138 that "a provincial council is to be formed" in each of country's 34 provinces that should "take part in securing the developmental targets of the state and improving its affairs in a way stated by law" and give "advice on important issues falling within the domain" of each province.

relevant category to use in order to explain women's problems in Afghanistan. As the trainer is lecturing the audience, a man is looking at his watch. Another one is playing with his mobile phone. A participant eventually interrupts her. He explains that currently, neither men nor women can complete higher education because of the different problems the country is facing. 'Women who live in the West can study for 20 years; he says pointing at Sonila, but here, women are just starting to study.' Another male participant adds:

In Afghanistan, women have more freedom than anywhere else in the world. They don't need to wear the full hijab, like in Iran. Why is the facilitator wearing hijab? She does not need to. We would have accepted her if she had come with the clothes she is used to wear in America.

This last comment is not translated to Sonila but she can already feel that tension is growing in the room. In an attempt to restore calm, she interrupts the debate and starts a relaxation exercise.

*Sonila:* Stand up! Shake your hands! Let's get rid of our bad energies. Hands up! And now grab apples! Let's find the positive energies!

While Sonila is already jumping in the middle of the room, embarrassed smiles have appeared on people's faces. An old man wearing *chapan* throws an interrogative glance at one of his colleagues. Watching these women and men dressed up in their traditional clothes jumping together in a room and grabbing imaginary apples in the air, has something of a surreal scene. I wonder what people's thoughts are behind the veil of compliance and docility. How does it feel like when, after a long journey from Samangan, you find yourself in a Ministry in Kabul doing relaxation games with your colleagues? Are they truly enjoying themselves or are they just trying to be polite with their 'guest' from America? These questions in mind, I end up doing strange moves with my body, mimicking the greatest harvest of imaginary apples I have ever had in my entire life. And while doing this, I am trying to forget that I am in Kabul, that it is winter and that outside, in front of the Ministry, children without proper shoes are selling matches to passers-by to make a living.

Time for tea break has eventually come. I find Sonila sorting out papers she will need for the second part of the training. I congratulate her for her energy and ask her how the trainings have been like up to now.

*Sonila:* It is hard work, you know, but I think they are starting to get it. Look at the faces of the participants I had in my previous training. This is how they looked before the training (she passes me a sheet of paper with ID photographs of people). Watch their faces! They are all closed, unhappy. They look sad and worried. Now look at their faces after the training (she passes me another sheet of paper with pictures of the same people taken after the training was completed). Look at them carefully and compare! Their faces have opened up. They are smiling. They are happy! I think these photographs are very telling.

I have come across such methods of success measurement in women's magazines where pictures of women are sometimes displayed before and after a specific diet, a facial makeover or a cosmetic surgery operation. I am surprised to discover that marketing strategies are now applied to development programmes. I look at the photographs and I read the names attached to them, trying to find in people's eyes what Sonila calls 'happiness'.

The second half of the training is dedicated to techniques of self-empowerment. A participant is asked to come to the centre of the circle in order to talk about his problems to the rest of the audience. The man seems embarrassed and not very much willing to be the guinea pig for this experiment. But pushed by his colleagues, already laughing with excitement, he finally surrenders.

*Sonila:* So tell us, what is exactly your problem? What do you really want?

*Participant:* The problem is that lots of people come to me to explain their problems. And I cannot do anything for them.

*Sonila:* When you want something, you need to envision what you want in your head first. If you want to get a house, you need to see it in your head. How does your house look like in your head? How many rooms? How many storeys? (Addressing the audience) He only sees the obstacles!

*Participant* (looking totally disoriented): For instance, I have some people who come to see me. Some of them have a University degree, a very good education, and they cannot find any job. I want to help them. But I cannot do anything for them.

*Sonila:* He does not get it! I want to know what you want. What is your house?

*Participant* (loosing patience): Of course, with time we can achieve some things. But worries remain in our heads until the problem is solved!

*Sonila:* So how do you feel when you face such problems?

*Participant:* I get upset, emotional... (looking for more adjectives) I worry, I get angry... and bored. (Translator writes on the white board: 'upset', 'emotional', 'worried', 'angry', 'bored')

*Sonila:* Do you feel powerless?

*Participant* (nodding): yes

(Translator writes 'powerless' on the white board)

*Sonila:* Do you feel helpless?

*Participant:* Yes

(Translator writes 'helpless' on the white board)

*Sonila:* Do you feel discouraged?

*Participant:* Hmmm...yes...I have headaches.

(Translator writes 'discouraged', 'headaches' on the white board)

Participants start losing patience. Murmurs spread in the room.

*Sonila:* Be patient! This is actually the most important key of this training!

*Translator* (pointing at participant): He thinks it's enough.

Participants laughing. Translator reads the words he wrote on the white board.

*Sonila:* How do you feel when you hear that?

*Participant:* When I hear that, I feel sad.

*Sonila:* Read it!

Participant reads: 'hopeless, headaches, discouraged...'

*Sonila:* Are you still upset?

(Participant nodding)

*Sonila:* Let's make him even more upset. Let's read it together!

Participants read together: 'hopeless, headaches, discourages, disempowered...'

*Sonila:* How do you feel?

Participant: Ok.

*Sonila:* Let's help him find a solution! What is the opposite of powerless?

*Participants:* Powerful!

Participants find the opposite of each feeling written on the white board.

*Sonila:* Now let's read these words and help him feel better!

Participants read the words aloud altogether: Powerful, hopeful...

*Sonila:* And now? How do you feel? Do you have hope now?

*Participant* (looking totally bored): yes.

*Sonila* (to the translator): So now, write on the white board: 'In the name of Allah, I will make my dream come true'. So that the problem just becomes small. (To the man) Please, read it!

Participant reads

*Sonila:* You have to write this twice and repeat this sentence everyday so that it helps you.

Trainings like these are regularly held not only in the Ministry of Women's Affairs but also in other Ministries. They are part of the NGO's package of standard solutions for building the capacity of civil servants and for creating a 'team spirit' within Ministries' departments. Their long-term objective is usually labelled under the broader term of 'good governance'. But trainings and workshops, like advertisement in the streets of Kabul, are not value free. They represent platforms from which ideas about progress, modernity and development are spread. Inspired by corporate management culture, their message is based on the view that the individual is the main actor of social change, an individual detached from outside constraints and whose will is essential to bring about progress.

This vision of the 'natural order of things' is generated by development discourses, transmitted through workshops, trainings and conferences and reproduced by development actors from both the developed and the developing world. This 'culture of modernity', to use Stirrat's words (2000), is marked by a faith in 'rationality' and a belief in a world that can be described through fixed universally valid categories ('individual', 'community', 'nation', 'free will'). The roots of such a way of thinking about the world are to be found in the Enlightenment and its stress on humanity's ability to understand and control the world. These are the guiding principles of the liberal project, which inevitably reflect the specific culture from where these ideas emerged.

Obviously, Sonila had a hard time trying to convince participants of the benefits of 'having a positive perspective on life'. Discussing the session with people at its end, I found that most of them took it as an entertainment, a way to pass the time, an escape from the repetitive and conventional rural life. What else is one supposed to find in a capital city if not shows and entertainments? 'Sonila is funny! I like her!', one woman told me. 'She has a great personality', another one mentioned. Very few comments were made on the content of the training itself, which I believe remained quite obscure for most participants.

Trainings held in Kabul have become a sort of private joke among civil servants. They are part of the panel of activities offered by international experts to the new Afghan elite. And if what is discussed does not make much sense, at least participants get a chance to meet other people, have a nice meal, discover the capital city and return home with a nice handbag and stationary for their children.

The underlying script of these trainings might not be very clear to the Afghan audience, but it is easily readable for the Western observer. Informed by her own life experience as a 'successful' immigrant to the US, Sonila wanted to convince her audience that positive change is merely a matter of individual will and self confidence. The complaints participants made about the structural barriers they faced in their daily tasks were to her eyes signs of a general negative attitude and reluctance to assume responsibilities. On her blog, she commented about a workshop she had run earlier:

In the class they resist everything I say. They doubt, question, debate and refuse to accept. I had one of the worst groups ever because they would not cooperate and would not give it a chance. It took so much energy to convince them that governance and the government are two different concepts, or the difference between politics and policy. Even though they had no clue, they gave me such an argument like: "Our government does not listen to us, it is corrupt, we have no power." So when I tried to tell them that we should look at the Afghan constitution to understand

the government policies, they skipped the constitution and started fighting about the President. This group did not like the meditation, did not like conflict resolution, did not like anything I did. What they liked is telling jokes and so they invented a ground rule if a phone rings the person whose phone rang had to tell a joke. So they would call each other and they wasted most of my sessions by telling jokes and giggling because they thought I did not get their games, while I patiently waited to connect with them. They loved money and their only complain was that they did not receive the complete transportation reimbursement which they had spent to get to Kabul after travelling for days. They asked for \$800 per person. When we told them that the Ministry of Transport has fixed rates for these provinces and it does not exceed \$40, a big fight emerged. So they lied, had no receipts, argued, threatened and at the end said that nothing was good and this training was a waste of time.<sup>33</sup>

The frustrations Sonila expresses in her on-line diary echo the comments I often heard among expatriate circles during my fieldwork in Afghanistan. Experts and technical assistants placed in Ministries came, like Sonila, with a whole set of ready made solutions to reconstruct the State apparatus. But the jargon they used - ‘governance’, ‘conflict resolution’, ‘policies’ to cite some of the concepts Sonila unsuccessfully tried to pass on to her trainees – did not match the political and social reality in which civil servants had to perform their work.

Identified as the ‘language of power’, civil servants themselves made a great use of the development jargon, without necessarily understanding its meaning or being very much convinced by its practical application. One can argue that this practice, often observed by anthropologists of development, is symptomatic of what De Sardan calls ‘transplant’ (2005, 78). In this process, actors of social change are aware of the potential benefits they can gain from using the language of development. These benefits are varied: credibility, inclusion, access to resources. However, the ‘transplant’ remains exogenous and assumes a populist dimension that is, to use De Sardan’s words ‘a common acknowledgement that concerns are focused on people’. When talking to civil servants in ministries, I often heard the word ‘gender’ in sometimes unexpected situations. Discussing this with an Afghan female friend, I was told that the use of this jargon was a means to create a bond with the Western woman interested in women that I represented in people’s eyes. ‘This is our culture, she said, we try to find commonalities with our guests to make them feel at ease’.

A similar concern for maintaining ‘order’ and ‘stability’ was observable during Sonila’s training. Participants were very careful not to upset the consultant, to the extent

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<sup>33</sup> Extract from Sonila Danaj’s blog. The comments she makes here do not refer to the training described in this section but to another training she had conducted earlier, with a group of representatives from other provinces. Last accessed on April, 29<sup>th</sup> 2008 <http://www.journeytowardpeace.blogspot.com/>

of putting aside the self-consciousness of their status as local authority figures in order to participate in stress relief exercises with a grace that I found particularly stunning. Contrary to critical views that depict development as a means to achieve social regulation and expand bureaucratic control, Mosse (2004, 654) describes development as a 'relationship maintaining system'. Building on Foucault's notion of 'governmentality', according to which social life is regulated through *productive power*, engendering subjectivities and aspirations; Mosse suggests that relationships built in development encounters necessitate compromise and collaboration. The training was a good illustration of this dynamic. By showing respect to their 'guest from America' participants were demonstrating their allegiance to the Ministry of Women's Affairs and to the Central Government as a whole. Of course, this does not mean that they were convinced by the ideas conveyed during that particular moment, but this was the 'public transcript' (Scott 1985, 1990) they had to convey in order to maintain their public persona.

More globally, the training I have described here is symptomatic of the weakness of the Ministry of Women's Affairs as an institution. A simple walk in the corridors of the Ministry gives already a sense of the inertia that paralyses the system. Hidden behind their computer screens, civil servants impatiently wait for the end of the working day, sipping tea and chatting with colleagues<sup>34</sup>. Nothing seems to happen here, except endless cycles of meetings during which no decision is taken. Boredom is the rule.

'We don't want pens! We don't want workshops! We want money to run real projects!' the director of the Department of Provincial Relations at the MoWA told me once, in an outburst of anger (Interview – MoWA, 16/06/2007). Most departments in the MoWA have indeed no other budget than the one allocated to cover salaries. Offices have been equipped with computers and internet access, civil servants receive regular training, but directors of departments have very few projects on their own to run, since funding is seriously lacking.

In the long corridors of the Ministry, anonymous women sometimes turn up, desperately seeking assistance. Many of them are war widows or victims of violence in their families. Their appeal to the Ministry often represents for them the last option when they have exhausted all the other alternatives provided by informal community

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<sup>34</sup> Nancy Dupree (1984, 334) mentions that after the Red army invaded the country, popular support for reforms sharply diminished and dissidence started to emerge under covert forms even within governmental offices. 'Women in government offices began slowdowns, particularly in the Ministry of Education's literacy program. Books and papers were purposely delayed, misdirected, lost and damaged. More than the usual time was spent in the office gossiping, knitting, and thumbing through magazines. False attendance reports were submitted.' This account echoes some of the personal communications I collected while conducting fieldwork in the MoWA in 2007.

support networks. Unfortunately, the MoWA has little to offer and most women are referred to other Ministries, supposedly better equipped to answer their demands.

The Ministries' vague mandate to mainstream gender and plan policies prevents it from answering individual demands, a role it used to play under the reign of King Zahir Shah. Indeed, in the early 50s, the Women's Institute (MoWA's ancestor) was a State agency that implemented very practical projects for women. It collected different women's embroideries from all throughout Afghanistan, modernized them and developed new techniques that were taught to women. Empowered by these new skills, women were able to generate greater incomes for their family, while supporting the cultural heritage of Afghanistan. Girls who were married at an early age were able to attend MoWA's schools and continue their education, without suffering from the stigma they might have faced had they attended regular state schools. Contrary to the MoWA, the Women's Institute was a highly respected institution and was generally perceived as a socially appropriate place for women to go (Interview - Gross, 23/05/2007).

The scarcity of funding in the MoWA reveals the little interest of the President's cabinet in advancing women's issues. Since its creation in 2002 until the period of my fieldwork in 2007, four different ministers had been appointed. Each new appointment had resulted in changes in the MoWA's administrative structure, with new staff appointed at each department. In an interview with Massouda Jalal, the former Minister of Women's Affairs underlined the difficulties she faced when attempting to change the status quo. She associated her removal from the cabinet with the discontent she created when trying to implement initiatives favourable to women:

At the beginning, they (conservative members of the cabinet) told me in a soft way that this much is enough for the women: one school or two schools and that's it. Women are now in the office. It's enough...enough! They were asking for cooperation. They were saying this way is the good Afghan approach. But I did not believe that. I was not the type of person to be convinced by politicians obsessed with their own interest. I am thinking about my own interest as well and my own interest is that women can reach equality and can live like men because I know the life of women inside families and outside families...even the educated ones, how it is in Afghanistan. We need to decrease their pain.

So we opened offices in all the provinces. At the district level, we set up women's councils. We created a big network of women. When this was created, I heard from fundamentalist leaders: 'Dr Massouda, please stop these councils.' But we went ahead and it's going on up to now. So finally, they decided altogether, all the fundamentalist leaders including the government's high authorities, the warlords, to remove people whose power would disadvantage them. They all joined hands together, they sent me home, and made a housewife out of me. Some of them are sending me

messages sometimes. They send me their 'little ones' to tell me: You're cooking now? (Interview - Jalal, 22/11/2007)

Dispossessed from their authority, Ministers of Women's Affairs have had limited opportunities to make a real difference for women. In some departments, directors have been appointed through political affiliations and neo-patrimonial networks. Some of these directors were not very much committed to women's issues and therefore, worked with the view of reinforcing the status quo. This was for instance the case of the Director of the Training and Advocacy department, a man in his mid forties, who was in charge of developing training and public information material for the Ministry. On March 8<sup>th</sup> 2006, for International Women's Day, he unilaterally changed the messages on the banners that were to be displayed all over the capital city and came up with his own slogan: 'A woman's virginity is a jewel on her husband's crown'. Aware of the internal politics, other civil servants who might have had a more liberal approach to women's issues were discouraged from expressing themselves, for fear of losing their jobs. Sonila's training itself did not address gender issues in great depth. The training rapidly turned into a self-empowerment session of the same kind as the ones run by the Alcoholic Anonymous.

In the Public Relations and Information department, a great amount of time was spent negotiating the content of each message to be broadcasted on media outlets. The validation process sometimes took months, meetings being organized at each level of the hierarchical ladder, until the message's content was eventually emptied of any transparent and readable meaning. The content of the produced documents faded away behind the 'aesthetics of communication' itself (Riles 2004, 20). Designed in the newly opened advertisement companies of the capital city, leaflets, posters, TV and radio spots, brochures and other institutional artefacts were developed under the guidance of local and international civil servants as part of a daily bureaucratic practice meant to consecrate the construction of a 'modern State'. The practice of producing communication and information, like Riles (2004) has demonstrated in her ethnography of the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women, became the ultimate end of such projects, rather than a means to activate social change. In the 'information age', producing information and using modern media - I was amazed to discover that four years after my first journey in Afghanistan in 2002, almost all the Afghan Ministries had developed their own websites in English and Dari - can be understood as a symbolic marker of Afghanistan's entry into modernity.

In a booklet developed by the MoWA in a public information campaign on ‘Violence against Women’, one could read: ‘A woman’s *jihad* is to take care of her husband’. In another one published on the occasion of the International Day on Violence against Women, the issue of rape was illustrated by a screaming woman having her veil pulled away by an angry man. When shown to random Afghans, interpretations varied widely but the issue of ‘rape’ was not mentioned even once. In spite of its ineffectiveness to illustrate the topic discussed, the personnel from the PR&I department validated the visual on the basis that it would not upset anyone. The quest for consensual validation and maintenance of relationships with the broader national political apparatus and the international community ended up being the main activity of the Ministry. At the same time, producing ‘information’, organizing meetings, conferences and training, drafting policy papers and writing reports were practices that maintained a semblance of professional managerialism to the institution.

The expatriate Technical Assistant who worked in this department explained to me that since the existence of the Ministry was being challenged by some conservative MPs, the department’s staff was very careful not to upset anyone and adopted a wait and see attitude. She said:

Men should feel invited here, but they behave as if it was their own domain. In fact, men are the ones who take decisions, even in this Ministry. (Interview - MoWA, 13/02/2007)

Finally, MoWA’s activities are hobbled by a hierarchical structure that impedes collaboration between its departments. This fragmented structure is partly due to the fact that various donors, with different agendas, support different departments of the Ministry, making them function as NGOs competing against each other. During the period of my fieldwork, UNDP was supporting the training and advocacy section, UNFPA was supporting the Health Department, The Asia Foundation was funding the PR&I Department, JICA was supporting the economic empowerment department and UNIFEM the planning and legal department. The presence of these different actors, despite their efforts to coordinate, contributes to the already deeply fragmented structure of the MoWA.

As already noticed on other humanitarian scenes, the marketization of international organizations and NGOs has enhanced inter-organization competition (Cooley and Ron 2002). This phenomenon is observable not only in Afghanistan as a whole, but also within Ministries, preventing collaboration between organizations who

have had to follow the different agendas set up by their respective donors. Driven by organizational imperatives of implementing programs and securing new contracts to remain solvent, NGOs have been driven by self-interested actions and consequently weak at sharing information between themselves (Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, 2006).

The political context in which the MoWA is operating explains for a large part its inherent impotence. But on the expatriates' side, the malfunctioning of State institutions was generally explained in strict cultural terms, instead of political ones. The absence of a 'public service culture', the non-existence of a 'culture of rights and responsibilities' or the predominance of the '*Insb'allah* culture' were common explanations for the ineffectiveness of the State bureaucracy. The same way Sonila complained about participants' greediness in her online diary ('they loved money'), allusions to a 'culture of impunity' or 'culture of corruption' were frequently made in reports written by journalists, international organizations and funding bodies<sup>35</sup> (USAID 2004; ICG 2008; Dimanno 2008). Through these representations, the Afghan culture was used as a deterministic explanatory device, depicted as given, static, fixed. The general assumption was that culture was shared and collectively agreed upon rather than contested, negotiated and constantly recreated. Arguments of these kinds simply ignored broader political and structural reasons for people's resentment and resistance.

As Olivier de Sardan (2005, 8) puts it: 'those who intervene in development (...) when applying in the field the technical methods they acquire through training (...) are confronted with a shocking reality: the behaviours of the people with whom they enter into contact do not coincide with their expectations'. The lack of consultation with Afghans concerning their needs has fed feelings of shame, despair and dispossession. Putting the blame on 'culture' for the poor results achieved in term of reconstruction over the past six years leaves the modes of engagement of the international community with Afghanistan simply unquestioned.

Indeed, the reconstruction project in Afghanistan can be described as a cultural exercise. In the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the contours of a 'culture of modernity' (Stirrat 2000) inspired from Western models of liberal democracy, is being shaped and moulded through workshops, meetings, conferences and information production.

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<sup>35</sup> See USAID (2004) *Human Security and Livelihoods of Rural Afghans*. p 45: 'Culture and systems of governance (including the formal, traditional, and customary systems) have severely curtailed the human rights and livelihood options open to rural Afghan women and girls.' See International Crisis Group (2008) *Afghanistan: The need for international Resolve*. p ii: 'Priorities and interests must be reconciled with a view to ensuring that the culture of impunity is tackled'. See The Star (2008, March). President Hamid Karzai: 'This culture of impunity should stop!'

However, the absence of solid roots within the social context in which these new cultural forms appear makes of these bureaucratic performances a sort of parody or mimicry of Western forms of governmentality. But by participating in these rituals, civil servants also created significations and social imaginaries that asserted their belonging to a certain elite endowed with national responsibilities.

## **2. Reconstruction as modernization**

The description I have made of the functioning of the MoWA underlines the complex relationships between development actors working under an international mandate for ‘reconstruction’ and local actors caught in-between divisive ideologies of development and nationalism. Conflicting views on the role of women in the ‘post-war’ period constitute one of the most controversial arenas among ‘reconstruction’ actors. Indeed, an observation of everyday affairs taking place in governmental institutions reveals that the current model for social change remains highly inspired by modernization ideology. As a result, instead of providing concrete opportunities for negotiating gender policies in the new Islamic Republic, the MoWA has become the symbol of hegemonic liberal Western views on gender. This direction was given during the Bonn conference when the agenda for reconstruction was initially designed.

### *a. The model for social change*

The agenda set up during the Bonn conference consisted in defining efficient structures to eliminate terrorism, reconstruct the state and kick-start the economy. But the plan for post-war reconstruction was more than a simple set of measures to deliver aid, ensure security and allocate resources. This series of agreements intended to reform the Afghan society as a whole and make it converge towards a Western model of democracy. The ultimate aim had therefore less to do with mere reconstruction than with an exhaustive and ambitious project for modernising the Afghan society according to criteria defined by international donors and international financial institutions. Programme implementation was indeed guaranteed by international funding and the presence of foreign troops. In addition, progress was to be monitored and evaluated according to indicators ‘collaboratively’ agreed upon.

As in other post-war contexts, the model for reconstruction and development was derived from Western experiences in liberal political development and economic

growth. In Suhrke's words (2007, 1298), the "Bonn Agreement was basically a script for transition to a liberal, constitutional democracy, served by an effective state apparatus ('competence and integrity') and a single army, with a commitment to 'social justice', respect for human rights, and 'sensitivity' to the rights of women." The economic framework for development was later designed through a series of additional documents.<sup>36</sup>

However, when imposing a project of 'liberal peace' upon Afghanistan, international donors poorly evaluated the scope of the task in which they were about to engage. Contrary to Bosnia and Yugoslavia where a vibrant civil society and strong state institutions existed prior to the conflict, Afghanistan presented a radically different case. Because of long lasting war and weak connections between central institutions of governance and peripheries under the stronghold of tribal leaders, the Afghan State bears no resemblance with the Weberian state model. First, the Afghan state never held 'the monopoly of legitimate use of physical force'. Even during the Communist regime, the Afghan state never managed to establish a bureaucracy capable of achieving 'legal domination'. Public services such as education and security were largely perceived as instruments of foreign domination and therefore were fiercely resisted (see chapter 1). Second, Afghanistan's development trajectory did not follow the Western path. With a very limited level of industrialization and the reliance on subsistence agriculture to ensure livelihoods, Afghanistan never acceded to the open market economy and remained broadly dependent on foreign aid for its development. Third, Afghanistan is one of the rare Central Asian countries that never experienced colonial rule. Kabul and other urban centres apart, most Afghans have been exposed to Western influences to a very limited extent.

In these conditions, current reconstruction programmes conducted under foreign leadership in many ways resemble the modernisation projects conducted in the 60s and 70s. In the previous chapter, I have demonstrated how early modernization attempts undertaken by King Amanullah, King Zaher Shah, President Daoud and later on, the Communist regime presented similar aspirations to reshape the Afghan social landscape. Inspired by post World War 2 development literature (The Washington Consensus), the Afghan elite was bought into the idea that social progress would occur as a result of large-scale social reforms intertwined with technological innovations (Cullather, 2009). Modernization projects were therefore designed as a package of integrated measures.

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<sup>36</sup> *The Afghan Compact* and the *Afghan National Development Strategy* presented during the London conference held in January 2006 both contain provisions supporting the integration of the Afghan economy into the global free market economy. For more details: <http://www.and.gov.af/>

This package included transfer of technologies and capital from more 'developed' countries, the development of a rational and highly centralized state operating through an effective bureaucracy and the transformation of social mores through secularization, legal reform and state education. It was believed that social engineering was necessary to lift up the country away from 'traditions' perceived as major barriers to development. As the ruling elite failed to reach out the peripheries, the link between attempts at modernization and social change for women became gradually perceived as a form of foreign interference.

As many critical thinkers have pointed out (Gardner and Lewis 1996; Shanin 1997; Crew and Harrison 1998), this vision of progress remains the blueprint for contemporary development strategies. However, in comparison to modernization projects conducted under King Amanullah in the 20s and King Zaher Shah in the 50s, the foreign foothold on the current project is much stronger. The 'post-Taliban' democratization process was from the outset more heavily internationalized than other reforms in Afghan history except under the communists. Technical experts from the West - such as Sonila whom I introduced earlier - were shipped in to implement the agenda for reforms. Placed in ministries as advisors on short-term contracts, they earned international salaries. Salary differentials between 'internationals' and 'locals' also enhanced tensions and fostered disillusionment, as concrete reconstruction projects were slow to start.

Expatriate modernizers, informed by their previous experiences of 'post war/reconstruction' in other countries, have tended to ignore local modes of knowledge and traditional practices in order to impose their own agenda. This tendency was highly noticeable in the gender empowerment trainings that were run in the Ministry of Women's Affairs as well as in other 'governance' workshops taking place in State institutions. Technical Assistants dedicated little time and thought to analyse indigenous forms of social organization, assess local needs and learn the lessons from previous modernization attempts. This lack of knowledge has had a direct impact on Afghan people's lives and subjectivities, forcing certain categories of the population, in particular women, to present themselves according to categories defined by Aid agencies – widow, disabled- in order to access new economic opportunities (Darulatzai 2006). According to Darulatzai (2006, 305), 'important aspects of social life and experience in Afghanistan are largely unknown and desperately need to be studied'.

The autonomy of the government was further limited by its strong dependence on international aid to finance the state apparatus and the reconstruction. This

dependence was created by what Barnett Rubin (2006, 179), using Ghassan Salame's words, calls a crisis of 'dual legitimacy'. On one hand, the Afghan State had to conform with international standards of good governance and democracy in order to ensure financial sustainability. On the other hand, a State able to answer international demands only and dominated by political figures responsible for major human rights abuses failed to gain the legitimacy of its citizens. The double objective of the Great powers involved in Afghanistan of finding an ally in the 'global war on terror' and reforming what the US called a 'rogue state' has led to contradictory policies that have challenged the very possibilities for state building, peace building and reconstruction.

This process of 'internationalised state-building', dominated by contradictory political agendas, can find its parallel in earlier foreign funded development projects in Afghanistan, notably during the Cold War period (Cullather 2009<sup>37</sup>). Referring to the period following the Second World War, Rubin shows how the US and the USSR used their financial support to the Afghan government in order to maintain their influence in the region. 'Afghanistan's rulers built a state with co-ordinated flows of foreign aid; the state exploded in civil war when the aid flows instead subsidised competing military forces; and the state collapsed when the aid flows ended. The post-2001 reconstruction project constitutes a new round of internationalised state-building, with the UN formally recognised as the coordinator of international assistance' (Rubin 2006, 178).

However, the coordination role undertaken by the UN has failed to build the legitimacy and the capacity of the recipient government. As Marsden puts it (2003, 95): 'Programme secretariats have been established in each ministry led by particular UN agencies, with international staff seconded to them'. In actuality, the UN are operating as a parallel administration, forcing the government to go and beg to NGOs when receiving requests for assistance. The very limited Afghan representation at key meetings is particularly revealing of the domination of international personnel in policy and decision making processes. The local ownership of development has been therefore reduced to its mere expression, leaving the Afghan ruling elite with no other choice but to comply with its obligation to produce quick and visible results.

The first reforms undertaken by the Interim Government consisted in reintroducing women in politics through a quota system, creating a Ministry of Women's

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<sup>37</sup> Cullather (2009) demonstrates how a development project in the Helmand valley, which started in the 50s under Zahir Shah thanks to US fundings, mobilized collective imaginaries of progress copied on Western experiences of development. 'Exporting an American model of progress required continual redefinition of the sources of American greatness and renewed efforts to plant its unique characteristics in foreign landscapes (...). The Helmand project symbolized the transformation of the nation, representing the legitimacy of the monarchy, the expansion of state power, and the fulfillment of the Pashtun destiny' (2009, 5)

Affairs (the first in the history of Afghanistan) and more largely, promoting women's visibility in the public sphere. These reforms were the easiest ones to introduce in order to meet international demands for gender equality and political plurality. However, the inclusion of gender in the political agenda is labelled by many as a purely cosmetic sham, which the power elite espoused to maintain international aid flows. For instance, the new regime has been quite talented in bringing up to the forefront highly visible women who in return will not challenge the status quo. These women, most of whom are linked to political parties, are used as tokens of progress in the 'democracy-building' process.

The timid gender reforms initiated in the social domain have however created anxieties among more traditional segments of society already feeling insecure regarding their current position and status. These anxieties were soon to be translated into the re-emergence of the Insurgency with regular suicide attacks carried out in Kabul and burning of girls' schools all over the country. During an interview I conducted with the head of the United National Front -the major opposition party - and a representative of Kabul province at the National Assembly, the political leader expressed his concerns about the speed and the scope of the reforms implemented by the government. He explained:

I have a fear and I hope this will not become true. When the communists invaded our country, we were young. They said that they wanted to bring democracy and they encouraged women to go to school and to go to work and to participate in meetings, study and wear beautiful clothes, and remove their veils and wear short skirts. It was a pain in people's heart, people could not accept that, but they could not speak. And the people knew that something dangerous was happening and that it would destroy our religion. And suddenly it exploded like a bomb, everything was finished, and the communists went away. I fear the same thing, the same democracy, will happen in Afghanistan. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, under Amanullah Khan, the same scenario happened. During the communist regime and under Amanullah Khan, democracy was defeated and I fear the same will happen. At the moment, democracy is not natural in Afghanistan. When people see images of Afghanistan with women wearing short dresses, they think democracy is established in Afghanistan. If you want to bring democracy, *you should start from the mosque.* (Interview - MP4, 25/10/2007)

A few days after this interview, the MP drove delegates of the National Assembly's Economic commission to visit a sugar factory located in Baghlan, a northern province of Afghanistan. As the delegation stepped into the factory, a bomb exploded and the deputy together with six others who had accompanied him, died on the spot.

The Taliban officially denied their involvement in the attack. But since then, his prophecy resonates with a bitter taste of truth.

Supporters of nation-building venture in Afghanistan, unaware of the results of previous modernization projects. They justify development aid to the new government in Kabul as a form of international social control aiming to provide a buffer against terrorism. What is seriously lacking in such a vision is a deeper analysis of the side effects such an intervention could have in the longer term.

### *b. The actors of social change*

The heterogeneous and contested nature of the actors appointed to implement the reforms and to foster social change is another explanation for the limited legitimacy the reconstruction project received. On the Afghan side, the technocrats who were brought to the negotiation table in Bonn were selected among members of the Afghan Diaspora in exile in Western countries, some of whom had occupied Ministerial positions under previous regimes (Mustafa Kasimi, Younis Qanooni) or had worked with NGOs (Dr Sima Samar) and international organizations during the war. Others were higher representatives and military commanders from the Northern Alliance (General Fahim) who with the support of the coalition forces had overthrown the Taliban regime in the weeks following September 11. If the former were well represented in the early cabinets, persons selected on purely ethnic and political criteria not committed to the modernist agenda were also included. As Surkhe points out (2007, 1299), 'political criteria became increasingly evident in 2006 and 2007 as President Hamid Karzai sought to co-opt potential rivals, rebels or critics by appointing them as special advisors to his office and distributing gubernatorial and police chief positions in the provinces. He came to recognise militias run by local strongmen, a move supported by the US military for counter-insurgency purposes as well'.

This scenario is well illustrated by the case of Ismail Khan, a powerful Tadjik commander from Herat who had fought beside Massoud's troops in the last days of the war against the Taliban. Appointed Governor of Herat province after the fall of the regime, Khan maintained his private army and ruled his province like a private fiefdom. Refusing to pass on to Kabul the revenues gained from custom taxes on goods from Iran and Turkmenistan, Khan's autocratic rule was soon to increase discord with the Afghan Interim Administration. The United States, which supports Hamid Karzai, have viewed Ismail Khan's ties with Iran with concern, and advocated ousting him. In March 2004,

the central government sent units of its newly trained Afghan National Army to assert its authority over Herat (North 2004). This led to clashes with Ismail Khan's men during which 100 people were killed. Among these was Ismail Khan's son, Mirwais Sadiq, then Minister of Civil Aviation. Under constant pressure from both the government and local rivals, Ismail Khan was removed from his position in September 2004. As a conciliatory gesture, President Karzai appointed him Minister of Energy in his cabinet. Since Khan's replacement by a new governor for Herat province, the security situation has continuously deteriorated (BBC 2008). Rumours say that current unrest in the provincial capital is sustained by Khan's men as a strategy to challenge the current governor's legitimacy and to maintain the Amir's stronghold on his province. The case of Ismail Khan is far from isolated. Several other commanders who received cabinet positions in the Interim Government remained unwilling to abandon their personal militias and to withdraw from their fiefdom of origin. The collusion of diverging interests within the central government, with political actors providing the commodity of violence and its counterpart, i.e security, is qualified by Pejcinova (2006, 35) as 'warlord democracy'.

On the international side, the coalition in charge of the reconstruction was equally factious. International agencies and bilateral donors had different visions and competing interests. The US, for instance, openly supported the recognition of private militias while the UN Assistance Mission for Afghanistan and other international agencies and bilateral donors strongly opposed this strategy to counter terrorism. In addition, the NATO unit in charge of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is facing difficulties in coordinating the activities of the 37 units under its command. Indeed, the different NATO countries are unevenly involved in the ISAF's mission, with the US, Britain, Canada and the Netherlands bearing the burden of the most sensitive and risky operations.

From an initially peace-keeping mandate, NATO has been forced to engage in the 'war on terror' as the insurgency gained in strength in many regions of Afghanistan. These unpopular military operations followed a strategy of collateral damages that cost the lives of many innocent civilians. These operations were counter balanced by small humanitarian projects carried out by Provincial Reconstruction Teams, NATO soldiers involved in small reconstruction projects in order to 'win the hearts and minds' of the local population. This dangerous mixture of militaro-humanitarian operations blurred the boundaries between the actors in charge of the reconstruction on one hand and the ones in charge of the security on the other hand, while reinforcing the rural population's resentment against the central government and the NGOs.

In short, it can be argued that the current situation presents many similarities with the invasion of Afghanistan by the Red Army in 1981. When discontent against the reforms conducted by the central government started to grow in the provinces, the USSR opted for a military intervention. In accepting the USSR military support, the government publicly revealed its dependence on the ‘outside world’ to foster social change and assert its own power. In the public memory, this moment was associated with the selling out of the country to foreigners.

### *c. Modernization and its discontent*

The contradictions of the modernization project underlined above opened a space for opposition voices to be expressed. The 2005 elections saw the re-emergence of conservative *jibadi* leaders in the parliament. Indeed, over half of the elected deputies were previous militia commanders or associated with the old *mujjabin* parties. They rapidly took control over the presidium and the parliamentary committees as well. The *jihad* party leaders, commanders and supporters still politically and ideologically closely associate themselves with the *jihad*. They generally share a conservative outlook on social, cultural and religious affairs, and many have a shared objective of ‘defending the *jihad*’ and establishing a more conservative Islamic state governed by Islamic laws (Wilder 2005, 6). Their strong foothold in the parliament represents a challenge to the advancement of liberal reforms and to the promotion of women’s rights in particular.

During an interview with Qazi Nazir Ahmad, a former *jibadi* from Herat close to Ismail Khan and deputy at the National Assembly, the MP expressed his wish to abolish the quota system for women at the parliament. He said:

This system (the quota system)<sup>38</sup> has been very favourable to women. In each province, women came (to the parliament) through this system. In Herat, 17 people were elected, 12 men and 5 women. It was a kind gesture towards women. Had this system not existed, no woman would have been elected. This was a decision that was made based on the constitution so we cannot oppose it. But for the next elections, we (the *jibadi* leaders) decided that each person should come with its own votes. At the moment we are working on other laws, but next year we will discuss about this system and we will put it on the agenda. It is a favour we made to women but this system does not exist in any other countries. So why should we have it in Afghanistan? (Interview - MP13, 04/10/2007)

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<sup>38</sup> As mentioned in the Constitution of Afghanistan, 25% of the seats in the Wolesi Jirga (lower house) are reserved to women.

Qasi Nazir Ahmad, like many other MPs sharing the same background as ex-*jibadi*, has been criticised for his record on human rights. Appointed as a judge by Ismail Khan during the *mujahedin* government, the MP is suspected of having implemented religious decrees with a particularly heavy hand during the course of his mandate<sup>39</sup>. The quality of the deputies is therefore a matter of major concern. A UN source estimated that of the 249 newly elected deputies, 40 are commanders still associated with armed groups, 24 members belong to criminal gangs, 17 are drug traffickers, and 19 face serious allegations of war crimes (Wilder 2005, 14). The presence of alleged war criminals and drug traffickers in the parliament undermines the legitimacy of the democratic system, arguably more so than the external controlling efforts.

This legitimacy was even more weakened when in March 2007 conservative MPs passed an amnesty law, protecting them against prosecution for war crimes. The bill was signed by the president and approved by the Mesharano Jirga (Upper House) based on the argument that reconciliation was necessary for reconstruction. This decision fuelled resentment among the general public and among human rights activists who had advocated for the right of victims to receive justice.

The pressure of the international community to build democracy from the top-down with little regards for local forms of social organization and power structures and with no reference to military-criminal structures, has resulted in little practical achievements in terms of reconstruction. The broader attempt at modernizing the Afghan society through social engineering has created resentment when the promises to improve people's living conditions and implement the 'rule of law' did not materialise. Conservative circles, by manipulating nationalist discourses about 'national autonomy', have mobilized popular discontent and regained the power they had lost during the Taliban years.

In such a context, the capacity of women to participate in public debates and to promote women's rights has been extremely constrained and limited. Six years after the 'liberation' of Afghanistan, only one woman (the Minister of Women's Affairs) remains in the President's cabinet, not a single woman has been appointed to the Supreme court and very few women MPs have been able to remain independent from political factions. The lack of priority given to gender issues within the cabinet has left the Ministry of

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<sup>39</sup> Interviews conducted with women working in women's organizations in Herat in October 2007 gave similar reports on MP Nazir Ahmad.

Women's Affairs (MoWA) particularly reliant on the international community for technical and financial support. MoWA's emphasis on project implementation has been reinforced by donor preferences for high-visibility, quick impact projects.

In the absence of political transparency and with the occupation of Afghanistan by foreign troops, measures taken to advance women's rights are better described as 'cosmetic surgeries'. Their ultimate purpose is to answer the West's needs for writing the success story of democracy rather than bringing positive changes to Afghan women's lives.

## **Conclusion**

The Gender Empowerment Training I have described in this chapter reveals the symbolic nature of the reconstruction process and the cultural project that is embedded within it. But the tensions that emerged during the workshop highlight that instead of building bridges between provincial administrative structures and the central government, encounters such as these seem to actually achieve the contrary. Misunderstandings that have emerged between Kabul and the peripheries have strengthened people's sentiments of exclusion and alienation together with their mistrust for the central government. Kabul, perceived as the Capital of all vices since the Russian invasion, remains for many Afghans whose lives have not improved and have even deteriorated since the occupation, the centre of corruption, loose morals and foreign pollution.

