

READING AFGHANISTAN

by

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary representations of Afghanistan tend to follow meandering streams of earlier thought, specifically Victorian notions of the country and its people that emerged as the result of Britain's nineteenth-century military encounters with the country; a strong Orientalist impulse; recourse to earlier travel writing, itself strongly imbued with outdated ethnographic study; as well as reliance on well-worn stereotypes and synecdoches. The tendency to repeat or recreate sometimes fragmented narratives about Afghanistan cloud or otherwise obfuscate any heightened understanding of the country's current realities. The thesis examines how Afghanistan has been represented to the Western world since the 9/11 terrorist attacks brought renewed attention to the country, including how the voices of Afghan women, largely unheard due to prevailing cultural norms, have been appropriated as part of Western representations of the country. As counterpoint to Western perceptions and representations, the thesis also gives attention to contemporary Afghan poetry (in translation) so as to present Afghan perspectives. Such exploration underscores how little new thought has been generated by the Western world about Afghanistan, thus reinforcing notions of the country's fundamental alterity.

Chapter 1: Introduction

*In my dream, I am president.
When I am awake, I am the beggar of the world. (Griswold 63)*

Afghanistan.

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear that word, that place? Do you think of on-going war, or a succession of never-ending wars? The deaths of more than 3,300 foreign military personnel? Or the more than 20,000 Afghan civilians killed as the result of hostilities since 2001? The Taliban¹ and their persecution of women, their enforcement of *burqas* and beards and the banning of music, their destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas? That some ninety per cent of the world's opium production is sourced from Afghanistan's poppy fields? That this country of 35 million people is among the world's poorest – and most corrupt – falling at the very bottom of United Nations indices for economic, educational, and health standards?

Or is it just some distant place, removed, Other?

Over the past thirty-odd years Afghanistan has rarely been at peace, beginning with the 1979 Soviet invasion of the country, American and other

¹ The Taliban (Pashto: طالبان *ṭālibān* "students"), also spelled "Taleban", is an ultraconservative political and religious faction that emerged in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s following the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the collapse of Afghanistan's communist regime, and the subsequent breakdown in civil order. The faction took its name from its membership, which consisted largely of students trained in madrasahs (Islamic religious schools) that had been established for Afghan refugees in the 1980s in northern Pakistan. The Taliban ruled as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan from September 1996 until December 2001, with Kandahar as its capital. While in power, the Taliban enforced its strict interpretation of Shari'a law and were condemned internationally for their brutal treatment of women. The majority of the Taliban are made up of Pashtun tribesmen, many of whom strictly follow the social and cultural norm called Pashtunwali. <<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Taliban>>.

international support of the *mujahideen* leading to the rout of Soviet forces, a period of all-out ethnic-based civil war, followed by nearly four years under Taliban rule, and since 2001 the American-led effort to oust the Taliban and install a democratically elected Government. Throughout the too many years of strife Afghanistan has frequently, although sometimes fleetingly, dominated the world's attention. Google "Afghanistan War" and you can choose from 651 million entries – compared with 47 million for "William Shakespeare" or only 1 million for "Michael Ondaatje."

The focus of international attention on Afghanistan has resulted in several different kinds of discourses – different ways of "reading" or "representing" the country. There is military parlance, full of obscure acronyms and pitched to the "rightness" of the campaign to defeat the Taliban and other insurgent groups, most often phrased in terms of the global "War on Terror." There is the diplomatic double-speak of the United Nations that employs universalistic terms to justify continued international engagement in Afghanistan, with focus on human rights, women's rights, democracy, and development. There is a historical discourse, too, which relates the West's current engagement with Afghanistan as a reverberant echo of the nineteenth-century "Great Game", the strategic rivalry and conflict between the British Empire and Russia for supremacy in Central Asia, or the notion that Afghanistan is "the Graveyard of Empires." These tropes, which generally depict Afghanistan and its people as an implacable Other, tend to wend their way through current representations of Afghanistan.

In addition to these different discourses and tropes, the West's most recent engagement with the country has produced a number of distinct literary genres, all of which, to greater or lesser extent, assume Afghanistan's fundamental alterity. One of these genres is Afghan-focused romantic or family-based historical fiction typified by Khaled Hosseini's wildly successful 2004 novel, *The Kite Runner*; followed by his 2008 novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*; and his 2013 book *And the Mountains Echoed*. Such novels typically depict Afghanistan's tortured recent past through the lens of family or personal history, and tend to present the country's somewhat mythic – if peaceful – past in golden terms, while demonstrating how perseverance and faith in truth or love will surmount all difficulties. Although Hosseini's and other similar novels provide a somewhat sugar-coated version of Afghan history, they do not shy away from civil strife and its consequences, as well as larger themes, including the brutality of war, the role of women in Afghan society, or the impact of institutionalized venality and corruption.

Accounts of a foreigner's experience in Afghanistan present another distinct literary genre, and generally take the form of either "as told to" biographies or what can be described as "fictive biographies" that combine elements of straight-forward biography with a more narrativized treatment written in either the first or third person. These narratives often disguise or transmute the author's voice or alternatively assume a kind of narrative omniscience, including insight into the thoughts, desires, and motivations of Afghan characters. In my experience, countries such as Afghanistan attract three types of foreigners:

missionaries, mercenaries, and misfits. None of these categories are mutually exclusive. Thus, we have accounts from battle-scarred war correspondents: *Restrepo*, the 2010 documentary film directed by Sebastien Junger and Tim Hetherington; Melissa Fung's *Under an Afghan Sky*; and Christina Lamb's *The Sewing Circles of Herat* and her valedictory *Farewell Kabul*. Or there is Kim Barker's *The Taliban Shuffle*, the "I was there" memoir that inspired the 2016 movie *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*. And, too, the tales of bold and/or bleeding-hearted humanitarian aid workers such as Greg Mortensen and his *Three Cups of Tea*; or Roberta Gately and her *Lipstick in Afghanistan*. Or there are the tales of foreign women attempting to redress women's inequality in Afghanistan such as Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* and Deborah Rodriguez's *Kabul Beauty School*. Because these somewhat fictive biographical accounts largely focus on women's rights [or the lack thereof] in Afghanistan, this genre can be referred to as "blue *burqa*" narratives of foreign encounters with the gendered Afghan "Other".

Other new literary genres dealing with Afghanistan include political screeds that second-guess the prosecution of the war or that outline the path for a more hopeful, and peaceful future for the country and its people. And there is the more fanciful, too, including at least one zombie-themed book, *Zombies in Afghanistan* (Payton), as well as a very B-grade film, *Osombie*, premised on Osama bin Laden's zombie resurrection from his watery grave and his return to Afghanistan to lead a Taliban zombie army against an intrepid group of American

Special Forces who are as skilled with one-liners as they are with the array of weaponry they use to vanquish the turbaned, zombie hordes.

It is to be noted that although Afghanistan has a long tradition of literature, and particularly poetry, with an emphasis on oral poetry, in recent times there has been a paucity of literature or political discourse available in local languages, and virtually no such material available in translation. In addition to low levels of literacy, particularly in rural areas, the lack of written materials is due to decades' long diaspora of educated Afghans and foreign "occupation" or "neo-colonialism," with many key documents, such as the country's National Development Strategy, prepared in English before being translated into Dari and Pashtu. Apart from a number of national or regional newspapers established since 2001, Afghanistan has a limited publishing industry, so there is a dearth of printed materials, including literary works, in local languages. The lack of Afghan language materials, as well as few foreigners fluent in Dari or Pashtu, has resulted in mostly Western representations of the country, with little Afghan counter-narrative.

This thesis considers representations of contemporary Afghanistan through both historical and literary lenses, and examines how such representations either reinforce alterity or provide a means to understand cross-cultural difference.

Chapter 2, "Representations of Afghanistan," provides an overall theoretical framework to analyze contemporary or post-9/11 representations of Afghanistan and its people. Using Corrine Fowler's 2007 *Chasing Tales: Travel*

Writing, Journalism and the History of British Ideas about Afghanistan as a guide, the chapter explores how Britain's Victorian-era military experience in Afghanistan continues to influence representations of Afghanistan and its people, including through a tendency towards medievalizing the country. The chapter also considers the influence of Orientalism, with key reference to Edward Said's seminal 1978 work *Orientalism* and his subsequent book *Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* as a predictor of Western coverage of the war in Afghanistan. The chapter also considers how previous ethnography, earlier travel writing, and synecdochic metaphor has influenced post-9/11 representations of the country and its people.

Given Western focus in Afghanistan on women's rights, Chapter 3, "Appropriating the Voices of Afghan Women," examines how the voices of Afghan women are exploited, appropriated, interpreted, or even completely ignored by Western writers. In particular, the chapter examines how Afghan women are presented, or represented, by four Western female authors and outlines some of the moral ambiguity that shadows cross-cultural and cross-lingual encounters in Afghanistan, and particularly with respect to issues of gender and women's rights.

And what of actual Afghan voices? As counterpoint to Western portrayals of Afghanistan, and given the general lack of material written by Afghans, including diaspora Afghans, Chapter 4, "Contemporary Afghan Poetry," undertakes an analysis of contemporary Afghan poetry, with focus on a collection

of poems written by members of the Taliban and collections of *landays*, short Haiku-like poetic aphorisms fashioned by mostly female Pashtun poets.

Drawing on theories of cultural difference or “otherness,” literature from a variety of genres, and my own experience living and working in Afghanistan,² I conclude (Chapter 5) by asking whether, how, or to what extent there is congruence among different depictions of contemporary Afghanistan. I will also ask whether it is possible to look beyond difference to similarities, or whether after more than three decades of intense international engagement with the country and its people, an unknown, unlimned alterity remains the signal characteristic of Afghanistan as presented through literature.

² I first visited Afghanistan in late 2001 and early 2002 as part of joint Asian Development Bank, United Nations Development Programme, and World Bank needs assessment missions that laid the groundwork for internationally-led reconstruction and development efforts. I subsequently worked in Kabul from 2004 to 2009 as Senior Country Specialist with the Asian Development Bank and then from 2013 to 2015 as a Senior Programme Advisor with *Tawanmandi* (“Strength”), a British Council-managed civil society strengthening programme that provided capacity development support and project grant funding to Afghan civil society organizations working in the Access to Justice, Anti-Corruption, Human Rights, Media, and Peace Building and Conflict Resolution sectors.

Chapter 2: Representations of Afghanistan

*My darling, you are just like America.
You are guilty; I apologize.* (Griswold 109)

The Foreword to Corrine Fowler's 2007 book, *Chasing Tales: Travel Writing, Journalism, and the History of British Ideas About Afghanistan*, posits that imagology – the study of cross-national perceptions and images as expressed in literary discourse – has become “more topical and urgent than before” (i). The Foreword also claims that

Increasingly, the attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices which govern literary activity and international relations are perceived in their full importance; their nature as textual (frequently literary) constructs is more clearly apprehended; and the necessity for a textual and historical analysis of their typology and their discursive expression and dissemination is being recognized by historians and literary scholars. (i)

While historians and literary scholars may be interested in such study, reportage about Afghanistan over the past 14 years has been little concerned with “textual analysis.” Fowler, a Senior Lecturer in Twentieth Century Postcolonial Literature, University of Leicester, acknowledges that Afghanistan's “history of contested borders, ongoing disputes over Pashtunistan¹ and dispersed systems of

¹ “Land of the Pashtuns”, the territory traditionally occupied by the Pashtun ethnic group, was artificially divided between Afghanistan and present-day Pakistan in 1893 by the colonial-imposed, highly porous, and still-disputed Durand Line border.

governance problematize its delineation as a culturally or geo-politically sealed off object of study, or indeed of writing” (3).

In her analysis of Afghan imagology, Fowler explores the inter-generic dependency among parallel genres of ethnography, travel writing, literary fiction about Afghanistan, as well as writing by journalists and war correspondents, with attention to how each of these narrative streams influences and is influenced by the others. As such, *Chasing Tales* helps negotiate the minefields of contemporary reportage about Afghanistan. As this chapter will explore, using Fowler as a guide, those writing about Afghanistan since 9/11 and its aftermath² have unquestioningly borrowed and repeated notions about Afghanistan and its people, with scant attention to their origins or “textual constructs.” As I will argue, the continued repetition of certain tropes or other stereotypical representations of the country and its inhabitants has to a very great extent precluded original thought about Afghanistan, with those oft-repeated constructs serving as the basis for what is presented as insightful analysis. The chapter will further argue that a reliance on non-contemporary writing about Afghanistan has so reinforced such conceptions as to colour and even distort current Western perceptions of the country. This chapter will suggest that despite extensive media coverage since 2001, and an ever-increasing body of literature about Afghanistan and its recent history, contemporary representations of Afghanistan bear false or misleading witness to the country and its current circumstances.

² Specifically, the United States-led invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent international efforts to vanquish al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other insurgent groups operating in the country and to refashion Afghanistan as a liberal (or more liberal) democracy, thus preventing the country from again becoming a haven for international terrorists.

Over the past several decades Western knowledge about, or attention to Afghanistan has waxed and waned. From the late 1950s through to the 1970s the ancient Silk Road connecting the Near, Middle, and Far East morphed into the Hippy Trail. This period corresponded to a period of Westernization and social liberalization in Afghanistan, or at least in its urban centres, and includes some notable pieces of Afghanistan travel writing, including Robert Byron's (somewhat earlier, 1933) *The Road to Oxiana*, Eric Newby's 1958 *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, Peter Levi's 1972 *The Light Garden of the Angel King*, and Nancy Hatch Dupree's 1972 *A Historical Guide to Afghanistan*.

Afghanistan's path to progress soon became much more rocky. In April 1978 Afghanistan's centrist government was overthrown by left-wing military officers, with political power subsequently shared between two Marxist-Leninist political groups. The new government, which had little popular support, ruthlessly purged any opposition and introduced extensive communist-inspired land and social reforms that were greatly resented by the country's devoutly Muslim and mostly anti-communist rural population. In late December 1979 some 30,000 Soviet troops entered Afghanistan to bolster the efforts of its faltering client state to contain a growing insurgency led by a number of urban and tribal Islamic groups that collectively became known as the *mujahideen* (Arabic for "those who engage in jihad"). With covert support from the United States, the *mujahideen* rebellion escalated, and ultimately spread to all parts of Afghanistan. While initially leaving the suppression of the insurgency to the Afghan army, the latter was beset by mass desertions and remained largely ineffective, necessitating a

dramatic increase in the number of Soviet troops. The Soviets tried to quell the insurgency by various tactics, but the *mujahideen*, with tacit popular support, had relatively free access to most of the country and skillfully used Afghanistan's harsh topography to undertake a guerrilla-based war of attrition. Ultimately, Soviet forces attempted to eliminate the *mujahideen's* civilian support through widespread aerial bombardment, which precipitated huge displacement, with more than 4 million Afghans seeking refuge in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. The ongoing and seemingly unwinnable war, with as many as 15,000 Soviet casualties (as well as more than a million Afghan civilian deaths), proved to be a huge drain on a disintegrating Soviet Union, leading to the full withdrawal of Soviet forces in early 1989.

But even darker days were ahead, as the victorious, if politically fragmented *mujahideen* groups began an internecine struggle for power marked by heavy fighting, including ethnic-based pogroms, a function of the tensions and animosities among Afghanistan's different ethnic groups. Several years of all-out civil war ended with the Taliban's 1996 establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which led to nearly five years of the Taliban's extreme anti-Western and anti-modern Islamic ideology, including giving sanctuary to Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda terrorist organization, which in turn led to Afghanistan becoming the focus of world attention in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.³⁴

⁴ Despite huge interest in Afghanistan over the past fifteen years, there is no single work that provides a comprehensive overview of the country's recent history or presents an overall analysis of the country's current circumstances. Rather, most of the books published about Afghanistan in the last decade have considered different aspects of the international community's re-engagement with the country. Jason Elliott's 1999 *An Unexpected Light: Travels in Afghanistan* provides a good overview of the internecine strife that followed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and which set the stage for the Taliban regime's rise to

Thus, by the time of the American-led ouster of the Taliban in late 2001, Afghanistan had been fraught by conflict and isolated from much direct Western media attention for nearly a quarter of a century. The West's sudden reengagement with Afghanistan necessitated a rapid re-familiarization by western audiences to Afghanistan's geographical, historical, socio-cultural and geo-political terrain. As Fowler outlines in her book, this re-familiarization consisted largely of the repackaging of earlier narratives, particularly nineteenth century narratives recounting Britain's earlier engagements with the country.

2.1 Victorian Conceptions of Afghanistan

If much of the recent narrative about Afghanistan has a “clash of civilizations” cast, pitting Western modernity against an implacable “other,” Fowler maintains that for Britain, at least, the “notions of ‘warlike Afghans’ have not primarily derived from generalized notions of Islamic militancy, but rather flow

power. Qais Akbar Omar's beautifully written 2015 memoir, *Fort of Nine Towers: An Afghan Family Story*, covers the same period, but from an Afghan perspective. Ahmad Rashid's 2000 book, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* is considered by many to be the classic text on what gave rise to the Afghan conflict. Given its post 9/11 timeliness, the book was reprinted in 2001, 2008, and 2010, with the latest edition – including a new preface and concluding chapters addressing the 2000-2009 period – re-titled *Taliban: The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond*. Rashid's 2008 book, *Descent Into Chaos: The U.S and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, analyzes the Afghan war from a regional perspective. Christina Lamb's *Sewing Circles of Herat* – addressed more fully in Chapter 3 – presents a good overview of the pre- and post-Taliban periods, based on Lamb's work as an award-winning foreign correspondent. Lamb's 2015 *Farewell Kabul: From Afghanistan to a More Dangerous World* similarly recounts Lamb's long association with the country. The book is filled with historical detail and is peopled with the kings, warlords, politicians, female poets, generals, front-line troops, and Taliban executioners Lamb encountered during her many trips to Afghanistan. Graeme Smith's 2013 *The Dogs are Eating Them Now: Our War in Afghanistan* was one of the first books to address the failure of the most recent Western military expedition into Afghanistan.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) website provides a chronology of key Afghan political events from 1838-1842 (the First Anglo-Afghan War) through to end-2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12024253>

from traumatic colonial memories of actual military encounters” (3). Fowler suggests that modern British (and, by extension, Western) conceptions of Afghanistan are rooted in Britain’s colonial experience in the country, particularly the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-1842), which ended with the massacre of some 4,500 British and Indian troops (and 12,000 camp followers); the subsequent Second Anglo-Afghan War (1897-80), which saw Afghan tribesmen defeat two brigades of British and Indian troops; and an inconclusive Third Anglo-Afghan War that followed Afghanistan’s 1919 assertion of independence. The two earlier wars were fought in the context of British and Russian maneuvering for influence over Afghanistan as part of the so-called “Great Game,” or what Fowler terms the “Victorian Cold War” (3).⁵

Lady Florentia Sale, wife of British military commander Sir Robert Henry Sale, was herself kidnapped and held hostage for nine months during the first Anglo-Afghan War. Her journal, “Disasters in Afghanistan,” published in 1843, was both widely read and critically acclaimed, with her graphic account of the Gundamak massacre greatly shaping British conceptions of Afghanistan. The extent of the British defeat was visually depicted in two now canonical paintings: the 1879 *Remnants of an Army* by Elizabeth Thompson (Lady Butler) and William Barnes Wollen’s 1898 *Last Stand of the 44th Regiment at Gundamak*. The historical memory of these nineteenth century military encounters, and the twin dynamic of defeat and victory, has continued to resonate in the minds of

⁵ The Great Game was a century long strategic rivalry between the British and Russian Empires for control in Central Asia, with Afghanistan serving as a critical buffer area between the two. The term was popularized by Rudyard Kipling through his popular and highly influential 1901 novel *Kim*.

both British and Afghans, and through frequent reference provides an important sub-text to the more recent conflict. Indeed, Fowler contends that notional views of Afghanistan “have prevailed in the popular British imagination from the early nineteenth century to the present” (3). She also claims that such conceptions have tended to be particularly insular and self-referential, which is interesting in that while Fowler focuses on “British ideas about Afghanistan,” the same notions feature prominently in all recent English-language coverage of the Afghan conflict.

As part of the [British] historical memory of Afghanistan, Fowler notes that the prolific writing of Rudyard Kipling was fundamental to the development of British ideas about the country, with Kipling being “the single biggest literary reference on [Afghanistan] travel narratives” (9). In particular, Fowler notes that *Kim*, Kipling’s most famous novel, heightened the prospect of crossing the North-West Frontier, and that “This frontier was for many decades the most vulnerable of British India’s borders and the symbolic point of entry into uncolonised and uncolonisable Afghan terrain” (9). Hence, through Kipling, Britons came to see Afghanistan not only as a historical crossroad, as it is invariably described, but also as a hostile and alien place. This Victorian representation of Afghanistan thus bears a clearly Orientalist cast. Indeed, in his 1978 *Orientalism* Edward W. Said draws on Kipling to articulate the recurring features of what now, due to Said, is termed Orientalism. The influences of Orientalism in relation to post-9/11 representations of Afghanistan are more thoroughly addressed in the next section of this chapter.

Fowler claims that Kipling's enduring influence on the history of British (and, by extension, Western) ideas about Afghanistan can be attributed to "the immense popularity of his fictional renditions of the country during his lifetime, which guaranteed the popular dissemination of these writings' peculiarly, mythologized conceptualizations of the country" (48). Commentator Hal G. P. Colebatch, meanwhile, notes that "Kipling's immense popularity helped move his images into folklore and mythology" (Colebatch). Two examples prove Kipling's overarching influence on Western perceptions of Afghanistan. First, there is Kipling's 1888 story "The Drums of Fore-and-Aft" in which a British regiment is charged by "six-foot fiends upon whose beards the foam is lying, upon whose tongues is a roar of wrath, and in whose hands are yard-long knives" (qtd. in Colebatch). Or the "four chilling lines" from Kipling's oft-cited poem, "The Young British Soldier," and Fowler's comment that "judging from the regularity with which it was and is cited, helped to entrench a British belief in merciless Afghan brutality" (29):

When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier. (97-100)

Frequent contemporary reference to Kipling's writing about Afghanistan gives him primacy as a source of a kind of received wisdom about the country and its people. Few reports emerging from Afghanistan in the post-9/11 era were devoid of references to "The Young British Soldier" or to Afghanistan being the

“graveyard of empires”. Foreign correspondent Christina Lamb begins her 2002 account of her already long-association with Afghanistan by recounting how she first arrived in Peshawar (the Pakistani city on the border with Afghanistan) as a “a gawky twenty-one years old English girl, dizzy with Kipling and diesel fumes” (Lamb 2). However, there is a historical problem with Kipling’s narrative authority, in that while Kipling was very familiar with British India, he never set foot on Afghan soil. His 1888 novella, *The Man Who Would be King*, while inspired by the exploits of two actual adventurers, is but an imagined version of Afghanistan. Fowler claims that “the relative paucity of writings by prominent British literary figures since Kipling’s death explains his privileged position as a commentator on Afghan affairs ever since” (48). That so much of contemporary Western representation of Afghanistan reflects the work of a 19th century British writer of fiction presents an ongoing difficulty with narrative authority, an issue that will be more fully explored in subsequent chapters.

If Kipling is an unreliable narrative source, his contemporary, Winston Churchill, who also became a Nobel prize winning writer, at least had actual Afghan battlefield experience through his participation in the Malakand Field Force, a not entirely successful set of 1897 skirmishes with Pashtun tribesmen along the Durand Line, which today remains the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Young Churchill, eager to establish both military and literary success to launch his political career, detailed his six-weeks’ experience in *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, published in 1898. Churchill’s comments about the Afghan tribesmen he fought – the great grandfathers of the insurgents

battling the young Western soldiers in the most recent conflict – are by today’s standards incredibly racist, but clearly bear heavy influence on modern-day British, and to a large extent Western attitudes about Afghanistan and its people. For example, young Churchill, “the knight of pen and sword” (Coughlin 158) describes the Afghans “as dangerous and sensible as mad dogs: fit only to be treated as such” (qtd. in Coughlin 33).

An entry in the 1908 *Imperial Gazetteer* presents a similar characterization: “Their step is full of resolution, their bearing proud and apt to be rough. Inured to bloodshed from childhood, they are familiar with death, audacious in attack, but easily discouraged by failure. They are passionate and treacherous in revenge . . . They are much under the influence of their Mullahs [religious leaders], especially for evil” (qtd. in Coughlin 24-5). Or there is this account by John Nicholson, a British political officer and survivor of the 1841 massacre of the British Residency in Kabul, who wrote that Afghans were “the most vicious and bloodthirsty race in existence, who fight merely for the love of bloodshed and plunder. I cannot describe their character in language sufficiently strong . . . From the highest to the lowest, every man of them would sell both country and relations” (qtd. in Coughlin 38). This dismissive view of an entire people gave rise to a similar sentiment still repeated today. For example, an October 2001 article by *The Guardian* correspondent Jason Burke attempted to provide historical context to what became a new chapter in Afghanistan’s years of conflict. In the article, Burke quotes an Afghan commander as saying, “You

can rent Afghanistan, but you can't buy it" (Burke).⁴ A 2012 blog post similarly states "You can't buy an Afghan, but you can rent one," and notes "Over the last several years we have been renting their allegiance and kindness. As long as we are there, saturating the countryside with security, passing out millions in aid money, and giving them everything they need or want that their own government can't provide then we are renting them," but with the clear implication of not being able to buy permanent devotion or loyalty (Bouhammer).⁵

Equally interesting is Churchill's assessment of the Afghans' Muslim religion: "Their religion is the most miserable fanaticism, in which cruelty, credulity, and immorality are equally represented" (qtd. In Coughlin 178).

Churchill biographer Con Coughlin notes that Churchill saw that despite a bewildering network of local alliances and animosities, Afghan tribesmen were

⁴ Burke's article, published in the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent American-led ouster of the Taliban regime, was more insightful than much of the international reportage that followed. The article also was remarkably prescient, in that Burke notes that all of his Afghan contacts agreed on two things: "first, that the American air strikes had made the task of winning wavering Taliban commanders over far harder by turning the hardline Islamic militia from villains into victims and, second, that a decision by the allies to use ground troops would mean the coalition's war was no longer against terrorism but against Afghanistan. Then there would be only one thing for the disparate factions of the country to do: fight the invader" (Burke).

⁵ The now lapsed blog, "Afghan Lessons Learned for Soldiers," repeated such conventional wisdom: "You can rent an Afghan all day long, but you can never buy him." The blog also offered the following stereotypical characterizations: "Afghans are different, just like your weird Uncle Joe, except on a National Level. They are stubborn and feel little compulsion to tell the truth, even if the truth is readily evident and the better for the story. They can be infuriating or they can be entertaining. It is your choice. If you decide it is your role in life to change them, you will be constantly frustrated. If you decide it is their role in life to provide you quirky entertainment, you'll find yourself constantly laughing . . . They are fiercely loyal, but in a very specific manner. Their friendship is hard won, but once earned, it is enduring. Without that loyalty, they'll act in their own best interest, solely, and that includes providing the least amount of information for the greatest amount of money. And if that means giving information to both sides while getting money from both, they have loyalty to their family, not to either side . . . I cannot tell you how to gain the loyal friendship of an Afghan and neither can they. I can tell you how to ensure you never gain that friendship and that is to attempt to change them. It is to demean them. It is to be rude to them. It is to try to game them. They recognize insincerity like an animal recognizes fear" (A.L.L.). Like all stereotypes, there is a more than a grain of truth to such characterization.

united by two overriding common bonds: their faith and their opposition to foreign influence or control. As such, Afghan tribesmen could easily be persuaded by their mullahs to resist foreign invaders so as to preserve traditional ways of Afghan life. In his dispatches from the battlefield, Churchill presented a fundamental clash between the values of Islam and those of the West, writing, “civilization is face to face with militant Mohammedanism” (qtd. in Coughlin 168). Churchill, then, presaged by more than a century Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations,” another recurring narrative element in most representations of the current Afghanistan conflict.