Under such circumstances, addressing women's issues has become highly problematic and sensitive. Threatened by conservative political leaders, staffed through neo-patrimonial networks, the MoWA, an institution originally destined to be the motor of major changes for women, has been reduced to a mere symbol for democracy: a space where cultural notions of progress and modernity are processed. At grassroots levels, these political developments have forced women to accommodate, adapt and find alternative strategies for 'conquering the public'.

In the following chapters, I explore in greater details women's strategies of social penetration. I show how the encounter of Afghanistan with global forces has created discontinuities in the way Islam is understood and lived by individual women. These tensions have nevertheless resulted in the production of 'alternative publics' or 'counter spaces' (Göle 2006: 34) where women are attempting to reconcile conflicting social expectations pertaining to their bodies and their role in society.

## Chapter 5

### Lipstick Jihad: Moral Panics, Indian Soaps and Cosmetics

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Bride being photographed in a wedding hall. Kabul. November 2007. © Alexandra Estève

One of the key questions that has occupied many anthropologists (Navaro-Yashin 2002, Mankekar 1998, Abu-Lughod 1997, Göle 1996) in the recent decades is how the specific communities they study are affected by the multiple forces of globalization. Indeed, the myth of ethnographic fieldwork as an experience through which the researcher relocates herself in a context culturally ‘authentic’ and ‘untouched’ by modernity is no longer relevant to describe the nature of contemporary anthropological work. This shift of focus in the discipline stands in the realization, against prior positivist assumptions, that culture is not manifested outside the political economy but rather constructed, negotiated and interpreted through the intricate power relations that define contemporary societies.

This chapter studies the ways in which the apparition of certain commodities such as cosmetics, fashion and TV soap operas on the market have produced anxieties around ‘culture’ at different levels of the Afghan society. Indeed, conservative and religious political groups have used the media and instrumentalized popular fears of ‘cultural dilution’ in order to challenge the current government and reassert their power

within their own constituencies. As a result, Indian series, fashion and cosmetics, as symbols of Western modernity, have become the center of legislators' attention. I argue that the current making of the Afghan nation, under the presence of international military troops, has radicalized the debates over national identity, defining Afghan 'culture' in terms diametrically opposite to those of the 'West'. These debates have placed women in the uncomfortable position of being responsible for preserving 'culture' and reproducing the nation according to criteria defined by conservative nationalist leaders (Yuval-Davis 1997).

In March 2007, an article entitled 'women misuse democracy' was published in *Arman e Milli*<sup>40</sup>, a national weekly newspaper (Arman-e-Milli 2007). The article reported that the Director of the Department of Women's Affairs (DOWA) of Balkh province complained about 'the semi-naked (sic) and skimpy clothes worn by women at wedding parties and other ceremonies in the province.' In the interview she gave to the newspaper, Feriba Majid expressed her concern towards what she thought was a misunderstanding of women's rights and democracy. She added that, 'we know that everyone interprets democracy in his own way, but some women are shaming other women by showing up half naked at parties. This is quite wrong and Islam condemns it'. She finally announced that female security officials would be hired to check women's appearance on specific occasions like weddings and other ceremonies.

The publication of an article like this was not an isolated occurrence in public debates. During the same year (2007), a number of similar articles were published in the press, waving the threat of cultural dilution and loss of Islamic values. Because of their recurrence, the sensationalized tone used by journalists, and the political reactions that ensued, this phenomenon can be described as a moral panic: a threat created through the collusion of the media and conservative political leaders in order to stir up popular fears and construct a new national identity (Stivens 2001).

After the downfall of the Taliban regime, polemics emerged around the increased Western influence and its perceived negative impact on the Afghan culture. Western style modernity, with new modes of consumption and life styles, was perceived as a threat to the 'happy Afghan family' and to conventional morality where men's control over women was generally understood as key to social order. This occurred in a context of

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<sup>40</sup> Among private publications in Afghanistan, *Arman-e-Milli* is one of the most popular, with a circulation of 4,200. Launched just after the fall of the Taliban, *Arman-e Milli* is widely seen as the mouthpiece of *Jamiat-e Islami*, the political party associated with the Northern Alliance (Commandant Massoud's party).

growing resentment against the presence of international military troops, NGOs and foreign companies broadly perceived as ‘polluting’ traditional religious values.

These anxieties were addressed at top political levels and fuelled heated debates within the National Assembly regarding the possible necessity to re-establish the Department for the Elimination of Vices and the Promotion of Virtue, a Ministry that had been initially created by the Taliban. During the Taliban rule, this Ministry became a notorious symbol of arbitrary abuses, particularly against Afghan women and girls. It ruthlessly enforced restrictions on women and men through public beatings and imprisonment.

With the approaching presidential elections and the growing discontent of the people regarding the poor achievements of the reconstruction process, Karzai’s government turned up the heat on identity issues in order to gain the confidence of conservative segments of society. This led him to support legal proposals banning the broadcast of certain TV programs, the use of cosmetics, the wearing of Western clothes and the reestablishment of the religious police. These measures targeted segments of the population traditionally considered as the most impressionable: the youth in general, and young women in particular.

Drawing from data collected during ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Women’s National Dormitory located on Kabul University campus in 2007, where I lived and spent time with young Afghan female students, I explore the everyday life of these girls as they were trying to position themselves in a new life environment, away from their families. I show how their everyday practices revealed a constant tension between the necessary fulfilment of different roles as dutiful and modest daughters and as young urban educated women, aspiring to present themselves as ‘modern’ and yet Muslim. For these girls, the achievement of modernity was associated with their capacity to consume cosmetics, make-up, Western clothes, Indian series and music. As innocent as these activities appeared to the Western anthropologist that I was, they in fact represented a source of ferocious gossips and comments within and outside the dormitory even though the vast majority of the girls were, to various degrees, involved in them. At the political level, these behaviours were perceived as what could be called a ‘lipstick jihad’ (Moaveni 2005)<sup>41</sup>. The government considered the phenomenon of such a magnitude that it hastened to intervene in order to preserve the social order.

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<sup>41</sup> I draw this expression from Azadeh Moaveni’s novel, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (2005) as the stories I use in this chapter bear many similarities to the ones recounted in the book. Moaveni grew up in California, in a family that had left Iran in 1976. The unresolved tension she felt between her cultural identity as an Iranian and an American led her, after

This chapter will look at a series of moral panics about the position of young people, especially young women, in the ‘new Afghanistan’. It will uncover the ways in which these moral panics affect young women’s perceptions of selfhood by exploring the strategies they develop in order to meet conflicting social expectations. I argue that the building of the Afghan national identity is centred on anxieties about the ‘family’, sexuality and the youth, with a particular focus on young unmarried women.

This chapter will therefore explore the context of these panics and the relationships of representation of the youth to a series of anxieties about modernity and national identity in contemporary Afghanistan (section 1). In the second section, I explore the content of the Indian soap operas that were banned by the government in 2008 and I analyse girls’ own understandings of these series. I then move on to show how for Afghan female university students, the desire to physically appear ‘modern’ while respecting their Muslim faith has forced them to engage in other forms of self-discipline in order to maintain status and reputation (section 3). Building on the anthropological literature on ‘embodiment’, I argue that girls’ creative responses to dominant discourses on their bodies can be understood as means to achieve independence, autonomy and therefore the expectations of modernity.

## 1. Moral Panics

The moral panics I describe here reveal the conflicting relation of the Afghan society with what could be categorized under the broad label of ‘modernity’. I use here the word ‘modern’ in reference to Western set of values (individualism, secularism and equality) produced by the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution and pluralistic democracy (Göle 1996, 7). The word has no Dari equivalent but has an historical anchorage in the modernization projects that marked the reigns of King Amanullah in the 20s and King Zaher Shah in the 60s and 70s and later on, the Communist regime in the 80s (see chapter 2). These different waves of modernization, inspired by Western ideas of progress, social engineering and economic growth, were designed in view of overcoming the lag in scientific, economic and political development. Under the

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college, to go to Iran as a journalist. The internal dilemmas and external pressures that the author experiences while reporting for *Time* in Teheran are, to a great extent, similar to the ones the Dormitory girls living in room 42 faced in their everyday life. But in contrast to the images of darkness that circulate in the Western press to describe the Ayatollahs’ regime, Moaveni depicts how Iranians routinely struggle to divert proscriptions. She recounts how Teheran girls wear veils of bright colors, invest in fashion and cosmetics (and even sometimes, cosmetic surgery), to preserve a sense of autonomy. The body practices I explore in this chapter are motivated by power dynamics comparable to the ones discussed in the novel.

Communist regime, 'modernization' was the alibi used to pursue imperialist domination. The counter-reactions these projects provoked among conservative segments of the Afghan society (tribal and religious leaders) underline the historical recurrence of conflicts over interpretations of modernity in the country's political memory. The concept of 'modernity' is therefore not foreign to Afghanistan: it is an integral element of its intellectual and political culture, an ideology imprinted with a particular colour in collective memories.

As Nilüfer Göle (1996, 8) argues for the case of Turkey, 'if we want to understand and account for practices of social actors, ontological narratives, collective identities it is necessary to decode local construct of modernity'. The current anxieties around 'culture' at a time of military occupation and foreign led modernization are symptomatic of the permanent nature of this ideological conflict. Referring to death threats received by inhabitants of a newly built luxury residential complex located in the outskirts of Kandahar, President Karzai commented: 'This is a war against modernization' (Palmer 2008). For having been a representative of a *mujjahedin* faction in Peshawar and a short-term supporter of the Taliban, the President of Afghanistan is well aware of the resistance that is meant to emerge as a result of 'modernization' projects conducted by exogenous actors. However, with the personal fortune his family has made as a reward for its military participation in the fight against the Taliban, Karzai is now a direct beneficiary of 'modernization'. In making such a statement, the President reactivates the stereotype that associates the Taliban with uneducated 'cave men' stuck in medieval traditions, conservative and backward, refusing Afghanistan's entrance into modernity. Ironically, the measures recently taken by his government to re-establish 'public order', notably a legal proposal submitted to the National Assembly in 2008 to ban music, parties and Western clothes, show that in order to assert its power, the government has had to make a higher bid in the debate over identity.

It is in this specific context that the moral panics I describe below have to be understood. After the intervention of the coalition forces in Afghanistan, the new political regime put in place with the support of the West was officially dedicated to establish democracy and to rebuild the country. Six years after the new Islamic Republic was created, as the Insurgency grew in intensity all throughout the country and the promises of justice, security and reconstruction remained un-kept, the government started to search for new ways of legitimating power structures. In the provinces, the 2005 parliamentary elections were broadly won by conservative leaders (labelled 'warlords' or *jihadis*' by their detractors and alternatively '*mujjahedins*' by their supporters)

who called upon the people in terms of their ethnic identities and put the blame on foreigners and their local allies for the lack of concrete advancements in terms of reconstruction.

The single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system used in the election only allowed voters to vote for individuals and therefore benefited independent candidates at the expense of political parties (Wilder 2005, 6). In the months that followed their election, the strategy of new MPs consisted in forming alliances according to their political inclinations. This resulted in a relatively clear divide between conservatives/traditionalists on one hand, and liberals/leftists on the other hand, with a clear majority of conservatives dominating the Assembly. Debates on social, cultural and religious issues generated some of the most heated and divisive discussions in the parliament. The freedom of the press and what could be aired on TV were one area of intense debate, as well as the role of women in society.

With an Assembly that rapidly turned into a major force of opposition, the government was left with no other choice but to defend Islamic principles and the Afghan culture with absolute certainty in order to counter balance accusations of 'Westoxication'. With the media promoting distrust, the new leaders validated their call for mobilising the nation to wage war against un-Islamic practices. Through the manufacturing of moral panics by the media, the political apparatus attempted to construct the national identity in opposition to what was broadly and vaguely defined under the general label of 'Western values and lifestyles'. In this discursive struggle, gender played a central role and women's behaviours and appearances became a major centre of public attention.

According to Erjavec (2003), moral panics have three main characteristics: a high concern over the behaviour of a *certain group* or category of people; an increased level of *hostility* towards the group regarded as a threat; a *disproportionality* in the assessment of the threat or danger. The media are the central actors of moral panics. They distort events by exaggerating their seriousness in terms of criteria such as the number of persons taking part in them and by representing events in a sensationalized and emotional way. Folk devils are reactivated in order to trigger off popular fears and enhance feelings of cultural dilution.

In the last few years, the presence of 'foreigners' in Afghanistan has become the subject of more intense polemics and has revealed the heightened concern about the issue of national identity. These moral panics present the three major characteristics described by Erjavec. Indeed, series of articles have been published in the national press

depicting the foreign presence in the country as a threat to ‘culture’, using terms such as ‘invasion’, ‘flood’, ‘ethical corruption’ to highlight the intensity of the phenomenon. Using the argument that internationals were trying to impose not only their military presence in Afghanistan but also their ‘culture’, the media requested more governmental control over their behaviour as well as restrictions on programs broadcasted by private TV channels and a higher attention paid to ‘un-Islamic’ practices among the Youth and girls in particular.



Entrance of a beauty parlour on Flower street, Kabul © Julie Billaud

In July 2007, the following article was published in *Cheragh*<sup>42</sup>, under the title ‘Strange cultural invasion with officials as watchers’:

Nowadays, discussions about culture, foreign civilizations and cultural invasion have entered a specific stage. This trend is accompanied by the usage of military operations and electronic tools and equipment to transform it into a global invasion. In Afghanistan also, after the collapse of the government of the Taliban and the arrival of foreign forces in the country and the establishment of radio and TV channels, some of the directors of the media intentionally or unintentionally started using the tools of propagation of foreign cultures. It should be mentioned here that if the culture and values of a society are faced with fragmentation as a result of the pressures of foreign countries or from the carelessness of the officials of the country, these changes will not be in favour of our regime or the people.

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<sup>42</sup> Independent daily newspaper; generally critical of the government. *Cheragh* is financed by Burhanuddin Rabbani, the recognized president of Afghanistan before Karzai and who also heads *Jamiat-i Islami-ye Afghanistan*. The English version of this article was produced by [www.afghanwire.com](http://www.afghanwire.com)

If a number of countries seek to impose their culture in Afghanistan using propaganda pressures and if they wish – in this way – to divert our young generations who are the backbone of society and want to pull them towards ethical corruption in order to lead our society to corruption and destruction and thus easily they seek to implement their policies in Afghanistan, then we should mention that as our society is an Islamic society and most of our people are faithful to Islamic principles, thus they will disagree with those who have been sold to foreign culture. There is no compatibility between these two cultures, and conflicts will erupt between these two ways of thought. The increase in foreign invasion will mean the general forces opposed to the government of Afghanistan will increase.

In such a situation, our government officials should advise those foreigners who come to Afghanistan to strictly observe Islamic customs, because foreigners walking around in the city and bazaars wearing semi-naked clothes will provoke the hatred of the people. Our officials should know that the Islamic style of dressing is of great importance, and we will realize the importance of the Islamic hijab when we see that some foreign countries cannot tolerate the Islamic hijab of a Muslim student. Therefore the officials of the ministries of Hajj and religious affairs and information and culture should conduct research and study into the exact nature of the foreign invader plot and they should search for ways to prevent it. One solution to this problem could be the establishment of the unit of Vice and Virtue so that they could have an active presence in society. Otherwise, if we only remain observers, then the crisis will become more intense, and carelessness in this regard will harm all of society. (Cheragh 2007b)

As this article shows, the perceived ‘external threat’ was articulated in divisive and irreconcilable cultural terms. In this short journalistic piece, the word ‘culture’ appeared not less than eight times and yet the fundamental characteristics of what was referred to as the ‘Afghan culture’ remained quite vague. In fact the article seemed to equate culture to religion. Islamic values, mostly determined through Islamic dressing code (‘We realize the importance of the Islamic hijab’) were put in radical opposition to foreign values (‘foreigners walking around the city and bazaars wearing semi-naked clothes’), reinforcing the idea that no understanding could exist between what the journalist called ‘these two models of thought’. By intensifying opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and by reactivating the fear of a ‘cultural invasion’, the media<sup>43</sup> supported the dominant conservative views of the political apparatus. The youth (‘the backbone of society’) in

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<sup>43</sup> There are three state newspapers in Afghanistan: *Anis* (Friend), a Dari publication, *Hewad* (Country), a Pashto publication and *The Kabul Times*, an English publication. *Anis* and *Hewad* both publish twice a week producing 5,000 and 4,000 copies respectively. *The Kabul Times* has a print run of 1,500 copies, of which nearly 25 percent is distributed free to government agencies and NGOs.

There is also a large and growing number of private newspapers like *Kabul Weekly*, a weekly with a print run of 3,500 copies in English, Dari and Pashto. Other private publications include *Arman-e-Milli* (Hope of the Nation), *Hasbt-e-Sob* (8 AM), *Islak* (Reform), *Killid* (Key), *Mardom* (People), *Cheragh* (Light). Among private publications, *Arman-e-Milli* remains one of the most popular, with a circulation of 4,200. Launched just after the fall of the Taliban, *Arman-e Milli* is widely seen as the mouthpiece of *Jamiat-e Islami*, the political party associated with the Northern Alliance. Most publications do not have a regular print.

general, and girls in particular ('some foreign countries cannot tolerate the Islamic hijab of a Muslim student') were perceived as a particularly vulnerable and influential group, in need of protection.

Similar views were expressed in another article entitled 'Being unveiled is not the meaning of democracy' and published in the same newspaper in April 2007. In this article, the author explicitly stated the necessity to control women's dressing habits, especially in schools and Universities.

If being unveiled was a sign of civilization, animals would be the most civilized! Following the fall of the Taliban and with the success of the interim, transitional and elected governments, people have been able to enjoy relative freedom. Another change that occurred was that women and girls started to go to work and to school. The government also carried out some projects that eased the return of women's rights and allowed democracy to permeate into society.

However, sorrowfully some women interpreted 'democracy' and 'freedom' in a negative way. They think that being unveiled is democracy and now such women and girls walk around the city wearing clothes that aren't suitable for Afghan and Muslim girls and women. Being unveiled negatively affects all the members of society. Some of the media are also engaged in spreading the presence of unveiled and scantily clothed women with the release of immoral programs showing foreign dancers. They work to spread the traces of these foreign cultures.

Therefore, some of the girls who go to school or university are now wearing clothes that are better suited for wedding parties. Now, the Islamic government of Afghanistan, which carries the word Islamic in its title, should consider the enforcement of veiling and the wearing of proper Islamic clothes in all spheres of society. (Cheragh 2007a)<sup>44</sup>

According to the author, the responsibility to preserve Afghan culture lies primarily with women. The practice of veiling is understood as a means to safeguard a collective sense of dignity ('being unveiled negatively affects all the members of society') and avoid foreign 'acculturation' ('they work to spread the traces of these foreign cultures'). The dramatic tone and the vagueness with which 'improper' Islamic practices are referred to are distinguishing journalistic features used to exaggerate the intensity of the phenomenon and spread moral panics. Indeed, by the end of the article, the specific behaviours the author wishes to denounce remain pretty unclear.

In Aull Davies' words (1995, 172), nationalism is a movement that seeks to create a large-scale community by building it ideologically and materially upon a particular idealised family form. In this process, women are often assigned primary responsibility for transmitting the characteristics of the nation. They are given symbolic status as

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<sup>44</sup> This article was translated from Dari to English by [www.afghanwire.com](http://www.afghanwire.com)

signifiers of the nation, which is often represented in the national iconography as a woman who has to be protected from external aggressions. In the case of the article above, emphasis is put on the necessity to protect women from 'external cultural influences'. According to Aull Davies (1995, 172), nationalism is 'an ideology that builds public (large-scale) identities on the basis of private (familial) relations'. In other words, it can be argued that the nation is the construction of a patriarchal system at the public level. The need for norms of behaviour and traditional practices to be continually re-invented through ritual hints both at the precariousness of imputed homogeneity within the national community and at the centrality of gender in articulating and perpetuating the sense of national belonging. Somebody has to invoke and perform the rituals and behaviours that reinforce these norms and to inculcate them into the next generation in order to ensure historical continuity. This 'somebody' is woman-as-mother-of-the-nation (Peterson 1994), with the nation construed as 'metaphoric kinship' (Eriksen 1993, 108; Smith 1991, 79). The insistence with which the media denounced women's 'deviant' behaviours underlines the centrality of women in defining national identity.

Indeed, confronting the information delivered in the columns of local newspapers with my personal experience as a Westerner in Afghanistan, it became clear that journalists were inventing a 'threat' rather than simply reporting one. My first walk in a bazaar of Kabul with Afghan friends was a revealing experience in this respect: I was definitely the only foreigner there and the way I was dressed drew amused comments from my friends. 'You look more Afghan than an Afghan girl', my friend Mustafa told me pointing at my long veil and large *shalwar Kameez*. Girls at the dormitory often found my clothes too 'traditional' and 'rural' to their liking and offered me their personal assistance in shopping in local clothes stores on several occasions.

I was therefore surprised to read reports about 'foreigners walking around half naked in the city', not only because the foreigners I knew lived under such security regimes that a simple walk in the streets of Kabul was forbidden to them, but also because the majority of them were putting quite an effort in trying to camouflage themselves under large clothes (at least during the day), for these same security reasons. I was actually more shocked by what was happening at night behind closed doors in places reserved for internationals than by their public attitudes.

For those who have never been there, Kabul is what it must have been like in a boom-town in the American Wild West, a surreal world of DJ disco house parties with bars of free flowing drinks, Chinese tea houses (you're not going for the tea) and stacks

of Ak-47s. Foreigners were not walking the streets of Kabul half-naked, for sure, but they were certainly drinking alcohol, listening to electronic music and visiting Chinese prostitutes in places created exclusively for these new types of consumers, shortly after the Intervention.

To help the internationals escape the anxiety of being cooped up in compounds, social mixers and parties were often organized. Some of these parties could sometimes involve a hundred internationals, dancing in a lighted garden to DJ mixes from around the world with a foreign mixture of flavours, camels and guns that left your senses buzzing. It was actually like you were transported to a zany middle world that had neither a home in Afghanistan nor in the West. In this strange ‘carnival of war’, humanitarian workers, construction contractors and private security guards were mingling and sharing the same dance floor at night, while meticulously ignoring each other during the day in an attempt to reassert the radically different nature and purpose of the work of each.

Many of these house parties and other establishments where internationals socialized did not allow Afghans to enter unless they had a foreign passport or were accompanied by a Westerner for various reasons; alcohol being the main one. This segregation led some Afghans to view the international community as wasting resources needed for the reconstruction of their country. In *Afghan Scene*, a free magazine distributed in NGOs, international agencies’ offices and venues reserved to internationals, photographs of the latest expats’ parties in town were published. Rumours ran wild amongst Afghans about what was going on behind the internationals’ compound walls.

Was this the behaviour journalists wanted to denounce when they were talking about ‘Western civilization’ and when they advocated for the re-establishment of the moral police? Or was it a broader popular feeling of alienation and dispossession that was to be read in the background of these press releases?

Whatever the motives behind journalists’ accusations, it was clear that with the approaching presidential elections, debates intensified both in the press and at the political level as to whether the freedom allowed by democracy should be promoted at the expense of ‘religious ethics’. In the National Assembly, conservative MPs started to question the moral content of Indian soap operas broadcasted on the private TV channels that had flourished short after the downfall of the Taliban regime, as well as movies produced by Afghan directors.

In September 2007, a movie critic from *Cheragh*, a daily newspaper, vividly criticized the newly released *Dokhtar-e-Afghan* (Afghan girl), a romantic movie produced

by Afghan film director Yousouf Rouyan, in which the main female character, played by Afghan actress Sana Tabasum is facing the moral dilemma of being in love with two men (Cheragh 2007c). The article mentioned that the movie was ‘the lowest example of Western debauchery’ and went on adding that the production of such a movie signified ‘the loss and violation of the complete dignity of the Afghan culture’.

As prime-time viewing slowly became a battleground between Afghanistan's liberals and conservatives, the government could not continue to ignore the issue. In May 2008 the Ministry of Culture and Information officially banned five Indian series from broadcast on private TV stations. These debates had put President Hamid Karzai in a bind as he was continuing to lose popularity. If he rejected the ban, he risked alienating Afghanistan’s clerics and their conservative supporters while giving Taliban-led insurgents fodder for anti-government propaganda. If he supported the ban, he risked alienating his Western supporters. Karzai ended up supporting the ban and the influential conservative clerics who pushed it. In his one public comment, he said media freedom would be maintained but he went on to add that ‘unsuitable material should not be broadcasted’. He also complained that there were too many foreign shows on TV (Kim Barker 2008).

What captivated my interest the most while these debates were taking place was the fact that series and movies that had monopolized legislators’ attention had one common denominator: all of them were starring female actresses playing the main character in the storyline. These soaps were quite traditional in many ways, showing prototypic female characters: evil temptresses against dutiful daughters and self-sacrificing mothers. But if gender stereotypes were somehow reinforced, the series also fuelled the audience with ideals of romantic love, a needed catharsis of feelings and emotions after the austerity, exigence and rigidity that had marked the Taliban period.

These series were doing more than simply feeding the masses with romance. *Tulsi* and *Perina*, the two most popular Indian series, were also addressing issues with which most Afghan families could identify: the difficult relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law and arranged marriage. These series also challenged some social taboos. *Tulsi*, the main character in the most popular soap, officially called ‘Because the Mother-in-Law was once the Daughter-in-Law’ and aired on Tolo TV, had certainly met with her share of un-Islamic adversity. Her husband fathered a child with another woman while he had amnesia. *Tulsi* herself nearly got married to another man twice — once when she was out of her mind and once when she thought her husband was dead. As for *Perina*, not only had she conceived a child with her secret lover without being

married to him, but she also became a rich and successful businesswoman, a status that remains quite un-common for a woman in the Afghan social landscape.

The reasons for banning the Indian soaps despite their popularity were for the clerics, unquestionable. *Perina* and *Tulsi* showed unveiled women wearing make-up and dresses that revealed their waist, arms and shoulders as well as romantic scenes in which lovers danced, courted and embraced each other. This was enough to get the Council of Clerics sitting on the Supreme Court more than angry against Tolo and Afghan TV. In an interview he gave to Al Jazeera reporter Zeina Khodr, a religious leader explained: ‘These programs have changed the behaviours of our children and women’ (Khodr 2008). This comment echoed opinions I often heard in Afghan families: democracy with the liberalities associated with it meant that girls and women would become uncontrollable, that they would start wearing make-up and inappropriate clothes, that they would demand greater freedoms and by doing so, challenge the reputation of their families.

Lutfia, my translator, invited me once to pay a visit to her sister who had just delivered a baby girl. Lutfia’s sister lived with her husband and three children in Khair Khana, a working-class district of Kabul. Lutfia’s mother had made the journey from her village in Paktia to see the newborn baby. When Lutfia entered the two-rooms flat, her mother gave one look at her and said: ‘What kind of clothes are you wearing, my daughter? Is this democracy?’ And she shook her head in disapproval. Lutfia wore a beige pair of trousers under a tight safari jacket, and a square veil tied under her chin, in the style of most female students on Kabul University campus. For Nasima, Lutfia’s mother, who had spent her entire life in an isolated village in Paktia and who had only attended primary school, the way her daughter was dressed was revealing of a fundamental shift the Afghan society had been through over the past six years. As much as she was proud to see her daughter having access to education and employment opportunities, she could not fully relate to the type of femininity her daughter embodied (Fieldnotes – 21/05/2007).

A similar sentiment seemed to underlie DoWA’s director Feriba Majid’s worries about women’s misusing democracy by wearing skimpy clothes at wedding ceremonies. These were actually the most prominent contradictions I noticed when I came to Kabul for the second time: still no electricity, no roads, more beggars in the streets and in the middle of this chaos, immense wedding halls with ‘exotic’ names and neon-tubes palm trees on their front courts. I could not help laughing when I saw the kitsch replica of the Eiffel tower in front of *Sham-e-Paris* (Parisian Night), the hippest Wedding Hall in town, a

vast complex exhibiting an ostentatious luxury of beauty salons, wedding clothes shops and photographers' studios. Dresses exhibited in stores' windows, with their flashy sequins and their bright colours were in sharp contrast with the monotonous conformity of street fashion.

This overt exposition of private wealth in the middle of overwhelming public poverty provides the newcomer in Kabul with a profound feeling of disorientation. It is probably to bring a semblance of order and keep a sense of public good that legislators like Feriba Majid felt compelled to reinforce the Islamic principle of modesty. As fashion showcased in stores' windows could be read as an overt invitation to private 'sexual' display of self, the public became more and more associated with individual luxury consumption, a lifestyle that appeared as contradictory and even alien to Islam.

In the beauty salons of Kabul, the walls were plastered with posters of heavily made-up Indian actresses. Afghan women modelled themselves on these women whom they perceived as beautiful and liberated. Inside the salons, women were dyeing their hair, plucking their eyebrows, brushing colored shadow on their eyelids, to eventually hide their hard work under their *chadari* as soon as they returned in the street. Despite the Taliban ban on cosmetics, women had continued running beauty salons inside of their homes, clandestinely<sup>45</sup>. Women's pursuit of beauty was a means for them to keep a bit of control over their lives that otherwise were mostly controlled by others. When the Taliban regime collapsed, beauty salons reopened in the country's major cities. With 50.000 to 70.000 estimated war widows in Kabul alone (IRIN-News 2008), the beauty industry had become an important and convenient business for women. Beauty salons often consisted in a small room with an open door on the street, attached to the compound of a family house.

A wedding has no price in Afghanistan. On this occasion, Kabulis can spend up to 20.000 US dollars, a small fortune when more than half of the population is living below the poverty line. The success of a marriage is measured by the number of guests a family can afford to invite. In a country where security is seriously lacking, a wedding is the safest means to develop coalitions and to strengthen ties with relatives and the broader community. The bride is never beautiful enough on her wedding day. She usually changes dresses up to three times during the party, disappearing for an hour to reappear, like in a fashion show, under a completely new face in front of the guests. The first one she wears is traditionally white, the second is green and the last one is either red

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<sup>45</sup> See Deborah Rodriguez (2008). *Kabul Beauty School*. New York. Random House.

or blue. Make-up and hair design should match her dress' colour, keeping hairdressers and beauticians busy for most of the night.

A wedding is therefore much more than just the bride's beauty. It is an institution through which families display wealth and tighten connections. The issue of women's dress at weddings is an issue that implicates whole families, not just the individual women. Before the wedding party, women from both families traditionally spend the day together in a beauty salon. The bride's body is entirely waxed, her feet and hands are dyed with henna, her face receives a thick layer of make-up and all this bodywork is performed under the attentive gaze of her female relatives. Through this ritual, the bride's body becomes the symbolic *trait d'union* between two families. The beautification of the bride through hair design, make-up and dresses is a process through which two families engage in a fruitful and rewarding cooperation.

When, in April 2007, controversies over a legal proposal to ban cosmetics and the Indian soaps were raging in the National Assembly, some dormitory girls were getting ready for another wedding party, covering their faces with different creams, powders and lipsticks. And while observing them I could not help but wondering why, despite of the comments they would receive as soon as they would step in the muddy streets of Kabul, nothing and no-one could stop them from performing their beauty rituals.

As Stivens (2001, 192) argues, "shifting relations and representation of the so-called private sphere – issues of family, gender, home and sexuality – are key sites for the cultural production (...) of modernity itself, and simultaneously a favoured site for the expression of tensions and ambivalences about the cost of modernity'. The current making of the Afghan nation under the particular context of foreign occupation and market liberalization is a deeply gendered process, in which contrasted views about the position of women in society come into conflict. The post-war context has provided individuals with new opportunities to explore and experiment with social boundaries. Young girls who have opted for slightly alternative physical displays are perceived as threatening because as women, they are bearers and reproducers of collective values. The moral panics that have emerged are the product of cultural politics through which local instances of power are attempting to assert their control over society in front of foreign invaders. 'Orthodoxy', as Talal Asad (quoted in Meneley 2007, 232) highlights, 'is always created in situations of power'.

Young women living in the National Women's Dormitory on Kabul University campus are on the frontline of this battle: their bodies are a site of political struggles over identity. But if girls' responses appear invested in the West, girls themselves imbue their appearance and action with a specific modern and Islamic morality. In the section that follows, I use dormitory girls' interpretations of their favourite Indian series to illustrate the complex relationship between conflicting understandings of modernity in contemporary Afghanistan. I show how the interpenetration of a sense of being modern and being traditional is mapped onto a shifting hierarchy and competing claims to legitimization. Discussions girls had around these soaps provide another illustration of the tensions between personal aspirations shaped by the emergence of commercial media outlets and political imperatives to preserve a sense of collective identity. Dormitory girls' struggle to position themselves in a changing political, economic and social environment reveals the fluctuating nature of 'culture' and challenge mainstream assumptions that view culture as fixed, monolithic and collectively agreed upon. Debates around the soaps invite us to question how the cultural politics of a fragmented State like Afghanistan articulates with contested visions of modernity.

## **2. The objects of Indian Soap operas**

Kabul University is an immense construction site. Here and there new buildings have started to grow, all built on the same Soviet style architectural model: solid parallelepiped blocks of concrete and bricks, piled up on top of the other. It is the middle of winter and the campus is deserted. Holidays have begun with the arrival of the snow when it eventually became impossible to study in classrooms deprived of heating systems. At the end of an alley, one can distinguish a three-storey building composed of 4 wings: the Women's National Dormitory. The relatively new aspect of the building contrasts with the boys' dormitory located a few hundred meters further. Whereas girls benefit from constant electricity, hot showers, a room equipped with new DELL computers and Internet access, boys crowd in freezing and filthy rooms that have remained untouched since their construction in the late 70s.

The girls' dormitory, like all reconstruction projects in Afghanistan, is a political business. Rehabilitated in 2004 with USAID financial support, the girls' dormitory was America's First Lady personal project. Its location in the capital city, on a University campus from where women had been excluded for thirty years, was an important symbol

in itself: bringing women 'back to school' to use the title of a UNICEF campaign, was a central goal of the US modernization project in Afghanistan.

The inauguration took place six months after the first walls were erected, under the benevolent eye of President Hamid Karzai and Laura Bush, who personally came from the United States for the occasion, just in time for a few photographs which are now exhibited in the building's main entrance hall. 'There is much more to this place than the bricks and mortar you see around us', Laura Bush said in her inaugural speech. 'The ordinary business that will take place here is, in fact, a symbol itself of the extraordinary leap forward Afghan women have taken' (Herman 2005).

It is winter and the 188 rooms, which are available in the building, are empty. Only a dozen of girls unable to return to their province of origin due to heavy snowfalls that have blocked the roads have had to stay in the dormitory, which is anyhow half empty during the rest of the year. On the walls of the long cold corridors lit with white neon tubes lights, posters of the Women's Rights Movement in the US are hanging. Suffragettes and early feminists' names and slogans appear on sepia prints, to which none of the girls seem to pay much attention. Because behind their closed doors, girls' dreams are fuelled with different stories: Bollywood movie star Aishwarya Rai, Leonardo Di Caprio starring in *Titanic*, white babies with blue eyes and teddy bears holding pink hearts in their arms. The contrast between the interior decoration of the rooms and the outside corridors covered with posters of suffragettes captures the simultaneity of modernity and its underside, of the necessary reconstruction of identity in the post-Taliban era. It bears witness of the various series of narratives that fashion and shape these young women's aspirations, desires and dreams.

Unaccustomed to sleeping on bunk beds, the girls have recreated their traditional bedrooms, with mattresses displayed along the white walls, around a large central piece of carpet, provoking the exasperation of the director of the dormitory<sup>46</sup>. Employed by UNOPS to administrate this girls-only institution, the Tadjik woman in her late forties thinks that the dormitory is more than a simple hostel. 'Girls from different ethnic backgrounds are mixing for the first time. Not only do they learn how to live together

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<sup>46</sup> The creation of women's dormitories on University campuses in Afghanistan has been one of the most visible measures undertaken by the International community to promote women's access to higher education after the fall of the Taliban regime. Altogether, four women dormitories have been built in regional universities. At the time of my fieldwork, the girls' dormitory in Kabul was half empty and I received reports that the ones built in Jalalabad and Kandahar were used by male students, since no female students had turned up. It is interesting to note that the creation of 'boarding schools' inspired from the British educational model was also central to modernization efforts in rural Iran in the late 30s. Sullivan (1998) provides a powerful account of how girls living in these institutions were bound to their bulk beds with their chador to prevent their falling down at night (1998: 224).

away from their families but they also learn basic principles of hygiene that are seriously lacking in their education’, she told me when I first met her (Fieldnotes, 17/02/2007).

In the corner of room 42, sitting on her mattress, 22-year-old Massoma is applying make-up on her face, getting ready to go to work at *Bagh-e Zanana*, the Women’s Park. Massoma is Hazara and she shares a room with Lutfia, a Pachai girl from Kapisa province, Rokia and Maryam, two Tadjik sisters from Kabul, and Mariam, another Hazara girl from Mazar-e-Sharif. Rooms shared between girls from different ethnic origins are rare but the girls of room 42 get on well. All of them have spent most of their lives in exile, in Iran and in Pakistan and have returned to Kabul short after the ‘liberation’, in order to continue their studies. They have brought with them habits, attitudes and consumption items slightly new for the other dormitory girls whose families have remained in Afghanistan during the war. Girls of room 42 are second-year students in different faculties but also the main breadwinners in their families. They share their time between the foreign organizations in which they are employed and the University campus. As returnees, girls of number 42, like other girls who have been raised abroad, consider themselves as more ‘modern’ and ‘open-minded’ than the others.

After dinner, watching television was one of the dormitory girls’ favourite activities. The Indian soap *Perina* started at 8.00 pm, at the same time as my English lesson, which could hardly compete with evenings’ major source of entertainment: Indian soap operas. Deprived of students, it was not rare for me to cancel the class and join the girls rushing towards the TV common room as soon as they heard the song of the generic. Tulsi and Perina, the heroines of these series, represented a major source of inspiration for these girls who thrived to model their appearances and lifestyles on these women they considered as beautiful and modern.

#### *a. Viewing politics: from State-sponsored TV to commercial TV*

Television, as Abu-Lughod (1997, 110) argues, represents an ‘ubiquitous presence in the lives and imaginaries of people in the contemporary world’. Colour television broadcasting reached Afghanistan in 1978. Radio Television Afghanistan, the National state-owned TV broadcaster, was created under the Communist regime as a means to ‘inform’ people about the achievements of the Revolution. When the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996, television was banned and Radio Afghanistan was renamed *Radio Voice of sharia*, the only authorized radio in the country. The religious police smashed privately owned television sets and strung up videocassettes in trees in a form of symbolic

execution by hanging. Anyone found harbouring a television set was subject to punishments of flogging and incarceration.

Short after the invasion of Afghanistan by the coalition forces, the reconstruction of Afghanistan's media outlets under US direction promptly began. Responsibility for overseeing the media development in Afghanistan rested primarily with the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), which maintains an important position in the US's 'democracy promoting' apparatus, sitting within USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (Barker 2008). Besides supporting the development of 'independent' non-profit printed media, radio and TV stations, the OTI also supported for-profit media. A \$2.2 million grant went to two Afghan-Australian brothers to create Afghanistan's first private media outlets, *Radio Arman* and *Tolo TV* (Ibid., 116).

Western support to media outlets, especially radio and TV channels, in Third World countries where the majority of the population is illiterate is not a new phenomenon. During the Cold War, modernization theorists asserted that for the seeds of democracy to grow, the Third World had to extricate itself from the disabling claws of tradition and become modern. Mass media, as Middle East analyst Daniel Lerner argued in his book *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958), was the most efficient means to open traditional minds by introducing them to difference. It encouraged opinions and political participation and fostered people's mobility. To his view, media was a primordial tool to create the modern citizen (quoted in Abu-Lughod 1995, 190). The international community's urge to promote the reconstruction of media in Afghanistan short after the downfall of the Taliban shows that Western concerns with 'promoting democracy' are still influenced by these views.

However, the main difference between early modernizers and the new generation of those who are sent to post-war or developing countries is that they no more consider the State as a reliable entity to create the conditions for democracy. As a result, 'civil society' and private entrepreneurs have become privileged stakeholders in democracy building for the values of 'diversity' and 'autonomy' they are supposed to represent. Indeed, USAID, as the main funding body for media projects in Afghanistan, insisted that media should be '*truly* independent', i.e 'autonomous' from State support and market-driven (Barker 2008). The creation of Tolo TV in 2004 is a good example of this shift in policy.

As a commercial TV channel, Tolo TV derives all its income from sale of advertising and production of programming content. Tolo TV is primarily broadcasting

live shows, music programmes, foreign movies, comedies and soap operas. It produces and broadcasts *Afghan Star*, one of Afghanistan's most popular television series. *Afghan Star* is of a similar format to *American Idol*, and is billed as Afghanistan's biggest talent search. Tolo is also broadcasting *Tulsi* one of the five Indian soaps that were banned by the government in May 2008. Tolo director Saad Mohseni rejected the ban, calling the government's intervention a breach to the Constitution and to media freedom. At the time of writing, *Tulsi* is still aired on TV and Tolo is still awaiting the final verdict of the Supreme Court.