Together with Kipling’s very similar, if fictionalized and somewhat romanticized views of Afghanistan, these other late 19th century representations of Afghanistan and its Pashtun warriors provided the entry point for the West’s reengagement with Afghanistan in the post-9/11 period. For example, Fowler notes that only a minority of British war correspondents did *not* refer to Kipling as part of their coverage of the American-led invasion and the subsequent NATO-led “Operation Enduring Freedom”: “This is particularly true of the early stages of the military operations, when [Kipling’s] writings were key to the process of (re)familiarizing the British public with Afghanistan. News reports, especially newspaper articles, are littered with references to Kipling despite his problematic association with the long tradition of absentee authority” (48). While Fowler limits her comments to “British” writers, other Western commentators used the same British 19th century lens to interpret the 21st century conflict. Although these later commentators have actually stood on Afghan ground, their inherited views and

prejudices about the country, combined with somewhat limited access to the country – and more importantly its people – outside a military or security “screen,” has prevented Kipling’s and Churchill’s successors from seeing or interpreting Afghanistan through new eyes. Contemporary representations of Afghanistan thus remain much rooted in the nineteenth century.

A good example of this nineteenth-century perspective is US General David Petraeus’ claim that “we captured the lessons of the British in the late nineteenth century in the [counter insurgency] manual” (qtd. in Coughlin xx). Unfortunately, as BBC correspondent David Loyn notes in his historical account of the 1897 siege against the British garrison in Malakand, the lessons captured were less how to win “hearts and minds” than to “butcher and bolt” (ii). Crucially, what both 19th century British troops and their 21st century military descendants failed to realize – despite Churchill’s invocation --- is that Afghans are particularly resistant to foreign interference or occupation, and will readily take up arms at the merest provocation, whether that be real or perceived insult to Islam or to sometimes ill-defined notions of family, tribal, or national honour.

Fowler suggests that Kipling’s overwhelming influence “is to an extent mediated by journalists’ differing senses of Kiplingesque mythology’s ongoing relevance to contemporary Afghan scenes and settings” (49). Crediting journalists with such independence of thought, however, is undercut by Fowler’s later emphasizing that “Reliance on Kipling during the 2001 [i.e. current or post 9/11] conflict inevitably carries the risk of displacing historically and politically disparate memories onto contemporary scenes and settings” (51). She further

suggests that the wholesale “borrowing” of such history-laden mythology prejudices key thematic agendas and contributes to the production of ‘non-knowledge’, with the result that the “incessant, conscious exchange of some narratives, images, and ideas” (51) allows others to remain unconscious or unexamined. Hence, Fowler notes that “the exclusive focus on one particular, and borrowed, narrative stream prevents exploration of other, more important aspects of the same story” (51).

As noted above, Fowler claims that Victorian-era representations of Afghanistan focus more on the blood-thirsty nature of Afghan fighters than on their religious zeal. Churchill, for example, presented the Afghans defending their territory during the Malakand campaign as little more than a heathen horde. Fowler contends that “For the British at least, broader notions of Islam tend to play a secondary role in confirming and supporting” impressions of the country and its people first generated in the 19th century (3). This point is debatable, in that a key aspect of post-9-11 coverage of Afghanistan certainly has been a fixation on Islamic fundamentalism, personified by the Taliban. Nevertheless, contemporary writers about Afghanistan have adopted such impressions with insufficient attention as to how deep-rooted historic memory might temper contemporary analysis of the country or a real understanding of Afghanistan’s current circumstances.

Closely related to the endurance of these Victorian and early-twentieth century representations of Afghanistan is the much-repeated notion of Afghanistan being rooted in a mythologized, even romanticized past, also

presented by Said as a key aspect of Orientalism.⁶ As Fowler documents, much contemporary writing about Afghanistan also features a tendency towards medievalization, and particularly in any reference to the Taliban and their strict interpretation of Islam. In addition to the country's depiction as a lawless frontier, Fowler argues that "Travel writers routinely relocate Afghanistan's contemporary scenes and settings to three distinctive historical eras: the invasion of Alexander the Great, the invasion of Genghis Khan and, of particular importance here, to Europe's medieval past (and sometimes all three in the space of a paragraph)" (64).

The contemporary tendency to medievalize the country does not give adequate recognition to the fact that Afghanistan, once at the very crossroads of human civilization, was quite isolated during the last decades of the twentieth century. In many ways, then, time – or at least the march of modernity – stopped in Afghanistan. A frequent trope in recent writing about the country, then, is to contrast the rapidly modernizing country of the 1960s and 1970s with its subsequent reversion, under the Taliban, to its feudal, medievalized past. Such reportage, however, all too often does not acknowledge that the veneer of 1960s and 1970s modernity was quite thin, and limited largely to Afghanistan's few

⁶ Orientalism is a Western scholarly discipline of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that encompassed the study of the languages, literatures, religions, philosophies, histories, art, and laws of Asian societies, especially ancient ones. Such scholarship also inspired broader intellectual and artistic circles in Europe and North America, and so that Orientalism also came to denote the general enthusiasm for things Asian or "Oriental." In the mid-twentieth century, Orientalists began to favour the term "Asian Studies" to describe their work, in an effort to distance it from the colonial and neocolonial associations of Orientalism. More recently, mainly through the work of the Palestinian American scholar Edward Said, the term has been used disparagingly to refer to the allegedly simplistic, stereotyped, and demeaning conceptions of Arab and Asian cultures generally held by Western scholars.
<<http://www.britannica.com/science/Orientalism-cultural-field-of-study>>.

major urban centres. More insightful reporting would examine how the collision between forced change and the country's conservative rural reality has contributed to ongoing political and social upheaval. Fowler argues that persistent medievalization in news media coverage tends to "hinder the exploration of political anxieties in relation to Afghanistan," and notes that these anxieties cluster around "the demonstrable precariousness of the historically amnesiac political rhetoric about Afghanistan's recent past and potential political culpability, especially regarding the role formerly played by coalition countries in the rise of the Taleban" (68).⁷

Fowler importantly notes that post-9/11 reportage too frequently confuses poverty-related "medieval conditions" with "medieval or barbaric culture" (69). She further notes that "It is a short step from discussions of medieval architecture or 'Afghan warlords' to a focus on Afghanistan's 'medieval culture' in need of external intervention" (69). This kind of narrative arc serves a number of purposes. First, it builds upon or reinforces existing tropes about Afghanistan, and particularly those views or perspectives inherited from the Victorian period. Secondly, it makes good copy, particularly when a foreign correspondent, often wearing body armour, is pictured in front of some ancient ruin or surrounded by Afghans in exotic garb. And thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, such a narrative provides a convincing argument for what Fowler describes as an ideological imperative "to impose technologically-driven modernity" on such a society. Hence, the fact that Afghanistan is mediievally poor provides justification for foreign intervention. Equally important, focus on the country's material poverty

⁷ "Taleban" is the spelling used by many British writers.

reinforces the notion of cultural backwardness. It thus is no surprise that so much of the donor fuelled (and, indeed donor driven) development since 2001 has focused on the trappings of modern governance, human rights, girls' schooling, and maternal health, all elements of a kind of *mission civilisatrice*. Interestingly, Fowler notes the inherent contradiction between the depiction of 'ancient' or 'medieval' Afghanistan and the detritus of modern warfare as "visual testimony to Afghanistan's contemporaneity," thus dispelling the notion of two apparently distinct and separate worlds (72). Afghanistan might be hostage to its recent past, but is not materially locked in time nearly to the extent featured in recent reportage.⁵

In *Chasing Tales* Fowler continually emphasizes the importance of "understanding how, why and when narratives consolidate or dissemble from tropes and narrative conventions associated with both Afghanistan and the sub-genres of travel writing associated with the region" (51). In addition to noting Kipling's pre-eminent influence on contemporary representation, Fowler points to "*Arabian Nights*-inspired commentaries" (53) imbued with a kind of Orientalist thought. Such commentaries evoke a blend of exotic romance and violence as well as a profound sense of otherness. Fowler claims that notions of *The 1001 Nights* have served to structure discourse about "the Orient" and,

in the case of Afghanistan, provided a ready resource for depicting an Afghan predilection for violence, especially violence with knives

⁵ For example, in 2001 Kabul, the country's capital, had only 12,000 landline telephones serving a population of some 2 million people. By 2015 the country had 24 million mobile telephone subscribers, with an overall penetration rate of some 75%. The phenomenal expansion of the telecommunications sector – a key source of government revenue – is frequently cited as a developmental "success" story. <http://www.budde.com.au>

and involving limb amputation. Though only the frame story of the *Nights* (Scheherzade) could be said to be set in Central Asia, the tales' focus on Muslim civilizations nevertheless provided writers and historians with a fictive repository from which to build up a picture of Afghan vengefulness and brutality, partly as a means of expressing the trauma of the 1842 massacre and partly as a means of demonizing Afghans in the face of persistent political threat from the North. (ft. 56, 228)

Fowler also notes that Kipling drew upon the *Nights* in his own fiction about Afghanistan: "Appropriating the tales for renderings of Afghanistan is ideologically significant, not least because the translated tales are a plentiful source of scenes of brutality" (ft. 56, 228).

Fowler contends, then, that contemporary representations of Afghanistan are crafted from an unsorted mix of *1001 Nights* fantasy and Kipling's fictional imaginings of the country and its people, blended unconsciously with more contemporary (albeit Churchillian) views of Islamic fundamentalism and the clash of civilizations. This amalgam, which never quite adheres, characterizes how writers and foreign correspondents have most recently presented Afghanistan – hardly the foundation for any deep understanding of the country, much less its current circumstances.

In addition, Fowler posits that an aspect of the gothic underlies contemporary representations of Afghanistan. She limns this gothic element, suggesting narratives about Afghanistan are haunted, "either by play of history,

the massacre of 1842, or the repressive collective guilt and trauma over British humiliations and violent interventions in Afghanistan's political affairs" (68). Fowler notes that throughout its history, the gothic has been a means of "displacing the hidden violence of present social structures, conjuring them up again as past, and promptly falling under their spell" (Fowler 69). In addition to characterizing (or stereotyping) Afghans, the frequent reference to Kipling's "The Young Soldier" in contemporary accounts of Afghanistan provides such a gothic undertow. Fowler's exposition of the resort to the gothic in contemporary representations of Afghanistan is very persuasive, including with respect to only veiled admissions in current foreign correspondent coverage that much of what has been attempted in Afghanistan over the past fifteen years has been futile, or that the most recent military campaign has been an historical echo of earlier battles – all of which ended in defeat. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 4, the element of historical haunting also is prevalent in Pashtu poetry, with its frequent patriotic allusions to Afghan and Islamic history, and particularly to victory in battles won.

Although Fowler convincingly demonstrates how post-9/11 representation of Afghanistan has built upon Victorian-era notions, she does not adequately address threads or influences of Orientalist thought. Fowler includes the works of Edward Said in her bibliography, but references Said's seminal *Orientalism* only in passing. While this is somewhat understandable given that her book, as per its title, focuses on the history of British ideas about Afghanistan, it is still a surprising gap, given that Orientalist thought or worldview is at least as important

as British colonial experience to how Afghanistan has been represented over the past 15 years. Fowler's failure to more thoroughly address *Orientalism*, at least in counterpoint to her Kiplingesque argument, is a significant shortcoming of her analysis, and particularly given that Said's later work, *Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, addresses many of the same themes or issues that Fowler considers.

2.2 Weaving the Threads of Orientalism

In the "Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition" of *Orientalism*, Said claims that he intended the book to be "a deliberately mediated and analyzed study" that "for all its urgent worldly references [would still be] a book about culture, ideas, history, and power" (xvii). In outlining his theory or conception of Orientalism, Said notes that the Orient – a generalized term that can include the Near, Middle, and Far East – "was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1). He also notes that as Europe's "cultural contestant," a Western conception of the Orient provides one of the "deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (1). Said outlines how Orientalist thought is rooted in a dynamic "of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (5), and contends that Orientalism has become a filter for how the West perceives not only the diverse countries, peoples, and cultures of the "Orient," but also for how the West approaches "what is a manifestly different (or alternative or novel) world" (12).

In relation to Fowler's focus on nineteenth-century notions, Said notes that Victorian-era writers and thinkers had "definite views on race and imperialism" (14) that became reinforced as part of a kind of Western presumptive intellectual authority over the Orient. In discussing what he terms "strategic location" and "strategic formation," Said posits that the accumulation or accretion of texts and textual genres addressing the Orient has resulted in "mass, density, and referential power" (20). He notes:

Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-a-vis the Orient; translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text – all of which add up to the deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient, and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf. (20)

Said then notes that as far as the Orient is concerned, "standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of 'the mysterious Orient'" (26), which can be characterized not only in terms of a dichotomization between stronger and weaker, with the Orient represented as "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'" (40). The essence of Orientalism, then, "is the eradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" (42), which, ultimately, is translated into a "political vision of reality whose structure promotes the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the

Orient, the East, 'them')” (43) – or, what Said later notes, is a kind of Western paranoia (72).

Said’s subsequent work, *Covering Islam*, has proven remarkably prescient, including with respect to how Afghanistan has been represented since the American-led ouster of the Taliban in 2001. In his introduction to the book, Said claims that the book addresses Western responses to “an Islamic world perceived . . . as being immensely relevant and yet antipathetically troubled, and problematic,” not the least because of “the resurgence of radical nationalism in the Islamic world” (x). Substitute “radical Islam” for “radical nationalism,” add in the War on Terror, and Said’s book accurately describes the West’s preoccupation with Afghanistan and its regional neighbours during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Said argues that the term Islam, as a kind of short-hand for alterity, “seems to mean one simple thing but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam” (x). Again, substitute “Taliban” for “Islam” to encapsulate a particular Western view of a cruel and medievalized Afghanistan. As Said notes, as events in the region have caught Western attention so strongly, the media “have portrayed it, characterized it, analyzed it, given instant courses on it, and consequently they have made it ‘known’” (x-xi). Further – as echoed by Fowler nearly thirty years later, and without attribution – Said notes that such coverage has given Western consumers of news “the sense that they have understood Islam without at the same time intimating to them that

a great deal of this energetic coverage is based on far from objective material”

(xi). Put even more strongly, Said charges the Western media with licensing not only patent inaccuracy but also expressions of unrestrained ethno-centrism, cultural and even racial hatred, and deep yet paradoxically free-floating hostility. All this has taken place as part of what is presumed to be fair, balanced, responsible coverage of Islam . . . there is an unquestioned assumption that Islam can be characterized limitlessly by means of a handful of recklessly general and repeatedly deployed clichés. (xi)

While Said’s comments are specifically directed to Western coverage of Islam, he addresses the same kind of historical memory-based allusion and blinkered or reductionist thinking that Fowler highlights, including through the use of synecdochic metaphor, such as the Afghan sport *buzkashi*, discussed below, or Kremmer’s use of Afghan (or “Oriental”) carpets as a metaphor for Afghanistan as an ancient centre of trade, with metaphorical aspects of both cultural refinement and unravelling. Said also accurately predicts the kind of slap-dash, seat-of-the-pants or off-the-cuff reporting that has so characterized reporting from and about Afghanistan:

Not knowing the language is only part of much greater ignorance, for often enough the reporter is sent to a strange country with no preparation or experience, just because he or she is canny at picking things up quickly or happens already to be in the general vicinity of where front-page news is happening. So instead of trying

to find out some more about the country, the reporter takes hold of what is nearest at hand, usually a cliché or some bit of journalistic wisdom that readers at home are unlikely to challenge. (xi-xii)

Mention Afghanistan's storied past, add in a bit of local colour, throw in some ethnographic lore, gravely cite the telling lines from "A Young British Soldier" and a budding war correspondent – or travel writer – has captured all the complexity of modern-day Afghanistan. An early paragraph in Kim Barker's *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (originally published in 2010 under the title *The Taliban Shuffle*) amply illustrates this approach:

Afghanistan was the so-called Graveyard of Empires, a pitiless mass of hard mountains and desert almost the size of Texas that had successfully repelled invaders like the Brits and the Soviets and seemed amenable only to the unforgiving people born to it. Men learned to fight like they learned to breathe, without even thinking. They fought dogs, they fought cocks. They fought tiny delicate birds that fit in a human hand and lived in a human coat pocket, and they bet on the results. They fought wars for decades until no one seemed to remember quite what they were fighting for. The national sport was essentially a fight, on horseback, over a headless calf or goat. Over the years, whenever Afghan men would tell me that they were tired of fighting, looking weary and creased, I would have only one response. Sure you are. (7)

In *Covering Islam* Said notes that “Islam” has always represented a kind of existential menace or threat to Western civilization:

It is no accident that the turbulence and the upheavals which are now taking place in the Muslim world (and which have more to do with social, economic, and historical factors than they do unilaterally with Islam) have exposed the limitations of simple minded Orientalist clichés about “fatalistic” Muslims without at the same time generating anything to put in their place except nostalgia for the old days, when European armies ruled almost the entire Muslim world. (xii)

Similarly he notes (and this in is the 1980s)

that in the West there has been a consensus on “Islam” as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world’s new political, social, and economic patterns. For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism. In all camps, however, there is agreement that even though little enough is known about the Islamic world there is not much to be approved of there. (xv)

Again, substitute “Taliban” (or, indeed, ISIS, or ISIL, or Daesh – or even Afghanistan) for “Islam,” and we see the combination of abhorrence and fear that has justified Western intervention in Afghanistan.⁸ As Said notes, “Islam’ seems

⁸ The Islamic State (IS) is a movement pledged to the establishment of a “caliphate”, a state governed in accordance with Islamic law, or Sharia, by God’s deputy on Earth, or caliph. The movement also is referred to as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or Daesh, which is an acronym for the Arabic name with which the

to engulf all aspects of the diverse Muslim world, reducing them all to a special malevolent and unthinking essence. Instead of analysis and understanding as a result, there can be for the most part only the crudest form of us-versus-them” (8).

Covering Islam was written in the wake of the Iranian revolution, with Said claiming, “Never before has an international trouble spot like Iran been covered so instantaneously and so regularly as it has by the media: Iran has therefore seemed to be *in* American lives, and yet deeply alien from them, with an unprecedented intensity” (25). He could have made the same comment about post 9-11 Afghanistan, although with the added complication that after more than two decades of a kind of blind neglect resulting from the country’s relative isolation, Afghanistan wasn’t just Other, it also was unknown. The combination of the two contributed to a decade of reportage marked by resort to easy stereotypes; conventional, if perceived wisdom; and hackneyed, oft-repeated metaphor – what Said alternately describes as “a limited series of crude, essentialized caricatures” (26) or “aggressive hyperbole” (108), notions he first introduced in *Orientalism*. This has resulted in little new knowledge about the country, and has contributed to a generalized failure to provide additional insight or to accurately present the reality of Afghanistan’s current circumstances. Furthermore, as Said notes with respect to western coverage of Islam, the Western narrative for Afghanistan “has generally proceeded not only from

movement refers to itself: *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq wa al-Sham*. Those in the movement apparently detest Western use of the acronym because it sounds similar to the Arabic word *daes*, which means “someone who crushes something underfoot”, and also *dahes*, which is “someone who sows discord”. See: BBC, “What is Islamic State?” and CBC, “‘Daesh’ adopted as new name for ISIS by U.S., France.”

dominance and confrontation but also from cultural antipathy” (155) – a further prescription for misrepresentation.⁶

2.3 Understanding Afghanistan

In sum, then, contemporary representations of Afghanistan are much rooted in 19th century British conceptions of the country, often stemming from Kipling’s exotic, Orientalized characterization of the country and its people. This characterization also privileges narratives that emphasize Afghan violence, with frequent references to lack of modernity or even the medieval nature of Afghan life. Rather than focus on context, including Western involvement or culpability in Afghanistan’s current circumstances, recent narratives about Afghanistan tend to depict Afghan insurgent forces as insensately violent and, by virtue of their Islamic zeal, implacably Other. In addition to providing a basis for an overall narrative or representation, such a portrayal also provides an ideological justification for those engaged in the War on Terror to assume their own jihadist-like efforts to recast Afghan society in Western guise.

In addition, there has been a kind of inherited tendency to refer to earlier writing about Afghanistan as perceived truth. Thus, as Fowler’s book explores, there is a clear legacy of nineteenth-century contexts and ideas that carry over to late twentieth- and early twenty-first century writing about Afghanistan, with

⁶ Said’s overall conclusion in *Covering Islam* is again eerily prescient, and particularly in the context of the al Qaeda and Taliban associated War on Terror and the more recent rise of ISIS: “If the history of knowledge about Islam in the West has been too closely tied to conquest and domination, the time has come for these ties to be severed completely. About this one cannot be too emphatic. For otherwise we will not only face protracted tension and perhaps even war, but we will offer the Muslim world, its various societies and states, the prospect of many wars, unimaginable suffering, and disastrous upheavals, not the least of which would be the birth of an “Islam” fully ready to play the role prepared for it by reaction, orthodoxy, and desperation. By even the most sanguine of standards, this is not a pleasant possibility” (164).

historical memory of past battles merging, almost as a recurring nightmare, with the so-called “War on Terror” and its decidedly anti-Islamic cast. As Fowler notes, “In historically imprecise twentieth and twenty-first century imaginations these traumatic memories have become partially dislodged from their original context of attempted British conquest and displaced onto contemporary Afghanistan in the form of generalized myths about war-like Afghans” (9). There is ample evidence to support Fowler’s contention, in that few contemporary accounts of Afghanistan are devoid of characterizations of Afghan vengeance or brutality.

As noted above, narrative authority is a key element of how Afghanistan has been described and interpreted. Many works have relied on historical palimpsest as a narrative tool, with some writers self-referentially tracing the steps of much earlier conquerors or explorers, such as Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, or Babur. Others, such as Robert Byron, have figuratively or literally excavated the palimpsest of the country’s storied past to exoticize their travel narratives, which are less about Afghanistan than the authors’ often shallow experience of the country, and usually with a focus on the country’s alterity. Some slavishly quote anterior works in an attempt to give borrowed depth to their often thinner contemporary narratives. Fowler notes that “in the quest for knowledge about Afghanistan after 2001, republished [ethnographic] studies are imbued with a specific form of authority” (87). Thus, just as references to Kipling so prominently feature in contemporary writing about Afghanistan, modern writers are compelled to reference the works of Byron, or

Newby, or Dupree, whose ethnography and travel writing continue to influence representations of Afghanistan. Contemporary writers reference these antecedent works to establish their own narrative authority. However, the use of earlier ethnography-based studies is successful only – and then all too rarely – when writers use such information to generate their own insights, to probe more deeply into not only what (or who) has preceded them, interpret the Afghanistan that confronts them in the present time. It is to be noted, however, that generalized insecurity due to ongoing and even intensified conflict has largely precluded in-depth ethnographic study or research as well as even basic travel narratives. In 2016, any attempt to follow the footsteps of Robert Byron, Eric Newby, or Jason Elliot would be nothing short of suicidal.

Fowler also outlines how a number of earlier ethnographic studies about aspects of Afghan life gained new currency after 9/11, and claims that “Republication and reissue have specific ramifications for the authoritative status of ethnography about Afghanistan” (87). She details how too often, contemporary writers’ slavish reference to earlier ethnographic works signals “a tendency to look to outmoded studies of Afghanistan for anthropological insights (cultural rather than political) into the root causes of conflict fought on Afghan soil, and with little reference to any external dynamic” (87). Once again, there is a wholesale borrowing of earlier thought to describe rather than to interpret new circumstances.

A prime example of how anterior and sometimes dated ethnography provides narrative “weight” to contemporary reportage about Afghanistan is the

frequent use of the Afghan game of *buzkashi* as a metaphor for “ongoing Afghan political control and chaos” (87). *Buzkashi* (literally “goat dragging” in Persian) is a traditional Central Asian sport in which horse-mounted players, loosely on teams but very much in an “every man for himself” style, attempt to drag a headless goat or calf carcass toward a goal post. The game, which can extend over a period of days, is marked by the ruthless, often violent way in which it is played, seemingly with no real rules. Azoy’s 1983 book, *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*, compares the cut and thrust of Afghan politics to a *buzkashi* match. The book was reprinted in 2003 as part of the demand for knowledge about the country, with the metaphor since becoming a standard trope to explain the Afghan game of politics or, indeed, wider Afghan culture. The metaphor is key to a subsequent work by Tamin Ansary, *Games Without Rules*, which further explores Afghan political life. In a January 2013 *Christian Science Monitor* interview, Ansary explained his use of the metaphor: “It’s not exactly about winning. Nobody was counting how many times they’d won a game. Instead, it was a platform for individuals to gain prestige, manifest their charisma, and gain followers. It was about how you’d handled yourself during the game, manifesting your manliness, your courage, your honor” (Ansary qtd. in Dotinga). Here, then, there is the truly mixed metaphor conflating Afghan culture and politics with a Kiplingesque description of Afghan masculinity.

As Fowler notes, the *buzkashi* metaphor “has retained its currency as an authoritative discourse rather than being discredited as ‘bad’ ethnography” (95). Indeed, nearly every serious modern writer about Afghanistan is compelled to

colourfully relate his or her own viewing of an actual *buzkashi* match as part of their attempt to explain Afghanistan to Western audiences. For example, in a 2010 Los Angeles Times article, “Afghans love to get their goat in rough national sport,” Tony Perry writes, “leaders are men who can seize control by means foul and fair and then fight off their rivals. The *buzkashi* rider does the same” (Perry). More recently, the *buzkashi* metaphor has been used to describe the process through which the opposing elements of Afghanistan’s National Unity Government – forged in late 2014 out of a fraudulent electoral process and subsequent lengthy mediation by the U.S. Secretary of State – have played a partisan, zero-sum game in negotiating each and every cabinet appointment and with rancorous debate about every policy decision.

The *buzkashi* metaphor seems apt, in that it seemingly links two aspects of Afghan culture. But on closer examination it might be equally applicable to politics anywhere, in that all societies recognize politics as a dirty game, where “rules” can be less important than the “cut and thrust” exercised by political actors. Hence, while the metaphor may, indeed, have validity in describing “the turbulence and subtlety of Afghan politics,” it likely is equally valid in describing politics in neighbouring countries where the game of *buzkashi* also is part of the culture (Fowler 87). Although the metaphor has considerable rhetorical effect, particularly in reference to Afghan warlordism, it does not adequately describe more important aspects of Afghan politics, such as ethnic and tribal loyalties or the complicated interplay of generosity and obligation or patron and client that underscores traditional Afghan society.

Perhaps Fowler's most important contribution to an understanding of how Afghanistan has been presented or represented in the post-9/11 era is her discussion of the importance of synecdoche, which she explains gained ethnographic currency in the 1930s when particular cultural "texts" were seen to provide clues to other aspects of the society in question. As defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary (9th edition), synecdoche is "a figure of speech in which the part is made to stand for the whole." In ethnographic terms, however, it is "the evocation of a social whole through representation of its parts" (Fowler 94), and thus goes beyond the implied comparison of metaphor to something approaching an overarching or higher level truth. In his examination of historical anthropological discourse, and specifically writings about and depictions of "savage" peoples by conquering races, anthropologist David Richards takes a less charitable view of synecdoche, which he terms "a familiar trope for representing otherness by describing a single cultural aspect which appears immensely significant as a key to the whole culture but which is nonetheless a riddle or seeming inexplicable event to the reader" (221). Thus, rather than providing a holistic view, synecdoche is more a three-dimensional wooden puzzle that only makes sense in its entirety. While the notion of synecdoche clearly has some appeal, and may work as a literary device, it is not a useful tool to understand – or fully represent – another culture.

As has been noted, in attempting to re-discover and interpret Afghanistan, Western commentators have fallen prey to the unquestioned repetition of antecedent views and attitudes. Unwittingly, they also have reinforced particular

tropes or stereotypes to the detriment of much in the way of new knowledge, insight, or understanding about Afghanistan. With little deep examination of the country's current context, including any real appreciation or analysis of what preceded and contributed to Afghanistan's current circumstances, those reporting about Afghanistan also have resorted to synecdoche and metaphor to provide the "easy answers" to the country's complexities. As noted above, *buzkashi* is a prime example of the use of synecdoche, with journalists and writers compelled to use *buzkashi* not only to describe Afghan politics, but to provide what passes as a wider view of the country and its people. The *burqa*, the enveloping garment worn by Afghan women to cover their bodies when in public, similarly has taken on synecdochic resonance in Western reportage about Afghanistan. Simple mention of the *burqa* has come to denote both the oppression of Afghan women and the threat of a return to Taliban rule. Frequently featured in writing about Afghanistan, *buzkashi* and the *burqa*, then, are both used to "explain" the country to a Western audience, but without providing any real insight or analysis into what or how they contribute to any deeper understanding of the country and its people. Rather, they reinforce notions of difference, of strangeness.