Since its creation, Tolo has been the target of heavy criticisms from the government and the National Assembly. The channel is regularly accused of broadcasting programs of poor informational and educational content, of promoting lifestyles in contradiction with Islamic principles and of creating polemics by discrediting members of the parliament. The strongest condemnations come from conservative segments of the National Assembly like Abdurrasul Sayaf, a deputy and former warlord, who accuses Tolo of being an entry point for 'foreign conspiracies' (Najibullah 2008).

The power of television stands in its capacity to bring non-local or temporally remote experiences to the heart of the most local situations: the home. Access to TV in Afghanistan is limited to major city centres but whenever TV sets and electricity are available, watching TV becomes a major source of entertainment. Invited once for dinner at a friend's place, I was astonished to discover that the TV set had been installed on the rooftop of the family's house especially for the occasion. As we ate in silence seated on carpets spread on the floor, watching an Afghan black and white movie from the 60s aired on Aryana TV, my friend Fahair, a twenty-two-year-old car driver from Penjshir, suddenly asked: 'Where is this movie from? This cannot be Afghanistan'. The scene was showing unveiled women wearing short dresses dancing and chatting with long haired men during a private house party in Wazir Akbar Khan, the upper class district of Kabul in the 60s and 70s, now turned into the headquarters of various UN and international organizations. For Fahair who was born during the war and whose male family members had dedicated their lives to fighting besides Commandant Masoud, it was hard to imagine that such a light-hearted lifestyle had once existed in his country. Despite my repetitive attempts at convincing him that this was Afghanistan, pointing at settings that were still recognizable, Fahair was stubbornly shaking his head in disapproval: 'This was shot in a foreign country! This is not Afghanistan! This is foreign, foreign!' he protested while I pointed at Gargha Lake where a black and white couple was walking hand in hand on a romantic song (Fieldnotes, 08/08/2007).

In post-Taliban Afghanistan, a well-intentioned conglomerate of media professionals sponsored by Western governments, have constructed of people like Fahair in general, and of women in particular a subaltern subject in need of Enlightenment. Influenced by Western liberal ideas, they feel endowed with the mission to alleviate ignorance, educate citizens and spread the seeds of a modern nation. When interviewed by Reuters journalist Sayed Salahuddin, Farzana Samimi, a presenter of the woman's program *Banu* for Tolo TV, emphasized the educational purpose of the soaps (Salahuddin 2006). 'It enlightens the minds of people in the family, not only of brides or mothers-in-laws, but others too', said the 27-year-old psychology major turned TV presenter, in defence of the Indian soaps threatened of censorship. Similarly, the TV and Radio spots produced by Sayara Media and Communication, the Communication Agency for which I worked at the beginning of my fieldwork, delivered messages about the importance of education, the evils of poppy production and consumption, the role of the Afghan National Police in bringing security to the population. The agency and its clients (NGOs, international organizations, Afghan ministries) that ordered such communication products worked with the aim of educating the public, holding the view that positive change would occur at the national level only if Afghan individuals at the grassroots changed and became more 'socially and civically aware'.

In March 2007, a conference organized by the Media and Civil Society Forum was held in Kabul Intercontinental Hotel under the slogan 'Media *is* Development' (original emphasis). In the middle of the luxurious salon where the conference was taking place, an Afghan camerawoman, whose face was totally concealed under a black *chader* that left only a thin line for her eyes, was filming the event. The conference was headed by The Killid Group (TKG), a Media Group founded in 2002 with the financial support of the OTI and the European Union (Barker 2008, 115). In the report that was published following the conference, one could read: 'Neither democracy nor sustainable development can work unless people are driving the process and feel that they are involved. A free and accessible media can provide the link between the people and state which is needed for enhancing ownership and involvement in the process.' (Killid 2007)

There was a certain irony in the conference's organizers reiteration of the commonplace idea that free media was pivotal to establish participatory democracy. Indeed, since their creation, TKG and other Media groups sponsored by the West as part of its 'democracy promotion' agenda had deeply jeopardised smaller provincial media outlets. Provincial media outlets, ran by small indigenous Civil Society Organizations and political parties, were no more able to compete for funding with giants like Killid. In this

respect, the comment made during the conference by MP Hadji Moahmmad Mohaqiq, chairman of the Media, Culture and Religious Affairs Committee at the National Assembly, was revealing of his political awareness of the double standards applied in the domain of 'Press Freedom'. 'Is the press freedom in the country driven by the presence of the international community or does it really reflect the degree of openness of the Afghan society?' the MP asked (Fieldnotes, 29/03/2007).

If *Tulsi* and *Perina* evidently won a certain success among the urban population of Afghanistan's major cities, the effects of broadcasting such series in conservative rural areas where fighting and NATO bombings were still going on, might have been less positive than what Tolo director Saad Mohseni argued. Additionally, if TV was to be a guide to 'modernity', one could ask who was to be accountable for arbitrating the benchmarks upon which the progress of democracy would be measured. So-called independent media sponsored by the West, even if well intentioned in their claims to 'educate' the Afghan public, undeniably reflected some of the ideas, values and aspirations of the development agencies that funded them. The Mohseni brothers (owners of Tolo TV), Atiq Rahimi, the Afghan film maker who had been selected by Tolo to direct the first Afghan soap opera, the TV presenters who ran prime time shows had this in common: they had lived in exile for a long period of time and had brought with them new ideas about 'modernity'. They were educated and could speak foreign languages. As members of the cosmopolitan middle-class, they shared relatively liberal views. Most of them had never experienced the hardship of their Afghan compatriots who had not been able to flee during the wars and they remained remote from the reality of provincial life. Their views on how women's lives could be improved and on the kind of knowledge women should gain in order to be empowered were inspired by the humanist ideas to which they had been exposed during their exile. They believed in the universal human capacity to break free from structures of subordination, despite the political and economic constraints that determined the every day life of common Afghan people.

The conflagration of these different influences while political unrest gradually spread in rural areas accentuated the already existent gap between these two distinguishable segments of the Afghan society. Questioning around the Afghan identity and the characteristics of the 'authentic *Afghanness*' were indeed part of every day casual conversations. Dormitory girls were not removed from these debates. On the contrary, the discussions they had after watching their favourite series revealed the complex ways in which they were engaged in interpreting these series in relation to their cultural and

social environment. Girls were not the passive recipients of the ideas and values transmitted through media works. Their interpretations were shaped by events in their lives and by the relationships in which they defined themselves.

### *b. Women as Subjects*

In Purnima Mankekar's words (1998) 'television audiences are one among several sites in which local negotiations of meaning are suffused by translocal relations of knowledge and power'. TV stations, the funding agencies and advertisement companies that support them are indeed powerful tools to shape public opinions and promote lifestyles. But if TV may create a global community of viewers, the same soap opera may be differently received in different parts of the worlds. Girls' interpretations of the soaps are located at the crossroads of these various instances of power but are also the product of their specific position within the Afghan society as well as the individual experiences that have marked their lives. The soaps are conversational objects that lead to the problematisation of the nature of the family as an institution pivotal to maintain social stability.

For Lutfia, who had lived with her uncle in Pakistan during the war and who, unlike the majority of the girls from her generation, had received an uninterrupted education in Lycée Franco-Afghan in Peshawar, the feminine models proposed in *Tulsi* and *Perina* were highly inspirational in comparison to the hopelessness that, in her opinion, marked the majority of Afghan women's lives. 'Tulsi and Perina are not Muslim but they face similar problems to Afghan women: unhappy marriages, difficult relationships with mothers-in-laws...The difference is that they are brave and independent. These women don't show weaknesses when they face difficulties. They are strong, independent women', she explained (Fieldnotes, 13/02/2007). Notions of independence, autonomy and strength to which Lutfia referred were further explained in relation to a traumatic event that had occurred in her family.

Lutfia's sister, Nafisa, had been kidnapped by a man from her village called Raouf whose marriage offers she had rejected numerous times. Raouf brought Nafisa to Iran where his family had found him a job. Nafisa totally disappeared for a few months, until she managed to convince him to return to Afghanistan. In order to preserve her family's honour Nafisa had had to marry her abductor. After she delivered her second baby, Nafisa who was leading an unhappy life with a husband with whom she continuously argued, approached the village's *shura* (council of elders) in an attempt to

obtain divorce. The divorce was eventually granted but Nafisa was refused the custody of her children, who according to local interpretations of *sharia* law, belonged to her husband. The pain of being separated from her children made Nafisa change her mind. She stayed with Raouf and a year later, gave birth to a third baby. Nafisa had turned into, in Lutfia's words, 'a prisoner in her own home'. Lutfia did not only blame Nafisa's husband for her sister's unhappiness but also her grandmother who had lobbied in favour of this marriage based on the argument that the family, mostly composed of women, and with an aging father at its head needed the support of an external man. Unfortunately, Nafisa's husband revealed himself to be a mediocre businessman and Lutfia's family never really benefited from this new connection (Fieldnotes, 21/05/2007).

It is informed by this life event that Lutfia commented on the Indian soaps. When I asked her how she reconciled the fact that *Perina* had conceived a child outside of marriage with the values of Islam, she simply replied:

These kinds of things happen all the time in our society as well. The thing is that it is taboo to talk about it. *Perina* and *Tulsi* are free women. If these series are so popular, it is because everyone would like to be free like the characters in the series. Everyone likes freedom. (Fieldnotes, 21/05/2007)

Lutfia associated freedom with love because her sister Nafisa's forced marriage to a husband who had kidnapped and abused her was, to her understanding, equivalent to a life sentence. In this marriage, Nafisa's sacrifice had brought nothing to the family except a strong sense of waste and treason. *Perina* could be blamed for having an illegal child but 'her love for Anurak was real and her heart was pure' she explained. The shameful stamp of treachery did not mark Anurak and *Perina*'s story. Besides, *Perina* was educated and had proved her worth by becoming a successful businesswoman. Nafisa's experience had traumatized the family to such an extent that the parents had promised Lutfia that she would be able to marry a man she would choose for herself. But this privilege was also granted to Lutfia because, like *Perina*, she was the main family provider and she 'had a brain', as she liked to say (Fieldnotes, 21/05/2007).

The value of love in the face of social pressure was understood by the girls of room 42 as a universally applicable alternative to marriages arranged by families for financial and strategic reasons. To them, love not only enhanced women's status and lives but was also an aspiration they could afford to have as educated women. What the soaps did was not simply selling 'foreign ideas' to the dormitory girls. As the example of

Lutfia shows, girls were actively engaged in negotiating and interpreting these ideas in the specific and culturally located context of their lives. Of course, to some extent, girls' perceptions of and ideas about marriage and the family were the product of cultural hybridization processes that had marked their lives as emigrants in Iran and elsewhere. They were also the reflection of the relative liberalism and cosmopolitanism that had suddenly reached Kabul after years of isolation due to war and civil unrest. But these ideas were not mere foreign transplants. The soaps were in many ways mirroring the lives of the girls; questioning some of their assumptions and making some of them challenge the boundaries of the social order.

For most Dormitory girls the romantic stories told in *Perina* and *Tulsi* were in many ways similar to the ones they had read in classic Persian literature. To a great extent, the soaps despite their Indian origin, could be interpreted as modern adaptations of the great Persian epics such as *Shahname*, the book of Kings written in the 10<sup>th</sup> century by poet Abolqasem Ferdosi. These were stories of honour, courage and impossible love that often ended, like for Majnun Layla<sup>47</sup> or for Rabia and Baktash<sup>48</sup>, by the death of the two protagonists. 'I will tell you a story to show you that love can destroy mountains', Maryam said once. And she spoke, while other girls sat in circle around her and attentively listened:

My grandfather, on my mother's side, was a dictator. He had 7 wives (she laughed). My aunt was a nurse in Iran. At that time, my entire family had moved to Iran. During that time, it was the Iran-Iraq war. One day, a young soldier arrived at the hospital where my aunt was working. He was wounded and my aunt took care of him. This man was very handsome. He was Iranian. He fell in love with my aunt at first sight. He wanted to marry her. My aunt fell in love as well. The man went to my grandfather to ask for my aunt's hand. My grandfather, who was a real dictator, always refused. My seven uncles refused as well. So there was only one solution left for my aunt. One day, she cut her veins. When my grandfather discovered my aunt on the verge of death, he got totally panicked. He understood he could not fight against such a strong love. He finally accepted to give her to this man. Since then, my aunt is still living in Iran and is married to this

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<sup>47</sup> The story of Majnun Layla is based on the real story of a young man called Qays ibn al-Mulawwah from the northern Arabian Peninsula, in the Umayyad era during the 7th century. Upon seeing Layla, Qays fell passionately in love with her. But he went mad when her father prevented him from marrying her. For that reason he came to be called Majnun Layla, which means 'Driven mad by Layla'. (Shafaq, 1952)

<sup>48</sup> Rabiah Balkhi was originally from Balkh province and is considered as one of the first Afghan/Persian 10<sup>th</sup> century poets who wrote in modern Persian (Dari). Her father, Kaab, was a governor. When Kaab died, his son Haares, brother of Rabiah, became the governor. Haares had a Turkish slave named Baktash, with whom Rabiah was secretly in love. At a court party, Haares heard Rabiah's secret from Rudaki. He imprisoned Baktash in a well, cut the jugular vein of Rabiah and imprisoned her in a hamam. She wrote her final poems with her blood on the wall of the hamam until she died. Baktash escaped the well, and as soon as he learnt about Rabiah, he went to the governor's office and assassinated Haares. He then committed suicide.

man, with whom she had four children. So you see, if your love is very strong, no one can destroy it. (Fieldnotes, 28/03/2007)

Stories like this were told and retold in the dormitory. They represented the ideal towards which most girls aspired. They frequently referred, always with a touch of admiration; to the people they knew in their circles who had 'chosen' each other. In the meantime, these ideas were highly romantic: love was an unachievable objective, an object of fantasy more than an idea that they thought could one day materialise. They warned each other about the danger of having unrealistic dreams. 'Perina is a fiction and stories like that cannot happen in Afghanistan. It can happen in India, in Iran but not in Afghanistan', Massoma commented after hearing Maryam's story. 'In real life, love does not matter. What matters is money.' (Fieldnotes, 28/03/2007)

For Massoma, who was an ethnic Hazara<sup>49</sup>, the ethnic group that suffered and is still suffering the most from discrimination, the upward mobility revealed in 'love' relationships could not apply to the people of her group. Among the other girls living in room 42, Massoma was undeniably from the poorest family. She had one sister and four brothers: one of them suffered from mental health problems, another one had illegally migrated to France and was kept in a detention centre next to Calais, and the youngest was only 14 years old and still attending school. The destitution in which her family lived, occupying a 15 square meters room in a slum located on the outskirts of Kabul, made her feel particularly responsible for maintaining her status as a loyal, self-sacrificing and dutiful daughter. Indeed, Massoma's father was old, sick and jobless. Massoma was able to support the family thanks to the modest revenues she made as a sport teacher but she was also aware that her marriage could be a more profitable and sustainable option for the supportive connections it could create with another family.

The ideal of 'autonomy' girls of room 42 aspired to was therefore never discussed outside of the kinship bounds and the material reality in which their lives were entangled. Dreaming was still allowed, after all. And while Massoma was getting ready to take off for work, Maryam and Khokia returned to their mirror to add some extra make-up to their eyes. This was perhaps what the soaps achieved the most efficiently: the modelling

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<sup>49</sup> The Hazaras speak Farsi and are mostly Shi'i Muslims (primarily Twelver Shi'i, some Ismaili Shi'is), yet there are also some Sunni Muslim Hazaras. They settled in Afghanistan at least as far back as the 13th century. Hazaras have always lived on the edge of economic survival. As a result of Pashtun expansionism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries which was fuelled by Sunni prejudices against the Shi'i (thus attracting the help of the mostly Sunni Tajiks and Uzbeks) the Hazaras were driven to the barren dry mountains of central Afghanistan (the Hazarajat) where they live today separated into nine regionally distinct enclaves. Suffering from continuous racism and discrimination, Hazara usually represent the lowest and poorest segments of the Afghan society. (Bacon, 1951)

of these young women's bodies on their favourite Indian actresses. This was a comment I heard once from a female civil servant at the Ministry of Women's Affairs: 'With all these new products and these Indian series, women have become more greedy and it creates troubles in families. Their husbands cannot always afford to buy them everything they want and then they argue and men become violent'. In her opinion, futile consumption desires among young women were a fundamental explanation for increased domestic violence (Fieldnotes, 09/02/2007).

Going shopping for clothes and cosmetics was indeed a major Friday afternoon activity. We would usually take the bus to *Kute Sangi* and crawl into one of these big malls that had survived the bombings. In what would be better described as Ali Baba's cave, girls would buy for each other lipsticks, eye shadows, creams and scarves. The gifts they made to their friends were not only means to consolidate their friendship, show their loyalty and strengthen the ties between group members but also practices that defined them as 'modern', 'independent' but also honourable Muslim.

Anne Meneley (2007) explains that in Yemen men and women's public spheres of sociability are segregated and that women's public sphere consists in women's gatherings in family homes. Women's capacity to invite each other in their houses is central to maintain a family's reputation of hospitality within the broader community (Meneley 2007, 228). Hospitality is considered in Afghanistan like in many other Muslim societies, an important Islamic value. As a result, such gatherings were regularly taking place in the dormitory, girls inviting each other for tea in their rooms, wearing fashionable clothes and make-up for the occasion and giving gifts (perfumes, veils, cosmetics) to each other. Despite the little money Massoma carefully saved for her family, she could not extract herself from the gift economy. If she was offered a *chader*, she had to make sure she could return the gift at some point. Her incapacity to do so would damage her status within the group and make her more vulnerable to gossips, backbiting and other criticisms that were commonly perceived as the worst and most dangerous feminine weapons. As a Hazara and a Shia, Massoma was already more exposed than girls from other ethnic groups to all sorts of mean criticisms.

As a matter of fact, the Indian series played a crucial role in creating desires and anxieties pertaining to different forms of modernity. For the most part, the meanings imputed to modernity were neither anchored in 'the West', nor assumed as self evident but were, in fact, constituted and contested through Tulsi and Perina's discourses on gender and class. A 'modern' woman would assert her class status by consuming dresses of bright colours and make-up and allowing herself to 'fall in love' (most of the time in a

platonic manner) but would also remain unconditionally faithful to her kin and family by making sure that harmonious relationships with her relatives were maintained. In other words, the language that bore aspirations for modernity had a local tinge to it.

Here I would like to use the image of Fulla, the Chador Barbie that was created by a Syrian-based designer studio in 2003 and that has appeared on the toy market of major cities in the Middle East since then. In the transcultural object that Fulla represents, two stereotypes of women's oppression seem to catalyse. While the Barbie designed by Mattel is an icon of sexualized, commodified femininity, associated with the West, Chador Barbie, with her veil and long coat, embodies masculine control over women's sexuality, associated with the East. However, a reading of Fulla as a pure instrument for self-surveillance that girls are inculcated to master is somewhat too simplistic. Fulla is more than the simple superposition of opposite values: like the Western Barbie, Fulla is sold with a whole panel of accessories such as a pink prayer rug, traditional silver jewellery and an extensive wardrobe including jeans and the type of colourful headscarves worn by many young women in the Middle East. Fulla's colourful and overtly sexualized veils transformed into fashion instruments reveal what they are supposed to conceal. As a result, Fulla does not escape from commodification (Meneley 2007).

However, unlike Barbie, Fulla is still single (there is no Islamic equivalent to Ken, Barbie's former boyfriend) but a Doctor Fulla and Fulla as a teacher have been created - both respected careers for women in Muslim societies. According to Fawaz Abidin, the Fulla brand manager, 'She's honest, loving and caring and she respects her father and mother.' (BBC-News 2006). The type of femininity embodied by Fulla (educated, modern, financially autonomous, yet Muslim and respectful of family values) is very similar to the type of femininity Perina and Tulsi embodied and to the type of femininity on which girls of room 42 thrived to model themselves. In this subtle balance between contradictory meanings attached to the 'modern' Islamic body, Fulla helps us to think through the transformations and shifts in ideas young educated cosmopolitan working girls tried to negotiate in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

In the early years of television in Afghanistan, modernity was articulated chiefly in terms of modernization, which was to be achieved through national development. Television was accordingly harnessed to the task of fostering development and creating modern citizen-subjects. The radio and TV soaps broadcasted on Radio Television Afghanistan aimed at 'educating' families and empowering women. In Tulsi and Perina's discourses, modernity was associated with progress, upward mobility and higher status.

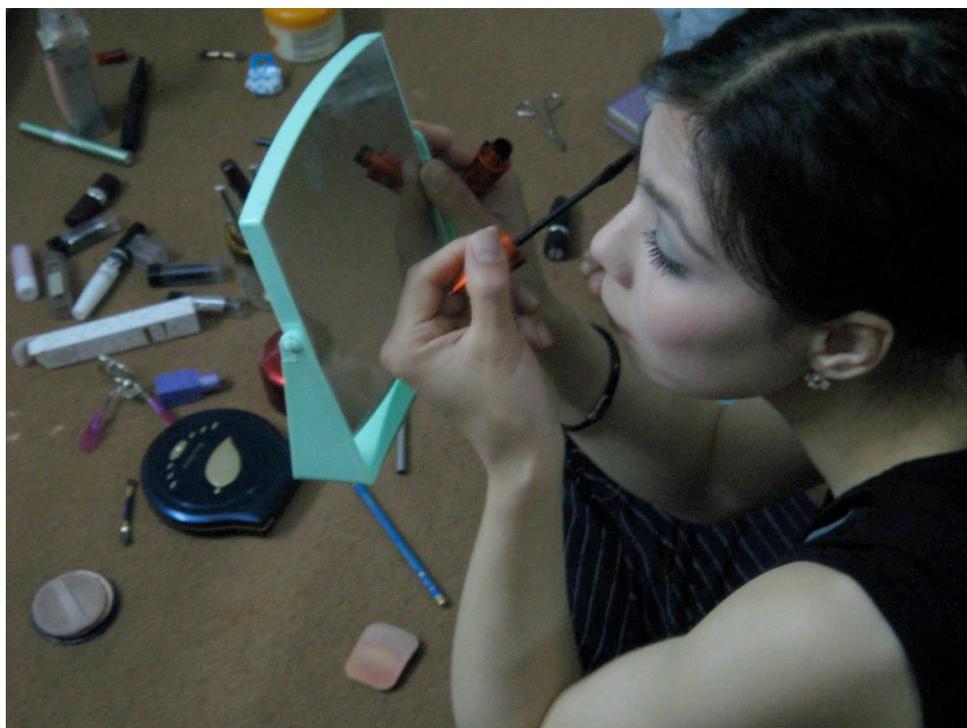
These representations of modernity resonated with aspirations and anxieties not just of girls securely positioned through their familial background within the middle class, but also those belonging to lower classes and upwardly-mobile working-classes. For the most part, Tulsi and Perina's discourses of modernity equated with 'modern' lifestyles articulated through consumerist aspirations and desires. In other words, for most lower-middle-class and working-class girls attending university, modern lifestyles were indexed by consumer goods such as cosmetics, clothes and Indian movies. As Mankekar (1998, 38) puts it for the case of India's booming film industry, 'when dreams for modernity were woven into yearnings for modern lifestyles, viewing subjects became interpellated by consumerist fantasies that were part of transnational circuits of desire.' But in Afghanistan like anywhere else where TV is available, these dreams were reinterpreted and adapted to the local context, in often paradoxical and contradictory terms.

The Indian soaps have therefore allowed a public culture to emerge in which new kinds of speech can be generated, breaking certain codes of silence and creating new aspirations for love, companionship and consumption. However, in a context where the norm of the 'harmonious family' prevails and where kinship relations represent the most reliable means to maintain a sense of safety and protection, these aspirations cannot be expressed in a way that would make them appear as threats to the social order. Girls' understandings of autonomy and independence were tightly entangled within a set of relations that formed the very conditions of their possibility.

With Saba Mahmood (2001, 2003), I share the view that agency 'is not a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create'. In the process of interpreting the soaps, dormitory girls were not radically opposing structures of subordination for the simple reason that these very structures, despite the gender hierarchies they produced, were also providing them with a sense of safety that could not be found anywhere else. As Mahmood argues for the case of the Islamist revival in Egypt (2001), there has been a tendency in the feminist literature, even in the post-structuralist one, to represent the subject as naturally inclined to seek positive freedom - i.e to be self interested and autonomous in its will. 'Freedom', under its liberal sense, is still taken as the norm. As the example of the soaps in Afghanistan shows, notions of freedom and autonomy are discussed within the broader economy of relations girls see an important interest in preserving. Besides gender, other forms of social stratification, such as class and ethnicity are determinant factors in shaping desires and aspirations.

In the section that follows, I further explore these ideas through an analysis of dormitory girls' bodywork. I show how everyday acts of beautification performed among certain segments of the girls living in the dormitory can be understood as a means to exercise 'agency' in the sense I have defined above, i.e. through reconciling contradictory social expectations and preserving allegiances. I attempt to move the debate on 'agency' beyond its association with 'liberal freedom' that views the individual as universally and naturally capable of self-definition and show how notions of 'self realization/self-fulfilment' vary across distinctions of class and ethnicity.

### 3. Lipstick jihad<sup>50</sup>



Massoma applying make-up. Women's National Dormitory. Kabul. April 2007 © Julie Billaud.

Applying make-up is part of the girls living in room 42 everyday rituals. Quantity and colours vary according to the place they go, to the people they meet, and of course, to the money they have to purchase what are considered luxury products in Afghanistan. The seriousness with which these girls take their physical appearance amidst destruction – the area where the University is located is one that has been the most damaged by the fighting during the civil war – could seem, at first, anomalous. But beauty in this section of the dormitory is a serious business. Even in the grimmest circumstances, our humanity is preserved in the mundane. Self-beautification is a means to keep a sense of dignity and control over oneself, especially when the political, social and economic climate tends to limit individual agency. This is probably the reason why; despite the winter that turns the streets of the city into muddy paths, women continue to wear black suits and varnished shoes. That is also probably what can explain the fact that despite the

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<sup>50</sup> *Jihad* (literally, 'struggle' in Arabic) is an Islamic term and a religious duty of Muslims. *Jihad* requires Muslims to 'struggle in the way of God', i.e to constantly improve themselves and society. *Jihad* that involves actual combats against the enemies of Islam is regulated by Islamic jurisprudence and represents a secondary form of struggle (See p 243). I use this expression here to describe the internal dilemmas of some female University students faced while trying to achieve the ideal of the 'good' Muslim girl and still appearing as 'modern' and 'liberated'.

*chadari* that totally conceals their faces, some women still wear heavy jewellery, make-up and bright colored clothes under the veil.

However, interest in beauty is not a specifically feminine characteristic. Acts of self-beautification can indeed be observed across gender. Under the Taliban regime, for instance, *Titanic* was one among the many Western movies that could be found on the black market. The movie, released in 1997, became such a phenomenon in Kabul that the bazaar located along the Kabul River got popularly renamed Titanic market (Hosseini 2007). Fascinated by the romantic figure embodied by Leonardo Di Caprio, young men in Kabul started to let their hair grow just below the ear, in an attempt to copy the actor's physical appearance. In order to avoid getting caught by the religious police that had made short hair compulsory for men, some barbers in Kabul had slightly modified the actor's original haircut: only the hair layers on the top head were kept long while the underneath hair were shaved according to authorities' prescriptions so that long hair could be hidden under a knitted Islamic cap. In the novel *Kabul Beauty School* (Rodriguez 2008), American beautician Deborah Rodriguez recounts how the trick got eventually discovered by a Talib during a compulsory collective *azan* (prayer) in a mosque and how the Kabul hairdresser was eventually sent to prison. After the fall of the Taliban regime, the 'Titanic haircut' became authorized again and hairdressers started to advertise it on their front store's windows. Men were getting shaved and bodybuilding centres reopened. Young men thrived to resemble famous Bollywood actors with their wet look, their tight blue jeans, their leather jackets and their muscular bodies. Like cosmetics for women, t-shirts perfectly fitting the curves of men's muscles became the material symbols of the 'liberation'.

#### *a. Bodies as sites of political struggle*

Our bodies and actions, according to Bourdieu (1984), rather than primarily cognitive models, encode cultural meanings. We bring forth worlds or make our lives meaningful, not only with language, rituals and works but also in and on our very bodies. Bourdieu claims that how one chooses to present one's social space to the world, one's aesthetic dispositions, depicts one's status and distances oneself from lower groups. The motivations behind some of the dormitory girls' pursuit of beauty, against dominant discourses reaffirming women's modesty as a fundamental principle of Islam, have to be explored and questioned. Why were some female students refusing to follow the classic dressing code when the potential repercussions (gossips, sexual harassment, arguments

with relatives) for their non-conformity were so harsh? Were they trying to make a public statement when, on Fridays they made their way through the narrow alleys of the bazaar, wearing lipstick and bright coloured veils? Or were their bodies simply the passive objects of globalization and its standardized consumption items?

Post-war periods are peculiar for the new possibilities that seem to suddenly open up. During my first journey in Afghanistan in 2003, just a few months after the downfall of the Taliban regime, women's magazines were exhibited on newsagents' stalls, their laminated front covers showing women's faces in multiple colors when in the streets of Kabul most women continued to cover under their *chadari*.

In the limbo that marked the post-war, between 2002 and 2007, everyone in Kabul seemed to be experimenting with the old and the new. Somehow, girls of room 42 were doing the same: testing boundaries and evaluating the scope of possibilities. After a while, I got so used to the girls' beauty habits that it took me a single look to tell where they were about to go. In *Shar-e-Naw*, the city centre, it was more common to see young women wearing jeans, semi-long jackets and make-up in the newly built shopping malls. In *Kut-e Sangi* bazaar, a few minutes drive away from the University, the crowd was more traditional and women tended to cover more with *chadari* and face-covering veils. On the University campus, despite its shabby aspect, and more prominently inside of the girls' dormitory, I would have a permanent fashion show. When visiting their families, girls would generally avoid wearing make-up. Length of veils and colours changed according to places and circumstances. The post-war period had created pockets of expressive spaces – often linked to consumption spaces - in the urban landscape.

In the narrow alleys of the bazaar, the group constituted by the girls of room 42, with colourful square veils, tight blouses, blue jeans, trainers and make-up, was highly noticeable. Men would stare as they passed. Women under their *chadari* would make nasty comments. And as the tension around them would increase, girls would start giggling and answering back, encouraged by the sense of safety brought by their click. 'He has pinched my bottom!' suddenly screamed Zoora as we were trying to make our way through an overcrowded path of the bazaar. The guilty (luckily) small man bent his head down and wormed into the crowd as if not concerned by the scandal he had provoked. But he was soon pulled back by an enraged Zoora, ready to give him a good lesson .

'What have you done, *bacha sack* (son of a dog)? What have you done?' she screamed in a fury while slapping his face over and over again with a finely nailed polished hand. People stopped walking, interrupted in their activity by a scene that I had myself never witnessed before. A bookseller finally stepped out of his shop to intervene

in the fight. ‘What are you doing, *dokhtar* (girl)?’ the panicked man said while walking towards Zoorā, raising his hands to the sky. ‘Let’s get out of here Zoorā!’ pleaded Lutfia who sensed things would turn wrong. ‘This man is a pig! He is a dirty pig!’ Zoorā said her face turned red of emotions. And she shaved him down like a rubbish bag, the man falling onto the bookseller’s array, books being displayed all over. We all ran away as fast as we could. In the evening, the story of the event spread like gun powder in the dormitory, Zoorā being visited by small groups of girls eager to get a first-hand version of the story. And she always finished her narration on this note: ‘If we don’t react, they (men) will think we like it and they will continue doing it (harassing women in the bazaar)!’ (Fieldnotes, 11/05/2007).

In the dormitory’s corridors, girls’ comments revealed a mixture of admiration and disapproval. ‘What do they expect if they hang out in the bazaar dressed up like that?’ I heard a girl saying outside of Zoorā’s room. Girls coming from poorer or more conservative families or/and from rural areas perceived girls who spent time besides their studies, at work, shopping in the bazaar, applying make-up in their rooms or giving calls to their friends as a threat to their own credibility in their claims to be dedicated students. To them, girls of room 42 were wasting their parents’ trust and would better study harder instead of concentrating on their physical appearance. At the same time, the fact that the story came from Zoorā made the whole event more acceptable. Indeed, Zoorā was already a powerful figure in the dormitory. Her mother was a rich divorcée and a Representative of Badakhshan province at the National Assembly. Her aunt was Zakia Zaki, a radio journalist of *Sada-e Subl* (Voice of Peace) who made herself famous for criticising local commanders and who was found shot dead in her house in June 2007, a few weeks after I recorded these events. The first time I met Zoorā’s mum, she had asked me only one question: ‘Are you married?’ and my negative answer had immediately satisfied her: ‘I will like you only for that. Men are problems, problems’ she had replied with a determined smile (Fieldnotes, 22/02/2007).

Because of her mother’s political position, the dormitory’s director had selected Zoorā as a girls’ representative. Her task mostly consisted in reporting girls’ demands to the dormitory’s administration and mediating disputes. In return for her services, she had been given a room of her own on the third floor. Zoorā’s position and the authority she had gained from it made her a well respected and feared girl with whom no-one dared to argue. I would learn too late that it was better to have her on your side than to have her

as an enemy<sup>51</sup>. She would openly give a call to her 'boyfriend' in front of everyone and ask him to buy her *shirini* (sweets) and other presents that he would rush to bring her on the same day, in front of the dorm's front gate. Zoorā's capacity to openly transgress gender norms, her 'capacity to aspire', to use Appadurai's expression (2004) stemmed from her upper class background, her position of authority within the dormitory and the support she received from female members of her family. This is not to say that the other girls' aspirations were radically different from those of Zoorā but their capacity to phrase these aspirations and act according to them without too much compromise were constrained and limited by their lower class status.

As the event that took place in the bazaar demonstrates, displaying non conventional corporeal garments in public spaces traditionally reserved to men like the bazaar was an extremely courageous act. The verbal aggressions and sexual harassment that ensued are revealing of the very narrow line in which these young women had to manoeuvre. It is doubtful that without Zoorā's encouragements the other girls would have dared behaving against the social norm of female shyness and modesty. But Zoorā's direct confrontation with her aggressor cannot be understood without taking into account her specific social location. If we consider that desires, bodies and behaviours are socially constructed, then notions of class and social capital informed Zoorā's performance. The task of realizing her right to respect in a situation where she appeared as a minority placed her in conflictual relations with a variety of structures of authority: some grounded in instituted standards of Islamic authority, some in masculine authority. Yet the logic of these conflicts had no predefined postulate and therefore cannot be understood by reference to arguments for gender equality or resistance to male authority alone. Of course it can be argued that the practical effect of these practices may be analyzed in terms of their role in undermining structures of male domination. But with Saba Mahmood (2001, 2009), I agree that such a binary reading in terms of resistance vs subordination 'is insufficiently attentive to motivations, desires, and goals that are necessarily captured by these terms'.

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<sup>51</sup> In June 2007, I was asked to leave the dormitory. Zoorā had reported me to the dormitory's director as a negative influence on the other girls and as a threat to the dormitory's reputation. However, the final decision to make me leave was influenced by other political developments pertaining to 'equal access opportunities'. Indeed, the Ministry of Higher Education had refused several Afghan female students' access to the dormitory based on the reason that the faculties in which they studied (music and dramatic art) were attached to the Ministry of Culture and not the MHE which was responsible for the administration of the dorm. The presence of a Westerner in the dorm was therefore in contradiction with their argument. But Zoorā's words to the director had undeniably further limited my chances to defend my case.

It is difficult to evaluate the extent to which the motivations that guided Zoorā's response were rooted in the social capital she had gained as a daughter of an upper-class, well-off and well respected family or in a feminist agenda to which she would have been acquainted as a daughter of a prominent female political figure. Probably both elements of her social capital played out at that very moment. But comparing her to other upper class politically conscious women I met during my fieldwork in Afghanistan, Zoorā's outspokenness was very much the product of her age. None of the elder women who had a greater political experience and broader knowledge of the political context considered direct confrontation as an efficient strategy to achieve change. Instead of engaging in a 'lipstick jihad' as Zoorā and other girls did, older women opted for dissimulation (performed compliance to gender norms) to confront hegemonic interpretations of gender relations (see chapter 6).

#### *b. Fashionable, Modern and Muslim*

Girls who displayed their pampered and fashionable appearance most consistently and across most contexts were the ones who had recently returned to Afghanistan and who knew very little about their country. Some of them were even born abroad, in Iran, Pakistan or further afield. This was for instance the case of Roqia and Maryam, two sisters who studied foreign languages at the University and worked part time in a shop on an ISAF military base located on the road to Jalalabad. Maryam and Roqia's father, a military officer, fled to Iran when the Russians invaded the country. He met his wife in Isfahan, where he worked as an electrician. Maryam and Roqia had never visited Afghanistan prior to their family's return in 2002. If they had heard about the Taliban and if their imagination was filled with the horror stories they had heard in the foreign press and through friends and relatives, girls who had been brought up abroad had never personally experienced the fear, beatings and humiliations of the other girls who stayed in Afghanistan during their rule. As a result of this radically different life experience, girls of room 42 could intellectually and emotionally afford the cost of 'lipstick jihad'.

The way violence is processed in the everyday life of Afghan women who have experienced the trauma of Islamic fundamentalism and civil war would necessitate greater investigation. However, I would like to mention here that the narratives of these women defy all the expectations of the Western anthropologist. These stories, often told during women's gatherings, frequently led to collective outbreaks of tears and

lamentation traditionally performed by women during funerals. The notion of ‘poisonous knowledge’ Veena Das (2000) uses to describe violence committed against women during the Partition of India is a useful tool to analyse the process by which women’s subjectivity is transformed through the experience of violence<sup>52</sup>. In the current absence of reparative justice and with the social stigma attached to rape victims in Afghanistan, women have had to develop coping strategies in order to make their lives meaningful again. By processing violence within local structures of feelings, women have tended to root their subjectivity within the social order and create continuity instead of resisting the norms responsible for their subjugation.

In a shrine located next to Jalalabad, for instance, mullahs became specialized in healing ‘crazy women’ (*zan-e dewana*) with exorcism and *taweez*<sup>53</sup>. The small consultation room located just behind the shrine was filled with women and their in-laws who had sometimes walked for several hours in order to get treatment. When I started to interview these women, it became clear that they had all their head and that what was locally diagnosed as ‘madness’ due to ‘attacks of jinns’ (evil spirits) was instead the result of trauma linked to violence (domestic or political). Women’s inappropriate behaviours in public such as walking bare-head in the village, refusing to participate in house chores, neglecting their physical appearance and their children were symptoms locally understood as ‘female madness’. But by subjecting themselves to masculine mediation to treat their ‘disease’ and sticking to gender stereotypes, women were using the only available means to express their distress and attract empathy. Violence was consumed and mediated within locally recognised structures of feelings. I further explore these feminine performances in chapter 7 but I think it is important to bear these developments in mind if we want to understand the radically different positions the young women I describe in this chapter occupied.

Maryam and Roqia’s work with foreign soldiers, their use of Farsi expressions when they talked and more significantly the veils and clothes they wore distinguished them from the other dormitory girls. Mariam and Roqia wore colourful square veils tied up under their chin, bright colored T-shirts under tight black blouses, jeans and trainers. They drew the contour of their eyes with black eyeliner and plucked their eyebrows in a

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<sup>52</sup> Das (1996), in discussing the violence on women during the partition of India, urges us to consider women’s ability to survive the ongoing presence of this pain not so much as dramatic transgression and defiance, but in terms of the ‘doing of little things’, that does not have the sense of ‘passive submission but of an active engagement’ (1996, 11-12). The experience of pain does not fully translates itself into passive suffering but enables certain ways of inhabiting the world that must be explored through an analysis of the language in which pain resides.

<sup>53</sup> Taweez are pieces of paper on which people write Koranic ayahs or some of the names of Allah and then put them in a necklace or something to wear it.

straight shape. They were, in short, the perfect Teheran girls. But even though both of them were targets of ferocious gossips by other dormitory girls and by people from their neighbourhood and as a result were singled out as *kehaliji* (foreigners), Maryam and Roqia kept on wearing make-up, fancy veils and the clothes they brought with them from Iran<sup>54</sup>. When I asked them why they did not try to change some of their habits in order to avoid harmful comments, Maryam replied:

Girls at the dorm are totally stupid. You know, the relationships that we have with foreigners are much easier than the relationships we have with Afghans. We feel that we are Afghans but with a superior culture. You know, in foreign countries, when a girl is working and is financially independent, it is perceived as something positive. Foreigners have a different culture and a different religion, but they think the same way as us. Here, it is not the same. It is very difficult for us to feel like foreigners in our own country. But it's like that. If we don't live here, where can we go? Afghanistan will develop one day and people will change their mind. (Interview - Roqia & Maryam, 08/05/2007)

Convinced as they were to belong to a 'superior culture', Maryam and Roqia were not willing to be associated with the more traditional-looking dormitory girls who wore large veils and loose *shalwar kameez* and whom they jokingly called 'Taliban'. It seemed therefore natural to them to embody an identity in agreement with their understanding of modernity and by doing so, to reject dressing practices they considered backward. Girls of room 42 had made the choice to confront gossips and backbiting in order to assert their modern, fashionable and yet Muslim self.

According to Goffman (1969), there is a similarity between the actions of individuals in social encounters and theatrical performances. Each of us is engaged in performances designed to manage others' perceptions. There is a need to tailor one's performance to one's audience. This performance has particular goals, what Goffman calls 'tactical self presentation'. Honing our performances according to what we think we know about our audience's expectations results in appearing to be different people in different situations.

Girls of room 42 were far from neglecting to manage others' impressions. What they 'gave', the verbal symbols and attitudes they used to convey information about

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<sup>54</sup> During our interview, Roqia and Maryam showed me some pictures of their lives Teheran. They recounted with great nostalgia the picnics they had in Teheran's parks with their family and friends on Friday, the comfort of the apartment they shared with relatives and the friendship they developed with Iranians. They remembered Iran as a place where they could mix more easily with boys and girls alike, even though they had to beware of the moral police. Their descriptions of Teheran youth echoed the ones of Kaveh Basmenji in his book *Teheran Blues: Youth Culture in Iran* (2005).

themselves and prevent false expectations, contradicted what they physically 'gave off' in public. In other words, girls were constantly involved in negotiating their appearance by using discursive justifications and disciplining their body in order to maintain their reputation. In public, their physical non-conformity was counter-balanced by a strict moral conformity to Islamic norms of modesty.

While I walked in the street with Massoma, for instance, she often reminded me not to laugh or speak too loudly. A girl laughing in public is perceived in Afghanistan, like in many other Muslim countries, as wanting to attract men's attention. Such an attitude is understood as a form of 'openness', a sign of availability that goes against social expectations of female modesty. Under the *chadari*, women's closedness, containment and modesty were materially visible. I was often surprised to hear the lively conversations women had in *bazars*, talking to each other through their *chadari* and bargaining with merchants.

In the absence of this sartorial device, girls of room 42 had to make extra efforts to conform to the ideal of female closedness and modesty (Meneley 2007; Makhoul 1979; Popenoe 2004). This meant, in practice, walking straight without watching around, looking determined in order to prevent being seen as a loiterer, and avoiding any facial expression that could be read as 'having a good time': girls had to show that they were walking with a purpose. Their personal bodies, despite appearances, did not exist outside the social context in which they manoeuvred. Girls, indeed, had to 'perform closedness' since their bodies were displaying opposite meanings.

However, such performances were mostly a means to prove to themselves and to other girls hanging out with them that they were good and moral Muslim girls for external observers were hardly able to read these signs. The constant comments to which they were subjected when walking the streets proved that local interpretations of female modesty and shyness as primarily displayed through 'proper' Islamic clothing were prevailing. It was not rare to hear women in buses commenting on young women's clothes. Colourful clothes and make-up were indeed corporeal ornaments considered as appropriate only within the intimate sphere of the home. But as a result of their education abroad and their position as breadwinners within their families, girls of room 42 had a very different understanding of the principles of 'shyness' and 'closedness' that were meant to apply to their sex. Despite their efforts to perform 'shyness' through other means, girls of room 42 were read as provocative transgressors in the social imaginary. In the context of the Islamic Republic, the public sphere was institutionalized and imagined as a site for the implementation of a religious and 'traditional' way of life. In a Muslim

context, women's corporeal visibility and social mixing in men's spaces all counted as 'foreign' and contrary to Islamic values.

The value attached to female bodies' closedness in Islamic cultures has been explored by Popenoe (2004) in her study of female fatness among the Azawagh Arabs of Niger. The forced-feeding of young girls in this society is intended to accelerate the process of sexual maturity because fatness is closely associated with womanliness. The sooner a girl has assumed the contours and curves that come with corpulence, the sooner she is considered of a marriageable age (Popenoe 2004, 44-45). Popenoe contends that in becoming fat, Azawagh Arab women actively cultivate an aesthetic of 'stillness, steadiness and closedness' which is in direct opposition to the aesthetic of men that valorizes 'hardness, uprightness and mobility' (Popenoe 2004, 191). According to Islamic scriptures, men and women are radically different kinds of beings that are best harmonized when opposed to one another. By disciplining their bodies to fatten, women prove themselves able to control the dangers of their own desires and thus prove willing to forego their own interest in favour of the interests of their society.

In the Azawagh Arabs' culture, like in Afghanistan, negative values are placed on that which is porous and open while positive values are placed on that which is closed and contained. In order to achieve the ideal of closedness, women therefore tend to marry close relatives, to remain remote from other ethnic groups and to close off their bodies through veiling and fattening. By wearing *chadari*, women actively reproduce the ideal of female closedness while showing their participation in a moral way of life, in which the separation of men and women's spheres symbolizes the distinct and complementary roles of men and women. *Chadari* works as a reminder that a woman belongs to her family and home, not with public spaces where strangers mingle. *Chadari* is to be understood, as Abu-Lughod puts it, as a sort of 'mobile home' (Abu-Lughod 2002, 785).

It must be stressed that unmarried women are not expected to wear this long enveloping robe. Young women classically wear long rectangular cotton *chader* of clear colors (beige or white symbolize purity), with delicately embroidered edges. Women start covering themselves under *chadari* when they get married, as a form of recognition of their new status as wives. When they become older and the pleasant appearance of their youth has passed - their sexual attractiveness has faded away and they are no more marriageable - they tend to abandon the *chadari* for long veils.

Precepts addressing proper behaviours between men and women who mix outside kinship bonds appear in the Koran on two occasions:

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty. This will be most conducive to their purity. Verily, God is aware of what you do.

And say to the believing woman that they should lower they gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and should not display their beauty to any but their husbands, their fathers ... (and certain other members of the household). Let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornments. O believers, turn onto God all of you so that you may succeed. (Dawood 2003. 24:30, 31)

Women, in advanced years, who do not hope for marriage, incur no sin if they discard their garments, provided that they do not aim at a showy display of their charm. But, it is better for them to abstain from this. God is All-hearing All-Knowing. (Dawood 2003, 24:60)

According to Muslim theologians (Mernissi 1992), the modesty emphasized in these passages encompasses all aspects of life and calls for decency, humility and moderation in speech, attitude, dress and total behaviour. Modesty prevents human beings from indulging in indecency, vanity and obscenity. The Islamic rule of dressing modestly applies to both men and women but religiously appropriate modest dressing has come to connote especially female clothing. This is mostly because women are generally thought of in terms of their sexual attractiveness, their essential weakness and their need of protection on one hand, and in terms of their strong sexual impulses which threaten the honour of males on the other hand. The veil therefore operates as a double protective shield: 'against external offences of society and against women's inherent evil' (Makhlouf 1979, 38).

What happens, then, when women do not appear to follow the mainstream aesthetics and politics of the veil? Should such practices be interpreted as 'transgressions', as a repudiation of socially shared standards, religious beliefs and moral ideals? By wearing headscarves of different shapes, colors and patterns, girls of room 42 were slightly changing its meaning: from purely functional garments, their veils were turned into fashion accessories. Their make-up was matching the color of their veils, and by putting such an effort in selections and arrangements, girls answered their personal desire to appear beautiful, fashionable and modern. But in their own opinion, these practices were not contradicting religious values. Girls were constantly reminding each other that they were Muslims and that as such, they had to behave in a particular way. They justified their attention to how they looked by citing the Islamic principle stipulating that Believers should have a pleasant and beautiful appearance. Rather than

transgressions, girls' beauty practices revealed the tensions and frictions between the contradictory expectations in which they were caught.

The pressure to look beautiful and fashionable mostly came from their peers but also from their work place where internationals tended to value Afghan women who displayed an emancipated Self. At work, the modern gendered subject was constituted through women role models and repetitive performances, including language styles and dress codes. This external pressure was revealed to me when Naheed, a woman employed in a local women's organization in Kabul, told me how her application to a position in a foreign embassy was turned down because of her wearing *hijab*, a long overcoat and a veil covering everything except the face and hands. 'They basically made me understand that if I wanted the job, I had to make an effort in the way I dressed', she said (Fieldnotes, 09/10/2007). She then went on explaining that her husband was happy for her to work outside of the house as long as she wore proper Islamic clothes. It is difficult to know whether this was common practice among foreign employers but it anyhow remained a tacit rule to give advantage to women who could represent the ideal of a liberated femininity the international community was eager to promote.

As a matter of fact, the imperative of 'beautiful and pleasant appearance' was the subject of different and conflicting interpretations. More traditional segments of society would associate this principle with a concern for health and hygiene: a proper Islamic dress should be functional, clean and not attract attention. University working girls generally considered jeans, tighter and shorter jackets more suitable for the lifestyle of active women. The actual practice of clothing was in fact a subjective experience, shaped by various personal and social factors as well as scriptural interpretations. If all the dormitory girls agreed with the principle of modesty, they had different understanding of what could be considered as modest and not sexually attractive dresses.

By tying up their veils differently, and choosing different patterns, fabrics, sizes, shapes and designs, girls of room 42, like many other Afghan girls employed or seeking employment opportunities, were exploring and negotiating its symbolic potentiality. Their head-covering practices embodied their struggle between remaining faithful to the Koranic principles on religiously appropriate dressing and constructing a fashionable, beautiful and modern appearance. Girls of room 42 spent a considerable amount of time in shops looking at the latest veils' arrivals, usually buying a few of them at once, to match their different dresses and the colour of their skin or to offer as presents to their friends. Choices of colours, patterns and shapes were influenced by a variety of factors: female TV presenters, Indian movies stars, advertisement, comments from others and

personal understanding of ‘appropriate Islamic clothes’. Lutfia, for instance, mostly wore black square veils tied up under the chin as she considered black as a decent and ‘chic’ color and the square foulard practical. Maryam often wore the hood she had brought from Iran, for similar practical reasons: she enjoyed the fact that she did not have to think about fixing it all the time, once it was on her head it would not move. Roqia and Maryam were more fashion-oriented as a result of their greater exposure to the feminine press and the fashion industry during their years of exile in Iran.

However, achieving a beautiful yet not sexually attractive look was a complex task that required a lot of calculation and beauty work. Girls would generally comment on each others’ scarves, go shopping for scarves in small groups and be attentive to each others’ advice. Girls were also very susceptible to comments they received from others. They spent considerable time and effort to have their veil look straight and symmetrical on their head. In scarves shops, girls tried them on in front of a mirror and checked the comfort quality of the fabric, the good position of their motives, the matching of their colours with their own skin colours. They also took a particular care of their veils: washing, ironing and storing them with great meticulousness. The time and effort expended on daily head-covering practices and the signification of the beautification had many similarities with hair works undertaken by women in other countries.

A prevailing discourse among the more fashion-conscious covered girls was that proper Islamic dresses had to be beautiful and that their work in foreign organizations necessitated a more modern approach to dressing. Girls were well aware that physical appearance helped creating a distinction with other dormitory girls, while creating rapprochement with foreigners. Their emphasis on appearance indicated not only the new meanings of covering available in a society that was slowly opening to market economy but also, at a deeper level, the quest for being ‘modern’.

For working girls like Roqia, Mariam, Massoma and Lutfia, and for girls who had lived abroad during the war in general, women in *chadari* were symbols of the oppressed Other, symbols of women who would always be excluded from modernity. In their understanding, girls wearing the traditional *chader* today were the ones who would accept the *chadari* tomorrow if their husbands asked for it. In contrast, dormitory girls who were sympathetic to longer *chader* felt they were closer to religious principles of modesty and resistance to luxury consumerism. By wearing formal *chader*, they showed their entire dedication to the quest of knowledge, a central pillar of Islam and the primary purpose of their presence in the dormitory. Girls of room 42, on the other hand, despised such girls quite overtly, calling them ‘Taliban’ and mocking their ‘old fashioned’ style. ‘These girls

have never been abroad and they have never worked', Roqia told me once, 'the only thing they know is their village and what the mullah has taught them. They think women should listen to men and do whatever they say.' (Fieldnotes, 04/04/2007)

The opposition between Islam and Western consumerism that gradually emerged in the urban landscape challenged the stability of commonly shared Islamic values. Consumerism promised a range of possible lifestyles that suddenly competed with, or contradicted the uniform lifestyle demanded by Islamic conservatism. As Navaro-Yashin (2002) argues in the case of the re-veiling movement in Turkey, globalization together with the transnational circuits of desires created as a result of economic exchanges, have reinforced contestations around cultural issues. Consequently, the intellectual separation of 'culture' from the 'economy' is artificial as it fails to uncover the ways by which commodification shapes politics of culture (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 79).

The actual dressing practices of urban, educated and working women that I observed in the Dormitory contest the stereotypical discourses and images about covered women, complicating the tension between Islam and consumerism (Sandikci et Ger 2005). The aesthetics and politics of the veil that I have described in this section show that veiling in contemporary Kabul has become an unstable sign, a cultural codifier of the tensions and promises of modernity. The veil as a fashion accessory connotes a political posture but also a rank and an identity. Urban educated working women, like the girls of room 42 striving to look modern and Muslim, are not mere symbolic repositories of the tensions between Islam and Western consumerism. The selection and wearing of veils entail an elaborate process that requires invocation of economic and cultural capitals. The actual practices and discourses of these young women indicate the personalized nature of Islamic covering. The beauty work around the veil gives the subject the sense of a self-constructing person, who can take control of her own body and image. Personalization and bodywork together create a sense of modern agency that is free to choose and shape. Through their continual attention to their physical appearance, girls of room 42 were not simply the symbolic repositories of conflicting interpretation of culture/religion but they were actively involved in making or in renegotiating culture/religion. In their capacity of 'resistance' and 'transformation', these girls' bodies became tools or templates for reinterpreting culture.

Of course, their capacity to aspire to a 'modern' self-image was also the result of the cultural hybridity that had marked their upbringing. Raised abroad, Maryam, Roqia, Massoma and Lutfia had a greater panel of possibilities at their disposal to negotiate cultural and social norms. Unlike the other girls who stayed in Afghanistan during the

Taliban regime, girls of room 42 had never directly experienced the beatings or the fear of the religious police. In this respect, the audacity with which they negotiated their appearance in public settings was less a sign of courage than a reflection of this fundamental ignorance. But if girls' personal positions - urban, educated, cosmopolitan and financially autonomous- somehow explained the underlying scripts behind their claim to modern identity, the power of the market in shaping their aspirations should also be acknowledged.

The availability of fashion and cosmetics in the shops of Kabul while on TV alternative images of women started to appear in commercials, TV programs and soap operas changed the modalities of young women's relations to their bodies and subjectivities. As Sabdickci and Ger (2005, 80) argue, 'the domination of market capitalism and its discourses of modernity, individuality and independence, propagated by tools such as marketing, advertising, fashion and media' cannot be ignored. It is important to take into account the broader economic, political and social contexts in which new identities emerge. The identities that were produced among young women involved in this 'lipstick jihad' revealed the complex and conflicting nature of the 'biopolitics' that structured their lives.

While they viewed fashion and cosmetics as a conscious personal choice in search of modern Islamic identity of an elite status, girls in actuality attempted to model themselves on the heroines of the Indian soap operas they watched everyday on TV. They wanted, like Tulsi and Perena, to look beautiful. They aspired to marry a liberal man, to be professionally successful while remaining caring, self-sacrificing and good Muslims in the eyes of their relatives. But taking such a political stand in an atmosphere marked by a return to religious orthodoxy was certainly a courageous act, that was often made possible thanks to the support of parents and relatives. 'Sometimes, my parents ask me why I have abandoned my traditional clothes. My mother does not like it very much when I wear blue jeans. But I explain her that I cannot wear village clothes in Kabul. My parents trust me and they know I am working hard for the family. They know I am not lying to them or hiding anything from them', Lutfia explained (Interview – Lutfia, 12/09/2007).

With or without lipstick, and despite girls' claims to independence and autonomy, the social norm of male control over female presence in public space kept its primacy over women's control over their bodies. This gender politics was not only pertinent for covered girls who simply wore classic Islamic clothes, but for girls involved in fashion and beauty work in general. While the latter felt a sense of empowerment provided by

the personalization of their appearance, the efforts they made to project their aesthetic judgments, religious interpretations and social position on their own bodies revealed the new forms of self discipline that came to regiment their lives. In the model of performance operative in room 42 and among working-class female University students in general, one had to 'retutor the body to behave in a different way in order to destabilize or disrupt the solidity of norms' (Mahmood 2001, 217). 'Through these creative and skillful negotiations of the principles of Islam and the ideals of beauty and fashion, these young women attempted to enlarge the scope of their possibilities in the public domain. Paradoxically, this entailed both possibilities and limitations, since increased visibility often meant girls had to make extra efforts to activate their Muslim Self.

### **Conclusion: Negotiating modernity**

The description I have made of these young women's everyday beauty practices is not meant to romanticise their resistance to social norms. Their *jihad* remained, after all, nothing more than a 'lipstick jihad', a conflict over meanings and values, expressed through symbols and physical displays. However, these practices, despite their marginality, should not be trivialized either, as they help us to better understand the power relations at stake in the societies we study. As Abu-Lughod advises, feminist ethnographers must not only look for 'hopeful confirmation of failure – or partial failure of systems of oppression' but also 'respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resisters but by letting their practices teach us about the complex workings of historically changing structures of power' (Abu-Lughod 1990, 53).

In the limbo that marked the Post-Taliban period, girls of room 42 were testing the boundaries of the social order with the only means they had at their disposal: fashion, cosmetics and soaps. They used their bodies as templates to project their views regarding religion and beauty and construct a modern Islamic identity and class status. It can be argued that these simple forms of feminine 'anti-discipline' (De Certeau 1984) were tactics that combined both elements of compliance to gender hierarchies and elements of subversion of these hierarchies. The idea De Certeau develops regarding spaces of resistance as dis-located from those of the powerful is I think useful to understand the texture of these performances. Indeed, girls of room 42 were less invested in resisting structural relations on face-to-face grounds. Most of the time, 'beauty performances' were taking place in 'semi-public spaces', i. e in the dormitory itself where girls organised

parties among themselves to celebrate other girls' engagement, and competed for the most beautiful make-up, dress and hairstyle. These deliberately hidden spaces were saturated with memories, fantasies and 'cracked sounds of pleasure and enjoyment' (Pile and Keith 1997, 17).

As I have attempted to show through the ethnographic material used in this chapter, differences between individuals are not a simple matter of gender, but are also shaped by other identity patterns such as age, class and ethnicity. The specific position of the girls of room 42 as educated, urban, working-class and returnees, were influential factors in the decisions they made to present a modern Islamic identity.

The moral panics that have emerged as a result of the arrival of 'foreign' consumption products on the Afghan market and growing popular discontent regarding the presence of the international community are indicative of the narrow room women have at their disposal to negotiate their public visibility. While calls in favour of the application of stricter Islamic orthodoxy have intensified in the political domain, most women have opted for strategies of dissimulation in order to access enclosed public spaces. These practices are explored in the chapter that follows.

## Chapter 6

### Visible under the Veil: Dissimulation, Performance and Agency in an Islamic Public Space

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*Chadari (burqa) seller in Herat, October 2007 © Julie Billaud*

*Khâ I na-shawi raswâ amrang-ejamâ'at bâsh*  
*Not to be considered strange, conform to the crowd*  
- Persian proverb

In the previous chapter, I have analysed micro-practices of ‘resistance’ or to use De Certeau’s terms, dispersed tactics of ‘anti-discipline’<sup>55</sup> (de Certeau 1984) among a segment of the girls living in the Women’s National Dormitory in Kabul, underlying the complex negotiations taking place when young women adopt alternative physical displays such as cosmetics and fashion accessories in spaces traditionally reserved to men. I have demonstrated that the bodywork of these young women is read as a form of provocation, a ‘lipstick jihad’ in the public arena when it is actually a common feature of

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<sup>55</sup> De Certeau (1984) distinguishes between actors’ strategies and actors’ tactics. Tactics are ‘opportunities seized on the wing (...) clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, manoeuvres, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries’ (xix) whereas strategies are more connected with the power that sustains them (xx).

women's gatherings (especially at wedding ceremonies) during which showing a beautiful persona is a means to maintain a family's reputation and strengthen ties with the broader community and kin. I associated the panics related to the 'revealing' of unmarried girls' bodies with the broader anxieties that have emerged in the Afghan society as a result of foreign military occupation. Fears that have crystallised around women's bodies can be explained by notions of 'vulnerability' generally associated with womanhood in patriarchal societies together with nationalist/militarized masculinities created during the war and reactivated by the presence of foreign invaders. In this scenario, masculinity is realized through men's capacity to protect 'their' women against foreign 'enemies'.

In this chapter, I focus more specifically on women's dissimulation strategies and meanings attached to the *chadari* (in Dari, *burqa* in Urdu) in the 'post-Taliban' context. My intent is to deconstruct Orientalist discourses on the necessity to 'save Muslim women' (Abu-Lughod 2002) that emerged short after the terrorist attack on the World Trade centre and provide a more problematized analysis of women's veiling practices. Indeed, after 9/11, the West has been bombarded with images of Afghan women covered from head to toe under their blue *burqa*. The *burqa* suddenly became the symbol of women's oppression, rendering the bodiliness of Afghan women a principal marker of their absolute 'otherness'. As a result of these discourses, the necessity to 'lift the veil'<sup>56</sup> was an argument used to gather public support for the military intervention. Seven years after the intervention of the coalition forces, as security continues to worsen and Karzai government is attempting to bring the insurgents/Taliban to the negotiations table, women have tended to re-veil and use dissimulation instead of exposure as a safer strategy to reach public spaces.

In the West, visibility and power have been defined as synonymous terms rather than as historically related positions. This is because, as Silverstein (2008, 119) puts it, "the institutionalization of a distinction between the public and the private is considered central to the functioning of liberal political culture, as is the situating of religion in the private." Social scientists (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Ortner 1996) have tended to analyse gender relations in other societies through the prism of the public/domestic divide and to explain the 'universal oppression of women' through women's relegation to the domestic domain and their 'invisibility' in the public realm. However, as much as these categories can be useful to describe women's situation in Western societies, they largely misrepresent the position of women living in Muslim societies. In Afghanistan,

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<sup>56</sup> In December 2001, *Time Magazine* featured a photo spread of Afghan women without veils, followed by a short article claiming that the US victory was the "greatest pageant of mass liberation since the fight for suffrage".

masculine and feminine spheres of influence are segregated and oftentimes, complementary<sup>57</sup> and religion is not alienated from other spheres of life. Normatively, women's veiling is a religious sign of modesty, the marker of gender segregation but should not be systematically read as a sign of women's oppression. As Mahmood (2001, 353) wisely argues, 'Muslim woman can only be one of two things, either uncovered, and therefore liberated, or veiled, and thus still, to some degree, subordinate (...). We need a way to think about the lives of Muslim women outside this simple opposition'.

Foucault (1977) has analysed how the body is a political field upon which power struggles take place. The body is not only a repository of signs but it is also the material through which subjectivities are shaped. In this chapter, I show how the disciplining of women's body is never total and absolute but rather constantly challenged, contested and negotiated. Afghan women are immensely aware of the conditions under which they have to negotiate their entry in the public domain. This knowledge is an embodied knowledge. It is the product of long years of war during which women have suffered from officially sanctioned discrimination. Visibility, over these past three decades, has found new meanings and has been associated with danger. Women's re-veiling in the 'post-Taliban' context is to be understood taking into account the broader social and political context in which it is occurring as well as women's own analysis of cost and opportunities provided by sartorial devices such as the *chadari*.

In this chapter, I discuss the different and contradictory meanings attached to women's veiling practices and dissimulation strategies: Where and when women are using *chadari*? For what purposes? Who are the women who are not wearing it? How are these signs read and interpreted in public spaces? Through an analysis of women's self-presentation, I underline the complex ways in which women are attempting to become legitimate actors in the public sphere. Focusing on the veil is not anecdotic since it has become the symbolic marker of Muslims' collective imagination in their encounter with the West. Paradoxically, it is through the veil that Muslim women make themselves visible, asserting through their 'hidden' bodies a set of values that contradict Western notions of modernity for which the withdrawal from religion is the prerequisite to women's emancipation and gender equality. Nilüfer Göle in her book *Interpénétrations:*

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<sup>57</sup> This complementarity is not based on notions of gender equality, even though equity is the guiding value behind these arrangements. For further analysis of the sexual division of labour in Afghan rural communities, see Lindisfarne-Tapper 1991, 100-131.

*L'Islam et l'Europe* (2005, 126) shows how 'in the act of wearing a veil one can read the critique of a logic of extreme women's emancipation solely founded on the body'<sup>58</sup>.

Scholars working on gender in Islam have often interpreted the various styles of veiling available in Muslim societies as embodied markers of particular ways of practicing piety or producing pious selves through body discipline (Mahmood 2005) or as an expression of opposition to Western definitions of modernity (Mernissi 1992; Kandiyoti 1991). If all these explanations are valid, my research among women MPs in Afghanistan suggests that the performative and strategic dimensions of veiling are the dominant motives that guide political women's gestures. The women I interviewed and observed during my fieldwork were more invested in expressing pious identities via clothing than in cultivating virtuous selves. Veiling and clothing were part of intricate strategies aiming at managing others' impressions in the context of public interactions where the presence of women was broadly considered as 'abnormal'. Issues of religion and faith were not the main centre of their attention, even though all of these women were undeniably strong believers.

The first section is a literature review of ethnographic accounts related to gender and veiling in the region. I place the veil in its cultural context, in an attempt to shed light on the variety of interpretations of male-female relations existing among the different ethnic and social groups populating the area. I also demonstrate that the use of the veil is context-specific and therefore entangled in broader communicative patterns that impose restraints on both men and women who are unrelated to each other (part 1). The second section underlines the ambiguous meanings conveyed by the *chadari* in the New Islamic Republic. As a form of social make-up, the *chadari* reveals as much as it conceals. It is 'a tool or weapon of domestication and disciplination and of identification, subjection and resistance' (Van Wolputte 2004, 254). The irony that is revealed in the case study I develop in this section demonstrates that the use of humour can be an effective way for those in lower status positions to covertly express resistance to the more powerful (part 2). In the third section, I compare and contrast the public performances and experiences of women MPs who have entered the National Assembly in 2005. I distinguish between 'nationalist/*jihadis*' women whose strict veiling is a sign of opposition to Western influence in internal affairs and 'liberal' women whose veiling practices are less consistent and more context-specific. By looking at these public

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<sup>58</sup> Translation from the author. The original sentence is: 'On peut lire dans l'acte de porter le voile la critique d'une logique d'émancipation extrême de la femme reposant sur le seul corps'.

gestures, I aim to illustrate the ordinary ways in which women struggle daily with cultural ideas about the female body and highlight the political and performative dimension of women's clothing (part 3). In the last section, I move on to other forms of dissimulation used by politically active women to reach various audiences. The conclusion of this exploration is that notions of 'public' spaces in Afghanistan are deeply rooted in discourses around collective moral values that challenge the liberal Habermasian conceptualization of the public as a space removed from ethical considerations (part 4).

### 1. Honour, veiling and etiquette

It is difficult to generalize about the meaning of the veil in Afghanistan, since veiling practices widely vary from one region, ethnic or social group to another. The veil is tightly connected to notions of honour or *izzat*. A woman shows her adherence to the honour system by doing *pardab*<sup>59</sup>, i.e. covering her head and avoiding contacts with unrelated men. By doing so, she ensures that the honour of her male relatives (*namus*) is preserved. The veil therefore operates as a mediator of male-female relations in a society that puts high value on a social order maintained through human efforts at disciplining 'natural inclinations' (*nafs*). However, the gamut of interpretations remains quite broad, as the variety of veils worn by women ranges from *chadari* of various colours, to long black hijab in the Eastern provinces running alongside Iran, or long colourful veils resting on the top of the head in the central highlands of Hazarajat. Ethnographers like Papanek (1973) Grima (1992) Maggi (2001) Lindisfarne-Tapper (1991) Anderson (1982) and Shalinsky (1986) who researched different tribal communities in this area, come up with relatively different findings, even though common trends of interpretations also emerge from their work.

Despite these variations, it can be said that the veil is an instrument aiming to accommodate the segregation of unrelated men and women, i.e. individuals not belonging to the same *kornal* or 'inhabitants sharing a household' (Anderson 1982). The Afghan society, like many other honour-based societies, distinguishes between *dakhili* (the private sphere, the household, what should remain hidden, the domain of *raza* or secrets) and *biruni* (the street, literally, the 'outside'). Men's honour (*namus*) is maintained through their capacity to control women and restrict their movements outside of the household. I often heard men saying: '*Zan namus e ma's*' ('The woman is our honour'). Soldiers will also

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<sup>59</sup> '*Pardab*' literally means 'curtain'. Women are encouraged to 'do *pardab*' after puberty, when they reach a marriageable age.

say: '*Watan namus e ma's*' ('The nation is our honour'). Women stepping outside of their house are traditionally veiled and accompanied by a *mabram* that is a male relative with whom sexual intercourse is virtually impossible because it would be considered incestuous. The role of the *mabram* is to protect women's honour (*izzat*). In practice, the room to negotiate who should be assigned the *mabram's* role is quite broad and varies a lot according to the context. I was once surprised to discover that a colleague of mine, meant to travel to rural areas around Mazar e Sharif, had been assigned a five-year-old boy, her son, as her *mabram*.

*Namus* can be defined as that which is defended by men for honour to be upheld, instead of acted upon to achieve honour (such as hospitality). If someone offends the rules of the gendered order, then there is reason to act in defence of one's *namus*. *Namus* is thus an important institution for maintaining the gender segregated order of the society. For instance, women will 'do *pardab*' to maintain the reputation of their family: their veil is a sign of their modesty and more generally, of their adherence to the honour system (Kakar 2003).

These rules defined in the *Pashtunwali* ('The way of the Pashtuns', the tribal code of honour, a conceptual body of rules passed on by oral tradition) are what make most of the Afghan etiquette. Even though Pashtuns represent the largest ethnic group in the country (40% of the total population), other ethnic groups such as Uzbek, Tajik, Hazara, etc. do abide by a code of honour that presents many similarities with the Pashtun one. It can be said that *Pashtunwali* is applied all over the country, even though with various degrees according to the different tribes, religious affiliations and social backgrounds.

Women's veiling, in particular under the full covering *chadari*, is to be understood as a means to maintain gender boundaries, a central component of *Pashtunwali*. The *chadari* operates as a 'mobile home' (Abu-Lughod 2002), as a means to maintain women's separation from unrelated men. In Papanek's words (1973) the *chadari* is a form of 'portable seclusion'. 'Everywhere, such veiling signifies belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life in which families are paramount in the organization of communities and the home is associated with the sanctity of women' (Abu-Lughod 2002, 785).

The *Pashtunwali* is built on various principles, including strict gender boundaries. *Pashtunwali* is integral to Pashtun identity. By adhering to *Pashtunwali* a Pashtun possesses honour (*izzat*); without honor s/he is no longer considered a Pashtun, and is not given the rights, protection, and support of the Pashtun community. *Pashtunwali's* honour-based society is governed by the concepts of chivalry (or bravery, courage) (*ghayrat* or

*nang*), hospitality (*melmastia*), gender boundaries (*pardab* or *namus*) and council (*jirga*) (Kakar 2003).

In Pashtun expressions it is recommended that both men and women conceptually apply *pardab*, and doing so is a sign of dignity for both men and women. According to anthropologist Jon Anderson (1982) who observed various situations in which the veil is used among Ghilzai Pashtuns, the veil is less a means to separate men and women than, on the contrary, a device that brings them together by regulating the terms by which they are socially present. It is part of a broader pattern of comportment called *haya* or 'extreme politeness' by which persons who could be legitimately married to each other are prevented from direct contact and interaction. Indeed, it can be said that men wear a 'veil' too since their interactions with other marriageable women is accompanied by a constellation of behaviours which are equivalents to veiling. For instance, when a man and a woman encounter each other outside the *kor* (household-inhabitants), restraint applies equally to both. The man will divert his gaze or act as if the woman was absent. He may additionally cover his face and turn away. He may also cover his mouth and avoid eye contact. This myriad of disengaging actions is to be understood as a form of respect on a man's part. 'Put another way, the veil is part of a pattern of comportment in which both sexes participate with slightly different but overlapping inflections' (Anderson 1982, 402).

Despite its applying to both genders, however, researchers (Papanek 1973; Lindisfarne-Tapper 1991; Kakar 2003) have found that Pashtuns commonly identify *namus* as "defence of the honour of women" and men often think of *pardab* as a way of controlling women, even though it also controls men. In principle, men are as bound by the rules of *namus*, and are thus as restricted from stepping into space reserved for women as women are from entry into men's space. For example, if a man who is unrelated to any of the women present walks into a woman's compound, he will be beaten, accused of dishonour, and even perhaps expelled from the community (Kakar 2003).

Lindisfarne-Tapper (1991, 105) however mentions that seclusion among the Durani Pashtuns does not translate into 'women only' or 'men only' spaces, like in some other Near Eastern countries. According to her observations, segregation is a practical consequence of the sexual division of labour. On day-to-day basis, rural women's interactions are with their families more than with other women. Nancy Lindisfarne even mentions that Durani women do not cover their face to any man while they are on their home ground, that is in the villages and fields associated with the household in which she

lives. A man may even receive his guests in his wife's private room and in her presence, a practice that would be impossible among other Pashtun tribes living in the South for instance.

Despite the wide room for interpretation, observing the rules of accepted behaviour and following the prescriptions of etiquette is highly valued. As Nancy Dupree puts it (Dupree-Hatch 2002): 'Honour is the rock upon which social status rests and the family is the single most important institution in Afghanistan'. In the honour system, the morality of a family is judged in relation to the behaviour of its women who carry the responsibility of passing on the values of the society to younger generations. These values include respect for elders and guests and proper behaviours in male-female relationships (Lindisfarne-Tapper 1991). Again, the criteria for appropriate behaviour may vary from group to group and often within each group, or even within extended families, but central to the rules of etiquette are those designed to uphold honour through the regulation of male-female relationships.

A parallel can be drawn between the privacy maintained through the use of *chadari* and the traditional Afghan home, surrounded by its undistinguished compound walls, where the secrets of the family are kept. Indeed, indigenous domestic architecture is inward-looking and exteriors present anonymous surfaces to outsiders. Dislike of ostentation, another prominent characteristic, is evident in architectural patterns (Dupree-Hatch 2002). The traditional architectural ideals promote the hidden nature of the intimate to the outside world. Within compound walls, the protection against outsiders is complete. Unrelated men are never brought inside without a warning call. 'A male visitor will never enter a room without knocking or coughing to announce his presence' (Dupree-Hatch 1998, 52).

Women, as central pillars of the family, are closely associated with this intimate and secret world. By wearing *chadari*, women symbolically carry the walls of their compound with them (Papanek 1973, 35). The sexual excitation, which is believed to exist when a man and a woman unknown to each other meet face to face, is prevented within the compound. Metonymically, the veil or *chadari* operates as a form of 'symbolic shelter' (Id.1973) and announces that a woman is behaving in a proper manner and has dismissed the possibility of sexual desire and interaction. However, veiling can have other meanings and women are particularly creative in clouding their public performances. Indeed, the typical symbolic associations of the veil are sometimes manipulated and reversed by individual women.

Stories of illicit sexual adventures, for instance, had mythic qualities in Kabul and women themselves criticized other women for using the *chadari* to conduct illicit sexual adventures or escape from the control of their relatives. One story was told of women walking Chicken and Flower streets in Kabul city centre, fully covered under their *chadari*, and stopping men in an attempt to sell sexual services. I never witnessed such activities myself, but always wondered about the logistics of sex work in Afghanistan when reading reports on the issue. Shalinsky (1986), in her ethnographic study of an Uzbek community in Northern Afghanistan, mentions similar stories of women dressing up with care and putting on cosmetics under their veil in order to flirt with shop keepers and obtain certain items cheaply. The anonymity provided by the veil means that a woman's identity cannot be revealed and the situation can remain secret. Ironically, the veil which primary aim is to prevent adultery can be used in adultery's cause. 'Thus veiling itself may be symbolically powerful for women since it provides an escape mechanism from the control of men. The power of veiling may lie precisely in the ambiguity: Does it protect the proper woman or shield the improper woman?' (Shalinsky 1986, 329).

In the same way, many women's rights activists, while opposing the compulsory veiling of women under *chadari*, used it to enjoy freedom of movement while carrying out their work. For them, the *chadari* was a symbol of women's oppression but by complying to cultural norms, they were able to work within the system to bring about change. The *chadari* was a guarantee of protection, particularly necessary when travelling to remote areas where security was often hectic. The example of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan provides a good illustration of the instrumental nature of the *chadari* among politically engaged women. Indeed, their documentation of human and women's rights abuses under the Taliban was entirely realized 'under the *chadari*' (Interview - RAWA, 08/09/2007). During my fieldwork, I met a great number of women's rights activists who continued wearing the *chadari*, not only for security reasons but also to gain people's respect and trust when working in rural areas, where people tended to be suspicious towards anyone coming from the 'outside'. This was, for instance, a *tactic* adopted by Rahela<sup>60</sup>, a member of the Afghan Women's Network, when she lobbied mullahs on women's rights in rural areas:

At first, it was difficult for us, women, to approach mullahs. They were reluctant to talk to us. But they gradually got used to us. By wearing *chadari*, we eventually gained their respect. (Interview - Rahela, 20/09/2007).

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<sup>60</sup> To preserve confidentiality and for security reasons, her name has been changed.

What stands clearly out of ethnographic studies is that the use of the veil is a context-bound permutation of *pardah* or an ‘inflected’ or ‘marked’ form of interaction, to use Anderson’s words (1982, 402). Veiled relations between men and women are guided by other behavioural idioms such as *haya* or ‘complete politeness’, which establishes complementarity and equality between two actors. In this respect, men do also ‘veil’ in the presence of unrelated women. This form of communication stands in clear contrast with ‘rough’ interactions, which dominate between men and women belonging to the same *kor* (Anderson 1982).

Unlike in Turkey or Egypt where the State has initiated prolonged efforts to secularize society, wearing the veil in Afghanistan cannot be read as a way for women to assert their faith or their Muslim identity, even though most women would say that it is a Muslim woman’s duty to cover. But since most Afghans tend to be religious and religion is deeply ingrained in the everyday, veiling has become for most women part of the ‘habitus’, something women just do when they leave their house or when they are in the presence of strangers. More subtle uses of the veil, such as decisions to cover one’s face to demonstrate respect for an older man or on the contrary, refusals to do so, are practices that reveal the potential power of women in challenging the gendered order (Abu-Lughod 1986). In the same manner, the multiplicity of veils available in urban areas where some level of diversity is allowed - squared headscarves leaving the front hair uncovered or transparent veils of shiny colours – demonstrates that new opportunities have opened for women to experiment and negotiate their identity and position in society. In short, as a communicational device that conveys meanings, the veil is one among the many other tools women use to convey messages to their audience in public settings. The story that follows is another illustration of this. It underlines the practical nature of the *chadari*, its ambiguous usages and the irony that underpins women’s performances in contemporary Afghanistan.

## 2. Irony and resistance

The bus was making its way through a dust storm. It was one of those days when I wished I wore a *chadari*. The dust was blinding us, entering our noses and throats, making us cough like asthmatic patients, reaching the under layers of our clothes. Women veiled under their *chadari* seated in the front of the bus were covering their babies under their long blue enveloping robes in an attempt to protect them from the

polluted air. '*Chadari* are sometimes practical', commented Massoma who had invited me on that day to her parents' home in *Dasht-e Bashri*, a poor and desolated suburb located South West of Kabul (Field notes, 08/10/2007).

Seeing Massoma dressed up with her semi-long black blouse, her polished shoes and her black trousers, walking in the muddy alleys of *Dasht-e Bashri* in which latrine's wastes were overflowing, had something of a surreal scene. The contrast between her pampered appearance and the desolation which surrounded us was simply too sharp. 'Now you understand why I prefer staying at the dormitory', she commented while pushing the front gate of the compound where her parents lived.