In examining the use of such metaphors to describe or account for contemporary Afghanistan, Fowler points to three ethical consequences. First, such metaphors assert a kind of stasis or timelessness, whereas history, as much as it may repeat itself, is dynamic. A second consequence is what Fowler describes as "the slippage from the literal to the symbolic that confers on the

anthropologist [or the reporter] the authority to generalize about a cultural rule, or rules” (97). Finally, and most importantly, she claims that “Synecdoche enacts a form of interpretive tidying up by identifying an internal cultural dynamic and shutting out the complex international dimension” of Afghanistan’s current circumstances (97).

Having outlined some of the ways contemporary Afghanistan has been represented during the past fifteen years, I question whether the portrayal has been anything near accurate and, indeed, the extent to which any new information, insight, and understanding about Afghanistan has been generated. This, in turn, begs questions about how the Western coalition powers have prosecuted their massive military, diplomatic, and developmental reengagement with Afghanistan and, ultimately, how such efforts, including attendant successes and failures, might shape the country’s future.

Chapter 3: Appropriating Voices of Afghan Women

*In secret I burn, I weep.
I am the Pashtun woman who can't unveil her love. (Majrouh 26)*

Although an increasing number of news and other reports emanating from Afghanistan now include reportage from a new generation of Afghan journalists and writers, Western coverage about the country, its people, and the ongoing conflict predominantly has been shaped or mediated by non-Afghans, and particularly through short-form articles filed by foreign correspondents. Because traditional Afghan society outside the country's rapidly growing urban areas is family-based, with Afghan females largely hidden behind compound walls or under headscarves, veils, or *burqas*, women, and women's voices, are either absent or all too easily ignored or discounted. Culturally prescribed barriers to male interaction with Afghan women extend beyond Western male journalists; in my work with Afghan civil society groups, meetings with community representatives are often sex-segregated.

In such circumstances, Western female journalists or writers are privileged, in that they have unique access to both genders. Western female writers note that they are treated by Afghan men either as honorary males or are accepted as a kind of neutral, perhaps even neutered, sex. With their access to both men and women, the accounts of female writers are particularly valuable. Such access, however, bears added responsibility, in that in addition to interpreting Afghanistan to the outside world, these writers also must represent that segment of the Afghan population that is mostly without voice. This chapter

considers how four Western female writers have attempted to include the voices or perspectives of Afghan women in their books. The chapter also examines how Western writers – both female and male – have tended to exploit, appropriate, or simply ignore Afghan female voice, thus unconsciously reinforcing the traditional, culture-bound constraints affecting Afghan women. The chapter also considers the ethical risk Western reporters face in appropriating Afghan female voice to present their own culture-bound perspectives or views.

Particular attention is given to British foreign correspondent Christina Lamb's 2003 *The Sewing Circles of Herat: A Personal Voyage Through Afghanistan* and her 2015 valedictory book *Farewell Kabul: From Afghanistan to a More Dangerous World*, given Lamb's long association with Afghanistan. It is to be noted that more than most other recent books about Afghanistan, Lamb's latest book attempts some overall reckoning of the West's current engagement with Afghanistan, although largely fails to unpack Lamb's own complicated relationship with Afghanistan and its war-weary people.

3.1 Exploiting Voices

Of the spate of books that appeared in the years immediately following the ouster of the Taliban and the launch of a massive internationally-led military and development campaign, Lamb's *The Sewing Circles of Herat* is one of the better, and more accessible works. Lamb's book is an account of what was then her already long association with Afghanistan, beginning with the time she spent with *mujahideen* fighters during the period of Soviet occupation, and ending with a number of visits in 2001 and 2002. Interwoven in the book is a useful summary of

recent Afghan history and, as is the case with much contemporary writing about Afghanistan, considerable detail about the country's rich and storied past. Similarly, Lamb judiciously refers to earlier writing about Afghanistan to honour the long tradition of Afghan travel writing and, reflexively, to burnish her own narrative authority. The book has a compelling "I was there" aspect as Lamb recounts being present at a meeting attended by Osama bin Laden, or how she spent a day in a mud-filled trench, under Taliban fire, with Hamid Karzai, the country's future president. The book details Lamb's encounters with a wide range of both notable and ordinary Afghans, including the exiled former King, various warlords, a Taliban torturer, soldiers, artisans, students, a Pakistani spy chief, and many others. Their narratives are presented mostly through direct quotation, although Lamb is silent on matters of translation or interpretation other than occasional reference to the "fixers" who facilitate the work of foreign correspondents.

An award-winning foreign correspondent, Lamb should be relied upon to give accurate voice to her interview subjects. Yet her recounting of her conversations with such a wide range of individuals seems highly scripted. While this partly can be attributed to the need to "translate" interpreted conversation into grammatical English, there is the danger of losing the original voices of her interlocutors. As a result, some of Lamb's characters – or subjects, given that these are real people – are rendered one-dimensional, with their words filtered or mediated by Lamb to advance her book's overall narrative. This is part of a

journalist's craft, but some of the dialogue Lamb presents seems overly manufactured.

Unsurprisingly, given the cultural context and subject matter of the book, the preponderance of the characters that people Lamb's account of her experience in Afghanistan – part memoir, part remembered or narrativized conversations – are male. To redress this imbalance, Lamb intersperses her mostly chronological narrative with “a handful of letters” and diary entries from Marri, a young female writer. Lamb solicited the letters – written over a period of several months from the end of Taliban rule to the establishment of the Hamid Karzai government – via a male Afghan colleague. The letters – which bore real danger for Marri, writing to a foreign news correspondent during a period of considerable political instability – were smuggled out of Afghanistan for delivery to Lamb.

Lamb cleverly uses Marri's letters as stand-alone chapters. One web-based reviewer claimed that “this clever formatting . . . provides for an enjoyable progression of the story, and allows readers to see the tragedy and triumph [of Afghanistan] through two pairs of eyes” (Mastel). The letters do break the book's chronology of recent (and not so recent) Afghan history and provide the book with an important female voice. The letters also are poignant, capturing some of the hardship Afghans, and particularly Afghan women, endured during years of war and the Taliban regime, and generally express the hopes and fears for a new era in Afghan history. Although it would appear that Lamb intended the letters – together with a concluding chapter that recounts Lamb's efforts to track down

and finally meet Marri – to anchor the book, the device is less than satisfactory. First, the letters present a curious mixture of youth and naivety – for example, Marri’s almost flirtatious admission that she always wore bright lipstick under her *burqa* as a form of passive defiance – with a degree of political sophistication and awareness unlikely for both the character and the time and place. As presented in the book, the translated entries seem both edited (in translation) and self-servingly mediated. Given that Lamb only meets Marri once, and then only fleetingly, the author’s use of the letters and diary entries is a contrivance that effectively exploits Marri’s voice to promote Lamb’s own journalistic perspectives.

The chapter describing the Herat “sewing circles,” actually secret schools and literary discussion groups conducted in defiance of the Taliban’s proscription of female education, is one of the book’s best, and rightly provides its title. Lamb’s “Afterword” account of her follow-up visit to Herat in the autumn of 2003, however, provides a depressing coda, with none of the bright, engaged women who managed keep their minds alive during the nearly four years of Taliban rule faring well in the new era of supposed freedom and democracy. One emigrated to Iran (where she became a successful writer); those remaining in the country fell into unhappy marriages or unfulfilling work, with others abandoning their literary ambitions as they succumbed to depression and suicide. By presenting their lives, Lamb gives Afghan women voice, but then seems to go out of her way to show that in reality, in their Afghan context, their voices, their lives really don’t matter. Lamb’s decision to conclude her book in this fashion is a brave one, in that it negates what otherwise is an inspirational human and uniquely Afghan

story. Or is Lamb, the seasoned war correspondent, intentionally using this sad conclusion to make other points? It would seem the latter, in that the final lines of the book provide an equally bleak pronouncement not by one of her Afghan characters, but by an American Special Forces officer: “What we do here trying to find the top [al Qaeda or Taliban] leaders is futile if we don’t do anything at the grass roots to stop recruitment and make life better for civilians . . . If you ask me we’re achieving nothing” (Lamb 339).

Given that Lamb, a distinguished war correspondent, claims the book as a “personal voyage through Afghanistan” it is odd that she offers nothing that indicates her own thoughts about the country’s future prospects, or how her deeply felt experience in Afghanistan and with its people marked or changed her. As a result, the memoir is depersonalized beyond journalistic reserve. Or, perhaps, she is unprepared to admit just how much Afghanistan had captured her heart.⁹

Farewell Kabul, a summary of Lamb’s two decades of reporting from Afghanistan, is an equally sad chronicle of failed Western political and military strategies: “What had started with hopes of a new world for Afghan women had ended with medieval black-hooded executioners, religious wars across the Middle East” (9). As Lamb writes,

This book sets out to tell the story, by someone who lived through it, of how we turned success into defeat. It is the story of well-

⁹ Such attachment to Afghanistan is common among those who’ve experienced the country. At the end of his book about his “travels in Afghanistan”, author Jason Elliot notes that upon leaving the country he “sat down . . . and began to weep” (473). Kim Barker’s departure was similarly poignant, counting herself among the “foreigners unwilling to fully commit to leaving Afghanistan but unable to figure out how to stay” (295).

intentioned men and women going into a place they did not understand at all – even though, in the case of the British, there was plenty of past history. The 1915 “Field Notes on Afghanistan” given to those heading out to the Third Anglo-Afghan War are full of salutary warnings, starting right off with “Afghans are treacherous and generally inclined towards double-dealing.” (10)

Lamb’s two Afghanistan books are very similar, with *Farewell Kabul* reworking many of the narrative threads presented in *Sewing Circles*. But whereas Lamb’s first book tried to interpret a rediscovered Afghanistan to an eager Western audience, her 2015 book addresses the missteps and failures of more than a decade of war. While *Farewell Kabul* paints a dismal picture, she stops just short of admitting the failure of Western strategy in Afghanistan, writing, “How it ends is yet to be told” (11). At the same time, the Afghanistan she presents is less a picture of the country and its people than the canvas upon which the West’s misadventures are painted.

As with her earlier book, *Farewell Kabul* is a skilful piece of reportage befitting Lamb’s long experience as a foreign correspondent. Again, she inserts herself into the story, switching between sometimes dense historical background and a more conversational kind of narrative, frequently using others’ words to make specific points or to present conclusions that she clearly shares. The book, with surprisingly few footnotes, is based on the thousands of interviews Lamb conducted over her long association with Afghanistan, carefully recorded in the notebooks she carefully amassed over the years, missing only a single notebook

lost when, embedded with the British military, she came under fire by Taliban insurgents. Lamb's use of direct speech, based on her field notes, propels her narrative. But as with *Sewing Circles*, Lamb never divulges her own fluency in Dari or Pashtu and provides no information about issues of translation or interpretation – although, to be fair, the bulk of the interviews Lamb conducted during her many Afghan assignments would have been in English.¹⁰ Lamb's story – and her own credibility as an informed reporter – is bolstered by the stories of the people she seeks out or otherwise encounters. Indeed, few present-day Western reporters have had such a long history in Afghanistan or the region, and can count people like Afghan President Hamid Karzai or Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto as both journalistic contacts and friends.

Lamb strives for objectivity, generally purging any sign of sentimentality, presenting what *The Guardian* reviewer John Kampfner described as “a journey through more than a decade of hell and futility, written vividly, with emotion but mercifully shorn of polemic” (Kampfner). Or, what John Arney of *The Independent* describes as “a spellbinding synthesis of analysis and highly personal reportage” (Arney). Lamb's 2015 book is not dispassionate, however; her narrative points to her deep-felt, even addictive connection with Afghanistan. At one point she mentions her “bruised heartstrings” (27) and also notes “Afghanistan was full of stories, and sometimes it felt as if my head would burst with the weight of all its woes” (408). Or there is her rare personal admission,

¹⁰ In *Farewell Kabul* Lamb notes that she “could only understand the occasional word” (409) indicating that she must have relied on interpreters when not dealing with English-speakers. That such conversations are rendered in good English points to a further level of mediation. As fellow Afghanistan author Christopher Kremmer notes in his review of the book, “The vignettes of her relationships with ordinary Afghans are, alas, hackneyed” (Kremmer).

dating from mid-2009: “I was depressed by my war. Everything . . . seemed to be going in the wrong direction” (433).

As might be inferred from its title, Lamb’s 600-page tome appears to be a final accounting of her long association with Afghanistan. As *The Telegraph* reviewer Patrick Hennessey notes, the book successfully distils “a vast and tangled mess of geopolitics, conflict, strategy and vibrant personal memoir into a single, readable volume” (Hennessey). The book provides a thorough accounting of Afghanistan’s recent history, and as in her earlier *Sewing Circles* recounts her encounters with warlords, politicians, foreign military personnel, fellow war correspondents, and ordinary Afghans, as well as the unsorted misfits, mercenaries, and missionaries drawn to places like Afghanistan. What is never clearly articulated, however, is any definitive coming to terms with a country she has come to know, and love. As a result, her otherwise masterful survey of the Western world’s most recent engagement with Afghanistan seems incomplete. Lamb clearly outlines how a brave, if wrong-headed attempt to fight terrorism and reconstruct Afghanistan as something approaching a liberal democracy has ended in ignominious failure. But she gives us no sense of any personal resolution, other than a kind of bitter regret.

As with her earlier *Sewing Circles*, Lamb consciously tries to include the voices of Afghan women to counterbalance what is preponderantly a male-dominated narrative. In *Farewell Kabul*, this takes the form of a chapter that recounts her initial encounter with women involved in the secret Taliban-era literacy and literature “sewing circles” and again provides a heart-rending

account as to how the women fared in the years following the Taliban's ouster. The chapter is among the book's most depressing, with a number of the women having been abused or murdered or otherwise trammelled by their abusive husbands and in-law families. None had realized their earlier bright promise, and few any longer had expectations of real improvement in the daily lives of Afghan girls and women. Lamb's account is compelling, but she largely withdraws from her reportage. A reader senses that she is disheartened and outraged in equal measure, but unlike in other chapters where she generally points to the failure of mistaken Western policies, or otherwise is ready to apportion blame, Lamb here provides little comment and gives no indication how the plight of Afghan women has affected her. Interestingly, Lamb makes no reference to Marri, the diarist who lends an Afghan female voice to Lamb's *Sewing Circles*. Did Lamb run into a dead end or, as earlier suggested, was the use of Marri's diary entries to anchor *Sewing Circles* a contrived literary device?