Massoma's family shared a house with three other Hazara families recently returned from Iran, each of them occupying one room. The carpets spread on the floor and the *toshak* (mattresses) and cushions displayed along the walls were the only pieces of furniture available. Massoma's parents, her three brothers and her sister had piled up in this place for the past three years, waiting for their financial situation to improve in order to find a better place to live. But jobs were scarce in Kabul and Massoma's father was old and sick. After long considerations, they had eventually encouraged their eldest son, Farid, to leave the country and find work abroad. Their last savings had been invested in a smuggler who organized Farid's long journey to Europe. According to the latest news, Farid had reached France, after a few months spent working illegally in farms somewhere in Northern Greece. He was now kept in a detention centre next to Calais, waiting for his asylum claim to be reviewed. He had told the French authorities that members of his family were Taliban supporters who pressurized him to take part in terrorist activities, which he had constantly refused until he had taken the decision to escape and seek asylum in Europe where he thought he would be safe. To support his case, Farid had asked Massoma to send a picture of the family dressed up as 'terrorists'. My mission on that day was to take some pictures of the 'terrorist' family and make sure they would arrive in France on time, before OFPRA (French office for the protection of refugees and stateless persons) had deliberated upon Farid's case.

In spite of my attempts to explain to Massoma that, because of his Hazara ethnicity<sup>61</sup>, Farid's story had limited chances to be taken seriously, she had insisted and

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<sup>61</sup> Repression by the Taliban of the Hazara ethnic group, which is predominantly Shia Muslim, was particularly severe. Although the conflict between the Hazaras and the Taliban was political and military as well as religious, and it is not possible to state with certainty that the Taliban engaged in its campaign against the Shi'a solely because of their religious beliefs, the religious affiliation of the Hazaras apparently was a significant factor leading to their repression. The Taliban have been accused of committing mass killings of the Hazaras particularly in the north. It has been claimed that the Taliban massacred thousands

here I was now, observing the boys applying thick layers of kohl under their eyes, 'to look more scary'.

'*Mamajan*, you need to wear *chadari* if dad is a Taleb', Massoma noted, unconvinced by her mother's look.

'I never had one...but I think our neighbour has. Let me see if I can borrow it from her!', she said playfully while running to the room next door.

She came back giggling, holding the blue piece of cloth in one hand, raising it to the sky as a sign of victory. Everyone was ready now: boys had their turbans around their heads, kohl under their eyes and Mamajan was hidden under her blue tent. 'Now make scary faces!' I advised while looking through my camera's objective. And as boys started to frown and purse their lips, I was already caught into the game, amused to discover how stereotypes about Taliban abroad had been assimilated in their country of origin.

What surprised me the most was to discover that even here, the local imagination was filled with the twin figures of the Islamic fundamentalist and his female victim. For Massoma it was very clear that her mother could not expose her face in front of the camera if she was to act as the Taleb's wife. Even here, in this destitute suburb of Kabul deprived of clean water and electricity, it was possible to envision the *burqa*-clad body of the Afghan woman as a visible sign of the West's invisible enemy. In the mud of *Dasht-e Bashri*, irony was the primary 'weapon of the weak' (Scott 1985) and people laughed about and played with this piece of cloth, which had become under the Taliban regime, the universally recognized stamp of Islamic fundamentalism.

The double irony that is easily detectable in the situation that I have described above – Massoma's mother being caught in the impromptu situation of having to perform her own oppression in order to support her son's freedom abroad and the anthropologist becoming an accomplice in the masquerade of representation – is very much revealing of the ambiguities and inconsistencies of subjectivity that characterize the contemporary world (Marcus 2001). To quote Marcus (2001, 211):

It seems to me that there are practices, anxieties, and ambivalences present in any location that are specifically keyed as a response to the intimate functioning of non-local agencies and causes,

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of civilians and prisoners during and after the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998; this massacre reportedly was aimed at ethnic Hazaras. In September 1998, approximately 500 persons were killed as the Taliban gained control of the city of Bamiyan. The Hazaras regained control of Bamiyan in April 1999 following prolonged guerilla-style warfare; however, the Taliban recaptured Bamiyan in May 1999 and reportedly killed a number of Shi'a residents. (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People, 2008)

and for which there are no convincing commonsense understandings. The basic condition that stimulates this widespread predicament of irony is an awareness of existential doubleness, deriving from a sense of being *here* with major present transformations ongoing that are intimately tied to things happening simultaneously *elsewhere* but without certainty and authoritative representations of what the connections are.

This sense of inescapable ‘doubleness’ that Marcus discusses here is very relevant to account for the tensions surrounding women’s visibility in contemporary Afghanistan. Indeed, what irony reveals perhaps most evidently is the conflict between the inner and the outer, between private desires and understandings on one hand and public pressures and official transcripts on the other hand. The *chadari* in itself does not tell us much about the type of subjectivities, negotiations and aspirations that exist ‘under the veil’. More often than rarely, women use the *chadari* as a strategic device, as a means to remain anonymous and maintain a sense of safety. The *chadari*, more than a mere status symbol, has become a functional instrument, the costume worn by women for a public play that has been written by others. And ironically, it is this ‘theatrical’ dimension of the veil as a form of ‘social make-up’ that allows women to go to work, go to the bazaar, or even in the case of Massoma’s mother, purposefully perform the role of the ‘oppressed Afghan woman’ in order to reach out foreign audiences. This is what Fernandez and Taylor Huber (Fernandez and Taylor-Huber 2001, 6) call ‘the Hobbesian paradox that men and women in their natural condition of life –“solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short”- can only gain their freedom by giving up their freedom.’

In the section that follows, I provide a deeper analysis of the reasons guiding women’s performances in public spaces, focusing more specifically on women’s physical displays. I draw on Goffman’s notion ‘performance’ to demonstrate that the ‘veil’ participates in resolving fears related to wider anxieties about social relations and the social order in general. In the post-Taliban period, the veil and clothing have become devices used by women to project identities and manage others’ impressions in public settings.

### **3. The legacy of fear and the occupation**

The short period of relative liberalism that marked the three or four years after the eviction of the Taliban gave opportunities for individuals to experiment with the way they appeared in public. During my first stay in 2003-2004, one could see in the streets of Kabul, especially in the city centre where stores selling bright coloured clothes imported from neighbouring countries had re-opened, young men with blue jeans and long hair or

girls wearing colourful veils over semi-long blouses. These street scenes had become more rare in 2007. An increased level of insecurity, with regular suicide attacks, robberies and kidnappings, had initiated a reversed return to physical conformity in public spaces.

The necessity to physically conform is closely related to the increasing level of public violence that women have experienced over the past decades. The Taliban and the *mujjabin* created a precedent by allowing unrelated men to punish women for infractions perceived to threaten diffuse notions of 'honour'. Since the invasion, the State has been unable to protect women in their transition from the private to the public sphere. In conflict-affected areas, women continue to face sexual violence, abduction, or forced or underage marriage (Azerbaijani-Moghaddam 2009, 67). However, the perpetrators remain immune from prosecution since sexual violence is a taboo and the justice system is corrupt<sup>62</sup>. 'Forms of public violence including deliberate attacks on girl students and women teachers continue today and remain unpunished' (Azerbaijani-Moghaddam 2009, 67).

The explanations I often heard from women wearing *chadari* was that it allowed some privacy and created a sense of security, when the outside world, beyond the compounds' walls of the house was seen as threatening, chaotic and oppressive. Many times during my journey in Kabul, I wished I could wear one too. After a bad experience in a taxi, which could have turned into a real nightmare if I had not had the life-saving reaction of opening the door to escape from the moving car, I eventually purchased one in a local bazaar. I did not make great use of it because the reduced vision together with the impossibility of wearing glasses under the knitted singeing made for the eyes, turned what I thought could be a protective piece of equipment into a dangerous experiment for the untrained user that I was. But for many women, the *chadari* increased their mobility while guaranteeing their anonymity, a precious asset when conservatism and insecurity were on the rise in Kabul.

It is when I heard Mehria Azizi's story that the association of visibility with danger became clearer to me. Mehria was a camerawoman working for the Afghan Media and Culture Centre in Kabul. She was only 24 but her charisma and her maturity – features of personality that many young working women had in common in Kabul -

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<sup>62</sup> Because sexual violence is a crime that diminishes the honour of a woman and her family, victims have often been reluctant to report it to the authorities. However, in recent years, some reports have underlined a behavioural shift, with families (probably encouraged by the media and human rights organizations) beginning to go public and threatening to commit mass suicide if the perpetrators were not brought to justice (IRIN-News 2008; Nagpal 2009; Muahid 2008).

really impressed me. After the collapse of the Taliban, Mehria and 13 Afghan women set out to chronicle the lives of the women in their country. Their film, 'Afghanistan Unveiled', marked the first time any of them were able to travel freely inside Afghanistan - in fact, it was the first time any of them had been outside of Kabul. They were the first female journalists to be trained in Afghanistan for more than a decade. They spent a year learning the fundamentals of film production, then set out for the rural provinces of Afghanistan. Several times, the filmmakers found themselves in verbal confrontations with Afghan men in the provinces who thought they had no business walking around showing their hands and faces. Mehria herself appeared in the movie, confronting a group of heavily armed village men unhappy with her public appearance without a *chadari*.

A few weeks before we met, Mehria's younger brother had been kidnapped and her family had had to give a ransom of 5000 USD to get him back. Another brother had been attacked and had ended up at the hospital with a broken nose. Mehria received constant death threats on the phone as well as anonymous letters. She complained to the police on several occasions but her complaints never got registered. I asked her if she had a clue who could be the authors of these anonymous calls and she smiled:

If the police are doing nothing for me and my family, can't you guess who is responsible for threatening me? It is obvious that some high-ranking authorities are involved in poisoning my life. All members of the government are uneducated war criminals who cannot stand women like me, who work with foreigners, go abroad and tell the truth about the political situation of my country to the rest of the world. But I won't give up, because it is too late anyway. Now I have enemies forever. But I do not worry for myself. I worry for my two younger brothers. They are so young, you know. They deserve a better life. (Interview- Azizi, 22/02/2007)

Listening to Mehria's story and to the stories of other female public figures I came across during my fieldwork, I started to get a sense of the price women had to pay for their public visibility. The international community had encouraged their reappearance in the public domain, through the funding of NGOs working in the field of gender and through government's lobbying. However, women who had taken this opportunity and who were willing to participate in public life did not benefit from any protection mechanism. This meant that public women had to take immense risks for their speaking out or find alternative protective mechanisms in order to reach the public.



Leila Ahmed has underlined the relation between colonial encounters and the emergence of specific discourses on the veil in the Muslim world. In Egypt under British rule or in Algeria under French domination, political elites used the veil as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression to justify the colonial enterprise. Veiling, under such circumstances, turned into an act of resistance against the modernizing elite coopted by the colonial establishment (Ahmed 1992, 152). As Ahmed (1992, 164) phrases it:

The veil came to symbolize in the resistance narrative, not the inferiority of the culture and the need to cast aside its customs in favor of those of the West, but on the contrary, the dignity and the validity of all native customs, and in particular those customs coming under fiercest colonial attack – the customs relating to women- and the need to tenaciously affirm them as means of resistance to Western domination (...). Standing in the relation of antithesis to thesis, the resistance narrative thus reversed – but thereby also accepted – the terms set in the first place by the colonizers.

It is certainly possible to draw a parallel between the current situation in Afghanistan and earlier colonial periods during which discourses on women and the veil first started to emerge. After years of total disregard for Afghan people, the sudden interest of the West in the plight of Afghan women and the focus on the *burqa* confirms that old colonial narratives on the veil have been reactivated in order to gather public support for the military occupation. At once urged to take back their 'freedom' and unveil by the West and urged to remain faithful to Afghan 'culture' by the new regime, women in occupied Afghanistan have become a 'figment in someone's else dream', as Azar Nafisi (2003) beautifully phrases it in her memoir *Reading Lolita in Teheran*. This renewed public attention to women's bodies and the use of 'colonial feminism' (Ahmed 1992) as an imperialist tool to assert domination, has trapped the struggle for women's rights in struggles over culture. Various political developments that have taken place in recent years confirm this vision.

In order to preserve an illusion of political autonomy and resist Western influence, conservative MPs have submitted various draft laws aiming at preserving patriarchal authority. These draft laws proposed the reinstallation of the religious police, the reopening of the Ministry for the Elimination of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue, and a ban on Western clothes such as jeans, long hair for men, cosmetics and make-up for women (Heikkila 2008). More recently in April 2009, Karzai signed a personal status law for Shias legalizing the rape of a wife by her husband and forbidding Shia women to

leave their house without their husbands' permission<sup>63</sup>. These legal proposals, even though not approved yet, are already announcing a return to homogeneity after a brief period of diversity, associated with anarchy and loose morals.

'I spent all those years fighting against Islamic fundamentalism and the compulsory wearing of *chadari* for women and now I advise women to wear it again,' complained Hamida<sup>64</sup>, a 24-year-old representative of a Southern province at the National Assembly and former University professor (Interview – MP1, 03/10/2007). Married by force to a local commander, the young MP became a widow 24 days after her marriage. She is now a single mother, well determined to bring change for the women of her province whose sufferings she has 'felt in her own heart'. But Hamida is also aware that in the current political situation the scope of her possibilities is extremely reduced. 'I have to be very careful not to upset anyone. If I don't wear *chadari* when I return to my province, commanders and mullahs, the one who are in power at the local level, will say: 'She is a bad woman. She does not respect Islam. Don't vote for her!' And my people will listen because they are illiterate, poor and traditional', she explained to me in the Parliament conference room, lowering her voice to avoid indiscreet ears.

Afghan women are immensely aware of the conditions in which they have to negotiate their entry in the public domain. This knowledge is an embodied knowledge. It is the product of long years of war during which women have suffered from officially sanctioned discrimination. Visibility, over these past three decades, has found new meanings. In Western societies, the visibility of people brings about public security in urban spaces. Public figures are expected to reveal their private life and expose it to public scrutiny. For Afghan women, public visibility has become equal to insecurity and to being subjected to constant control by others (the police, religious leaders, community and neighbours). Even though the moral police have disappeared in most cities, the new Islamic Republic still expects people to conform to Islamic prescriptions. Several male students at Kabul University even mentioned to me being arrested by the police on several occasions and asked for the identity of the female friend accompanying them. They eventually had to bribe the policemen in order to avoid arrest.

This controlling gaze is the same apparatus that Foucault (1977) referred to in *Discipline and Punish* in his description of the architecture of Bentham's Panopticon, the huge prison with only a single jailor. As described by Foucault, the concept of the design

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<sup>63</sup> The new and redrafted law was signed in mid July 2009. The new version omits original provisions that allowed men to demand sex from their wives and that required women to ask their husbands' permission to leave their home. However, the law still includes a provision that states a man does not have to provide financial support for his wife unless he has 'access to her.'

<sup>64</sup> To preserve her anonymity, the name of this MP and her province of origin have been changed.

is to allow an observer to observe all prisoners without the prisoners being able to tell whether they are being watched, thereby conveying the sentiment of an invisible omniscience. Thus the visibility of an individual and his awareness of the existence of authority and the possible presence of a surveyor result in his/her constant obligation to observe discipline. The efficiency of the system lies in the fact that the individual 'assumes responsibility for the constraints of power', making himself 'the principle of his own subjection' (Foucault 1977, 202-203). A feeling of insecurity results from the prisoner's constant visibility. This fear constitutes the central motor of self-discipline. In the case of Afghanistan, the fear of punishments has resulted in the production of 'docile bodies' that have internalized power hierarchies to the extent that they have become almost natural. The reluctance of women to remove their *chadari* is a good illustration of the long lasting psychological effects of the Taliban's 'technologies of power'.

As Afghan sociologist Nasrine Gross (Interview - Gross, 23/05/2007) argues, the Taliban rule has been particularly traumatic for Afghans because for the first time, their faith, a fundamental component of their identity, has been radically questioned. If before the Taliban, rarely did people interrogate the depth of their own 'Muslimhood', the harsh rules and punishments imposed by the religious students contributed to spread a general feeling of guilt regarding religion. Indeed, under the constant control of the religious police, men and women, especially in the cities, were persistently reminded of their inherent 'sinning' nature. According to my observations, the long-term effect of such a trauma is noticeable in people's obsessive urge to justify the way they physically present themselves or to make comments on the ways other people look. Of course, in any society, people are always expressing something with clothing, sending out intentional or unintentional signals about themselves. Clothing is an important visual aspect of performance, part of the expressive equipment identified with the performer. In the case of Afghanistan, as clothing has become the centre of political attention, physical displays that do not strictly conform with the norm are perceived as potentially threatening to the social order.

During the civil war until the Taliban, Afghan women have lived with the same feeling of continual but secret and unverifiable control. Thus, the experience of wearing *chadari* has become in fact the paradoxical experience of some kind of freedom along with an acceptance of enclosure and discipline. To be disciplined and similar to others allowed women to be less subjected to others' sight and consequently be freer in their movements. This dissimulation and social invisibility in terms of appearances and behaviours is constantly shifting, according to variables such as place and time and is

defined according to the status, gender and age of social actors. To maintain their security and right of presence in social spaces, individuals must obey assorted codes that are particular to each space or vis-à-vis the others. While such codes existed in Afghanistan well before the Taliban, the Taliban regime has refashioned them, forcing individuals to play roles and to adopt new appearances according to their moral system. In the new Islamic Republic, even though such rules are no more officially sanctioned, they remain an unwritten law. As a result, dissimulation through conformism constitutes the dominant strategy to access public spaces.

Women have adopted strategies of dissimulation and invisibility that have become part of a process of social inclusion and negotiation. For instance, women continue to wear the full covering *chadari* in order to go to work, attend public meetings and demonstrations. In June 2007, for example, hundreds of women organized a collective peace prayer at the sacred Shrine of the Prophet (Kherqa Sharif) in Kandahar, a mosque that is normally barred to women. The mullah even allowed the women to broadcast their prayers from the shrine loudspeaker (AdvocacyNet 2007). A few months later, in January 2008, 600 women rallied in Kandahar in order to protest against the kidnapping of an American female aid worker (BBC 2008). This public event was even more surprising that it took place in one of the most conservative areas of the Pashtun South where women are rarely seen in public spaces. Women's demonstrations of this type were not isolated occurrences. In May 2005, hundred of widows marched in Kabul in protest against the kidnapping of Clementina Cantoni, an Italian aid worker from CARE International. A river of blue *chadari* suddenly flooded Kabul city centre, displaying photographs of Clementina and carrying banners requesting her immediate release. Under the Taliban regime, women protested on several occasions, for instance, against an edict that closed public baths and against the rise of the price of bread. Protected from external gazes, able to see without being seen, women could feel safe to occupy the public arena and make their voices heard. Their 'absent presence', to use Amir-Ebrahimi's words (2006), under the disciplinary monotony of the *chadari*, enabled women to step in spaces traditionally occupied by men.

Women were proud to recount how they distorted the original meaning of the *chadari* during the Taliban time by hiding books and stationary used in the clandestine schools they ran from their homes. Retelling stories of covert disobedience, defiance and resistance to the moral police was always a source of excitement and laughter. To ridicule the rules imposed by the Taliban was their favourite technique for exorcising fears and anxieties accumulated during this time while regaining a sense of self worth.

Clandestine organizations like the sewing circles of Herat ran by Muhammad Ali Rahyab a professor of Literature at Herat University, reached an almost mythic status inside and outside Afghanistan<sup>65</sup>. There, instead of sewing dresses, women studied banned writers such as Shakespeare, Joyce, Nabokov, Tolstoy, Dickens, Balzac and Dostoevsky as well as classic Persian literature. One of these underground literary circles gave birth to the renowned Afghan poetess Nadia Anjuman, who was only in grade 10 when the Taliban took power in the eastern provincial capital. Her poetry, produced ‘under the *chadari*’, helped her transform into hope the greyness of her secluded life. ‘Memories of Light Blue’<sup>66</sup>, written in reference to the *chadar*’s most usual colour, is one of those attempts at transcending the dullness of the everyday, a central motive of her artistic work:

*You, exiles of the mountains of oblivion*  
*You, diamonds of your names sleeping in quagmire of silence*  
*You, the ones your memories faded, memories of light blue*  
*In the mind of muddy waves of forgotten sea*  
*Where are your clear-flowing thoughts?*  
*Where did your peace-marked silver boat moon craft go?*  
*After this death-giving freeze, the sea calms*  
*The clouds, if they clear heart from bitterness*  
*If daughter of moonlight brings kindness, induces smiles*  
*If the mountain softens heart, grows green and turns fruitful*  
*Will one of your names, above the mountain peaks, become the sun?*  
*Sunrise of your memories*  
*Memories of light blue*  
*In the eyes of tired-of-flood-water fish and*  
*Scared-of-rain of darkness*  
*Will it become a sight of hope?*

Women who have broken into the political apparatus share this common-sense understanding of the possible physical and social dangers associated with visibility. In the section that follows, I look more precisely at political women’s public performances in a space where their presence remains highly contested: the Afghan National Assembly. Indeed, the new Constitution ratified in 2004 foresaw a 25 percent quota for women in

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<sup>65</sup> See Christina Lamb (2002). *The sewing circles of Herat: A personal voyage through Afghanistan*. HarperCollins.

<sup>66</sup> Poem translated by David Tayari. Accessed online in January 2009. <http://www.thehypertexts.com/>  
Note from the translator: ‘light blue’ means ‘great hopes’ in Persian.

the Parliament, a political move initiated with the view of repairing past injustices. This legislation was passed thanks to the pressure of women's groups and the international community, but *jibadi* leaders who occupied the majority of seats in the Assembly broadly perceived women's presence on their side as 'abnormal' and as a result of exogenous forces, with little or no endogenous legitimacy at all.

Even though adding women in politics can never be a guarantee for gender equality in the broader society, the presence of women in the parliament has undeniably been a positive step. It remains that the women who have joined the legislative apparatus are not only divided along political, class and ethnic lines, but their room of manoeuvre within such a conservative environment is extremely narrow. As a result, many female MPs have had to develop subtle strategies in order to gain political recognition and validation from their male counterparts. This included, among other techniques of body-discipline, a constant attention to the way they looked and veiled in public.

#### 4. Veiled politics

An observation of clothing and veiling practices among women involved in politics in Afghanistan reveals the central and contested place of Islam in the new Islamic Republic. It also reveals to what women should renounce in order to become public. In this respect, the comparison between parliamentary women and female university student is very telling. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, female university students struggled to veil as little as possible in order to display a modern yet Muslim persona. In contrast, women MPs often had to renounce to feminism and veil more strictly if they wanted to gain entry into mainstream politics. Different social positions involved alternative uses of the body.

In general, women sitting in the parliament can be divided into two categories<sup>67</sup>: Conservative/nationalist women who defend a formalist approach to Koran and liberal women who support an interpretive approach. While the majority of them belong to the first group and have been co-opted by various *mujjabin* factions, women from both tendencies agree that Islam provides them with a means of being involved in the public sphere. However, their fashion statements mirror their political inclinations and to some extent, their different understanding of Islam and the place of women in society.

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<sup>67</sup> The Wolesi Jirga is mainly composed of Pashtuns (118 seats), Tajiks/Aimaqs (53 seats), Hazaras/Shias (41 seats) and Uzbeks (20 seats). For further details on the ethnic and political composition of the parliament, see Wilder 2005.

Indeed, for both men and women, self-presentation is central to convey meanings regarding political affiliations and as a result, clothing reflects a political posture. President Karzai, for instance, played the card of reconciliation between the 'old' and the 'new' by choosing to wear at once the traditional long-sleeved *chapan*<sup>68</sup>, a *karakul* hat and the black suit of Western diplomats. Observing the clothes of the MPs sitting on the benches of the Afghan National Assembly is already revealing of their political inclinations or at least, of the political identities they strive to project on their audience. Long-bearded men in traditional *shalwar kameez* (large pyjama), tubans and pakols (woolen headgear mostly worn by Tajiks) mix with clean-shaved men in Western suits. On the women's side, the length and colors of veils are a source of constant comments.

Generally, political women's veiling practices were informed by the geographic location of their respective constituencies. Women MPs originating from rural areas felt more compelled to veil in a more conservative manner than their female colleagues who came from urban areas.

'For Shukria Barakzai (MP for Kabul province), it does not matter if she wears small veils because people who vote for her are educated...they come from the city. For me it is different. My people did not go to school. My people are illiterate and conservative. So I have to pay attention to the veils I wear', an MP from Farah, explained to me (Interview - MP1, 03/10/2007).

Women who are affiliated with *jibadi* groups tend to dress more traditionally than women who belong to more liberal groups. Their veils are longer and less colourful (black, white or light beige) and their interpretation of women's rights is based on a belief in the inherently different nature of men and women. Many of them wear *chadari* or long veils when returning to their province of origin but abandon it as soon as they return to Kabul. Their public performances convey monolithic nationalist meanings about the primary role of women as mothers and family carers.

For female MPs who affiliate themselves with more liberal groups, choices of veils' colours and length are a matter of perpetual arrangements and meticulously weighted decisions. Veils and clothes change according to the audience they face and the context in which they navigate. Their decision to wear *chadari* when travelling to the provinces is mostly influenced by the security situation or the individual dressing practices of their female colleagues. Their performances are more contradictory and less

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<sup>68</sup> *Chapan* is a long coat worn over clothes, usually during the cold winter months. Usually worn by men, these coats are adorned with intricate threading and come in a variety of colors and patterns.

consistent than conservative women and involve constant negotiations and calculations. 'If I don't wear *chadari* when I go back to my province and my colleague Bilqhis does, then she appears as the modest one and I appear as the amoral one' (Interview - MP6, 10/03/2007), an MP from a Northern province noted to underline the necessity to embody strict Muslim norms in order to reach out more 'traditional' or rural audiences.

For both 'nationalist' and 'liberal' women, clothing is linked to different conceptions of the place of Islam in politics. For nationalist women, wearing long veils and occasionally *chadari* is partly a means to conform to proper religious and cultural practices. But most importantly, it is about honouring the work achieved by the *mujahedin* during the *jihad* and opposing the hegemonic influence of the West in internal affairs. On February, 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007, in a public gathering organized by *jibadi* leaders in Kabul National Stadium, Shakila Hachemi, MP of Logar province, took the microphone and harangued the crowd, denouncing the blasphemy committed by her fellow MP Malalai Joya who had accused some *mujahedin* sitting in the Parliament of being war criminals (Islah-e Milli 2007). The rally had been organized in order to gain public support for a legal proposal preventing the state from independently prosecuting people for war crimes committed during conflicts in recent decades<sup>69</sup>.

That Hachemi was given the opportunity to talk in a conservative assembly of prominent political leaders, not particularly renowned for their progressive approach to women's issues, was in itself very telling. It showed that far from being united, women from different political and ethnic backgrounds, tended to engage in identity politics and put forward the specific political agenda of their own ethnic or religious groups, while dismissing or ignoring the ones of their gender.

Vice-President, Mohammad Karim Khalili, Lower House Speaker, Mohammad Younus Qanooni, former *Jibadi* Leaders, commanders and a number of MPs took part in the gathering. Surrounded by heavily armed men, raising an accusative finger to the sky, her speech suddenly reached a climax: 'Death to Malalai Joya! Death to human rights!' she screamed while receiving an overwhelming round of applause.

The association of Joya with human rights and therefore, with the West, was typical of conservative/nationalist discourses. Indeed, Joya was regularly accused by her detractors of being sponsored by Western leftist groups and as a result, of being an infidel, a Communist and therefore, disrespectful of national values. During her campaign in Farah for the legislative elections, Joya's enemies circulated pamphlets on

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<sup>69</sup> The lower house of parliament, the Wolesi Jirga, approved the bill after President Hamid Karzai revised an initial bill that had been approved by both chambers of parliament that gave amnesty to all Afghans involved in war crimes during the last three decades of fighting.

which she appeared bare-head. The pamphlets called her a ‘prostitute’ sold to the West and attacked her for her lack of modesty: ‘If Joya removes her veil now, soon she will remove her pants too’, commented one of these pamphlets (Mulvad 2007). Joya’s fearless interventions in parliamentary sessions unfailingly provoked sexual insults, physical attacks and death threats. A secularist at heart, Joya regularly appeared unveiled on foreign TV stations and newspapers, Western journalists being particularly foud of her outspoken and charismatic character. The outburst of resentment against the values she defended (women’s rights, human rights and secularism), ironically forced her to constantly wear *chadari* while travelling in the country.

In such a conservative atmosphere, women MPs having a liberal agenda for women have as a primary goal to keep the support of their own constituencies while lobbying potentially supportive men within the parliament. If some of them admit supporting Joya behind closed door, they pay attention not to be associated too closely with her<sup>70</sup>. The way they look in public is a fundamental issue of attention, many of them preferring not to talk to the media at all or appearing on TV in order to have free hands for back stage negotiations. In the same way, many ‘liberal’ female candidates to the legislative elections conducted their campaign under the *chadari* and gradually removed it once elected. This was for instance the tactic adopted by Fatima Azim (pseudonym), now representative of a Northern province at the National Assembly, and running a small low profile group of female MPs involved in civic education activities in rural areas.

I gave all my speeches wearing *chadari*. My family is an intellectual family. My father is a university professor and my mother is the director of a kindergarden. It is not common in our family for women to wear *chadari*. When I started my speeches, I just removed a little corner of the veil to be able to speak. If I had not presented myself this way, my people would have thought that I was disrespectful of our traditions. You know, wearing *chadari* is essential in my province. It has become a tradition. Now, since I have been elected at the parliament, my people sometimes see me in the press and they see that I don’t wear *chadari* anymore. They are getting used to it. When I return to my province to attend political meetings, I wear long veils instead of *chadari*. For people, it is becoming normal to see political women without it. Slowly, slowly people will change their mind. We should not go too fast. (Interview - MP8, 30/06/2007)

Younger female MPs who had lived abroad during the war are less eager to compromise and less reluctant to openly support Joya. This is for instance the case of 27-

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<sup>70</sup> Some women’s rights activists also disagreed with Joya’s insistence on secularism as a means to enhance women’s rights. They perceived her approach as disconnected with the political reality and political sensitivities of the country. In their view, gender equality was embedded in Islam. Joya’s desire to disconnect politics from religion was, in their opinion, a dangerous path to advance the cause of women.

year-old Maryam Sohrat<sup>71</sup>, a representative of Kabul province, who returned from her exile in Iran especially to run for the elections. At first glance, the poster she printed for her campaign resembled an ad for a Bollywood blockbuster. It showed her smiling face, her hair covered under a bright canary yellow veil over a background of a similar color, an image that wanted to transmit hope and change to Afghanistan's youth. But the image gave rise to severe critics from conservative clerics and political leaders. "Her posters are driving our youth towards sin," thundered the Dari language *Cheragh* newspaper supported by Rabbani, former President of Afghanistan and now head of the major opposition party, the United National Front. "It is a political weapon against true Islamic voters" (Walsh 2005). Sitting in UNIFEM resource centre for women in Parliament, with her lipstick, fluent English and matching Nike trainers and headscarf, Maryam Sohrat undeniably brought a touch of glamour to Afghan politics. She recalled:

I got several telephone calls during my campaign. Once, an old man told me: 'What is this colour? What is this poster? We are Muslim people! This is an Islamic country!'. And I told him: 'What is wrong with Islam? I have my scarf on and if you are talking about the colour, this is my favourite colour, I like it. And if you are talking about my smile, it is one of my features. This is not abnormal to smile. I wanted to show what the wish of the young generation in Afghanistan is. You know, young people are tired of darkness.' (Interview - MP9, 29/08/2007)

Maryam's response to her critics was to a great extent the product of her lack of political experience and her second-hand knowledge of the power relations at stake in the political apparatus. She envisioned Islam as a religion that promoted gender equality and granted many freedoms to women. She was inspired by Islamic feminism and its achievements in Iran, Malaysia and elsewhere. Devoutly Muslim, she called herself a feminist but avoided using this term in the parliament, for fear of receiving the same treatments as Joya and losing her already fragile credibility due to her young age and her 'modern' physical appearance.

Feminism has some negative connotations here. It is understood like: 'You want your rights. You want to divorce men.' You know, if you are talking about women's rights, the two main things men think about are: women want to be free to wear whatever clothes they like and then, women want to get divorce. Because of this, men have a negative understanding of women's rights. Men feel threatened. People who are more conservative or more religious, like mullahs and others, they are thinking that the women who are active in the field of women's rights, they come from the

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<sup>71</sup> For security reasons, her real name has been changed.

West, their ideas come from the West, they want to be free like the women in the West and they want to get divorced. (Interview - MP9, 29/08/2007)

The political characters represented by Malalai Joya and Maryam Sohrat, in spite of their differences, present common distinctive features that help us delineate the boundaries of women's political participation and public visibility in contemporary Afghanistan. Both MPs are young, educated and both display a physical appearance that does not conform to traditional standards of Islamic dressing. In addition, both speak fluent English and take their political inspiration from 'abroad'. Joya looks at Western secularism while Sohrat draws her political views from models of Islamic feminism that have emerged in other Muslim countries. However, neither of them benefit from a strong social base of support outside of their limited constituencies: a few RAWA<sup>72</sup>/Maoist/secularist supporters for Joya and a few University students for Sohrat.

The reasons behind Joya and Sohrat political marginality are varied but undeniably, the outward looking political postures they embody cannot receive a strong echo in the context of the occupation. Of course, neither Joya nor Sohrat's political projects aim to target Islam or Afghan culture, but those laws and customs to be found in society that express androcentric interests, indifference to women, or misogyny. Such a discourse, as seductive as it may be for the urban and educated person's consciousness, has currently no place in the Afghan political landscape. Without nationalist/Islamic veils to ideas of reforms related to women's issues, the persuasiveness of Joya and Sohrat's discourses remains absolutely marginal.

So what do we learn from political women's public performances? What does their veiling and clothing practices teach us about the nature of power relations in contemporary Afghanistan? Why are women who have made their ways into the highest political circles still reluctant to completely abandon the *chadari*? What emerges from the ethnographic material I have presented above, is that in a context of foreign occupation where women's bodies have become the symbolic markers of the broader social body, veiling represents the privileged medium of expression of one's nationalist endeavours and resistance against external influences. The veil ensures the cohesion of the collectivity and provides a sense of national continuity when society is threatened of fragmentation by the presence of an external 'enemy'. By strictly conforming to gendered norms, nationalist women strengthen their integration within their own political groups. 'Liberal' women, i.e women who are more radically inclined to advance women's rights

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<sup>72</sup> Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan

through an interpretive approach of *sharia*, cannot simply avoid the nationalist discourse for this would lead, as the case of Joya demonstrates, to their total marginalization. The groups to which they belong are too weak already in the political landscape and cannot afford a radical rejection of nationalist politics. In short, in public settings, women from both tendencies have to adjust their performance in order to conform with gendered norms of appropriate behaviours in order to maintain their public presence.

The mobilization of religious repertoires in nationalist movements has been observed in Algeria during the revolution when the meanings of the veil as a cultural and social object got transformed as a result of the French colonizers' attempt at eradicating Islam from the public domain. In response to these attacks, many Algerians turned inward, retreating in the traditional Islamic community and family life that remained the only safe havens from which a sense of independence could be preserved. Fantasia and Hirsch (1995) explain that when the colonial elite attempted to expand its control over the private sphere through new laws designed to supposedly 'liberate' women, Islam became the 'language of refusal' and as a consequence, traditional gender practices such as veiling and cloistering of women were reinforced (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995: 149). According to Fanon (quoted in Fantasia and Hirsch, 150): 'Every new Algerian woman unveiled announced to the occupier an Algerian society whose systems of defence were in the process of dislocation, open and breached'. A public figure like Joya, who appeared unveiled on Western TV, addressed Western audiences dressed in 'un-Islamic' clothes and advocated for secular democracy, was perceived as a threat for the same reasons underlined by Fanon in the case of colonized Algeria. Her unveiled body displayed on satellite TV channels became a source of fear because it carried the signs of shattered boundaries and disappearing worlds.

Mahbouba Seraj, a member of the Royal family returned to Afghanistan in 2001, worked with women MPs under a UNIFEM programme designed to enhance female representatives' political skills and help them develop alliances among themselves in matters related to women's rights. She explained to me that the greatest difficulties for these women was to gain the support of their male colleagues since men were the ones who had the real power to initiate change:

If you want, as a woman, to make it in the political arena, you need three things: First you need to have a well-known family name. Second you need to be Pashtun, since the Pashtuns represent the main ethnic group in the country. Finally, you need the support of men. This support, you cannot get it if you're young because respect is gained with age and experience. But the support of men is decisive. This is the reason why it is difficult to build alliances between women. They compete to

get men's recognition and they cannot see the advantage of working together yet. (Interview - Seraj 07/10/2007)

Several other women MPs who mentioned receiving regular misogynist comments when they referred to international women's rights standards in the Assembly confirmed these dynamics. 'Wear a proper veil first, *hamshira* (sister), and then you will be authorized to talk. This is what some of them (men) tell me sometimes', complained Masooda Babak (Interview - MP3, 16/09/2007), founder of a women's organization and now MP for Kabul province. Even in liberal circles, prejudices against women are widespread. Women are often accused of hysteria and are reproached their lack of rational thinking or their ignorance of the rules applying to political negotiations. A moderate male MP at the head of the National United Front, the main opposition group in the National Assembly, viewed his female colleagues in these terms:

We should always apply logic to our talks. I am always present inside of the parliament and I can tell you that most women are not able to speak logically. They simply can't do it. They don't have enough knowledge about Islam. Mullahs become upset and angry. When this happens, I raise my card and I say: 'This woman doesn't mean that'. I say the same thing in another language, and then all MPs agree with me. (Interview - MP4, 25/10/2007)

In these circumstances, displaying a respectful Muslim persona through proper veiling and clothing amounts to affirming one's patriotic allegiances and a certain form of recognition for the historical heritage of the *jihad*. With a parliament dominated by *jihadi* factions for whom women's rights are certainly not the priority, women are left with little choice but to conform in order to gain men's recognition. The 'emotional glue' (Mayer 2000, 3) conveyed by nationalist ideas, despite their systematic reproduction of gender stereotypes, cannot simply be ignored. As Mayer (2000, 6) puts it, 'because the nation was produced as a heterosexual male construct its "ego" is intimately connected to patriarchal hierarchies and norms. These enable men and nation to achieve superiority over women and a different Other by controlling them. As a result the intersection of nation, gender and sexuality is a discourse about a moral code, which mobilized men (and sometimes women) to become its sole protectors and women its biological and symbolic reproducers'. Nationalist/conservative women, and to some extent, liberal women too are participating in defending the 'moral code'. Through their dresses, women compete to embody the perfect model of the 'pure' and dedicated Muslim mother/sister. But liberal women's indirect or direct participation in the reinforcement

of this discourse allows them to gain credit and support in their own political groups when women's rights issues are put on the negotiation table.

In her study of the women's piety movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood (2005) distinguishes between veiling practices as embodied production of Self, the purpose of which are to produce or create Selfhood and veiling practices as signs of collective identity. She argues that while the latter endows some nationalist or identitarian dispositions and rest on a conception of self as distinct from the outside world, the former are predicated on a sense of self constructed through norms and conventions. Indeed, embodied practices are forms of socialization which involve forced and forceful reiterations – what Bourdieu came to theorise as 'habitus'- so that the subject, caught in a set of 'structuring structures' appears as if behaving 'naturally'. Building on Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' and Foucault's theory of power and discipline, Butler (1997) offers a new reading of the notion of performativity by applying it to gender. She argues that gender is not a fact or an essence but a set of reiterated acts that produce the effect or appearance of a coherent substance. In short, gender is something that people do rather than an entity or a quality they possess. It is a set of acts, a performance, it works and derives its compulsive force from the fact that people mistake the acts for the essence and in the process, come to believe that they are mandatory.

However, the distinction between embodied and identitarian veiling practices may be erroneous and both forms of subjectivities may coexist among the Afghan political women who are the subject of my study. The ethnographic material I have presented here demonstrates that conceptions of the relationship between the self and the body are not radically opposed. Liberal and nationalist women equally strive to cultivate virtuous selves while expressing pious identities through clothing. All of them (except Malalai Joya who defends secularism) insist that they do not aspire to the freedom enjoyed by Western women. They all view Islam as the basis of gender equality and the family as the core unit within which women can develop and empower themselves.

As a result, the concept of performativity developed by Butler is too much centred on the individual to fully grasp the multiplicity of other factors that shape political women's performances. These factors include the space within which the performance occurs, the others involved and how they might see and interpret what they witness. The theory of 'performance' developed by Goffman (1969) seems to integrate these factors in greater depth by relocating the individual in the context where s/he navigates and in a set of relations. In Goffman's view, the performance is not the mere

product of discourses, as Butler suggests, but it is an act, which is validated through interactions with different audiences. These different interactions constitute the reality of the every day.

Nationalist as well as liberal women navigate in the public sphere and the projection of identities is part of the construction of collectivities. Even those more liberal women who are most concerned with embodying modern Muslim personae are also engaged in performances, while the most nationalist-oriented women are concerned with embodying piety and national autonomy. Their encounters with the public are necessarily performative in the sense of ‘theatrical’ and changing according to audiences and situations. As Goffman argues, there is no essential self (Goffman 1967, 85): ‘While it may be true that the individual has a unique self of his own, evidence of this possession is thoroughly a product of joint ceremonial labour, the part expressed through the individual’s demeanour being no more signification than the part conveyed by others through their deferential behaviour toward him’.