Farewell Kabul would be a stronger work if Lamb were more forthright as to how Afghanistan affected or changed her, or if she were clearer in articulating – on her own terms, and in her own voice – why she feels that the West's most recent encounter with Afghanistan has been so disappointing, even futile. The book's concluding chapter, "Postscript: War Never Leaves You" attempts a summation, but Lamb's comment "I am just sad" (598) seems inadequate, even when qualified by Lamb's depressing litany: "Sad because I really believed that things didn't have to be like this. Sad for all the hopes there once were, and for

all the lessons we did not learn from our ancestors and others who have tried to tame these lands before. Sad for all those lives lost or damaged” (598).

Although *Farewell Kabul* provides an indictment of all parties involved in the Afghan conflict, and their attendant catalogue of failed policies, at the end of the book Lamb seems more weary than indignant. Has she, indeed, ended her long association with Afghanistan? “As we flew away . . . I looked down over Kabul and knew I would miss it so. I could not have lived through this and just walked away. I have tried my best in this book to explain who did what and why, but this is a story with few heroes” (599). As with others touched by Afghanistan, including myself, perhaps Lamb’s reticence stems from a feeling that if one could only have done more, or felt more deeply, then things might have turned out differently. In the book’s final sentence, Lamb claims that “Pomegranates and plots and petty feuds were all in my blood now” (599) – a curiously removed comment to capture her decades’ long association with “that beguiling, benighted country” (Hennessey).

3.2 Appropriating Voices

I have argued that Lamb’s use of a young Afghan woman’s diary entries to give narrative structure to her *The Sewing Circles of Herat* was a kind of exploitation. The device allowed Lamb to give the impression of having included an Afghan female voice in her book, and also provided Lamb with a heightened degree of narrative authority. The diary entries, which seem somewhat mediated, allow us a glimpse into Marri’s thoughts, but do not convincingly provide larger insight, and particularly when Lamb provides little comment or interpretation of

her own. As a result, the diary entries become little more than a too carefully contrived device to give the book an overall narrative, and chronological, arc.

But if Lamb exploits Marri's voice, other female Western writers about Afghanistan have tended to appropriate the voices of Afghan women, using such voices to make their own, culture-bound points, and often without specific permission, in that there is little opportunity for Afghan women to confirm or otherwise validate the use of their words. As a result, there is a problem not only of appropriation, but of the authority or right to use another's thoughts and words, particularly when due to cultural and linguistic barriers, such thoughts and words may largely be inferred rather than directly stated.

One of the most contentious books written about Afghanistan in the post-Taliban era is Åsne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul*, translated from its original Norwegian by Ingrid Christophersen. Although Seierstad's book focuses on the lives of women in one Afghan family, Seierstad appropriates their voices – and even their thoughts – to present a damning view of Afghan culture.

In early 2002 Seierstad spent several months living with the extended family of a middle-class bookseller in Kabul. As a Western female living in what remains a traditional Muslim country, Seierstad had contact with all family members, including its women, and subsequently wrote a somewhat fictionalized account of their lives, with focus on how the family's women were oppressed or otherwise circumscribed by their patriarchal culture. The book does not present a complimentary view of either Seierstad's host family – “a family's dirty linen hung out for public gaze” (Hill) – or Afghan society as a whole. Indeed as suggested by

Conor Foley in a perceptive article, Seierstad's exposé represents an egregious violation of both Pushtanwali, the Pashtun code of hospitality, and the Afghan notion of "namos," or the status, purity, and virtue of women (Foley).

An anonymous web-based reviewer claimed that "Stepping back from the page, award-winning journalist Åsne Seierstad allows members of the Khan family to speak for themselves about their joys, sorrows, rivalries, loves, dreams, and temptations" (Bookbrowse.com). But do the characters she presents really speak, or are their voices more Seierstad's, based on what she understands (or chooses to understand) and as interpreted through her own cultural lens? It must be noted that only three members of the extended Khan household spoke English, and Seierstad wrote her book in Norwegian, so in addition to the question of voice, there are the filters of language – Seierstad gleaning and interpreting the thoughts and motivations of members of the household rendered in what only can be assumed was imperfect English, committing this interpretation to written Norwegian, and then having her words translated into English (and then other languages). Can meaning or understanding survive so many transformations?

Interestingly, although Seierstad serves as the arbiter of the entire Khan family, she mostly disappears in the book's narrative. We don't hear her conversations (or their translations) with family members; the only voices we hear are those of the family, channelled through Seierstad. If this is an interesting narrative device, and one that allows the family story to unfold, a critical reader should question how Seierstad knows what this character or that character is

thinking or feeling. Were the members of the Khan family really willing and able to communicate their innermost thoughts and emotions to Seierstad, or has she simply created fictive characters that represent her general impressions and perhaps limited understanding of what was being said, much less felt? How much of their soul-baring was “invented” to carry the narrative forward? By focusing on this one Afghan family, did she intend to represent all of Afghanistan and its people? How does she separate what she is told, or what she observes from her character’s culturally-rooted perspectives from her own equally culture-bound views? Seierstad addresses some of these questions in the book’s “Foreword”:

I have written this book in literary form, but it is based on real events or what was told me by people who took part in those events. When I describe thoughts and feelings, the point of departure is what people told me they thought or felt in any given situation. Readers have asked me: “How do you know what goes on inside the heads of the various family members?” I am not, of course, an omniscient author. Internal dialogue and feelings are based entirely on what family members described to me. (Seirestad 4-5)

Although Seirestad claims not to be an omniscient author, this is precisely the role she plays in the book’s unfolding narrative – an invisible but all-knowing interpreter and story-teller. In effect, she writes the book from inside the head of each member of the family, attributing thoughts and feelings to them, just as if

she were creating fictional characters in a novel. In doing so, she appropriates not only their voices, but their very persons.

Interestingly, few reviewers objected to the culturally judgmental aspects of Seierstad's book. The *Washington Post's* Mark Hertsgaard noted that "Seierstad writes of individuals, but her message is larger, and no one who reads it will be sanguine about transforming this very traditional culture into a modern democracy anytime soon" (Hertsgaard qtd. in Hill). Another anonymous reviewer (cited in the same article) found the book to be "an emotive indictment of a horrible society" (Hill). In subsequent interviews Seierstad maintained that if we can't understand the Afghan family, we can't understand Afghanistan. This may be true to a point, but can the portrayal of one Afghan family be extrapolated to hold true to a nation of 35 million people? If our own families were held up to such invasive scrutiny, would we be so ready to condemn all of Western society?

Largely due to the enormous attention directed to Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, and the paucity of contemporary information about the country, Seierstad's book quickly became an international best seller. Because of its remarkable success, members of the "Khan" family filed suit against Seierstad for "defamation and assault on character, family, and country" (*The Guardian*). In 2010, a Norwegian court ruled against Seierstad, concluding that neither Seierstad nor her publishers "can be considered to have acted in good faith to ensure they [the reported thoughts of one of the main characters] were correct and accurate" (*The Guardian*). In December 2011, however, a Norwegian appeal

court overturned the ruling, concluding that the facts of the book were, indeed, accurate.¹¹

The ethical burden of representation is highlighted in a 2010 interview with Seierstad during which she claimed that her book was not a criticism of the Islamic way of life – but that it “just reveals a lot about it.” As *The Guardian’s* Amelia Hill reported:

This, I suggest, is disingenuous – and dangerous. Seierstad’s outrage at the way women are treated in the book crackles on every page, but because she has written herself out of the narrative, her highly subjective account could be accused as masquerading as an objective report. There is a long pause. “I agree now that it is not possible to write a neutral story,” Seierstad says. “I don’t criticize the society with my words in the book but I agree, it’s there in the text anyway. It’s not an open critique, but it is a critique.” (Hill)

If Seierstad’s journalistic judgment and ethical reportage can be critiqued, her attempt to engage with Afghan “Otherness” should be credited. But in her attempt to play an intermediary role – to explain Afghan society to an external audience – Seierstad’s own perspective and cultural values and biases intruded, making her a less than objective interpreter.

¹¹ Having ultimately lost the suit, the real-life “Bookseller of Kabul” took revenge by self-publishing his own account of Seierstad’s perfidy. *Once Upon a Time There Was a Bookseller in Kabul* includes the appearance of a pair of Norwegian trolls with magical powers who agree to hear the Bookseller’s plea for redress – a uniquely mangled cross-cultural end to the affair.

In the same *The Guardian* interview-cum-article Seierstad further defends herself from such charges:

My project, my only goal, was to understand what was going on inside one of these families. I was there as a journalist, invited into their home to find out about Afghanistan. Should I, when I know something is not right, like the very way the bookseller treated his wives, say it's not important? Yes, it is important and I have to find out....It's important for us to know Afghanistan. It is a country where we waged a war and to understand people you have to dig deeper and there's nothing unkind in that." (Hill)

In another online article academic Faisal al Yafai takes Seierstad to task on this point, writing:

What, when writing about foreign cultures, is true, and what can be considered accurate? Here the idea of accuracy must mean something more than an adherence to the mere facts. It must mean giving, as far as possible, an accurate reflection of the conditions under which the facts appear. Seierstad's story is not the story of Afghanistan, but the story of one family....But how do you reflect a society that is not your own (al Yafai).

al Yafai also notes that the legal suit against Seierstad raised another important question: "How to trace that defining line between fiction and non-fiction, between something that really happened and something that could have happened? (al Yafai).

Although Seierstad's book makes for fascinating reading, it also is profoundly disturbing, and not only for its depiction of Afghan family life. In addition to an absolute violation of Afghan cultural codes, Seierstad abuses the hospitality of her Afghan hosts by taking possession of their voices and constructing a narrative that does not really belong to her.

3.3 Interpreting Voices

Anna Badkhen's 2013 book, *The World is a Carpet: Four Seasons in an Afghan Village*, recounts the author's repeated visits to a single, desperately poor village on the fringes of nowhere. Part memoir, part travelogue, part a book of ancient and modern Afghan history, Badkhen's beautifully written, if at times overly lush narrative crosses genres to provide a vivid, if often disturbing view of Afghanistan. Interwoven with a richly detailed palimpsest of the country's history, Badkhen provides careful observation of daily village life, centred around a village woman's year-long weaving of a single carpet, her family's major source of income: "Two hundred and forty symmetrical knots per square inch. Three hundred seventy-two thousand knots per square metre. One million one hundred and sixteen thousand knots in all" (262).

Whereas Lamb's books mostly recount her dealings with Afghanistan's "movers and shakers" or other colourful individuals she meets along the way, Badkhen focuses on life in a single destitute village. Her narrative is both personal and unvarnished. Like Lamb, Badkhen fully exploits having access to both male and female Afghans. Although Badkhen relies on her male interlocutors for much of her information about life in this remote Afghan village,

she also details her interaction with village women, with a focus on their difficult, hardscrabble lives. Badkhen's account of her discussions with the women of the village provides observations and insights that simply would not be available to a male writer.

Russian born, and obviously a gifted linguist, Badkhen does not reveal the extent to which she was able to communicate in local Afghan languages. Nor does she address how she managed conversations – including bawdy sex-related discussions – with village women. Although judgment – about male privilege, about the never-ending cycle of poverty, about the effects of opium addiction, about the war and politics – is never hidden, Badkhen to some extent keeps such judgment in the background, giving her characters voice, if not agency. The judgment comes more from an appreciation of Badkhen's careful description of mostly joyless lives on the very margins of civilization. Reflecting on the life of Ozyr Khul, a newly-married teenage village boy, she writes of his likely future:

A fate not so different from the fate of most men in Oqa, scripted by centuries of life and war in the desert: he would draw murky water by rope out of an open well seventy-five feet deep. He would never have enough to eat, and his teenage wife would grow old by her second child. God willing, the children would live past the age of five. His wife would weave carpets and support his family. He would smoke opium to take his mind off his tribulations. He never would learn to read and write. His honeymoon would last three days, and

then Ozyr Khul would return to collecting calligonum thorns under agonizing sun to barter . . . for oil and rice and wheat. (Badkhen 145-146)

If *The World is a Carpet* allows entry into Afghan lives, the book's Afghan voices are filtered through Badkhen's own worldview, although with less of Lamb's exploitation of Marri's voice for mostly narrative purposes, or Seierstad's outright and omniscient appropriation of her female "characters'" innermost thoughts. Hence, in recounting her interactions with the villagers, and particularly the village's women, Badkhen perhaps more successfully interprets, or makes accessible, some of what makes up their lives.

A particular strength of Badkhen's narrative is the way she presents the fixedness of the villagers' lives. She writes of what she terms a "friction":

I heard life unyielding . . . Perhaps I had come back for this: the unobstructed sky, the resilient candor of my hosts who wove joy out of sorrow, the seductive contrast between the ancient and the modern, between the unspeakable violence and the inexpressible beauty – even some dubious personal vastation that made me more alert to intricacies of life shaped within such precarious balancing. (Badkhen 13-14)

Writing of her seasonal visitation to the village of Oqa, Badkhen also writes of the palimpsest of time:

We talked about the conceit that Afghanistan exists outside time. It was true that the rhythm of life here may have maintained

unchanged for millennia, the seasons doled out in forever-repeating segments of lambing and fasting, of lavish weddings and meagre harvests and raids by foreign invaders. All were expected here in equal measure, like the passing of time itself. But the subtlest alterations, barely perceptible and seemingly superficial to an outsider – those were truly significant because they bespoke real, existential change to the substance of the land. (Badkhen 46)

Without relying excessively on direct quotation, it is Badkhen's observational powers that allow her to present the lives of the Oqa villagers.

If the books by Lamb, Seierstad, and Badkhen provide comment, and perhaps judgment, on the lives of Afghan women, Veronica Doubleday's 1998 *Three Women of Herat*, reprinted in 2009 with a new introduction, provides a detailed account of the lives of three quite different Herati women. Doubleday lived in Herat during the 1970s with her anthropologist husband, during which time she claims to have "eschewed (male) public life in favour of the 'hidden world of Afghan women'" (4). Doubleday spoke fluent Farsi, and thus had greater access to the spoken word, if not necessarily the thoughts of her protagonists. As Doubleday notes, "Unlike the journalists who report so negatively about Afghan women today, I was speaking Persian [i.e. Dari] with these women, and interacting without translators or mediators of any kind" (xiv). The book thus provides a fascinating, almost ethnographic account of the insular and family and tradition-bound lives of the three women, albeit during a time of relative peace in Afghanistan, at least compared with the thirty years of conflict that followed.