Selves performing identities do not need to be conceptualized as autonomous or distinct from the social world. Similar to the case argued by Rachel Rinaldo (2007) for women’s groups in Indonesia, among women MPs sitting on the benches of the National assembly, the veil serves both to inculcate piety and to express identity, both intentionally and unintentionally.

I qualify the body practices that I have described in this section as ‘performances’ in the sense of Goffman (Goffman 1956), not because I assume that women’s veiling practices are mere cynical or alienated responses to a dominant discourse, but in order to highlight women’s acknowledgement of and participation in a moral system in which their bodies are constant centres of attention.

## **5. Reinventing the ‘public’**

Public spaces are imbued with multiple ideologies, which contextually frame the multifaceted subjectivities that actors who navigate within them possess. Scholars have argued that models of the public sphere founded on the modern nation-state create and necessitate individuated subjectivities (Habermas 1989). I have shown that by contrast, in Afghanistan, the public sphere simultaneously sanctions political women’s subjectivities as Muslim women, as mothers/wives/daughters and as dependent on men. Their capacity to maintain a public position depends on their ability to embody such subjectivities. As has been observed in other post-colonial states, women activists in

Afghanistan are being rooted in nationalism and the struggle against foreign influence and therefore when they articulate demands for women, they 'inevitably run the risk of being stigmatized as anti-nationalist and anti-religious' (Al-Ali 2000, 1).

Women know, when stepping into male dominated domains, the risk they face of getting caught in the middle of an international discursive struggle portrayed as a simple matter of human rights on one hand and a nationalist discourse that defends with absolute certainty 'Afghan culture and traditions' on the other hand. In order to manoeuvre in this very narrow corridor, Afghan women have had to create and reinvent new public spaces for themselves. Women entering public spaces are therefore bringing with them expectations of traditional, feminine behaviours. The parameters of women's public behaviours are strictly circumscribed in both covert and overt ways. Women's public presence is justified through the language of women as 'carers of the nation'. This suggests that women are entering an anomalous space neither purely private nor strictly public, but rather a public space restricted by traditional principles of sociability, thereby modifying but not fundamentally disrupting rigid distinctions between public and private, male and female.

Women employed in Ministries, in NGOs as well as women elected at the Afghan National Assembly are very careful to present themselves as dutiful mothers or daughters. The way these women talk about their 'people' is very similar to the way they talk about their children. Dr Massouda Jalal, for instance, who was the only female candidate for the 2004 Presidential elections, used the slogan: 'Vote for the Mother' for her campaign (Interview – Jalal, 22/11/2007). Mahbouba Seraj, a woman's right activist running Koran reading groups for women in rural areas, insists that despite the fact that she has no children, she has motherly feelings for the women with whom she works (Field notes, 28/09/2007). She likes to call herself 'Mother Afghanistan' and the way she interacts with her 'beneficiaries' is in many ways similar to a mother dealing with her own children: patting them, kissing them and encouraging them to learn. In her opinion, women are teachers and have the religious duty to be educated in order to be able to educate their own children. For these 'visible' women, maintaining a motherly figure in the public domain is an effective means to gain recognition and legitimacy.

The ceremonies organized for International Women's Day by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and other women's organizations under the patronage of prominent feminine political figures followed the same discursive lines. In Shar-e-Naw luxurious hotels' reception rooms, walls were covered with banners on which one could read the following passages of the Koran: "Women rock the cradle with one hand and carry the

earth with the other”, “Paradise lies on mothers’ feet”, “Thanks to women, men can reach mountaintops”. Girl scouts dressed up in military uniforms sang the Afghan national anthem while radio presenter Rana Nooristani, daughter of a woman representative of Nooristan province at the National Assembly, read poems in which women embodied the beauty of the Afghan land: “Women, you’re the beauty of the land, the basis of life. You know the secrets of life. God created you. You, modest queen.” (Field notes, 08/03/2007)

Among the various government officials and religious leaders attending the ceremony, one figure in particular attracted my attention: General Khotul Mohamadzai, her military uniform covered with medals, was among a small group of military officers to be present here. In her traditional annual speech, she underlined the glory gained by the sacrifices made to protect the motherland: “My respected mother, I write about your dignity with my blood. As long as I’ll live, I’ll always be yours, my mother. At home or in a deserted place, you are a treasure of love for your daughters and sons. You are a patriotic woman. May each drop of our blood be sacrificed for you.”(Field notes, 08/03/2007). Ill at ease in such an ostentatious deployment of nationalist feelings, I left the room before the end of the ceremony, a female organizer running after me to offer me the gift that would later on be distributed to all the female attendees: a bridal veil and a Koran.

But Mohamadzai’s public discourses had not changed since, in the early eighties, she had been appointed General by the Communist regime, eager to showcase women in a political apparatus that wanted to present itself as ‘modern’ and progressive. This is what I would discover when I would come to interview her in her modest apartment in Makrorayan a few days later, this time without video cameras to record what she had to say. ‘I hate politics and I hate war’, Mohamadzai confided after she had recounted how she lost all her family members during the successive conflicts (Interview – Mohamadzai, 08/04/2007). Widowed a few years after her wedding, Mohamadzai was living with her only son in a flat decorated with various trophies, prizes and official photographs. While she turned the yellowed pages of an old photo album, I realized the instrumental role women like Mohamadzai had played in sustaining the democratic pretence of the successive governments, a role Mohamadzai continued to occupy in the new Islamic Republic.

As tactical as these performances may well be, they are part of a specifically feminine repertoire that allows women to engage in public activities without frantically challenging the gender order. If the ‘nationalist’ discourse remains a favourite avenue, it

often goes with a religious decorum. Indeed, models of the Islamic government are based on religious figures such as Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah, his daughter and Khadija and Aisha, his first and second wives. Women who have entered the political arena have appropriated Fatimah, Khadija and Aisha's models in new ways. By adapting and conforming their appearances and their behaviours to these predetermined Islamic socio-cultural models, Afghan women have gradually managed to access arenas where they were originally perceived as illegitimate. Their knowledge of the Koran and their ability to refer to it in different circumstances are powerful tools to break through the public, and sometimes to bring about small changes for women, under the veil of compliance and invisibility. For instance, a few businesswomen have emerged in Kabul, most of them supported by US-based organizations. They are running small and medium enterprises specialized in jam making, tailoring and regional trade. During interviews, these women often mentioned Khadijah, a rich merchant of Mecca who became the prophet's first wife, as the original source of their inspiration (Interviews – Siddiqi, 15/05/2007; Zarghona, 21/03/2007).

Being able to refer to the Koran and to demonstrate one's mastery of religious texts was therefore pivotal for women to assert their presence in public arenas. Women's rights activists commonly used this tactic to access women living in remote rural areas and to avoid the suspicion or reluctance of local mullahs. They reclaimed the heritage of Islam as a religion that originally attempted to protect women against the discrimination and violence that marked the pre-Islamic order and promoted women's rights through an Islamic framework. Among the rights they wanted other women to be aware of were the right to inheritance, to *mahr* (the money a woman can claim from her future husband before her marriage and in case of divorce), to *nika* (religious marriage contract in which a mutual consent should be expressed for the marriage to be valid), to education, health and respect (as a daughter, mother, sister and wife).

These were, in women's rights activists' opinion, the legitimate rights women could claim in a Muslim society. On her arrival to a village, Mahboubia Seraj would first meet the mullah and the village chief. Greetings were long and elaborate, news from the city and nearby villages were exchanged before the purpose of the visit was eventually revealed. A male colleague who would run similar discussion groups with local village men and mullahs would always accompany her. Obtaining men's consent and including them in the debates was the precondition to getting access to the women. She would be very careful not to use the jargon of international human rights and would use her family lineage (Mahboubia belonged to the Royal family) and her age (she was a *kala safed*, a

white head) as entry points in the community. She would then gather the women in the house of a well-established local woman (usually a nurse, midwife or school teacher) who already enjoyed some kind of public recognition for her work within her constituency. Discussions would usually start on this note:

*Mahbouba:* Before Islam appeared, what do you think the life of humans was like?

*A woman:* Before Islam appeared, when a child was born and she was a girl, they would bury her alive.

*Mahbouba:* Yes, you're right. When a girl was born at that time, people would bury her alive. People were illiterate and they did not know about their rights. No woman could get married or receive heritage. Society did not treat women well. They threw girls in rivers and they buried them alive. Because of this, God sent his prophet Mohammad to the people. 1400 years ago, God sent Prophet Mohammad to the people of Saudi Arabia. And women started to have rights. (Field notes, 28/08/2007)

The session would discuss issues related to marriage, inheritance, violence against women and education and would usually end up with a meal offered to all the participants, as a token of their newly formed friendship. These women's gatherings were quite revolutionary in rural areas where women's spheres of sociality were often reduced to their own family circles, with little opportunities for unrelated women to meet and discuss. There, in the safe space created by the motherly figure of Mahbouba, women were encouraged to talk freely about their problems and sorrows and find collective solutions for themselves. A new public sphere not predicated upon a Habermasian assumption of secular liberalism and the attendant separation of public and private, politics and religion or group and individual, provided discursive fields within which Muslim women were able to contest notions of work, body, honour and piety. This political repertoire, imbued with collective moral virtues derived from religious texts, allowed women to gain a sense of pride and self-worth while contesting the margins of the gender order.

A woman gave birth to Prophet Mohammad. It's not possible for a woman to give birth to Prophet Mohammad if she is dirty. I don't understand these ideas according to which women are dirty. Islam says that no woman is dirty. Prophet Mohammad says that the paradise is at the feet of mothers. I want to tell you that Prophet Mohammad says that women should take care of their children so they become good Muslims and they guide other people in society. (Field notes, 28/08/2007)

The cultivation, embodiment and display of virtuous selves, copied on famous

Islamic female figures, were the common denominator of the women who ran for the legislative elections. Many of them ran their campaign from home, receiving visitors in the same manner as a Queen holding court, listening to people's demands and problems while using their networks of personal contacts to help them find solutions. It is thanks to the direct or tacit support of their male relatives that such gatherings were made possible. They were proud to say that they did not individually decide to run for the elections but were rather called by their own people to take part in the electoral competition. A common argument they used to justify their participation was that, unlike most male candidates, they had 'no blood on their hands', they did not commit any crimes during the war and that, as mothers who had suffered the death of their husbands and sons, they were dedicated to establish peace in their country.

What emerges out of the examination of these feminine public performances is a general sense of deference and respect for rules of conduct, which from the outside, may be understood as mere reinforcement of gender hierarchies. But by behaving according to societies' expectations of appropriate feminine/Muslim comportments, women were able to create for themselves an alternative public space or 'semi public spaces' from where they could increase their participation in public life. It is their behaviours as women holding a certain status or position that expressed compliance, not their other substantive selves dedicated to achieve change for women. For these rules were parts of a necessary cultural 'ceremonial' - i.e highly specified, extended sequence of symbolic action performed by august actors on solemn occasions when religious sentiments are likely to be invoked' (Goffman 1956: 5) - to follow in order to become legitimate in the public arena. Because 'the rules of conduct which bind the actor and the recipient together are the bindings of society' (Goffman 1956, 25), women were careful to create terms of familiarity with the 'super ordinates'. And by doing so, they struggled to enlarge the scope of their possibilities.

## **Conclusion**

In Afghanistan, the use of the veil is part of a broader set of rules that define proper gender behaviours in public settings. These rules apply to both men and women and vary according to variables such as age, ethnic affiliations, social status. To some extent, men do wear veils too and abide by these rules in their daily interactions with members of the opposite sex. In the context of a military occupation, showing respect

for these rules, as instrumental as it may appear, has become all the more significant in that it provides a sense of continuity and collective belonging.

My aim in this chapter was not to diminish or question the religious endeavours of the women I observed, but rather to underline the possibilities that were enabled through the reiteration of these feminine ceremonials. As it would be erroneous to reduce the veil to its instrumental functions, it is also inappropriate to see in it a pure religious expression. Deference and dissimulation were indeed political gestures that worked as the necessary social make-up for women to break through the 'public'. A deeper analysis of their motives and actions showed that women were able to strategize and adapt to their audience, displaying different layers of their multiple selves, according to the different audiences they wished to address. As a result, the dichotomy proposed by Saba Mahmood (2001) between veiling practices as embodied forms of subjectivity and veiling practices as identitarian forms of expression may be too simplistic to describe the complex ways in which women position themselves in relation to others in specific contexts. The concept of 'performance' developed by Goffman provides a more appropriate framework to analyse these practices since it relocates the individual in a set of interactions that constitute the everyday of individual men and women.

The following chapter provides a deeper insight into the concept of Islamic performance that I have started to develop in the course of this analysis. I show how the mobilization of a collective memory and shared cultural imaginaries through emotional performances are key to achieve public recognition and preserve a sense of self-definition.

## Chapter 7

### Ambiguous Speech: the Politics and Poetics of Emotions and Feelings among Afghan Women

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Rabia Balkhi by Afghan poet and artist Hameed Naweed

*I am an Afghan girl and it is right that I always cry*

Nadia Anjuman

A legend says that in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Afghan poetess Rabia Balkhi wrote her last love poems with her own blood. Born in Balkh in the court of the Samanids where many Persian poets held residence, Rabia fell in love with Baktash, the Turkish slave of her brother Haares. Mad with rage at the discovery of her sister's secret liaison, Haares killed Baktash. It is said that Rabia would have retreated into the house's hamam, cut her veins, and written these last words on the bathroom's walls: "When you see things hideous, fancy them neat / Eat poison, but taste sugar sweet".

There is in the poetry of Rabia Balkhi, like in the literary work of the many Afghan poetesses who followed her, a peculiar voice, that one could define as specifically feminine. Nadia Anjuman's poems, for instance – whom I quote in the introduction to

this chapter - communicate grief, sorrow and sadness, which combined together, convey strong impressions of despondency and suffering. Nadia, like Rabia, was turned into a national heroine when she died under mysterious circumstances in 2005 – probably assassinated by her husband although suicide was the official explanation - after the publication of her first collection of poems under the title of *Gul-e Dodi* (Flowers of Smoke). Thousands of people, among them government's officials, Herati poets and students attended her funeral.

Drawing on previous anthropological studies on emotional meanings systems (Abu-Lughod 1986, Grima 1992, Rosaldo 1984, Leavitt 1996), I analyse women's articulation of despondency as a means to maintain relationships, honour and gain public recognition. Indeed, to the external observer that I was, women's expressions of feelings through emotional performances had a particular and distinctive flavour. Women's rhetoric was emphatic, lyrical and tinted with a nationalist imagery in which women, as symbols of the nation, embodied the country's pains and sufferings. In this chapter, I argue that these distinctively feminine narratives are tools widely used by women to manage others' impression and gain public validation. While reproducing common stereotypes about female irrationality and emotional fragility, these discourses allow women to access the public without disrupting social expectations of femininity.

In an attempt at moving beyond the simple association of emotions with the domains of the private and the intimate, recent anthropological work has highlighted the various ways in which emotions can create, maintain, challenge or redefine social relations (Rosaldo 1984; Ong 1988; Scheper-Hughes 1997; Abu-Lughod 2007). Indeed, Western philosophical tradition, from Plato to Descartes, has analysed emotions through a 'romantic' framework, connecting them to biological instincts or primary body experiences and placing them in opposition to rationalism. In this perspective, emotions have been seen as disordering and problematic or at least, as vague and irrational (Lutz and White 1986). As a result, scholars of 'culture' have tended to neglect the study of emotions for their assumed 'universal' existence made cross-cultural comparisons unworthy.

In recent years though, a body of literature challenging these conceptions has emerged. These studies have attempted to criticize the binaries (individual/social, universalism/interpretivism, romanticism/rationalism, public/private) that have for a long time framed academic debates on emotions and feelings by proposing alternative categories of analysis. These new studies have highlighted the 'constructed' and 'relational' aspects of emotions by underlining the complex ways in which the moral

order - notions of 'good' and 'bad' - was in all societies defined or filtered through the language of the Self, i.e. emotions. Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), for instance, has shown how Bedouins in Egypt both assert and challenge their acceptance of social hierarchies through discourses of emotions linked to the ideology of honour and modesty. In a similar move, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1997) has shown how the combination of particularly harsh living conditions, high infant mortality rates and religious beliefs in a slum in Northern Brazil impact on women's capacity to express mother love.

In this chapter, I look more specifically at women's emotional rhetoric and performances in various contexts in order to map out the various instances in which these ambiguous communicative codes are used as political or persuasive strategies. Although emotions unarguably involve instinctive and unconscious body experiences 'under the skin', they also assume a pragmatic communicational function tightly intertwined with broader systems of values, identity and ethnopsychological understandings. As Leavitt puts it (1996, 530): 'Emotions are understood not to be exclusively "under the hat", not "locked in the heart", the liver or the belly (even if that is where people say they feel them) but as forming systems of differently toned feelings/meanings that are learned by socialized bodies as typical responses to social scenarios and that are expressed (or suppressed) in social contexts'. As the different cases I present in this chapter demonstrate, the performance and rhetoric of feelings among the women I observed took place within culturally defined cognitive frames that have identifiable boundaries. Women's enactment of such culturally framed emotional repertoires allowed them to loosen patriarchal control over their lives and challenge gender hierarchies, while preserving the core values of the honour system.

I also link women's emotional repertoires to the broader nationalist and poetical frames within which they develop. The relationship between affects and politics has been underlined in studies related to the development of the nation-state (Anderson 1999; Smith 1991). However, these studies have tended to deny the central role of gender in shaping national sentiments. On the contrary, feminist scholars (Aretxaga 1997; Einhorn 2006; Yuval-Davis 1997) have demonstrated how gender and nationalism are tightly connected together and how both work to strengthen patriotism, especially in times of war and conflicts.

In her study of the conflict in Northern Ireland, for instance, Aretxaga uses Foucault's concept of 'microphysics of power' to analyse the subjectivity of nationalist women taking part in the resistance against the British occupation. She argues that spaces of social transformation are not necessarily infused with upfront resistance to dominant

discourses but rather determined by subtle, marginal and oftentimes contradictory attempts at modifying these discourses. These ‘everyday forms of resistance’ (Scott 1985) are informed by conscious and unconscious social practices, which involve a great deal of engagement with emotions. This is because, as Jane Flax points out, ‘political action and change require and call upon many human capacities including empathy, anger and disgust’ - and I would add, suffering – ‘that are not always expressed in language’ (Flax 1992, 458). These analyses are key to understand the predominance of emotional performances and discourses as ‘oppositional practices of everyday life’ (de Certeau 1984) among Afghan women trying to break through the political/public sphere.

In the first section of this chapter, I investigate women’s emotions in poetry. I specifically focus on Nadia Anjuman, a young Afghan poetess who died shortly after the publication of her first collection of poems and became a sort of national icon. I confront her poetic production to her life story in order to highlight the transgressive potential of poetry as a literary genre. I argue that poetry, as a well-respected literary form, is an important expressive device used by women to comment on society. This analysis sets the basis of the imaginary framework that impregnates women’s world (part 1). I then move on to explore narratives of martyrdom that were recurrent among Afghan political women. I show how women borrowed notions of self-sacrifice and *jihad* from mainstream politics but reinterpreted and slightly changed their original meaning in an attempt to gain public validation (section 2). I then move on to analyse women’s emotional performances by looking more specifically at the issue of women’s suicide. Indeed, in the recent past years, an increasing number of women have been reported to resort to self-immolation to ‘escape’ from domestic violence, especially in the Western provinces of Afghanistan. These dramatic gestures were often interpreted by women’s rights groups and international human rights organizations as signs of women’s despair and hopelessness. Using the case study of two sisters from the dormitory who attempted to end their lives through poisoning, I highlight the expressive, ritualized and subversive nature of female suicide (section 3).

## 1. Poetic Resistance

Poetry writing and recitation in Afghanistan have been and still are very important activities. Nancy Hatch-Dupree mentions that ‘while treasuring the poets of the past, a great many gifted Afghans try their hand at writing poetry and poetry readings or *mushaira* are a popular form of entertainment’ (Dupree-Hatch 2002, 979). A Persian

proverb says that ‘good poets are like angels of heaven’. Indeed, it is commonly believed that a poem can put an end to a family problem or to troubles in a village. Lutfia, a girl from the dormitory whose family lived in Parwan province, told me that her mother, who only attended school for three years, knew a large amount of poetry, despite her poor level of literacy. She explained that using poetry brought validity and strength to an argument and that in her village, women resorted to this form of expression on a regular everyday basis. She said:

In our village, most people, especially women, are illiterate. So if a woman uses poetry, it shows that she has some kind of knowledge and her ideas get more easily accepted. (Fieldnotes, 13/02/2007)

Although women’s oral poetry has a long tradition in Afghanistan<sup>73</sup>, until a few decades ago, women were rarely individually recognized as poets or writers on a par with men. As almost any educated woman will tell you in Afghanistan nowadays, the artistic and cultural achievements of Persian poetesses – from Rabia Balkhi, Mustahi Khujandi, Qaratul Ahin to even Forough Farukhzad – have been suppressed and insufficiently examined.

A few Afghan poetesses have however started to gain public recognition after the USSR withdrawal from Afghanistan, as a reward for the patriotic endeavour expressed in their poetic work. Indeed, from the Communist regime up to the Taliban, poetry has gradually become a means of resistance. But whereas men’s poetry was deeply influenced by the ‘Kalashnikovation’ of society (Goodson 1998), encouraging men to take arms and resist the occupation, women’s poetry explored feelings of pain, captivity, darkness, loneliness, wandering, escape, absurdity and nothingness, sometimes assuming metaphysical dimensions. The expression of such feelings, while reinforcing certain ideas of women as essentially emotional individuals, opened doors for a certain form of public validation.

Lila Abu Lughod’s (1986) work among the Awlad Ali Bedouins in Egypt has underlined the centrality of poetry as a form of ‘resistance’ or as a means to mediate relations between men and women. I share with her the view that poetry, as an aesthetic and spiritual domain of life, is about beliefs and values and therefore about politics. In countries like Afghanistan, where two thirds of the population is illiterate, oral poetry has been traditionally used as a channel for commenting on society and politics. Poetic

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<sup>73</sup> See Bahodine Majrouh (2003), *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women’s Poetry*, New York, Other Press

composition and performances structure social relations and provide individuals with a form of political expression and persuasion. Studying the poetry of women is particularly interesting since the ambiguous messages that are channelled through their literary work allow them to express covert forms of dissent. Through poetry, women compose with the boundaries of gender norms and gain a relative sense of autonomy while conforming to the honour system.

#### *a. Poetry, honour and resistance*

Political literature has a long history in Afghanistan and many female writers have contributed to its flourishing, especially during the emergence of leftist political movements in the 60s. While women had remained largely excluded from the artistic and literary life of the country prior to this period, Faridullah Bezhan (2007, 2008) has documented well how the relative liberalization of the Afghan society in the 1960s and 1970s produced a new urban middle class politicized elite in Kabul that gave birth to a handful of female writers. Some of them, like Spozhmai Zaryab and Maryam Mahboob who specialized in the art of short story writing, have become notorious for their denunciation of violence against women committed by both sides during the war.

While the Communist regime tried to assert its control over the country with the military support of the USSR, poetry gradually became a genre of preference for expressing political dissidence. In opposition to the official literary forms promoted by the PDPA, some Afghan poets attempted to escape from the rigidity of socialist realism, using poetry, a genre despised by the ruling elite, to denounce political abuse. The Party, seeking to rally the Afghan people to the cause of the revolution, wanted to create a literary and artistic elite capable of fostering the national ideology. ‘Art for art’s sake’ (poetry) had to be abandoned for socialist realist fictions. As Ahmadi (2008, 95) explains, the Writers’ Union founded in 1980, encouraged authors to produce literary work that ‘reflected the lives of workers, peasants, farmers, and, above all, the armed forces that defended the regime and safeguarded the revolution. Anticipating the necessary demise of ‘evil forces’ of reaction and the dawn of a bright future, these works were expected to deal with the development of a revolutionary hero who overcomes all odds and, even if *he – and only rarely she* – is not to see the fruit of his endeavours, plants the seeds of hope for the future of the masses at large’.

Literary production had therefore to convey enthusiastic messages, to transmit the revolutionary ideals of progress and freedom from feudal oppression to the broader nation. In order to achieve this project, the ideal manhood was forged around

stereotypical images of dedicated and tireless workers, labouring farmers and above all, dutiful soldiers fighting against the ‘enemies of the revolution’. As in the poster reproduced below, womanhood was used as an allegory of the nation, in need of the same protection as the fragile gains of the revolution constantly under the threat of ‘backward antirevolutionary forces’.

Ironically, literary works (whether oral or written) produced in the Afghan refugee camps during this same period reproduced the same ideals of militarized masculinity and subservient domestic femininity. Anthropologist Audrey Shalinsky (1993) for instance, has documented how the various *jibadi* parties in Pakistan distributed tape cassettes both in the camps under their control and in Afghanistan, which promoted, through lyric tales and stories inspired from the life of prophet Mohammed, appropriate behaviours for women in time of *jihad*. These stories linked religion, courage, honour and territory and promoted differentiated roles for men and women in the war effort. What *jihad* meant for women was to maintain their chastity and purity by staying at home and remaining totally segregated from men. As a consequence, the *Jihad* was endowed with a moral dimension, which women had the responsibility to maintain through appropriate veiling and (re)-production of future soldiers and *umma* members (Shalinsky 1993, 674).

However, men had other moral duties like showing courage in the battle against the enemies. The *landays*<sup>74</sup> collected by the Afghan poet Bahodine Majrouh (2003) among Pashtun women living in the refugee camps in Pakistan, reveal that women, far from being passive servants of the honour ideology, actively participated in reproducing it, shaming the men who did not demonstrate enough bravery in the art of war.

*In battle today my lover turned his back to the enemy.*

*I am ashamed of having kissed him last night. (Bahodine Majrouh 2003, 16)*

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<sup>74</sup> Brief poem of two verse lines of nine and thirteen syllables respectively. Landays are exchanged and spontaneously improvised by Pashtuns and used in their everyday interactions.



Propaganda poster produced during Kamal's government. The big banner says: 'Have you joined the Sawr Revolution yet?' The small banners say: 'Learn from champions!', 'Hurry up, defend the nation and the revolution!' and 'It's our duty to defend the country and the revolution!' (Government-of-Afghanistan 1984)

The nationalist project, from the civil war up to nowadays, has gendered the nation around rural patriarchal values, emphasising a heroic tradition of fearless Afghan *jihadis* and locating feminine traits of characters in the imported follies of urban life. For the *mujahedins*, the liberation of Afghanistan went far beyond physical force and far deeper than an independent political system. The Afghan nation had to return to its original ‘authenticity’ by purifying its soul from foreign ‘pollution’. As Olesen (1996, 276) explains: ‘The Islamic discourse dominant in the resistance revolved around the concepts of *hijra* and *jihad* leaving two identities available for the believer: *muhajir* (exile), *mujahed* (holy warrior) and in the last instance *shahid* (martyr)’. For the holy warriors, the two identities were not conflicting: when they went on military operations, they were *mujahed*, and when they returned to the refugee camps in Pakistan, they were *muhajir*.

Besides references to the Koran, the *mujahedin* also used the tribal code of honour (*Pashtunwali*) to reaffirm the patriarchal order. To protect *namous-e watan* (the honour of the nation) became synonymous with protecting women, *namous-e mard* (the honour of men). The necessity to protect women from the polluting influence of *kafir* (unbelievers) was a central motive in discourses of resistance. This theme was emphasized in the many political pamphlets and songs produced in the refugee camps. For instance this one written by Rafiq Jan (quoted in Olesen 1996, 279):

*O, Muslim, modesty, shame and to be in pardah*<sup>75</sup>

*Is a great nang wa namus*<sup>76</sup>...

*You can't tell her not to go somewhere*

*She has the freedom to be at everyone's side,*

*Whoever she wants*

*She could spend the night with him...*

*Everyone has to accept this command*

*All of us should taste each other's women*<sup>77</sup>

*Khalqis believe that zar, zan wa zamin*<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Pardah, literally means ‘curtain’. Women start doing ‘pardah’ after puberty. This includes veiling and avoidance of unrelated men (see chapter 4)

<sup>76</sup> *Nang wa namus* refers to the tribal code of honour.

<sup>77</sup> This verse means that under the Communist regime, women are no more the ‘property’ of their kin and families. The poet interprets the communist ideology as an encouragement to loose morals and adultery.

<sup>78</sup> ‘women, gold and land’ (Pashtun saying).

*Are common things*

*O, Muslim! Think about it...*

It is not surprising that the response of Afghan nationalism to the colonialist discourse of the Soviets who justified their occupation of the country by the necessity to modernize and 'liberate' women, was the idealization of traditional motherhood within the symbolic terrain of nationalist culture: the rural home. The national project, which materialized after the withdrawal of the Red Army, during the civil war and reached its peak with the emergence of the Taliban, was predicated on a rejection of modernity, a return to an essentialized rural and mythical tradition. The consequences were enormous for women who were erased from the professional and intellectual life of the country.

However, while the country gradually grappled with violence and silence, the voices of women were not totally extinguished. Writers like Maryam Mahboob and Spozhmai Zaryab<sup>79</sup> eventually fled from Afghanistan and continued exploring Afghan women's suffering in the short stories they published abroad. Poetry writing seems to have remained more popular among the women who either stayed in the country or among the ones who lived as refugees in Pakistan and Iran. For many young girls excluded from education, and for professional women relegated to the home, poetry writing became an important means of self-empowerment. A number of girls living in the dormitory told me that during their years of exile in Pakistan or in Iran, poetry writing became a means to deal with their worries and anxieties. In an article published in the women's magazine *Sadaf* (Pearl), an Afghan girl recalls how poetry writing helped her keep hope when the outside world was no longer accessible:

Slowly, I found out that controlling words would help me find a voice, and so I found the poet inside of me. For five years I patiently tolerated the clouds that had come into my life because I believed in the saying: 'patience is difficult but has its rewards.' (...) After some time, the clouds vanished and the light of hope started to shine again. Bathed in light, I ran to my white world. (Najwa 2006)

The choice of poetry as a primary form of expression is no accident. Writing poetry is positioning oneself within a respected genre as well as within an intellectual elite and female poets can expect to receive a similar kind of public respect and recognition as

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<sup>79</sup> Maryam Mahboob left for Canada in the early 1980s after brief stays in Pakistan and India (Bezhan, 2008: 374). Spozhmai Zaryab studied literature in France and in Afghanistan. She served as a translator at the French Embassy in Kabul. She left Afghanistan in 1991 and has lived in France since then (Bezhan, 2008: 314).

their male counterparts. Using classic Persian poetical forms, some women wrote *ghazal*. But while respecting the structural requirements of an ancient poetic form, the themes women addressed were in rupture with tradition. Indeed, instead of employing allegorical or supernatural elements to derive some moral principle or some aspect of temporal life or life after death (Bezhan, 2007: 6), women talked about their intimate experience of war. They talked about their pain but also about topics considered taboo within a conservative society, such as love and beauty. Because poetry permits the manipulation of language and the covert alteration of mainstream discourses on womanhood, women found in it an appropriate way to preserve a voice while remaining within the cultural boundaries of a literary tradition.

### *b. Women's poetry: the language of ambiguity*

Laila Sarahat Rushani, for instance, expressed through her poetry the suffering of the nation at war. A graduate in Literature from the University of Kabul, Rushani was one of the few intellectuals who remained in the country during the conflicts. Her father, Sarshar Rushani, was a known journalist, who was tortured and brutally killed by the ruling wing of the communist Khalq party. She was born in Charikar, the capital city of Parwan province, north of Kabul. She was forced to leave Kabul after the Taliban militia intensified their abusive treatment of women. She went to the Netherlands in 1998, where she lived as a refugee. There, she published *Eve in Exile*, a literary journal in Farsi. On July 21, 2004, she died of brain cancer at the age of 46 in a hospital. On July 29, her body was received at Kabul Airport by a large number of Afghan poets, intellectuals and her friends and relatives, who mournfully escorted her funeral to *Shuhadai-e-Salibeen* cemetery where she was buried.

Rushani is known for her strong spirit of protest, her courage and intellectual resistance against the communist regime and Taliban's reign of terror, which permeate much of her poetry. In a poem entitled 'Assamayi Mountain'<sup>80</sup>, the poet praises patience and courage, values that are metaphorically associated with the stillness of the Afghan

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<sup>80</sup> The *Assamayi* mountain is located south of Kabul. In 1991, a part of the mountain cracked. In 2008, Afghan author Attiq Rahimi published a novel under the title *Singue Sabour* (Stone of patience). The book recounts the story of a woman who decides to use her paralysed and mute husband as a 'stone of patience'. The silence of the man encourages the woman to share with him all the secrets of her life she had never dared to share before. In Persian mythology, *Singue Sabour* is a magic stone to which one can confide his/her sorrows. Like a sponge, the stone absorbs words and secrets until it cracks. After the explosion of the stone, the confident is forever relieved from his/her sadness. This poem written by Rushani uses a similar metaphor.

mountains but also with the rootedness of women as central pillars of the family and the broader nation:

*Oh Assamayi*  
*In your stony breaths*  
*Is the spirit of a thousand silent sparks.*  
*Oh stone, oh patience*  
*Your height is faith's firmness --*  
*History's sublime poem*  
*Oh mountain*  
*The myth of sacred pride*  
*Is inscribed*  
*In your conscious mind*  
*The endless pain of this city*  
*Is for so long*  
*Engraved in your cold stony vein*  
*Oh stone, oh patience*  
*Oh silent witness of crimes.*  
*What wound was swelling*  
*In your inner-stone's bleeding heart*  
*That suddenly sundered your heart?*  
*Oh stone, oh patience!*<sup>81</sup>

Unlike many young poets and intellectuals of her time, who either espoused the communist ideology or those who became disillusioned after a period of cooperation with the communist regime, Rushani never compromised her commitment to her art and her spirit of justice and integrity. Her poetry fully espoused the cause of the resistance by fuelling the nationalist imagery with loyal representations of women as 'suffering mothers'. Like in the patriotic literature produced in the camps, the source of women's power according to Rushani did not stem from their engagement in action but rather from their capacity to endure and remain silent, like *singue sabour* (the stone of patience)

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<sup>81</sup> This poem was translated into English by Dr Sharif Fayeze. Dr Fayeze was the first appointed Minister of Higher Education after the fall of the Taliban. He holds an MA in English Literature from the University of Northern Colorado, and a Ph.D. in American Literature and Oriental Studies from the University of Arizona. Fayeze has taught English literature at the University of Kabul in the 70s and at the University of Mashad in Iran, during the Soviet occupation. He is the founder of the American University of Kabul.  
<http://www.ariaye.com/english/poem2.html>

or the Afghan mountains. What is nonetheless striking in such a poetic piece is that while Rushani seems to reproduce the ideal of silent womanhood, her writing is already an act of defiance to such an ideal. The tension between the discourse of the poetess and her action demonstrates that Afghan women are not deprived from this dreamy imagination, an imagination that allows them to symbolically reconcile the vexed relationship between their own subjectivity and patriotism. Through Rushani's poetry, the apology of silence is turned into a means of breaking that very silence itself.

In 1994, under the government of Rabbani, Rushani was appointed chief editor of the short-lived women's bi-monthly magazine *Irshad-e Niswan* (Ladies' Guide). Granting such a political reward to a woman, when in the meantime, the *mujjabin* started to implement gender discriminatory policies, is a good indicator of the efficiency of poetry as a means to gain public recognition and visibility. The language of poetry, with its subtle slipperiness of meanings, remains the most appropriate language for women to use in order to speak out.

In some instances, women's experiences of war helped them develop a political consciousness and challenge mainstream representations of women in a less covert manner. This is for instance the case of Meena, the founder of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, assassinated by agents of KHAD (Afghanistan branch of KGB) and their accomplices in Quetta, Pakistan, in 1987. In a poem entitled 'I will never return' published in 1981 in *Payam-e-Zan*, a publication of RAWA, Meena challenges nationalist images of women as weak and powerless:

*I'm the woman who has awoken  
I've arisen and become a tempest through the ashes of my burnt children  
I've arisen from the rivulets of my brother's blood  
My nation's wrath has empowered me  
My ruined and burnt villages fill me with hatred against the enemy  
Oh compatriot, no longer regard me weak and incapable,  
My voice has mingled with thousands of arisen women  
My fists are clenched with fists of thousands compatriots  
To break all these sufferings all these fetters of slavery.  
I'm the woman who has awoken,  
I've found my path and will never return<sup>82</sup>.*

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<sup>82</sup> Poem published on RAWA's website: <http://www.rawa.org/meena.html>

If the patriotic tone remains central, with the figures of the suffering mother and bereaved sister appearing right in the introduction of the poem, Meena also underlines the radical transformation of her political consciousness as a result of her experience of war. Meena's poetry is a testament, a political vision and an encouragement for other women to follow her steps. She anticipates the coming of age of a new generation of women ('My voice has mingled with thousands of arisen women') who will struggle for women's rights and democracy and who will be ready to sacrifice themselves for these higher ideals. It is interesting to notice that somehow the prophecy of the 'martyred' Meena got fulfilled through the emergence of a feminine figure like Malalai Joya on the Afghan political scene after the fall of the Taliban. In her memoir 'Raising my voice', Joya, who as a refugee child attended one of the *Watan* schools run by RAWA in Quetta (Joya 2009, 22), Pakistan, presents herself as part of a tradition of fearless women ready to die for the cause of justice. She writes:

You cannot compromise the truth. And I am not afraid of an early death if it advances the cause of justice. Even the grave cannot silence my voice, because there are others who would carry on after me. (Joya 2009, 3)

### *c. Nadia Anjuman: a rebellious voice*

It is probably the city of Herat, the cultural heart of Afghanistan that has produced most of the contemporary Afghan poetesses and the most powerful and sophisticated *ghazal*<sup>83</sup>. Herat is indeed deep in history, with a cultural richness that can be dated back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. During the rule of Tamerlane's son, Shah Rukh, Herat became the capital of the Timurid empire. This era spelt the beginning of a cultural renaissance, with the Court attracting numerous writers, architects, artists, poets and philosophers (Doubleday 2006). This was also the time when women were given greater political power. Gohar Shah, Shah Rukh's wife, whose mausoleum is still standing in the women's park, opened the first *madrassah* for girls and governed over the empire for ten years after the death of her husband. Herat was also home to a large number of poets and Sufi mystics – the poet Jami, the Sufi Ansari, the scholar Mahmud Arifi. The saying

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<sup>83</sup> The *ghazal* is a poetic form consisting of rhyming couplets and a refrain. Each line must share the same meter. A *ghazal* may be understood as a poetic expression of both the pain of loss or separation and the beauty of love in spite of that pain. The form is ancient, originating in 6th century pre-Islamic Arabic verse. In its style and content it is a genre, which has proved capable of an extraordinary variety of expression around its central themes of love and separation. It is one of the principal poetic forms the Indo-Perso-Arabic civilization offered to the eastern Islamic world.

goes that under the Timurid dynasty, you could not stretch your leg out in Herat without kicking a poet.

Herat has not lost its intellectual and cultural aura since then. During the five years of the Taliban rule, poets and writers organised a fierce resistance. Not with weapons, but with books and poetry. A network of clandestine literary circles, officially called ‘Sewing Circles’ to avoid attracting the authorities’ attention, flourished all throughout the city (Lamb 2002). There, young women, faces and bodies hidden by their Taliban-enforced uniform of sky-blue *chadari* and flat shoes, would come several times a week to read and comment on ‘illicit’ literature. In their handbags, concealed under scissors, cottons, sequins and pieces of fabric, were notebooks and pens. On the menu were classic Persian writers and poets as well as foreign authors like Dostoyevsky, Brecht and Shakespeare. Their teachers would also encourage them to develop their own literary creativity by initiating them to poetry writing, right under the nose of the religious police.

One of these young students, Nadia Anjuman, became notorious after the publication of her first book of poetry under the title of *Gul-e Dodi* (Flowers of Smoke) in 2005. The poetry of Nadia Anjuman, a student at the Golden Needle, the first Sewing Circle established in the city by Prof. Mohammad Ali Rahyab, stands out in the midst of Herat’s vibrant underground poetic production, as a denunciation of the Taliban regime. In a poem entitled ‘Useless’ written in 1999, the nineteen-year-old Herati poet compares her life to the one of a bird in a cage:

*No desire to speak again; what should I sing about?  
I am accursed by time whether I sing or not  
Why should I talk of honey since it is poison for me?  
Alas! A group of oppressors closed my mouth  
I don't have a confidante, who shall I be coy with?  
Why do I cry, laugh, die and remain?  
Myself and this corner of captivity, the sorrow of failure and regret  
I was needlessly created and I should seal my mouth shut  
I know that it is spring and the season of delight but  
What can I do with tied wings? I cannot fly  
Even though I have long been silent, I haven't forgotten the songs  
Because my heart and soul speak in every moment  
Happy the day when I will break the cage*

*When I will leave this solitude and sing with abandon  
I am not a weak tree that sways with every breeze  
I am an Afghan girl and it is right that I always cry<sup>84</sup>*

The repetitions of questions that remain unanswered together with a lexical field of imprisonment convey strong feelings of alienation and despondency. However, the ones who are responsible for Nadia's sufferings are not easily identifiable. Referents remain vague and highly ambiguous. Who is this 'group of oppressors' Nadia is referring to? Is she denouncing the ruthlessness of the Taliban or more specifically, her family dissatisfied with her poetic activities and with whom she had regular arguments?

Reading Nadia's poetry through the prism of her life story and the specific social, political and cultural contexts in which she emerged as a poetess, helps us to get a grasp on the veiled meanings hidden under the surface of her words. Following the fall of the Taliban, Nadia continued to attend the literary meetings held at the Golden Needle. Amy Waldman of the *New York Times* met her then. Nadia had already written some 60-70 poems. As the first person in her family to be a writer, Waldman noted that Nadia had to fight for her family's cooperation. She also wrote that, 'She has fought, too, to stave off marriage, fearing it [would] limit her freedom to write. 'I think I've been quite successful,' [Nadia] said. 'Girls are expected to marry at 14 or 15.' (Waldman 2001)

Marriage did come eventually, though, in 2004, and to a scholar. Farid Ahmad Majid Nia, 27, was a lecturer in philology at Herat University. Nadia's brother Shaffi says that she had resisted this pairing, and that the marriage was not altogether a happy one. "Nadia was a successful woman, a popular woman, a good poet, and he (Farid) was feeling jealous. He asked Nadia several times: Why are you popular and I'm not? Why do people know you and they don't know me? I'm the husband. I'm a man," he testified in a CNN interview (Obaid-Chinoy 2009).

Despite the disagreement of her husband and family, Nadia did not stop writing. Her poetry can be read as provocative answers to their accusations. If she could not totally resist their authority, no one could prevent her from expressing her feelings and sorrows. Unleashing a 'false smile' (2004), she warned them:

*Don't pretend that tiredness explains my blunt presence  
Don't sing of my steep intelligence without salt*

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<sup>84</sup> Nadia Anjuman's poems translated into English can be found on this website:  
<http://nadia.afghanwire.org>

*Because of temptation my wings head towards disappointment*  
*At your turn, don't send me into the night*  
*I am the happiest appearance of hope*  
*Desirous of sophistry, don't call me sorrowful*  
*I know the language of life and disgust*  
*Don't explain this speech inimically*  
*I have a story of a false smile*  
*Swear by God! Don't make stories from my pain*  
*In this moment that we sat talking*  
*Don't garb the time in poetry*

In 2005, *Gul-e Dudi* ('Flower of Smoke) got eventually published, and it quickly became popular in Afghanistan and Iran. Christina Lamb wrote in a piece for the *Times* on Nadia's death that 'friends say her family was furious, believing that the publication of poetry by a woman about love and beauty had brought shame on it.' (Lamb 2005) Following Nadia's death, *Gul-e Dodi* was chosen for republication by the Norwegian PEN Centre and the Centre Culturel Français in Kabul as the first publication in a series of Dari poetry books. She was due to bring out a second volume of poems in 2006. Ahmed Said Haqiqi, president of the Literary Circle of Herat, founded in 1920, said that Nadia 'was becoming a great Persian poet.' (Khadige 2007)

But there was already, in a poem entitled 'Poisoned' she had written in 2001, three years before her marriage, an anticipation of her own fate. In this piece, probably written after another dispute with 'the scorpions' (her family members?), the young poet appears to be less afraid of death than of being silenced and forbidden of poetic production ('injecting poison into Knowledge's organ').

*That night....*  
*At the private gathering of the scorpions*  
*A heated and bitter discussion*  
*Continued for a long while*  
*The topic: injecting poison into knowledge's organs*  
*Choosing the poison*  
*They couldn't come to an agreement*  
*Suddenly, from their midst*  
*A black one, the worst of his offspring*

*Opened his barbed mouth*  
*Saying that*  
*Night is passing, we mustn't delay*  
*While the victims sleep*  
*Arise and find someone to sting*  
*I inherited from my grandfather*  
*A bottle of deadly poison*  
*I will sacrifice myself...*

The exact reasons for Nadia's death remain obscure. On November 5, 2005, the couple's dispute reached a tragic climax. Twenty-five-year-old Nadia was brought to the hospital after having been beaten by her husband. She died soon afterwards, leaving behind her a six-month-old child. Her husband confessed to slapping her during an argument but contended that her death was a suicide, that she took poison after they argued. At the age of nineteen, when she wrote 'Poisoned' (poem reproduced above), she had already announced that she would sacrifice herself ('I have inherited from my grandfather/A bottle of poison/I will sacrifice myself). But Anjuman's friends and family denied this possibility. Anjuman felt that suicide violated the laws of Islam, they said (Khadige 2007). What's more, bruising on her face indicated more than a slap. Both Anjuman's husband and his mother were arrested in conjunction with the poet's death, but they were eventually released. They refused to allow an autopsy and today the death is classified as a suicide.

Her husband Farid spent only five months in prison. 'I had no problem with Nadia,' Farid confessed in his prison's cell. 'But she and my mother were always fighting. I was two years old when my father died. My mother brought me up, and faced a lot of problems. I also had problems trying to marry Nadia. I did not want to make either of them unhappy.' Interviewed by CNN after his release, he said: 'Nadia was trying to put pressure on people to love her more. It's just something women here do' (Obaid-Chinoy 2009). According to a report released by the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (Gardesh and Ghafari 2005), Nadia would have been limited in her movements, not only by her husband, but also by her mother-in-law. Nahid Baqi, a close friend of Nadia said, that 'Farid's mother wanted him to marry someone else. When he insisted on Nadia, she began to hate her.' (Lamb 2005)

Did Nadia swallow some poison to put an end to an unhappy marriage, staging her death as she had already announced it in her writings? Did she succumb from the

beatings of her jealous husband? Was her mother-in-law the main source of conflict in her household? Was Farid caught between his wife and his mother's conflicting demands? These questions will remain partially unanswered. The Minister of Women's Affairs, Massouda Jalal told a press conference in Kabul that Nadia had been murdered by her husband (Gardesh and Ghafari 2005). Richard Jeffrey Newman, a poet, essayist and translator of Persian poetry, wrote on his blog that Nadia's death could be understood as a form of honour killing. He explained Nadia's tragedy in the following terms: 'Male control of the female body. The female body as the repository of male, and therefore family, honour. The responsibility of upholding that honour in male terms weighing entirely on the shoulders of the woman. The resulting and often horrifyingly circumscribed nature of that woman's life. The deaths, psychic and literal, of women who cannot survive such circumscription.' (Jeffrey-Newman 2005).

The reasons for Nadia's death, whether self-inflicted or not, probably include all these various explanatory elements. But if Nadia is gone, her poetry will remain, all the more so that her death brought a heroic and romantic aura to her literary production. Her poems are fine examples of her arresting style and fearless examination of self and society. They describe her sentiments but they are perceived by others as personal statements about interpersonal relations, and it is this public denunciation, even though hidden under layers of ambiguous meanings that made her songs so potentially threatening.

Nadia's story is a good illustration of the sensitive nature of poetry as a vehicle for personal expression, confidential communication and political statement. Her *ghazal* reveal the tension between individual aspirations and the expectations of society. That Nadia reclaimed so fearlessly a voice in a context where women's silence and modesty were perceived as society's essential cultural means to preserve honour, underlines both the rebellious potential of women and the creative and symbolic nature of their protest. In the meantime, her story lies at the interface of complex relations between the intimate, the national and the international levels.

Indeed, Nadia's readership was not restricted to her hometown. Her poetry reached an audience that probably exceeded her initial intent. It did not take long before *Gul-e Dodi*, first published in Dari, was translated into English and French on poetry blogs (Burch 2005, Badihian 2005), crossing the borders of Afghanistan, and becoming the most poignant voice of the oppressed women of this war-torn country. The publicity she received was, to a great extent, beyond her control. What a better story for Western audiences than the one of Nadia, a young woman who, with words only, audaciously

defied the Taliban's 'rule of terror' and died for transgressing the rules of a the honour system? Nadia's words spoke to international literary critics, who quickly compared her to Sylvia Plath, the American poetess who, after a suicide attributed to a dominant and exploitative husband, became the icon of the feminist movement in the West (Enszer 2006). Reports of Anjuman's death spawned memorial sites for the poet in the West and a flurry of poems by Western writers as paeans to her life and work.

There is little doubt that such a newly found recognition (even though mostly achieved post mortem) may have encouraged Nadia to find a stronger voice. As Julie Enszer rightly argues, 'the fact of a young Afghani woman speaking about being treated poorly is potent after the United States invasion and purported liberation of Afghanistan from the Taliban. To hear a young woman continues to struggle with voicelessness, to read her assertion that there are things she cannot read and say inevitably resonates with western readers, and especially western feminists' (Enszer 2006). We wanted to hear her say:

*Ah, remember the good day when this cage was broken;  
That loneliness is gone, my delight, I sing the cares away.  
I am a frail stick that trembles in air each time,  
An Afghan daughter who can say wherever she needs to say<sup>85</sup>.*

But whilst it is important to take these broader geopolitical elements into account when analysing Nadia's poetry, it is also necessary to recognize her individual drive for writing her feelings in such a hostile environment. The girls in the dormitory sincerely admired Nadia. Her story and her poetry talked to them in a similar way as those of Rabia Balkhi or Malalai of Maiwand. In many instances, they felt the same anxiety as the poetess regarding their future marriage, the restrictions it would possibly impose on their lives and the pressure of their family to conform to certain norms and values. They could relate to her desire to express her dissatisfaction.

To them, writing poetry was the best possible response to life's uncertainties, especially for a young woman who had otherwise very few opportunities to express her discontent. Nadia tried to follow the correct path by relating her sorrows to those of other women, echoing their own loneliness, and therefore giving them hope in a brighter

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<sup>85</sup> Ghazal translated by Khizra Aslam.  
[http://www.thehypertexts.com/Nadia\\_Anjuman\\_Poet\\_Poetry\\_Picture\\_Bio.htm](http://www.thehypertexts.com/Nadia_Anjuman_Poet_Poetry_Picture_Bio.htm)

future. They could feel a certain form of sisterhood, a universality of experience, when they read:

*Girls, grown up with hurting soul  
And wounded bodies  
Happiness has escaped their faces  
Hearts, old and cracked*<sup>86</sup>

Even when she gained some popularity, first in the small literary circles of Herat, Nadia tried to follow the customary procedure for declaring her unhappiness. But in her poems, which increased in intensity as she became unhappier, she expressed a different set of sentiments and presented a side of her feelings not revealed elsewhere. Nadia's anger, more evident in her last poems, might have crossed the boundaries of socially accepted forms of women's expression.

*Oh dear God!  
I do not know if their soundless cries  
Reach the clouds, The skies?  
I hear the green*<sup>87</sup> *paces of the rain*<sup>88</sup>

Her poetry was ultimately judged to be sincere and to reflect her feelings accurately, and this is probably the reason why thousands of poets, intellectuals and students turned up at her funeral (Webster and Olenska 2005).

The case of Nadia confirms the relationship between poetry and conjugal/familial matters generally considered as private. Her discourse seems to be opposed to the mundane discourse of ordinary language structured around honour-linked personal ideals. But as Lila Abu Lughod so eloquently argues in the case of Bedouin women's poetry, 'individuals whose ordinary actions and statements conform to the modesty code, who take pain to represent themselves as moral and worthy of respect, use poetry to comment on their personal fortunes and tribulations in love and to express sentiments

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<sup>86</sup> Ghazal translated by A.S. Shayek

<http://www.persianmirror.com/community/writers/MSN/2006/AfghanPoets.cfm>

<sup>87</sup> Green is obviously the colour of Islam, but it is also associated with hope in Afghanistan.

<sup>88</sup> Ghazal translated by A. S. Shayek

<http://www.persianmirror.com/community/writers/MSN/2006/AfghanPoets.cfm>

that violate the canon of modesty' (1986, 232). This specific form of feminine expression has been observed elsewhere, among Pashtun communities in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and is beautifully analysed by Benedict Grima (1992). In her ethno-linguistic analysis of women's narratives of misfortunes, she underlines the respect women gain when they use poetic forms to express their sorrows. She also comments that *gham* is socially recognized as the monopoly of elder women. This is perhaps the reason why Nadia's writings obtained full national recognition only when she died as a wife and a mother, leaving behind her a six-month-old child.

Although love, silence and death, the three central themes of women's poetry, contradict the honour ideology while actively engaging with society's ideals, women's language with its 'protective veils of form' (Abu-Lughod 1986, 238), is also to be read as a commentary on those ideals. Rushani talked about the stillness of the Afghan mountains, but while praising patience and silence, central values attached to womanhood, she also regained a voice and eventually obtained political reward. Nadia expressed feelings of despair, beauty and love, themes that defied the honour system more frantically, but she remained within the appropriate frame of poetic expression.

Indeed, *ghazals* are associated with traditional romances and the tragic tales of love and every time poets use this form, they evoke this grand and mythical world that Persian speakers feel proud of. By making use of sophisticated *ghazals*, Nadia inscribed her work in an esteemed and highly valued cultural tradition, and indirectly likened herself to the much-admired tragic heroes and heroines of the lore. Her poetry denounced political oppression under the Taliban, but it also made more general commentaries on the restrictions imposed on women as a result of the honour system. By using the language of emotions, Nadia revealed both an intimate experience and a universal one. She could have been forgiven for her imprudence as Afghan women are generally perceived as emotionally fragile and child-like. In other circumstances, she probably would have. But war modifies culturally framed perceptions, rendering questions of honour all the more pregnant that men's responsibility to control women becomes central to their identity, when the war has dispossessed them from everything else.

The work of Nadia Anjuman and other Afghan poetesses helps us to better understand the imaginary universe that shapes Afghan women's lives. It also gives a taste of the texture of the language they use in order to reach an audience. In the following section, I analyse how some of the themes that emerge in Afghan women's poetry (death, silence, honour) can also be found in political women's speeches. I argue that the

symbolic veils that women use in order to get a voice are ‘tactics’ that are essential to their political participation.

## 2. Feminine Martyrdom

When the new national Assembly was elected in 2005, a majority of former *jibadi* leaders, who had been evicted from politics by the Taliban, returned into power. Their main source of self-legitimisation stood in the fact that they had once conducted *jihad* against the Soviet occupiers and later on, against the Taliban, and that as such, a great number of their followers had been martyred to protect the nation. In spite of the downfall of the fundamentalist Islamist regime of the Taliban and its replacement by a supposedly ‘democratic’ Islamic republic, narratives of martyrdom and *jihad* remained central arguments to assert political authority.

The concept of *jihad* today refers to actual fighting against ‘infidels’. It is generally translated as ‘holy war’ in Western media. However, the word in itself has several semantic catchments and also refers to exerting oneself for some praiseworthy aim (Olesen 1996, 11). The term *jihad* therefore encompasses a greater fight, i.e a believer’s inner struggle against the *nafs* (the lower or passionate soul filled with unrepressed desires), which aims at purifying the spiritual heart. While all Muslim men and women are exhorted to rid themselves from unruly emotions through prayers, knowledge seeking and self-discipline, *jihad* that involves actual combat has traditionally been reserved to men.

As a source of political credibility, notions of *jihad* and martyrdom re-asserted the masculine nature of the State as defined in the new Islamic Republic. I was however surprised that such a vocabulary was broadly used by female MPs too, who reclaimed their participation in the national liberation movement and the sufferings they endured during the war as evidence for their political determination. But women’s references to ‘martyrdom’ did not encompass exactly the same meaning as men’s ones. Playing with the polysemy of the concept, women’s *jihad* and martyrdom could be understood as a symbolic reinterpretation of a national mythology in which women’s bodies already played a central and ambiguous role.

Indeed, the national history of Afghanistan does not lack female fighters who unhesitatingly sacrificed themselves to defend the ideal of national autonomy. At the heart of it appears the character of Malalay who conducted an Afghan battalion against the English invaders during the first Anglo-Afghan war in Maiwand. The legend says that there came a point in the battle when the Afghan army, despite their superior numbers,

started to lose morale and the tide seemed to be turning in favour of the British. Seeing this, Malalay, the daughter of a shepherd who lived next to the battlefield, took off her veil and shouted out:

*Young love! If you do not fall in the battle of Maimand,  
By God, someone is saving you as a symbol of shame!*<sup>89</sup>

Using her veil as a banner, she encouraged the soldiers to find a new resolve and to redouble their efforts, until she was herself stuck down and died. The killing of Malalay was considered as *namardi*, cowardly, literally, unmanly and the offense outraged the Afghan army. Malalay's death spurred on her countrymen and soon the British lines gave way, broke and turned, leading to a disastrous retreat back to Kandahar and the biggest defeat for the Anglo-Indian army in the Second Afghan War.

But Malalay is not an isolated figure in the Afghan national mythology. She belongs to a long-standing tradition of female warriors who committed suicidal acts of bravery to defend the motherland. Indeed, as in the epic tales of Medieval Times, Afghan history is full of powerful female fighters. Tales of warriors, horses and fortresses feature young women such as Shah Bori, described as a girl with a taste for male clothing and horse riding. She is said to have liked living the life of a warrior, refusing for a long time to get married. She is also said to have died fighting the troops of King Babur, in the 16th century. Then comes Nazauna, who, legend has it, single-handedly protected the Zabol fortress with her sword in the 18th century. In 1980, another heroic female figure by the name of Naheed appears (Bahodine Majrouh 2003). She led the first demonstration of schoolgirls and female university students on the streets of Kabul, openly denouncing the Red Army's occupation of the country. She was martyred while trying to fire a captured Russian machine-gun. Alongside her, hundreds of other innocent young Afghan girls were brutally murdered.

These feminine martyrs have passed through the history of the country, giving their names to modern state institutions such as Rabia Balkhi maternity hospital or Malalay High School, the first high school for girls opened by Queen Soraya and sponsored by the French government in the 1930s, as part of King Amanullah's modernisation programme. Malalay High School has trained the first generation of active women in Afghanistan, following the educative model of Jules Ferry schools in France

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<sup>89</sup> See Ewing, Garen (2005) *Malalai: Afghan Heroine of Maimand*.  
<http://www.garenewing.co.uk/angloafghanwar/biography/malalai.php>

and remains until today the most renowned educational institution for girls (Abou-Bakre Gross 1998). More recent prominent feminine figures, such as Malalay Joya, the MP evicted from the Parliament in 2007, or Malalay Kakar, the first police woman of Kandahar shot dead by the Taliban in 2008, have inherited their names from Malalay of Maiwand. They share in common with their ancestor deep patriotic sentiments together with a sense of self-sacrifice.

Reflecting on the meaning of these terrible tales, I came to wonder which cultural and social patterns had produced such a long lineage of exceptional women martyrs. Did these characters play the same roles as other national icons one could find elsewhere? Were they part of a man-made story in which women fighters were at once heroines and victims, instrumentalized to foster nationalist feelings? Like the character of Antigone in the Greek mythology, Malalay, Naheed, Nazauna and Shah Bori assumed a fundamentally ambiguous position, simultaneously challenging and reproducing the expectations of their gender all at once. On the one hand, their death embodied the suffering of the nation occupied by foreign invaders. On the other hand, their sacrifice fostered nationalist feelings around the necessity to protect the motherland. It is because they performed stereotypical masculine roles in the national story that they reached the status of heroines. Their *jihad* was meant to be a masculine battle, not a feminine one.

The ambiguity and marginality of feminine acts of bravado is appealing because it challenges the honour system by underlining men's incapacity to protect women-as-bearers-of-the-nation. Stories of female warriors reposition women on the frontline of the *jihad* against the enemies of Islam, making them the pioneers of the national battle while underlining the fragility of gender relations as framed in the honour ideology. It is because men fail to perform their role as protectors that women are martyred. The killing of women by the 'infidels' (*kafer*) is *namardi*, un-manly, but the men who made the sacrifice of women possible by failing to protect them are also to be shamed for failing to prevent their deaths.

Women who enter political spheres are perceived as threatening for these same reasons. Politics in Afghanistan, like in many other countries, is perceived as a dangerous masculine game that may involve violent death. In the turbulent political history of the country, power changes have often been achieved through bloody coups, with political leaders either killed (President Daoud in 1978, Prime Minister Taraki in 1979, President Najibullah in 1992, Commandant Ahmad Shah Massoud in 2001) or forced into exile (King Amanullah in 1929, King Zaher Shah in 1973). In politics like in *buzkachi* games - Afghanistan's national sport, a sort of local polo played with a headless calf weighing

about 150 pounds - masculinity is constructed through a man's capacity to take risk and put his life in danger for serving the nation while protecting its womenfolk.

Women assuming the same roles and accepting the responsibility to take the same levels of risk, through their mere presence in political arenas, are challenging conceptions of the 'public' as a space reserved to hegemonic masculine values. Their presence in the public provokes an ambivalence of feelings in the same way as Malalay of Maiwand on the battlefield.

Women who accept their symbolic 'martyrdom' by challenging the gender order do so with the view of opening gates for future generation of women. The notion of 'sacrifice' is indeed a frequent leitmotiv in their public speeches. What is put forward is a form of sacrifice made for the future generations, a sacrifice that does not involve blood, that confirms their innocence and purity and their traditional role as mothers. Political women, especially those who have a more liberal agenda for women, like to present themselves as path breakers. It is for instance the case of Masooda Babak, MP of Kabul province, who runs a women's NGO and struggles for greater gender equality in the laws produced by the National Assembly. Trying to get a divorce from her husband who has remarried without her consent and who has deserted the family house, her fight for gender equality was also a personal struggle. Fascinated by her charisma and her outspokenness, I was curious to know what motivated her to keep going despite the threats she constantly received. 'If no woman does it, who will? In your country too you have had women who died to defend women's rights. I am glad if I am remembered as one of these women in my country,' she told me during an interview at her house, after having introduced me to her daughters for whom she dreamt of a better future (Interview – MP3, 16/09/2007).

Reclaiming 'martyrdom' was also a narrative intensively used by Farah MP Malalai Joya. In an interview with BBC News conducted in 2006, Joya, who survived several assassination attempts since her participation in the Constitutional Loya Jirga in 2002, made it clear that death threats would not make her renounce her struggle for justice and women's rights. She said:

Never again will I whisper in the shadows of intimidation. I am but a symbol of my people's struggle and a servant to their cause. And if I were to be killed for what I believe in, then let my blood be the beacon for emancipation and my words a revolutionary paradigm for generations to come. (Coghlan 2006)

And later on she added, keeping the same lyrical tone:

They will kill me but they will not kill my voice, because it will be the voice of all Afghan women.  
You can cut the flower, but you cannot stop the coming of spring. (Coghlan 2006)

A leitmotiv in Joya's interviews was that she was less afraid of death than of her country's going downward in terms of human and women's rights. Abandoned by the political elite in power, evicted from the parliament for her denunciation of war criminals, the romantic persona Joya embodied was fashioned by notions of self-sacrifice and martyrdom of a different nature than the ones used by mainstream parties. Like other women's rights activists who received the support of Western organizations, the image of women as pure and with 'no blood on their hands' almost assumed a religious dimension.

Other women, who had greater political ambitions for themselves or who worked in a more conservative environments, often had to reaffirm patriarchal values in order to get entry in political circles dominated by men. In November 2007, for instance, Fatana Gailani, founder of the Afghan Women Council and daughter of Pir Sayed Gailani, a prominent political and religious figure, organized a conference for the International Day on Violence against Women in Jalalabad, her native city. Jalalabad is located in Nangahar, a province predominantly populated by Pashtuns and, which has faced a fresh upsurge of attacks against governmental institutions and NATO troops in the past years. On this occasion, Gailani had invited important political figures, mostly men, to attend the conference. As a representative of a women's NGO, the official motive she used to organise such an event was to raise awareness on everyday forms of violence against women. In reality, the conference rapidly turned into a personal campaign during which Gailani tried to rally supporters for her candidature to the next parliamentary elections. Various local figures, including a law professor at the University of Nangahar and the Chief police were invited to participate and deliver speeches. Beside Fatana Gailani, only one woman, the head of the Department of Women's Affairs, was given the opportunity to talk. After having denounced 'these shameless women who ask for divorce and abandon their children and husband in the name of democracy', she ended up her communication with those words: 'My dear brothers and sisters, keep an eye on your daughters and never let them go out without a leash tightly attached to their necks!' She ended her speech in a storm of applause (Field notes, 25/11/2007).

A central figure of women's resistance to the Soviet occupation, Gailani had run a clinic for women as well as girls' schools in the refugee camps in Pakistan. Having

returned to Afghanistan shortly after the fall of the Taliban, she was well aware that women's liberation would not just come with military intervention but through women's political participation and greater economic opportunities for the people of Afghanistan. While supporting rural women through micro credit and literacy programs, Gailani also took the opportunity of this new visibility to campaign for herself. She wanted her beneficiaries to know that the loans given by her NGO were coming from her and not from Karzai's government whom she considered corrupt and nepotistic. She also understood the importance of gaining the trust of male politicians. Using their language, their codes and to a great extent, reproducing gender stereotypes were key to obtaining their support.

The speech she delivered on that day, in front of a dominantly masculine audience of local officials and ex-*mujahidins*, used references to *jihad* and martyrdom, but in a manner that conformed more closely to patriarchal ideals. In an emphatic lecture that lasted for almost an hour, Fatana talked 'of her feelings with an open heart', as she phrased it herself. Raising an accusative hand to the audience, in the manner of a preacher, she said:

I always tell my colleagues that women's *jihad* has been to care for the orphans, to support the widows and to clean the tears of the mothers. (During the *jihad*) We provided education for hundreds of children and health services for the women. *We* promised on God and on the Q'uran that *we* would never lie to our people and *we* would never say anything wrong. This struggle has built our personality. *We* are struggling for the truth. *We* never committed any crime. Insh'allah we will succeed because God promised it. (Fieldnotes, 25/11/2007)

What was striking in Fatana's discourse was the ambiguity of the general message. Who was included in the 'we' that she used in the statements: '*We* never committed any crime. *We* are struggling for the truth'? Was she referring to the *mujahedins* or to the women who struggled on their side, caring for the orphans and the widows? While reasserting women's primary roles as carers during the *Jihad*, Fatana seemed at the same time to stress women's respectability and purity at a moment when massive killings of innocent people took place.

In their move away from the *dakhili* (home, private sphere), women distance themselves from traditions and create the condition for new forms of social imaginaries to take shape. Indeed, in Afghanistan like in many other Muslim countries which histories have been shaped by relations of domination with the imperial West, the

engagement of Islam with modernity has allowed new actors to emerge in the public sphere (Göle 2006, 10). These new actors belong to social groups that moved from rural areas to urban cities, from the margins to the centre of politics and oftentimes experienced migration to foreign countries. Women who have entered the political arena after the fall of the Taliban are all marked by this particular form of ‘social disembeddedness’ (Göle 2006, 12). Their move into the ‘public’, however, does not systematically involve a clear break up with patriarchal norms since maintaining continuity, as we have seen in the previous chapters, is crucial to preserving a sense of personal safety and communal cohesion.

Acceptance, suffering and patience are the main qualities Afghan women are expected to have. Women in general are expected to sacrifice themselves for their families, not for the wider nation. However, the narratives that I have analysed in this section demonstrate that women are particularly resourceful in clouding their performances and in manipulating the different meanings of the nationalist/*jibadi* rhetoric. The tension created between discourses that are confirming certain notions of womanhood and acts of covert reinterpretation that challenge these notions are underlining the extremely narrow room of manoeuvre for women to exercise agency. But far from being futile gestures, these marginal social practices also highlight how women’s engagement with ‘mainstream’ politics brings nuances and changes to traditional gender discourses.

In the section that follows, I further analyse the themes of women’s martyrdom through the case study of two suicide attempts I witnessed while I lived at the women’s dormitory on Kabul University’s campus. I highlight the performative and symbolic dimensions of this collective gesture by closely examining the social and cultural contexts in which such acts were carried out. I argue that the impossibility of overcoming social barriers leads women to resort to extreme solutions that both confirm and transgress ideas that associate womanhood with emotional fragility. These gestures, if carried out of despair, also entail a symbolic dimension rooted in the social imagination of the country. They are means to claim ‘the last word’ when all other verbal and non-verbal strategies have failed.

### **3. The Last Word**

In *Songs of Love and War*, Afghan poet Bahodine Majrouh (2003) argues that Pashtun women’s poetry challenge society in a similar way as female suicide. ‘In her innermost self,’ he writes, ‘the Pashtun woman is indignant and sceptical, feeding her

rebellion. From this deep-seated and hidden protest that grows more resistant with every passing day, she comes out with only two forms of evidence in the end – her suicide and her song’. It is Majrouh’s conviction that Afghan women’s poetry, like their suicide, challenges the society by glorifying three themes that taste of blood - love, honour and death. ‘By eliminating herself in such an accursed way,’ he goes on, ‘a woman thus tragically proclaims her hatred of the community’s law’ (2003, xv). Indeed, the tribal code of honour considers suicide a cowardly act and men will never resort to it. Women’s choice of the means to end their lives emphasizes the iconoclastic meaning of the sacrifice: women will either resort to self-immolation or poison, not to bullets or ropes, which are the tools used by men to wage wars or to tie up cattle or pull heavy loads.

In 2007, press and NGOs reported an increasing number of cases of women attempting to commit suicide through self-immolation (Motlagh 2007; Tang 2007). The phenomenon grew stronger and stronger particularly in Herat, to the extent that a NGO opened a special yard for burnt women in the city’s central hospital. When women did not immediately succumb to their wounds and were brought to health facilities, families usually tried to cover the self-inflicted gesture behind stories of domestic accidents. Some Afghan friends commented that women’s self-immolation had always existed even though it had never been part of the ‘Afghan culture’, since Islam forbade suicide. Like most social phenomena they considered shameful (like drug addiction, divorce or lack of modesty), women’s self immolation was seen as a foreign practice Afghans had brought to the country on their return from exile, something that was foreign to local social practices.

However, the subject started to attract my interest when Orzala, an Afghan woman running an underground shelter for women victims of domestic violence in Kabul, made this comment about women’s self immolation:

I don’t see such women as ‘victims’, to me victims are those who accept to suffer, but if they try to show to their in/outside world that they don’t accept repression, they are not victims anymore. In most of the cases *I see it as a way of protest...* To me it is not an act of despair only. It certainly includes the feeling of helplessness but not entirely. You go and meet up with many of those women, then you would understand that they truly didn’t want to kill themselves but to express their sufferings to people outside their boundaries. (Fieldnotes - 03/08/2009)

The statement was indeed powerful, but Orzala’s analysis echoed other stories I heard elsewhere, at the Women’s National Dormitory, in women’s NGOs, in conversations with friends and in press reports. The issue of rape, for instance, started to

be publicized, with families coming to Kabul in search for justice for their dishonoured daughters. We saw on television and in newspapers reports mothers threatening to commit collective suicide if criminals were not prosecuted (Nagpal 2009). In the National Women's Dormitory in Kabul, girls shared with a mixture of excitement, admiration and disapproval melodramatic stories of female suicide. These stories portrayed women who had resorted to such an extreme act either as deeply convinced of their due right to make certain demands pertaining to their lives and therefore as courageous and desperate justice seekers, or more simply as victims of patriarchal oppression. But in both cases, it is always with great thrill that stories dealing with probably one of the greatest social taboo were recounted. Suicide, for sure, had a certain romantic appeal among girls who spent a great part of their everyday reading poetry and classic Persian literature in which such stories abounded.

But if the truthfulness of these tales exchanged in the intimacy of dormitory girls' bedrooms could probably be questioned, it nevertheless seemed to me that the vivacity with which girls talked about female suicide was not the mere product of excitement provoked by discussions about illicit or socially repressed acts. Suicide talked to them in a much deeper and meaningful way. It echoed themes that had a specific cultural resonance and that Majrouh highlighted in *Songs of War and Love*: love, honour and death.

In the last months of my fieldwork, I personally became the witness of two suicide attempts by two sisters who were students at the University of Kabul and to whom I was quite close. Beside the fact that these acts, like any other acts carried out of despair, were the outcome of deep feelings of alienation, I also believe that they illustrate well the rebellious dimension of female social performances that Majrouh mentions. My aim here is not to diminish the real pain Khadija and Fawzia (pseudonyms) actually felt when they decided, one after the other, to swallow a cocktail of cheap tablets purchased in the bazaar. I am deeply convinced that the two of them were profoundly unhappy about their situation and that they could not think of any other way to relieve the pressure they felt weighing on them. However, I also think there is something else to read in these stories, something that has to do with the ways women in subordinate positions find means to channel demands that cannot be expressed otherwise. Neither Khadija nor Fawzia did really aim to end their lives but what they achieved through this collective gesture was quite powerful: not only did they get the last word in a family dispute that had lasted for months, but they also managed to momentarily reverse some of the power dynamics in which their relations to male family members were entangled.

Let me recount the story. The first sister, Khadija, was a singer, a musician and a student in musicology at the University of Kabul. She had developed a talent and a taste for music while in exile with her family in Iran during the civil war. There, Khadija together with her mother and sister weaved carpets to complement the sporadic earnings of their father and brothers. And while weaving, they listened to the radio and Khadija sang along. Once, Khadija showed me a picture of herself all dressed up in a black outfit with a panther print headscarf. She stood in a middle of a boys' band in which all the boys wore leather jackets, crossing their arms on their chest in a nonchalant parody of virility. The picture had been taken during her high school time in Esfahan, when some friends had recruited her as the singer of their underground rock band. At the time, her parents did not see any objections to this extra curricular activity, as long as she did well at school and helped with the weaving. But back in Afghanistan, the situation of the family changed dramatically. The family house had been destroyed during the fighting and the father struggled to find a job. The family eventually ended up renting a small room in a collective house in a poor suburb of Kabul deprived from electricity and running water. The girls managed to integrate into the University after successfully passing the entrance exams. Both Khadija and Fawzia found part-time jobs to support the family but their income, even added to the one of their father, barely covered the household expenditures.

In such a situation, and in the Afghan context, being a female singer and musician was much less acceptable than in Iran. Musicians have always suffered from social stigma in Afghanistan and female ones, even more (Doubleday 2006). A sign of this general contempt for the world of musicians can be found in the name of the district of Kabul where musicians have traditionally lived: *Kharabat*. *Kharab* in Dari has many meanings - something damaged, like a house hit by a rocket; a car that won't start; something or someone bad or naughty; *abat* means a place where people live. Consequently *Kharabat* means a place where naughty people live. When the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996, their primary objective was to re-establish order and bring back morality in the capital city that had been perceived since the Soviet occupation as the centre of sins and corruption. One of the first edicts they promulgated banned music, even at wedding ceremonies. As a result, most Afghan musicians lost their means of subsistence and fled abroad. The ones who stayed buried their instruments to avoid repression. After the downfall of the regime, music reasserted itself in the streets of the capital, with tapes and CD shops reopening in Shar-e-Naw, their front windows showcasing colourful albums of most popular Afghan singers as well as foreign pop

stars. But despite this rebirth, the stigma associated with musicians remained strong, especially for women singers. Khadija was the first Afghan woman to sing in public after the downfall of the Taliban.

Khadija was not ready to give up her passion and she continued taking music lessons and performing at official ceremonies, without letting her parents know. Unfortunately, the news spread like fire in her neighbourhood and her father, Ahmed, alerted by Khadija's younger brother, eventually found some music scores in her bag. A huge argument ensued, during which Ahmed destroyed her music scores and threatened to keep her locked in the house, a punishment he could not afford since Khadija was contributing to the household income by working in a marketing agency beside her studies.

A few days later, I received a phone call from her sister Fawzia. Khadija had swallowed a cocktail of tablets and was at the hospital. I jumped into a taxi and found Fawzia, Khadija, their cousin (also a singer) and their father, Ahmed in a narrow, dirty and dark hospital room, an injection suspended above Khadija's bed and plugged into her forearm. She was safe now, but weak and she could hardly walk. We hired another taxi and we drove back to the family house in *Dasht-e Bashri*. In the car, the father who had been speechless for a while, started to talk again and each of his sentences was punctuated by Fawzia's groans, her fingers clutched tightly into her sister and cousin's hand. 'Dard darom! Dard Darom!' (It hurts! It hurts!) She sobbed while pointing at her heart (Fieldnotes, 20/11/2009).

The argument continued at home, but this time Ahmed had lowered his voice, leaving the space free for Fawzia, Khadija and their mother to burst into loud sobbing, tears and screams, a collective demonstration of pain that I had never witnessed before, except at funerals, when women rally together to mourn the dead, weeping one after another while recounting aloud biographic elements of the departed's life. Unable to engage in a discussion with the women of the house, Ahmed desperately turned to me: 'We are Muslims, you understand Julie? We are Muslims and Afghans and Khadija is behaving in a non-Muslim way. Singing is not for respectable women. Everyone talks...you see (pointing at the next door neighbours), everyone talks...It is a shame... it dishonours the whole family'. And Khadija, suddenly recovering her lucidity, to respond: 'I am a Muslim too. I wear hijab. I pray. I read the Koran. I am educated. I work hard for the whole family. The Koran does not say that singing is bad. Singing brings peace in people's hearts! Only ignorant people talk badly about singers.' But before Ahmed had the opportunity to open his mouth, she rolled her eyes, got off the ground to catch her

breath and mimicked a dramatic fainting fit that kept him voiceless and petrified, as if the performance of pain had brought an indisputable element of truth to her daughter's speech. This scene repeated itself several times, Khadiga and Fawzia taking turns to defend their views in front of a father who seemed totally overwhelmed by the situation.

Five days only after this episode, I received a phone call from Fawzia who alerted me, in a voice I could hardly recognize on the phone, that she had swallowed tablets like her sister: 'They have to understand, Julie, that we are not bad girls or bad Muslims. If they cannot get this, then there is no point for me to live either'. I knew that since a while, Fawzia had been pressurized by her father to find another job than the one she had as a sport teacher at *Bagh-e Zanana*, which he found inappropriate for a woman. He also complained about the way she dressed, which was not modest enough for his liking. Fawzia wore blue jeans and trainers, and small colourful veils, like most of the young professionals who attended courses at the University of Kabul. But Fawzia's father had never been to the University. He was a daily labourer struggling to make ends meet and to provide for his five children. His situation made him particularly sensitive to gossips from relatives and neighbours and as it became more and more difficult to find jobs in Kabul, he consequently became more and more tense about the family reputation (Fieldnotes, 25/11/2009).

Fawzia was a Kum Fu champion and one of the few female members of the Afghan Olympic team. She had taken part in an international competition in Sri Lanka shortly after the fall of the Taliban. If, under family pressure, she had eventually given up this title, she continued to practice once a week in a small gym club located on the outskirts of Kabul with a private coach, without her parents knowing about it. Like her sister, Fawzia led a double life but the public visibility she had gained over time, attracting the recently reborn press that now flourished thanks to foreign sponsors in the capital city, made it difficult for her to cover her secrets. Rumours ran wild that with the 'liberation' of Afghanistan, women and girls in particular were being left without control, using the pretext of democracy to engage in 'un-Islamic' activities. Sport and Music undoubtedly belonged to this category.

I do not think that Khadiga and Fawzia sincerely wanted to put an end to their lives. Both of them were totally passionate about music and sport and they had many University friends who supported them. They were also very upset about their family not adhering to their choices and it was not rare for me to be used as an intermediary when there was a disagreement between them and their parents. 'Women are the honour of a house', the mother told me once. 'If women misbehave, then the whole family's

reputation is damaged'. And indeed, in a house without furniture, electricity and running water, reputation was all that was left to preserve. It felt uncomfortable taking the girls' side when I could also empathise with their parents' worries. It is easier to be liberal-minded when there is always bread on the table. But I was also full of admiration for Khadiga and Fawzia's commitment to pursue careers in fields that were not particularly favourable to women and in which they obviously had talent.

Without attempting to diminish the veracity of the pain produced by the real dilemma in which they were caught, I understand Khadiga and Fawzia's gestures not as purely desperate acts carried out of profound feelings of hopelessness. I also see in this reiterated performance an attempt at finding means to claim 'the last word' (Seremetakis 1991) in a dispute where their voice had been silenced. I use the word 'performance' here to describe an action that is transformed through culture into a conventionally understandable symbolic product and to underline the communicative nature of female suicide. Bauman (quoted in Grima 1992, 10) states: 'Performance as a mode of spoken verbal communication consists of the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence. This competence rests on knowledge and ability to speak in socially appropriate ways. Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content'. I see Khadiga and Fawzia's suicide attempts as performances in the sense given by Bauman here. Both of them had an intrinsic knowledge of their audience's expectations and the ways in which they could be managed.