Claiming a more accurate representation of Afghanistan and its people, Doubleday's 2009 introduction notes: "It is my hope that the re-publication of this book will help to offset the misapprehension and prejudices about Afghanistan that abound in the popular Western imagination. It is important for people to know about life there during times of normality, before the traumas and upheavals of invasion and war" (xiv).

Indeed, Doubleday's book provides an important counter-narrative to numerous more recent accounts where authors, without such intimate access to the daily lives of Afghan women, fixate only on the *burqa* as a symbol of misogyny and oppression. "Ironically," Doubleday writes, "the symbol of oppression had liberating aspects for me, since it minimized the differences between me and the Afghan people. I was freer, less bothered in crowds" (65). At the same time, Doubleday confirms that she did find the veil to be a vehicle of oppression, a means by which men assert their power over women. "I experienced the way in which the veil breeds a submissive attitude in women: the lowered head and downcast eyes, and the tendency to sink into the shadows" (65). But, in an apparent contradiction, Doubleday continues, "I also understand that the veil is addictive; one quickly feels undressed and exposed without it" (65). Although most Afghan women don't have the freedom to choose whether or not to "wear the veil", Doubleday – or, indeed most other writers – surprisingly never ask Afghan women about their feelings about facial and body coverings. As a result, again Western judgment obtrudes, as with Doubleday's characterization of one of her subjects:

For me she symbolized the imprisonment of purdah; an intelligent, strong-willed and highly creative woman chained and smothered by an ignorant, bigoted husband. Had she been a man . . . would she have been jealous, resentful and malicious, poisoned by her own frustration? I could imagine her life as a man: free, out of the house, hard-working, responsible, pursuing her own interests. As a woman she bowed submissively, confined to domesticity and the labours of serving her family, her creativity stifled. She was not simply the product of her particular culture – frustrated women like her exist in many societies. Her inferior role, her struggle for her own voice and her submission to great outside forces haunt so many of us. (153)The books examined in this chapter – each written by experienced, empathetic, award-winning female authors – do attempt to give voice to Afghan women, but not completely, and not necessarily authentically. While Lamb, Seirestad, Badkhen, and Doubleday provide their readers with shadowed glimpses of the difficult lives of Afghan women and their families, their accounts more demonstrate the difficulty faced by Western writers in moving beyond Afghanistan’s essential alterity to understand, explain, or interpret the country and its people, and particularly its women.

Chapter 4: Contemporary Afghan Poetry

*On our native soil, the martyr's drops of blood
Are the red tulips of freedom's springtime.* (Majrouh 44)

Earlier chapters have considered Western representations of Afghanistan, where Afghan voices – when they've been expressed – have been highly mediated. In this chapter, we hear Afghan voices as revealed in poetry, albeit voices still somewhat mediated given the poems' translation into English from their original Pashtu or Dari.

Although the adult literacy rate in Afghanistan currently is estimated to be only some 34 per cent¹², Afghanistan has a very long history of literature, particularly poetry, with highly developed oral poetry traditions. Once a world centre of learning and literature, Afghanistan still has “a prolific culture of versification” (Devji 11).

As D. N. MacKenzie details in his 1958 article “Pashto Verse,” there are both literary and popular forms of Pashtu verse. MacKenzie claims that whereas Afghan writers tend to refer to the literary variant generally as ‘metrical’, “This is a misnomer, for though they follow the classical rhyme patterns, Pashto poets do not, indeed cannot well, obey the quantitative rules imposed on Persian verse. In fact, *all* Pashto verse is syllabic in nature” (319-

¹² In 2012, the Afghan Ministry of Education claimed that the national adult literacy rate (> 15 years) was 34 per cent, with 18 per cent female literacy and 50 per cent male literacy (up from an estimated 12.6 percent female and 43.1 percent male in 2000). In rural areas, however, where nearly 75 per cent of all Afghans reside, the situation is more acute: as of 2012 an estimated 90 per cent of rural Afghan women and 63 percent of rural Afghan men were unable to read or write and were without numeracy skills.
<http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/Afghanistan.pdf>

20). The different forms of Pashtu verse include the *tarana*, the *ghazal*, and the *landay*. The *tarana* is derived from Hindustani classical vocal music and, although a *tarana* can be read or declaimed as poetry, it more generally is performed as a sung recitation, with certain words and syllables based on Persian and Arabic phonemes rendered at a medium or fast pace. During its dictatorial rule and subsequently as an insurgent force, the Afghan Taliban has used *taranas* as a tool of culturally-rooted propaganda.¹³

A *ghazal*, meanwhile, is a more structured form of verse, traditionally invoking melancholy, love, longing, or questions of metaphysics. A *ghazal* generally is

composed of a minimum of five couplets—and typically no more than fifteen—that are structurally, thematically, and emotionally autonomous. Each line of the poem must be of the same length, though meter is not imposed in English [translation]. The first couplet introduces a scheme, made up of a rhyme followed by a refrain. Subsequent couplets pick up the same scheme in the second line only, repeating the refrain and rhyming the second line with both lines of the first stanza. The final couplet usually includes the poet's signature, referring to the author in the first or third person, and frequently including the poet's own name or a derivation of its meaning. (Poets.org)

¹³ A Google search of “Taliban *tarana*” provides a sampling of YouTube and other videos that demonstrate the Taliban’s skillful use of the *tarana* form to propagate its jihadist messages. Of equal interest to the videos are the various comments posted in response; the range of highly emotive reactions provides ample evidence of the propagandistic importance – both supportive and in absolute opposition – of this particular form of Pashtu poetry.

Because the “interlinked couplets do not have to possess any continuity of narrative or even mood” the form can be characterized by its ambiguity; indeed, “the rules of the genre require the *ghazal* to be read at as many different levels as possible” (Devji 16). As the result of this inherent ambiguity, the *ghazal* form – the most popular genre of poetry in the region – poses particular challenges to accurate, as well as aesthetically true translation.

Although Mackenzie (320) cites an unnamed 19th century commentator as having somewhat dismissed the *ghazal*, writing “Il n’ya rien de particulier á dire du *ghazal*: il a passé de la poésie persane dans le poésie indienne, et c’est là que l’ont pris les poètes populaires de l’Afghanistan” (“There is nothing particular to say of the *ghazal*: originally an Indian poetic form it became part of Persian poetry and from there was adopted by the poets of Afghanistan”). MacKenzie expresses more appreciation for this particular poetic form, noting its “very complex rhyming patterns” and “bewildering variety of lengths” (322). He notes, however, that the versification of a *ghazal* generally is subordinated to the demands of the tune, given that Pashtun *ghazals*, like *taranas*, are commonly sung or recited, often with musical accompaniment.

As for the various forms of Pashtun folk poetry, MacKenzie indicates two main categories: “The spontaneous verselets sung, we are told, at work and on the road, and those sung to the national *Atari* dance” (320).¹⁴ MacKenzie also

¹⁴ The *Atari* is a group, sex-segregated dance performed at Afghan weddings and other events. “The dancers form a circle and move in an anti-clockwise direction, bending their bodies and inclining to the centre to clap on the main beat, then turning outwards and holding a graceful pose, their arms delicately raised. Step, close, step close . . . They dance, bending inwards to clap and then leaning outwards, arms aloft, wrists loose and heads proud.” <http://books.google.ca/books?id=LooKUC0hLD0C&pg=PA15&lpg=PA15&dq=atari+dance+afghanistan&source=bl&ots=8vdoVeOPT8&sig=Vksf49JfDjVcCTA7aBYGVOjqxrs&hl=en&sa=X&ei=>

reports that like the *ghazal*, Pashtun folk poetry is “traditional and nearly always anonymous” (320). It is to be noted that the *landay*, the first of these poetic forms, is predominantly a form of female poetic expression, and hence is of particular interest given that the voices of Afghan women are culturally, and even physically, suppressed, at least in the public sphere (i.e. where adult males, and particularly foreign males, are present).

As part of the international community’s renewed engagement with Afghanistan, attempts have been made to understand the country’s cultural traditions, including its poetry. These efforts have resulted in a body of (translated) Afghan poetry being made available to a wider, non-Afghan audience. In particular, this has included *Poetry of the Taliban*, a collection of 235 poems written over the last twenty years by members or sympathizers of the Taliban, as well as recent collections of *landays*, folk poetry by mostly Pashtun female poets. It is to be noted that despite the stylistic complexity of other forms of Pashtun and Dari poetry and the total dissimilarity between the Pashtu and English languages, *landays* seem to lend themselves to versification in English translation – at least based on the collections of *landays* currently available in English.

As this chapter will demonstrate, poetry remains a key aspect of Afghan (and not just Pashtun) culture. Afghans know – and use – poetry as part of their daily lives. Poetry is used as aphorism, to express common sentiment, to invoke feelings of nationalist or jihadist pride, or even to make

[QnLMUtPpOoGO2wW19oGYCQ&ved=0CDkQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=atari%20dance%20afghanistan&f=false](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321111111)

astute political comment. Afghanistan's long and continued tradition of living poetry belies the stereotype of a country only slightly removed from the medieval.

4.1 Poetry of the Taliban

The 2012 publication of *Poetry of the Taliban* by Hurst and Company, an established British publisher, provides insight into mindset of Taliban and, to some extent, into larger Afghan (or at least Pashtun) society, in that while far from homogenous, Afghans share many common cultural values and practices. The poems in the collection were gleaned from Taliban websites and other media sources and while not officially endorsed or "owned" by the Taliban can broadly be seen to represent the movement.¹⁵ Collected by two Western journalist-researchers, the poems were translated into English by two young Afghans, one a medical doctor and the other a student. Although it obviously is impossible for a non-Pashtun speaker to gauge the quality or accuracy of the translation, the English versions of the poems are striking, sometimes for their literary achievement, but more for what they reveal about Afghans and Afghanistan.

In the Preface to the collection, Faisal Devji, University Reader in Modern South Asian History at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford, places the poetry of the Taliban within the context of contemporary Afghanistan, noting that

¹⁵ As detailed in the book's Introduction, "The older poems of the 1980s and 1990s were collated from magazines, newspapers and cassette tapes, transcribed where necessary and then translated . . . The newer poems, in contrast, are an almost complete collection of all those published on the Taliban's website between December 2006 and February 2009. In this respect, [the collection] is a representative sample of the different styles and themes as found in the post-2001 repertoire of Taliban poetry" (31).

From its origins in the Soviet invasion of 1979, the war that continues to wreck Afghanistan has also given rise to an extraordinary aesthetic consciousness. By weaving it into carpets [so-called war carpets¹⁶], photographing it in secret studios and commemorating it in song and verse distributed by way of CDs and cell phones, Afghans across the political spectrum have struggled to humanize a long and destructive war in an effort that bears comparison to the cultural productivity of the First World War in Europe. Poetry, which was probably the most important aesthetic medium of traditional Afghan society, has played a crucial role in this effort, and the Taliban verse collected in this volume represents the melancholy beauty of the old lyric as well as the moral outrage and call to action that is characteristic of modern literature. (14)

Devji also notes that the poetry in the collection exhibits a deep historical consciousness, stating: “Rather than seeing the war in Afghanistan as one example of an endless conflict between Islam and its enemies . . . this body of material possesses a far more nuanced appreciation of the past” (18). Devji’s comment is in no way surprising, however, in that Afghanistan is steeped in history. Indeed, as discussed in earlier chapters, historical allusion and palimpsest are constants in any writing emerging from, or about Afghanistan. Devji posits, however, that while the Taliban poets draw upon the country’s

¹⁶See <http://www.warrug.com/> and <http://www.google.ca/search?q=war+carpets+from+afghanistan&client=safari&rls=en&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=SvvLUqnrMuOf2QXoroHQBA&ved=0CDcQsAQ&biw=1651&bih=1015>

storied past, their poems also incorporate modern perspectives pioneered by nationalist and socialist writers in the twentieth century, resulting in poems that can be both lyrically traditional and fiercely propagandistic in a contemporary context.

The publication of the collection provoked a flurry of controversy in the Western world. For example, in an un-bylined article in *The Independent*, Colonel Richard Kemp, former commander of British forces in Taliban-dominated Helmand province, warned against “being taken in by a lot of self-justifying propaganda” (qtd. in *The Independent*). Kemp’s further comment – “What we need to remember is that these are fascist, murdering thugs who suppress women and kill people without mercy if they do not agree with them, and of course are killing our soldiers” – rather succinctly proves the importance of this collection of poems in terms of a Western perception of the Taliban (qtd. in *The Independent*). Kemp declaimed the publication of the book by a British publisher, stating “It doesn’t do anything but give the oxygen of publicity to an extremist group which is the enemy of this country” (qtd. in *The Independent*).

As a counterpoint to this argument, a 2009 essay, “Poetry: Why it Matters to Afghans?” prepared for the Program for Culture and Conflict Studies at the [American] Naval Postgraduate School suggests that the study of Afghan poetry offers Information Operations (IO)¹⁷ practitioners and analysts valuable insight

¹⁷ Information Operations (IO) are described as the integrated employment of electronic warfare (EW), computer network operations (CNO), psychological operations (PSYOP), military deception (MILDEC), and operations security (OPSEC), in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities, to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own. IO are actions taken to affect adversary information and information systems while defending one's own information and information

into the power of poetry within the Afghan battle space. The essay, apparently written by Afghan academic Wali Shaaker (whose name appears as a header throughout the essay, but without other attribution), claims that “Understanding enemy ‘narratives’ requires further knowledge of cultural tropes and values, such as poetry, which will inevitably help western forces compete with or counterbalance the insurgent domination of the IO battleground” (ii).