In Durkheim's typology (1897), suicide is described as either an individual's default or an excess of social integration. Durkheim thus draws a link between individual and society, operating a radical move away from purely individualist psychological explanations. However, Durkheim's sociology of suicide fails to acknowledge the communicative potential of self-harm. The data I use in this case study reveal that the display of self-harm and emotions is related to women's identity as defined in the honour code. The concept of 'performance' helps us to understand how cultural expectations of women's weakness, uncontrollability and emotionality can be used by women themselves (even though, oftentimes, unconsciously) in order to renegotiate the gender order.

The intensity of the episodes I witnessed once the two girls returned, one after the other, from the hospital to their family house, made me realise the subversive potential of female suicide. Khadiga and Fawzia's performances followed the same communicative patterns. The tears, the specific expression of women's pain and

suffering (men do not cry), brought some validity to their claims. Through this performance, girls were not in position of listeners anymore but opened an expressive space for themselves to voice their demands. While reproducing the stereotype of feminine hysteria, tears and fainting fits asserted the seriousness of their respective demands. The same way Rabia Balkhi cut her veins to demonstrate her eternal love for Baktash, Fawzia and Khadiga swallowed poison to demonstrate the seriousness and sincerity of their aspirations.

Similar feminine strategies have been observed in other honour-based societies where women's communication patterns follow a comparable repertoire. For instance, Nadia Seremetakis (1991, 5) shows how death rituals in Inner Mani (Greece) represent a performative arena where pain figures prominently as an orchestrating and prescriptive communicative paradigm. During these rituals, women's expression of pain through lamentations and screams, allows them to obtain some form of collective validation. According to Seremetakis, women's capacity to receive such a validation is due to the almost legal value that pain assumes in the Inner Mani ethical code (Ibid 1991, 105). She says: 'To 'witness', 'to suffer for' and 'to come out as representative for'<sup>90</sup> are narrative devices in laments that fuse jural notions of reciprocity and truth claiming with the emotional nuances of pain' (Ibid 1991, 102).

I believe that Afghan women's expression of pain and sufferings has a similar function. In her ethnography of Pashtun women in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, Benedict Grima (1992) points out that in the tribal code of honour, *gham* (worry, sorrow, grief, sadness, hardship) is expected in women. To express *gham* is to do Pashto, i.e to participate in a moral system in which the preservation of honour is paramount. She says: 'Pashtun women earn respect and reputation by the amount of hardship and suffering they endure' (1992, 13). However, young unmarried girls are not expected to participate in the *gham* rituals organized by women at moments of life crisis (deaths, illnesses, accidents). Young girls are seen as ignorant and inexperienced until marriage familiarizes them with the *gham* of mature womanhood. She goes on: 'The precedence given to pain and suffering over joy, and to the ritual and narrative around each *gham*, also shapes the memory and perception of one's life (...). Life stories are told as an attestation of being moral Pashtun women.' (Ibid. 1992, 13). In such a moral framework, *gham* can be understood as the key to women's social success, as well as a means for women to create a temporary sense of autonomy and to develop their own singular voice.

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<sup>90</sup> The mourners occupy these three functions in death rituals among Inner Mani people.

As young unmarried girls, Fawzia and Khadiga's performances could not be acknowledged as social expressions of *gham*. However, their violation of *pardah* (women's modesty) through the scandal provoked by their respective suicide attempts and then later on, through their screams and tears brought some validity to their grievances. In a culture that values individuals' capacity to suppress and deny the inner self (*nafs*), such behaviours amounted to loss of control resulting from extreme distress. Their father and brothers' silence in front of these intense emotions reveals men's fundamental fear of women's behaviours. The threatening element of women's emotional expression stands in the fact that men's honour is assessed through a man's capacity to remain in control of the gendered order of the family and the community. The only option left for Ahmed, Fawzia and Khadiga's father, was to give up a part of his authority and allow both of them to continue their occupations.

A few weeks before writing this chapter, a girl from the dormitory sent me a link to a video posted on youtube. 'You will recognize this person', she wrote at the end of her e-mail. And as the music started to play on my computer's speakers, I saw Khadija's round face appearing on the screen. She had been selected to participate in *Afghan Star*, the Afghan equivalent of *American Idol*, the most popular TV show in the country. Not only had she made it to the final, but she also appeared in a traditional Afghan dress, singing on stage, the only girl left out of eight participants. And in spite of my embarrassment towards such TV programmes, especially in countries still at war like Afghanistan, I could not help feeling overwhelmed with both joy and anxiety at the sight of Khadija's smiling and singing in front of the camera. My worried excitement was not the result of a specific resonance that such a public visibility might have had for a Western woman like me – live TV shows have never been my cup of tea. But the moving image of Khadija on the computer screen when she was now so far away from my world made me realize the depth of her determination. It also made me wonder whether Khadija's willpower was only the result of her personality and life trajectory or the outcome of broader global/external forces that shaped youngsters' aspirations while encouraging the development of new feminine subjectivities: autonomous, rebellious, self-driven.

In the newly reborn Western-sponsored national press and in the international news, it was not rare to see young women like Fawzia and Khadiga making the headlines. These feminine figures were gradually becoming the new role models of the young generations grieving for leisure; romance and Western pop music (Mackenzie and Sediq-Behnam 2009), rightly deserved after long years of war and destruction. In the meantime,

such stories fed Western imaginations with necessary stories of liberation and women's emancipation in sharp contrast with the images of Middle Age darkness personified by the Taliban, they had received prior to the military intervention. But the attraction of Afghan youngsters for 'Western' lifestyles, encouraged by an anarchic opening of the country to liberalism and market economy, while many regions remained at war, were a major source of social tensions, especially for older generations and rural inhabitants who understood the phenomenon as a new form of acculturation. I wondered what would happen to girls like Fawzia and Khadiga, who had initiated such a break-up with 'old values', as they called them, once the safety nets provided by NGOs and international constituencies, would disappear from their country.

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This case study underlines the fluid nature of the boundary between the private and the public. It highlights how women, through emotional performances, are able to challenge the gender order, at least at the margins. With Catherine Lutz (1986), I share the view that emotions are partially rational, learned, voluntary, controlled and cultural. They represent a central component of the social and cultural life and expression. Outwardly manifested affects are inherently linked to individual consciousness. They are an expression of the Self, shaped by the cultural context and the moral framework in which individuals are rooted. Instead of a clear divide between the private (the emotional world) and the public (the political world), the study of emotions demonstrates that publicness is a continuum that varies according to audience size and status inequality (Grima 1992, 9). 'A setting involving total status inequality, such as that between a young wife and her father-in-law, would be closer to the 'very public' end of the continuum. On the other hand, an interaction between two women of the same age would be closer to the 'less public' end of the continuum' (Ibid.1992, 9).

In the case study I use here, the reiterated performance of Khadija and Fawzia can be considered as 'rather public' since they dealt with issues pertaining to family reputation and honour and reached a broader audience than the household members where family disputes are traditionally supposed to be locked. Hospital doctors, neighbours and relatives were given to witness Fawzia and Khadija's distress. Since laments and suffering narratives are the counterpart to male forms of heroic self-presentation (Grima 1992), Khadija and Fawzia's performances, by following gendered forms of emotional expression, created realities of identity for both themselves and their

audience. The communicative competences such performances reveal, demonstrate that women are fundamentally aware of society's gendered expectations. Emotions are not 'locked in the heart' but rather learnt and practiced to convey meanings and manage others' impressions.

The idea of emotions as means of expression is perhaps better illustrated in the context of marriage proposals. Afghans usually understand a woman's silence as her approval. A girl, for instance, is expected to answer to a marriage proposal by keeping silence if she agrees to the offer. On the contrary, if she refuses to get married to her suitor, the expression of her refusal is often accompanied with screams and tears. In rural areas, where it is the wider family that usually considers marriage proposals, young girls rarely have their say in such decisions. Girls are from a very young age disciplined to remain silent and obey male relatives. Mahbouba Seraj, the grand daughter of King Habibullah, niece of King Amanullah and a woman's right activist who also ran a national weekly radio programme called 'My Beloved Afghanistan' dealing with human rights in the Koran, worked with the objective of changing this trend. In several provinces of the country, she had organized women's groups, which she visited on a regular basis.

Calling herself 'Mother Afghanistan', Mahbouba had lived in exile in the United States for twenty years, from the downfall of the monarchy to the US military intervention and had always remained hopeful of returning to her home country one day. And here she was now, Mahbouba, flamboyant with her grey hair, driving for days on mud tracks to visit women in villages that had never received any visits for decades, except the ones of the Taliban and, more recently, of the World Food Programme trying to make-up for the poor harvests. Making our way through the mountains to Panjao, a small village located in the breathtaking Dragon Valley, eleven hours drive from Bamyán, sixty-year-old Mahbouba was feeling enthusiastic.

These women, no one cares for them. They don't see anyone else from the outside. So I know that they appreciate my visits. I know they are waiting for me to come. They don't have many opportunities to go out of their homes and discuss together. I give them this opportunity and for me, it is also very rewarding. (Field notes, 28/09/2007)

Besides providing women with essential knowledge of their entitlements according to Islam, Mahbouba also focused on re-teaching women culturally appropriate ways of expressing their disagreements. I was surprised to discover that one hidden consequence of war, beside the more obvious losses of relatives, starvation and absence

of health care, was the elimination, in the literal sense, of women's most basic means of expression: emotional performances. This is what Mahbouba felt the most strongly about: rebuilding a culture that once allowed women to cry and scream when they felt treated unfairly. Sitting in the middle of a room, between breastfeeding mothers and young schoolgirls covered with white *chader*, Mahbouba with the slightly authoritative tone of a *Ustad* (teacher), encouraged women to rehearse their protest.

*Mahbouba*: When a boy wants to marry a girl, if she remains silent; what does it mean?

*A woman*: It means that she agrees.

*Mahbouba*: When a girl does not want to marry a boy, what should she do?

*A woman*: She should cry and shout. (Laughters)

*Mahbouba*: Yes, she should cry and shout. You should remember that when you disagree, you should not keep silent. You have to cry and shout. Now, shout...shout together!

(women screaming and laughing). (Field notes, 28/09/2007)

The emotional performances of women I have described in this section demonstrate that transformations of gender relations often occur in the interstitial spaces they allow to open. It is the ambiguity stemming from their polysemic nature that provides the background upon which negotiation can occur.

## Conclusion

The material I have presented in this chapter underlines the uneasy positioning of women within Afghanistan's politics. The fundamentally ambiguous nature of women's modes of expression demonstrates the difficulty of renegotiating gender norms in the 'post war/reconstruction' era. Political women's resort to *jibadi* rhetoric, through references to martyrdom and sacrifice, and to emotional performances such as the one's of Khadija and Fawzia, while Anjuman's poetry of feelings highlights the centrality of emotional repertoires in mediating women's public visibility. These practices also show that as subalterns, women are not simply deprived of the ability to influence the social order by pushing the boundaries of the private. The fact that public figures such as Joya and Anjuman got eventually eliminated from the public domain highlights the disruptive nature of women's presence in this space.

The confining limits of representations of femininity within the nationalist ideology produce the experience of silencing for actual women. In order to break that

silence, women are left with little choice but to veil their protest with complex expressive forms. In the meantime, these 'invisible' practices, that disturb mainstream discourses of womanhood without fundamentally modifying their cultural roots, are crucial to the acknowledgement of the extraordinary resourcefulness of women in manoeuvring the honour system and the nationalist ideology that it sustains.

## Conclusion

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A wall in Kabul displays the posters of candidates to the 2009 Presidential elections © Karim Amin

In June 2008, Faiza Silmi, a 32-year-old Moroccan woman married to a French man of Moroccan origin, was refused French citizenship on the ground that her ‘radical’ practice of Islam was incompatible with French values like equality of the sexes. Faiza, like her husband and her four children (all of them French), was a practicing orthodox Muslim from the Salafi branch of Islam. As a result, Faiza wore a *niqab*, an Islamic facial veil that is among three flowing layers of turquoise, blue and black that covers the body from head to toe. It was the first time that a French court had judged someone’s ability to be assimilated into France based on private religious practice, taking *laïcité* — the country’s strict concept of secularism — from the public sphere into the home. Despite Faiza’s insistence on her personal choice in wearing *niqab*, the Court associated her veil with her submission to her husband and therefore, considered her appearance a sign of her inability to integrate French society (Bennhold 2008).

Reading this news in the French press, a few months after my return from Afghanistan, I felt embarrassed by the confidence with which legislators, unanimously supported by French political leaders, from left to right, stood on their decision. France’s door was definitely closed to Faiza. Not to her husband who practiced the same religion

as her. But to Faiza only. Ironically, despite judges' reassertion of the gender equality principle to support their decision, the law seems to present double standards when it comes to religion. Through the Court's verdict to exclude her from citizenship, Faiza, like many other Muslim women who have started to appear veiled in public places in France, had become the symbol of the 'oppressed' other. By drawing such a strict boundary in the public consciousness and in its laws between the ones who could be French and the ones who could not even aspire to it, France had rejected not only any possibilities of dialogue but also further critical analysis upon its own relationship to these 'different others'.

This absence of dialogue reinforced by the West's certainty to belong to the 'civilized' world<sup>91</sup> represents for anyone concerned with the representation of cultures, a major source of worries. The use of static, a-historical and essentializing 'cultural' explanations instead of analysis that take into account the broader social and political context in which the 'veil issue' is occurring is equivalent to reactivating old orientalist discourses about Muslim women. The imagery of Islam as a peculiar religion, predisposed to maltreating the female sex, seems always to have existed. Post-colonial feminist scholars such as Leila Ahmed (1992), Meyda Yegenoglu (1998) and Lila Abu-Lughod (1990, 1998) have demonstrated how gendered discourses about the 'Oriental' woman have served colonial expansions while maintaining the hegemonic nature of Western identity. In the postcolonial era, veiled women remain caricatured in the West as oppressed victims while at the same time being accused of threatening the (overly tolerant) majority. What is seriously lacking in such discourses is any sense of genuine empathy (i.e an empathy based on true equality, and not on the superior 'civilisation' view) for Muslim women and how this 'debate' may be affecting them.

At the time of writing this conclusion, Afghanistan just went through its second presidential elections since the downfall of the Taliban regime. News releases reported a general climate of fear, fraud and insecurity, with explosions, attacks of polling stations and intimidation of voters taking place all over the country and undermining the fairness of the entire electoral process. Notwithstanding this turbulent situation, two female candidates joined the presidential competition (only one participated in 2004) and women's rights activists managed *in extremis* to bring gender issues on the agenda of the main candidates (Tzemach-Lemmon 2009). However, many Afghans hesitated to go and

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<sup>91</sup> The word 'civilization' had disappeared from Social Sciences and was recently reintroduced in the political domain following Samuel Huntington's writings on the 'clash of civilizations'. As Nilufer Göle points out, the term 'civilization' used to refer to the Universal. Nowadays, the term refers to the fundamental difference of the West in terms of culture and religion. (Göle 2005)

vote, for fear of getting caught up in the midst of violence. Others, disenchanted by the widespread corruption and the unmet promises of the Karzai government, abstained from voting altogether. A run-off election was finally called after the UN-backed Electoral Complaints Commission revealed widespread ballot stuffing. Karzai's main competitor, Abdullah Abdullah, finally pulled out, arguing that his demands for changes in the electoral commission had not been met and therefore, the conditions for fair and transparent elections were not ensured. His withdrawal turned the president into a winner by default, strengthening the popular perception that 'democracy' was nothing else but a masquerade orchestrated by the West in order to justify its occupation (Cooper and Zeleny 2009). Meanwhile, the election of Obama as President of the United States did not bring major changes in the US strategy for Afghanistan. The focus remains on military operations, not in the development of a country that ranks 175th among 177 nations on the Human Poverty Index (UNDP 2007). Democracy has obviously not come to Afghanistan yet and it is likely that the country will remain under foreign military occupation for a much longer time than initially announced.

In the meantime, I have received some both good and bad news from the dormitory girls. In a year's time, they will graduate from the University of Kabul. Three of 'the girls of room 42' have obtained scholarships from foreign governments. Lutfia is now a student in my hometown in France, Maryam started a degree at the University of Rennes in September and Saida is in Turkey where she is being trained to become a gynaecologist. The ones who had no mastery of foreign languages had to stay behind. I heard that Masuda is worried that she will have to return to Ghazni and marry a cousin she does not like much. Most of them fear that with graduation, marriage proposals will intensify and their career dreams will vanish, unless serious employment opportunities give them some negotiation power in marital arrangements.

As political unrest is firmly setting in and the prospect of a time-honoured peace under a unified country is gradually disappearing, women's rights have been further pushed aside in the national political agenda. A few weeks before the elections, Karzai, in an attempt to obtain the necessary support from the Shia community in the Presidential elections, approved a law drafted by conservative Shia clerics and enforcing the right of a husband to starve his wife if she refuses him sex<sup>92</sup>. The rise of civilian casualties due to NATO bombings has strengthened popular resentment against foreign troops and a

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<sup>92</sup> The new and redrafted law was signed in mid July 2009. The new version omits original provisions that allowed men to demand sex from their wives and that required women to ask their husbands' permission to leave their home. However, the law still includes a provision that states a man does not have to provide financial support for his wife unless he has 'access to her.'

government perceived as the puppet of the US and their allies. As a result, nationalist sensibilities and sensitivities have been reactivated, rendering women's lives occupied in two ways: by NATO forces and by nationalist discourses that associate national sovereignty with misogynist perceptions of womanhood.

In this thesis, I have attempted to explain how women from different walks of life, generations, ethnic and social backgrounds, creatively try to accommodate, engage with or get around these different pressures. Taking into account the model of gender relations upon which the Afghan nation has been shaped as well as the broader geopolitical dynamics in which Afghanistan has been entangled over the past decades, I have shown how women sometimes contest and sometimes reproduce this model. I have essentially focused on 'oppositional practices of everyday life' (de Certeau 1984) because although these practices remain marginal, unconscious and even futile at times, they teach us a lot about what is usually obscured in relations of power. Indeed, the material I have presented in this thesis illustrates how subjectivity, experience and sexual difference but also culture and politics shape individual women's capacity to exercise agency in an extremely constraining environment.

Inspired by Sherry Ortner's interdisciplinary approach to ethnographic studies of 'resistance' (Ortner 1995), I have tried to avoid the three main weaknesses she identifies in the academic literature and that she calls respectively 'sanitizing politics', 'thinning culture' and 'dissolving actors' (1995, 176). The method I have adopted is therefore threefold. The first step consisted in underlining historical continuities between Afghanistan's earlier encounters with the West and the current 'post-war/reconstruction' project. These historical parallelisms are useful to understand how the country's vexed relationship with the 'West' and 'modernity' has traditionally crystallized around discourses on women and their bodies. In chapter 2, I showed how the different regimes that have succeeded one another have instrumentalized the woman's question in order to promote broader political ideas and to give symbolic meaning to the construction of the national identity. Like the swing of a pendulum, any attempt at 'modernizing' the country has been immediately followed by violent insurrection in rural areas and by a return to conservative gender politics.

I defined the current 'democracy building' project with its specific agenda for women as another attempt at 'modernizing' Afghanistan that bears many similarities with earlier modernization projects carried out under King Amanullah, Zaher Shah and later on, the Soviet-backed communist regime (chapters 3 and 4). In chapter 3, I underlined

how reconstruction has essentially focused on constitution-making and the writing of laws while more concrete reconstruction efforts in terms of infrastructures and security have been relegated to the background. The entire refashioning of the justice system from above as well as discourses on justice inspired by International Human Rights law have been experienced, at the local level, as new forms of cultural alienation and Western imperial domination. A closer look at the functioning of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (Chapter 4), the first ever in Afghan history, highlighted how discourses about gender equality follow a liberal model that is totally removed from the material reality of ordinary Afghans.

My use of a 'post-colonial' framework to understand power dynamics in contemporary Afghanistan is not particularly innovative. Other scholars who have written on Afghanistan such as Suhrkhe (2007), Lindisfarne (2008), Hanifi (2004), Ayotte & Husain (2005) have also underlined the relationship between the production of discourses on Afghan women/the veil and imperialism. My contribution to this literature is a description of how these discourses are reproduced at the 'local' level, what they do to actual women and how they impact on their ability to 'speak' as subalterns.

In order to achieve this, the second step consisted in analysing women's everyday practices and in particular women's body rituals (chapters 5 and 6), emotional performances and discourses (chapter 7). The justification for an anthropology of praxis is that 'resistance' to systems of domination is often taking place at the margins of these systems, in the interstices left uncontrolled or in spaces opened up by global forces. In as much as actors in positions of domination do not constitute a homogenous group and are themselves caught in power hierarchies, subalterns are not necessarily rational agents struggling to maximise their profit. A study of women's everyday practices demonstrates that 'agency' is not only shaped by cultural systems of values but is also made more complex by motives and social imaginaries that inhabit a specific moral universe in which women occupy a central role. Women's dispositions are fashioned by cultural and psychological processes as much as material and political ones. But hegemony is often more fragile than it appears and if in many ways women reproduce the system, the system is also being changed, challenged and contested by practice (Ortner 1984).

My analysis of University girls' complex body work in chapter 5 demonstrates that while aspiring to embody modern (i.e urban, working-class and educated) feminine Selves, girls were also concerned with maintaining relationships and preserving the ideal of the 'good Muslim' girl. Their symbolic rebellion, through cosmetics and fashion, had little in common with the one of Western feminist movements that struggle to break free

from patriarchy, religion and the commoditization of their bodies. In their quest for a balance between a modern feminine identity and a Muslim one, these girls experimented - sometimes painfully and sometimes playfully - with the boundaries of the gender system without attempting to break with what they understood was part of their 'culture' and 'religion'.

By contrast, because of greater public visibility, women who were more directly involved in politics were more compelled to wear 'nationalist veils' in order to achieve legitimacy. This did not mean, however, that their hands were totally tied to nationalist politics. My analysis of veiling practices among women's rights activists and MPs in chapter 6 demonstrated that these women were both strategic and pragmatic when it came to manage their audience's impression in the public domain. Their embodied knowledge of gender norms and social expectations allowed them to navigate in different circles and carve out new spaces for negotiations. Their public visibility under the veil was not totally tactical either, since all of them were devout Muslims who understood veiling as an Islamic prescription. But contrary to Saba Mahmood's analysis (2005) of women's veiling in the context of the Islamic revival in Egypt, I do not think that Afghan women's bodywork can solely be explained as an attempt at producing pious selves through body discipline. If religion informed their actions in a meaningful way, religion was definitely not their only source of guidance.

Finally, another process of social transformation that this work has underlined is what I would call the ritualized transgression of social taboos. These specifically feminine performances allow the irruption of a feminine experience that is silenced in language but that receives validation through the mobilization of broader social anxieties pertaining to the potentially threatening nature of women's bodies. In chapter 7, for example, I examined how the public visibility of women's suicide, through self-immolation or poisoning, acted as a transgressive symbol of femininity excluded, rejected from existing field of discourses, thus forcing an opening in representation. I qualify these gestures as 'rituals of resistance' because they entail the mobilization of certain cultural notions of womanhood, the eventual outcome remains mainly symbolic but also permits a temporary redefinition of the gendered order.

My intention in deciphering non-verbal cultural expressions by focusing on embodiment and performances was to highlight the extreme resourcefulness Afghan women are able to deploy in order to protect, widen or maintain the fragile spaces in which their lives are entangled. This recognition is all the more necessary that Afghan women have too often been portrayed as powerless and silent victims. I hope that this

work has contributed to drawing a more accurate and subtle picture of Afghan women by demonstrating their capacity to be historical agents capable of defining their own future.

The study of Afghan women's poetry and the cultural imaginaries that constitute the makings of their world, helps us to better understand how individual women's ability to access the public is dependent on their capacity to mobilise socially appropriate cultural expressions. In the last chapter, I showed how public women play with the polysemic nature of hegemonic political/religious repertoires (i.e notions of jihad and martyrdom) in order to assert their presence in men-dominated arenas. These covert reinterpretations, in spite of their inherent ambivalence, bring nuances and marginally challenge traditional gender discourses. In the same way, women's emotional performances, even under their most dramatic forms like suicide attempts, carry with them communicative potential. By provoking scandals and disrupting social taboos, women do not manifest a lack of social integration such as Durkheim (1897) argued to explain suicide in Western societies. On the contrary, these highly dramatic gestures, by following gendered forms of emotional expression, strengthen realities of identity while bringing an almost legal validity to women's demands. By following such cultural repertoires, women not only confirm their allegiance to the gender order but also demonstrate its intrinsic fragility.

Feminists around the world know well enough that positive changes in gender relations cannot be achieved in the course of a day and that each step forward should never be considered as definite. In the case of Afghanistan, such transformations are not likely to occur as long as a sense of national autonomy (and a sense of pride) towards the 'West' is not guaranteed. Besides, progressive gender policies can only develop when sovereignty is ensured, that is when a more straightforward and less unequal relationship to the 'West' can develop. The practices I have described here have to be understood in the light of these broader geopolitical dynamics that have been partly responsible for the 'colonisation' of Afghan women's lives over the past decades.

Indeed, postcolonial feminists legal scholars such as Ratna Kapur (2004) and Nivedita Menon (2004) have highlighted the contradictions that emerge in the field of law when globalization and liberalism collude to redefine the subject 'woman' in Third World postcolonial countries. For instance, Menon demonstrates that by following the

logic of constitutionalism<sup>93</sup> in its transition towards independence and the building of a 'modern' State, India has inherited from its colonial past a definition of women as autonomous individuals entitled to rights. The shortcomings of these legal developments that Menon highlights – i.e the lack of connection between the imagined 'woman' of the liberal legal/radical feminist agenda and the ordinary woman whose life is entangled in intricate social relations that are part of a distinctive ethos - are, I think, worth recalling if we want to go beyond the normative framework that accompanies most 'democracy building' efforts. Can 'women' as subjects of politics come into being through different praxis? Can they, when caught in the midst of women's rights talks in which their voice is constantly silenced, produce counter-hegemonic definitions of their own bodies? (Menon 2004, 209). The analysis and empirical material I presented in this study demonstrate that women are not deprived of imagination when it comes to negotiate the norms that regiment their lives. However, the choreography of these 'tactics' occupies a specific moral universe that does not follow the path of a public 'coming out' like it is the case in more organised forms of social movements in the West or in countries that do not have to bear the burden of military occupation.

I share with Kapur (2004) the view that we need to be cautious when gender essentialism informs legal reforms in the 'South'. She writes: 'By not remaining sufficiently attentive to cultural and historical specificities, gender essentialism constructed through a VAW discourse has prompted state actors, non-state actors and donors to embrace universalising strategies in responding to human rights violations against women. It has further obscured differences between women located in very different power relationships' (2004, 106). The challenge that Kapur leaves us with is 'to think of ways in which to express ... [our] politics without subjugating other subjectivities through claims to the idea of a 'true self' or a singular truth' (Kapur 2002, 19). This, she argues, would lead 'to a reformulation of the notions of agency and choice ... [where agency] is neither situated exclusively in the individual nor denied because of some overarching oppression. It is situated in the structures of social relationships, the location of the subject, and the shape-shifting of culture' (Kapur 2002, 19).

This critical approach to 'agency' is important to keep in mind when analysing the norms that guide contemporary projects of State building. As the case of Afghanistan demonstrates, the current struggle over women's rights has caught women in the tension between their demands for gender equality within their community and their dependence

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<sup>93</sup> By constitutionalism, Menon refers to 'a specific method adopted by modern democracies of safeguarding the autonomy of the individual self' (2004, 1).

upon and support for the community as site for resistance to foreign occupation. The imposition of a Universalist framework to establish gender equality has not only hampered Afghan women's capacity to speak for themselves but it has also derailed the conditions of possibility for constructing legal norms differently. This study has shown how legal metanarratives inspired by Western liberal tradition have been used to create modern state institutions that bolster the myth of reconstruction in the West while leaving Afghan elites with the task of either reproducing 'the project of positive unoriginality' (Morris quoted in Chakrabarty 1992: 1509) or redefining 'culture' in fixed and essentialized terms.

As much as women's micro-practices of resistance may often appear as futile and mostly symbolic, it is important not to ignore them, for they are integral part of what constitutes the psyche and subjective universe of Afghan women. With Judith Butler (2004), I believe that this acknowledgement of the 'other' is what is being frequently overlooked in the present efforts of media, politics and reconstruction in Afghanistan. Drawing from Emmanuel Lévinas' concept of 'face' as the basis from which the 'Other' can make an ethical claim on a person, Butler remains wary of the responsibility with which the West has endowed itself as a result of 'seeing' the unveiled faces of Afghan women in the press, post 9/11. She says:

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, 142)

The revealing of Afghan women's faces in this episode of 'liberation' concealed their 'suffering over war'. While the apparition of faces in the media momentarily humanized the anonymous *burqa*-clad women whom we had seen earlier wondering in the rubble of Kabul, this staged collective unveiling did not result in a real acknowledgement of women's faces, in the Levinasian sense. *We* remained blind to their loss, to their 'grief and agony'. By seeing a reflection of *our* own aspirations in their faces,

we eventually de-humanized them. Butler's hesitation to celebrate the unveiling of Afghan women as a symbol of 'liberation' is important because it insists on the ethical urgency to look beyond the veil, at women's subjectivity and experience. I hope that this work will have contributed modestly to achieving this, to bringing flesh and soul to representations of Afghan women.

## Glossary

**Afghanyiat:** Afghan-ness.

**Biruni:** Dari term, meaning the ‘exterior’, the ‘public’ arena, the ‘street’. It generally refers to the outside world, outside of the house.

**Burqa** (burka, or burkha) is an Arabic term (also used in Urdu) that designates a full body covering garment worn by women in some Islamic tradition.

**CEDAW:** The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discriminations Against Women was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979. It is often described as a general bill of rights for women.

**Chadari:** The full Afghan chadari covers the wearer’s entire face except for a small region about the eyes, which is covered by a concealing net. This type of covering is also common in North Western Pakistan close to the Afghan border.

**Chadar:** A chadar is a full-length semicircle of fabric open down the front, which is thrown over the head and held closed in front. It has no hand openings or closures but is held shut by the hands or by wrapping the ends around the waist.

**Chapan:** Long sleeved overcoat worn on shoulders. It is the customary uniform of tribal leaders in Afghanistan.

**CSO:** Civil Society Organizations.

**Dakhili:** Dari term, meaning the ‘interior’. It generally refers to the interior of a house.

**Dewana:** crazy.

**Dokhtar:** girl, daughter.

**Fransawi:** Dari term for ‘French’.

**FRU:** Family Response Unit.

**Gham:** Pastun term for ‘sorrows’ and ‘worries’.

**IHRC:** Independent Human Rights Commission.

**Izzat:** Generic term for ‘honour’.

**Jirga:** Pashtun term that refers to a tribal assembly of elders, which takes decision by consensus.

**Khaliji:** foreigner.

**Korwal:** Pashtun term for ‘household inhabitants’.

**Landay:** Short piece of oral Pashtun women’s poetry, traditionally used to comment on everyday social events.

**Loya Jirga:** Pashtun term for ‘grand council’. A loya jirga is a mass meeting usually prepared for major events such as choosing a new king, adopting a constitution, or discussing important national political or emergency matters as well as disputes in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

**Madrassah:** Type of educational institution, usually with a central religious component.

**Mahram:** In Islamic *sharia* legal terminology, a *mabram* is an unmarriageable kin with whom sexual intercourse would be considered incestuous, a punishable taboo. In Afghanistan, the *mabram* is responsible for escorting women when they venture outside of their house.

**MoWA:** Ministry of Women's Affairs.

**Meman-khana:** Room reserved to guests in an Afghan traditional house.

**Meshrano Jirga:** The House of Elders is the upper house of the bicameral National Assembly of Afghanistan.

**Mujjahed** (Pl. mujjahedin): Arabic term. Literally, means 'someone who struggles'. The term has taken on meanings that are specifically religious, or specifically military or paramilitary or both. It came to refer to 'someone who fights in a *jihad*', i.e. 'holly warrior'.

**Nafs:** Arabic term, meaning 'self' or 'psyche'. Usually refers to unruly emotions and desires. Muslims are requested to remain in control of their 'nafs'.

**Namardi:** Dari term, meaning 'unmanly'.

**Namus:** Arabic term, meaning 'honour'. For a man and his family, *namus* means sexual integrity of women in the family, their chastity in particular. On the other hand, the man has to provide for his family and to defend the *namus* of his house, his women in particular, against the threats (physical and verbal) from the outer world to members of his extended family.

**Nang:** Pashtun term for 'bravery', 'courage'.

**Pardah:** Urdu term, meaning 'curtain'. It refers to the practice of preventing women from being seen by men. This takes two forms: physical segregation of the sexes, and the requirement for women to cover their bodies and conceal their form under a veil. In the Muslim world, preventing women from being seen by men is closely linked to the concept of *namus* (honour).

**Pashtunwali:** 'The way of the Pashtuns', refers to the tribal code of honour as practiced among Pashtun communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

**PDPA:** People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, a communist party established in 1965.

**Poar:** Term used in Pashtun customary jurisprudence, usually translated as 'blood money'. It refers to what is given to a victim's family to compensate for an offense. *Poar* can include cash, services, animals and also the transfer of women.

**RAWA:** Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan founded in 1977 by Meena Keshwar Kamal.

**Shura:** Arabic word for 'consultation'. It is believed to be the method by which pre-Islamic Arabian tribes selected leaders and made major decisions. This word is often used in the name of parliaments or village councils in Muslim-majority countries.

**SNTV:** Single Non-Transferable Vote.

**United National Front:** The group is as a broad coalition of former and current strongmen, commanders from the anti-Soviet resistance, ex-Communist leaders, and various social and ethnic groups. Its leader is former President of Afghanistan Burhanuddin Rabbani. Many of its members were formerly part of the similarly named United Islamic Front (better known as the Northern Alliance). It represents the main opposition party at the National Assembly.

**Ustad:** Dari term for ‘teacher’ or ‘master’ (in music).

**Wolesi Jirga:** The House of the People is the lower house of the bicameral National Assembly of Afghanistan.

**Zan:** woman, wife.

**Watan:** Arabic term, meaning ‘country’, ‘nation’, ‘homeland’.

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## Ethnographic Data<sup>94</sup>

### Interviews with Members of Parliament

- MP1. "Interview with MP from South West province," October 3, 2007.
- MP2. "Interview with MP from Eastern province," September 11, 2007.
- MP3. "Interview with MP of Kabul and women's rights activist," September 16, 2007.
- MP4. "Interview of an MP from Kabul, former commerce minister and head of the United National Front," October 25, 2007.
- MP5. "Interview of a woman MP from Northern province," March 10, 2007.
- MP6. "Interview of MP from Northern province," February 23, 2007.
- MP7. "Interview with a young female MP from Kabul Province," June 9, 2007.
- MP8. "Interview of MP from North West province," June 30, 2007.
- MP9. "Interview of MP from Kabul," August 29, 2007.
- MP10. "Interview with MP from a province under Taliban control," September 22, 2007.
- MP11. "Interview with MP from Kabul province and Head of the Women's Commission at the National Assembly," June 27, 2007.
- MP12. "Interview of Qazi Nazir Ahmad, MP of Herat and former Jihadi," October 4, 2007.

### Interviews with women's rights activists/High ranking officials/Businesswomen

- Ashraf-Nemat, Orzala. "Interview with Orzala Ashraf-Nemat, director of a women's shelter and women's rights activist," September 26, 2007.
- Azizi, Farida. "Interview with Farida Azizi, women's rights activist," October 23, 2007.
- Azizi, Mehria. "Conversation with Mehria Azizi, camerawoman," February 22, 2007.
- Bashir, Maria. "Interview of Maria Bashir, Herat General Attorney," September 13, 2007.
- Farida, & Farid. "Interview of Farida and Farid, teachers who ran a clandestine school for girls during the Taliban regime," January 30, 2007.
- Gross, Nasrine. "Conversation with Nasrine Gross, Afghan sociologist and women's rights activist," May 23, 2007.
- Head of the Family Court. "Interview of the Head of Kabul Family Court," August 16, 2007.
- Head of the FRU. "Interview of the Head of one Family Response Unit in Kabul," September 23, 2007.
- Jalal, Massouda. "Interview of Massouda Jalal, ex Minister of women's affairs and medical doctor," November 22, 2007.
- Judge Family Court Kabul. "Interview of female judge at Kabul family court," August 22, 2007.
- Makai-Shah, Gul. "Interview of Gul Makai Shah, Director of Kabul National Theatre," September 12, 2007.
- Mohamadzai, Khotul. "Interview of General Khotul Mohamadzai, first woman reappointed at the Ministry of defense by Karzai's interim government," April 8, 2007.
- MoWA. "Conversation with Technical Assistant at the Ministry of Women's Affairs," February 13, 2007.
- . "Interview with the Director of Provincial Relations, Ministry of Women's Affairs," June 16, 2007.

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<sup>94</sup> This list of references to ethnographic data does not include the entire data set collected during my fieldwork in 2007 but only the material I used in order to inform the argument of this thesis.

- Perlika, Soraya. "Interview with Soraya Perlika, Director of the Union of the Women of Afghanistan," July 3, 2007.
- Rahela. "Interview with Rahela, woman working at the Afghan Women's Network," September 20, 2007.
- Rashidi, Leila. "Interview with Leila Rashidi, teacher," February 8, 2007.
- RAWA. "Interview with 2 members of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan," September 8, 2007.
- Seraj, Mahbouba. "Interview of Mahbouba Seraj, grand daughter of King Amanullah and women's rights activist," October 7, 2007.
- Sherjan, Hassina. "Conversation with Hassina Sherjan, business woman and women's rights activist," June 20, 2007.
- Siddiqi, Kamela. "Interview with Kamela Siddiqi, business woman," May 15, 2007.
- Sobhrang, Soraya. "Interview with the Head of the Women's Rights Department at the Independent Human Rights Commission, Kabul," September 17, 2007.
- Zarghona. "Interview with Zarghona, business woman," March 21, 2007.

### **Interviews with Dormitory girls**

- Lutfia. "Interview with Lutfia, translator and student boarding at the National Women's Dormitory," September 12, 2007.
- Maryam, & Roqia. "Interview with Maryam and Roqia, University students boarding at the National Women's Dormitory," May 8, 2007.

### **Fieldnotes**

- Fieldnotes. "Conversation with a female employee at the MoWA." Kabul, February 9, 2007.
- . "Conversation with a woman employed in a women's organization." Kabul, October 9, 2007.
- . "Conversation with Fahair, car driver." Kabul, August 8, 2007.
- . "Conversation with JSSP staff member, PAE group," August 16, 2007.
- . "Conversation with Lutfia, research assistant and student at the University of Kabul boarding at the National Women's Dormitory," February 13, 2007.
- . "Conversation with Maryam, student at the University of Kabul." Women's National Dormitory, March 28, 2007.
- . "Conversation with Maryam, student at the University of Kabul living in the National Women's dormitory." March 2007.
- . "Conversation with Roqia, student boarding at the National Women's Dormitory." Kabul, April 4, 2007.
- . "Conversation with the director of the Women's National Dormitory." Kabul, February 17, 2007.
- . Communication. "E-mail conversation with Orzala Ashraf-Nemat, women's rights activist," August 3, 2009.
- . "Fieldnotes - Jalalabad," October 13, 2007.
- . "Mahbouba Seraj in Panjao, Hazarajat," September 28, 2007.
- . "Observations collected in the family of Fawzia and Khalija, University students." Kabul, November 20, 2009.
- . "Observations collected in the family of Fawzia and Khalija, University students," November 25, 2009.
- . "Observations recorded at Masoma's family house." Kabul, October 8, 2007.
- . "Observations recorded during a visit at Lutfia's sister house." Kabul, May 21, 2007.
- . "Observations recorded during a walk in a bazaar of Kabul with the dormitory

- girls.” Kabul, May 11, 2007.
- . “Observations recorded during an event organized in Jalalabad by Fatana Gailani (women's rights activist) on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women,” November 25, 2007.
- . “Observations recorded during the Ceremony organized by the Sacrificers for Peace on International Women's Days in Kabul Landmark Hotel,” March 8, 2007.
- . “Observations recorded in the National Women's Dormitory.” Kabul, February 22, 2007.
- . “Observations recorded at the house of MP in Kabul,” February 23, 2007.
- . “Observations recorded during a Gender Empowerment Workshop at the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul,” March 29, 2007.
- . “Observations recorded during a visit at a Family Response Unit in Kabul,” September 23, 2007.
- . “Observations recorded in the National Women's Dormitory and recorded in my fieldwork diary.” Kabul, April 2007.
- . “Observations recorded in the Women's National Dormitory,” March 8, 2007.
- . “Visit of Kabul's Family Response Unit with JSSP women's rights advisor,” August 1, 2007.
- . “Observations recorded during fieldwork in Justice institutions,” August 1-8, 2007.