The essay provides “a primer into how Afghan insurgent forces such as the Taliban . . . operationalize poetry and create narratives that resonate with Afghan society” (ii). The essay is aimed at providing “the necessary tools and analysis to stimulate US and Coalition forces’ attempt to dislodge the insurgent stranglehold on the IO realm and to better enhance allied communication with our Afghan counterparts and citizens” (ii). While the essay “sheds some light on the way poetry shapes and mirrors Afghan’s [sic] outlook” (ii), it rather bizarrely suggests “operational use” of selected poetic phrases or aphorisms to reinforce key messages when dealing with tribal elders, so as to “remind Afghans that we also value tolerance and prefer peaceful solutions to problems – that we are in Afghanistan to promote peace and tolerance, not to instigate war and aggression” (11). The essay also suggests that publishing

inspirational pieces in the Afghan media would certainly support U.S. and Coalition IO missions, which is to instill a sense of hope and optimism among Afghans. We could also use such literary works to further solicit cooperation from the Afghans. Calls for unity

systems or rumors deliberately spread widely to influence opinions.
https://fas.org/irp.doddir/dod/jp3_13.pdf

and sacrifice could be more effectively articulated by Afghan writers, which could rather come from within the society, than from foreigners. Reading literary pieces as such could augment optimism among Afghans, and as a result, could lead to their active participation in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. (23)

It would be interesting to know how many International Security Assistance Force or Resolute Force commanders have used Afghan poetry in their attempts to convince village elders of their good intentions, or the degree to which IO is considered to have contributed to Coalition military operations.

If the 2012 publication of *Poetry of the Taliban* resulted in considerable international reportage – as well as often hostile comment, similar to that of Colonel Kemp – there has been little critical assessment of the poems themselves. This is unfortunate, for the *taranas*, *ghazals*, and other poems in the collection reveal much about the Taliban. If the book doesn't necessarily provide "an unfettered insight into their [the Taliban's] wider worldview", as promised on the collection's dust jacket, the book's Introduction rightly notes that

The variety of voices manifested in these poems allows us to finally escape from discussing Afghanistan only in terms of policy or security matters. The poems, each the expression of individual sentiment, endow the poems in question with agency, responsibility, and ultimately accountability as well. As such, they prompt us to rethink our assumptions about a movement that has perplexed outsiders for decades. (48)

Rather than engender (the term is used advisedly!) empathy towards the Taliban, the collection, and what it reveals about the Taliban, might contribute to what surely must be the first principle of military strategy: know thy enemy.¹⁸ In their introduction to the collection, editors Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn emphasize that the poems are, above all, about Pashtun, or Afghan, identity.

They also astutely stress that:

The question of emotional resonance is extremely important for the Taliban: without it, the poems featured in this collection would probably not be read and recited [in Afghanistan] as widely and as avidly as they are. Emotion can be a powerful motivating factor, even for the unaffiliated, and it is often discounted in analyses of who the Taliban are, or who among them does the fighting; their *emotional* response to the situation around them is a key part of that identity. (32)

The notion of Pashtun/Afghan identity – and the emotional response such identity evokes in terms of patriotism, nationalism, notions of honour, a sense of oppression or persecution in the face of foreign occupation, religious zeal, perceptions of otherness – thus underscores how this particular collection of poetry can contribute to a better understanding of contemporary Afghanistan.

The poems in the collection are categorized by its editors into six main

¹⁸ This aphorism is credited to Sun Tzu's ancient military treatise, *The Art of War*: "To know your Enemy, you must become your Enemy" and "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle." http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1771.Sun_Tzu

thematic groupings: poems written prior to September 11, 2001; lyrical poems dealing with love or pastoral themes; overtly religious poems; poems expressing dissatisfaction or discontent; poems dealing directly with battle and martyrdom; and poems dealing with what the editors describe as “The Human Cost.” or poems addressed to suffering and the consequences of war. These are somewhat arbitrary classifications, however, because few of the poems focus on only one theme. Rather, as Mackenzie notes about the nature of Pashtun verse, themes may be discontinuous, and a single poem may include temporal shifts and varied historical allusions that, while seeming to have no particular connection, impart significant and emotive meaning to an understanding Pashtun audience.

If the poetic sentiments expressed by these often anonymous Afghan poets may or may not represent those held by wider Afghan society – and it can be posited that to a large extent, they do – the poems certainly present actual (albeit in translation) Afghan voices rather than the scripted or narrativized Afghan voices that are presented in what might be termed the “blue *burqa*” genre, in the foreign correspondent influenced accounts of the “war against terror”, in political analyses of the conflict, or even in the first person (and sometimes fully Afghan) memoirs and sometimes self-serving (auto)biographies, written almost exclusively in English. As such, then, the poems and their voices provide an understanding of Afghan selfhood as a reflection of our tendency to instead see the Afghan Other. In addition, even in translation, the poetry provides

important insight into how Afghans – or at least the Taliban – perceive their world.

The poem “I will be commending your history” by Mohammad Zaman Mozamil, transcribed from a recording made during the 1990s, is a tribute to a fallen comrade, but also has clear propaganda intent. The poem’s jihadist sentiment is echoed in the refrain “I am crying for your martyred face, O you, soaked in blood” from another late 20th century poem (63-4). Meanwhile, in the poem “The Nation’s Murderer” (64-66), also transcribed from a recording made during the 1990s, it is unclear who is being chastised, but the two-line refrain after each single line verse exhibits fiercely nationalistic zeal. The poem also invokes a preoccupation with protecting the Islamic faith (or at least its Taliban-held variant):

God will punish you on doomsday

O murderer of the nation, why do you bring grief to Afghans,

You deserve hell, you will be going to the hot flames.

You are fighting against the holy Qur’an

O murderer of the nation, why do you bring grief to Afghans,

You deserve hell, you will be going to the hot flames.

Such zeal is similarly expressed in the 2008 poem “I am an Afghan Mujahed”¹⁹ (138-9), including the following stanza:

I am an Afghan mujahed, I am an Afghan mujahed.

¹⁹ Muslim guerrilla warriors engaged in a jihad, from the Arabic or Persian mujāhidīn, pl. of Arabic mujāhid, *one who fights in a jihad*, active participle of jāhada, *to fight*; see ghd in Semitic roots. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Mujahed>

Anyone who looks the wrong way at me will find himself lost for
ever,

Look, I am a known champion in history,

I am an Afghan mujahed, I am an Afghan mujahed.

We have the proper shari'a and believe in it at all times,

Shari'a is my light and I am light of heart in its light,

I am an Afghan mujahed, I am an Afghan mujahed.

With similar fervour, several poems in the collection mix sentiments of religious jihad with nationalism, particularly in relation to the presence of foreign (or foreign-backed, such as the often discredited Afghan National Army) military forces.²⁰ For example, the 2007 poem "Strong-willed" (141) is a combination of nationalistic pride and justification for jihad, specifically mentioned in the final lines of the poem. The poem also is notable for how it addresses a sweep of Afghan history, from the 19th century Anglo-Afghan wars to the Soviet occupation to the current US-led campaign:

Don't raise your head;

I am strong-willed.

Cruel man! Don't spread your dollars around,

I have a revolutionary religion.

You'd best be leaving now,

I have sons born of Malalai.

²⁰ While the Taliban, certainly, views the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) as collaborators or puppets, such a view is not necessarily shared by other Afghan citizens. Based on its nation-wide poll of 9,260 Afghan men and women, a 2015 survey conducted by The Asia Foundation found that 80.8% of respondents had confidence in the ANA, while 70% of respondents expressed confidence in the ANP (Asia Foundation).

Just ask the British,

I have an army like Akbar Khan.

Just ask the Russians,

I can tell you tales of war.

I made the Russians kneel;

I have daring youths.

I will sacrifice myself

for I have the shari'a of Mohammad.

Jihad is my path ahead

and I will be proud to be sacrificed.

What does the world matter?

I have Mohammad as my leader.

I devote my life to my religion;

I long for the day of judgement.

In similar fashion, the May 2000 poem "Victory's Sun", by Abdul Wasi Hasyal (68) serves as rallying cry against the enemies of the Taliban (and its Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan):

The sun of success has risen in the sky of victory

My Emirate's soldier has come up to the trench.

Dawn tells of the good news of life,

The sun-lit dawn has come upon the blossom of the gloomy
night.

It falls on the enemy from their high roof of arrogance,

The swordsman with sword in hand has risen in the east and in
the west.

We are faced with thorny ways in this thorny time,

The wounded have risen on the hill.

They ruined the palaces of oppressors everywhere,

Akbar's [God's] name has appeared on every Talib's sword.

The white rays of his success are spread by every sun,

O Hasyal, doomsday has come upon our enemy.

Although not a great poetic work in and of itself, this poem nevertheless is an interesting example of Taliban poetry in that it combines Pashtun poetic form with skilful propaganda, marshalling the faithful towards ultimate victory while at the same time shrewdly depicting the enemies of Afghanistan (and the Taliban) as arrogant, and living in palaces. The poem also demonstrates a convention of this type of Afghan poetry, with the poet identifying himself in the final lines of the poem as a kind of signature exhortation.

In the Preface to the collection, Devji notes that just as the western view of Afghanistan is shaped by British colonial experience and writing (as detailed by Fowler, and explored in an earlier chapter), "the role played by the Anglo-Afghan wars in this literature makes of the British an enemy so obdurate as to reduce both Russians and Americans into the palest of their imitators. So, if Britain could be vanquished, the reasoning goes, neither Russia nor America ever had much of a chance of victory" (Devji 20). Thus, references to Britain or Englishmen can ambiguously refer to all of Afghanistan's foreign occupiers, although recent

Taliban poetry frequently refers specifically to the Soviet Union/Russia (Gorbachev) and the United States (George W. Bush and Obama), and usually addresses their ultimate defeat.

The anonymous poem "*Ghaza*" (187) reinforces the notion of English (or foreign) Otherness:

The English are wandering on my soil,
Those red, red-faced infidels are wandering.
But it's a pity when I see
My Afghans wandering with them.
Cry for these widows and orphans,
Cry for my injured in the hospitals.
The legs of some and the hands of others are amputated;
Cry for my martyrs in the cemeteries.
I won't ever forget them;
A love of the Qur'an walks in my heart.
Those who were brokering the selling of countries,
The slaves of the English are wandering.
They play with my head today.
They are wandering with pizwan²¹
He taunts me today,
They are ashamed, wandering in the world.

²¹ A piece of female jewelry, hung from the nose.

The characterization of all of Afghanistan's foreign occupiers as British is repeated in the 2007 poem "Goodbye" by Alam Gul Naseri, in which the poet decries how "Englishmen have occupied my home" and "play with our dignity and chastity" (138), another emotive appeal to Afghan independence and cultural values.

Another 2008 poem "Poetic Speech" (124/5) is pure polemic, a summary Taliban rant against all that Afghanistan has become under foreign occupation. Without any degree of poetic subtlety, the poem provides another nationalistic rallying cry:

My God, what misfortune has fallen upon our homeland?

There is widespread robbery and wine-soaked "freedom".

There is disobedience of God and disrespect for the Prophet;

There is a life of ill-repute and misfortune.

We are the slaves of foreigners inside our own homeland;

Everywhere people think only of themselves; friendships are
made with Satan.

There is a distance between hearts, and friendships with
unbelievers;

There is luxury: what a strange republic this is!

There is insecurity: what a strange democracy this is!

Human worships human and the awkward activities of unworthy
people are going on.

The infidels are bombing the poor from every side;

Who is doing the spying for this to happen? There is disrespect
of the Qur'an.

There is the fluttering of dollars, slavery of the infidels;

There is our poverty, and friendship to the Western countries.

They are cheating us and calling it human love; there is a plot
against our religion;

Whether they be Pashtun or Tajik, Hanafism is our religion.

Our nation is Abrahamic, and against idolatry;

For those who are slaves, there is a defect in their faith.

This scream comes from every oppressed mouth,

Whether it's London, America, Denmark or Canada.

Whether it's Russia, France, the Netherlands, or Britain;

This is Mikhaeel's cry; may they all be disgraced around the
world.

The emotional tenor of the poem is blatant; it is a screed. At the same time, the poet's skilful utilization of allusions that resonate with any Afghan makes it a powerful poetic statement. For example, the sardonic reference to "wine-soaked 'freedom'" can only refer to Operation Enduring Freedom, the official name used by the U.S. government for the war in Afghanistan, and with a sly reference to the West's corrupt or debauched ways.²² The poem characterizes Western

²² Interestingly, the operation was originally called "Operation Infinite Justice", but because some religions use the phrase as a description of God, the moniker was changed to avoid offence to Afghanistan's predominantly Muslim population. President George W. Bush's remark that "this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while" certainly tended to reinforce a mutual notion of jihad.

military forces – or, more generally, all foreigners – as being godless, drunken, and corrupt. The reference to “disrespect for the Prophet” clearly refers to the many instances where Westerners, both in Afghanistan and abroad, have desecrated the Qu’ran – frequently resulting in violent anti-Western demonstrations in Afghanistan. In addition, the poem plays upon popular resentment about civilian deaths due to the foreign bombing campaigns – both by the Soviet Union and the U.S.-led coalition – and the imposition of democracy.

The poem “A Time is Coming” (69-70) by Sadullah Sa’eed Zabuli (also transcribed from a recording made in the 1990s) converts such sentiment into a revolutionary call to arms, using the literal and metaphoric white turbans and flag of the Taliban:

A time is coming, a change is coming,

A revolt of white banners is coming.

A white caravan of turban-wearers is coming from all directions,

They have the beautiful light of justice in their hands.

They are going to break the [Devil] horns of the cruel stranger,

The message of release from colonisation is coming.

A revolt of white banners is coming.

A later stanza gives assurance of victory, again combining revolutionary zeal with contemporary events, conflating the Taliban’s struggle in Afghanistan with strife in Iraq. Such fervour is repeated in the 1996 poem “The Islamic Movement’s Forces” (70), which in addition to the “white banners” [of the Taliban] also refers to “The Pharaohs of their time”, a frequent trope indicating oppression.

The May 2000 poem “Blood Debt” (71-2) is interesting in that it addresses both the country’s Soviet and Western enemies (specifically Britain and the US) framed in jihadist terms, with reference to Malalai, an Afghan female hero who rallied Afghan fighters to return to the battlefield to rout English forces at Maiwand in 1860; to 19th century British Governor William Hay Macnaghten; as well as the “Pharaohs”, or Afghanistan’s British, Soviet, and American occupiers. As with other poems in the collection, “Blood Debt” uses historical allusion and temporal shift to evoke feelings of both pride and defiance. The poem, “Excited Waves” (76) provides a similar nationalistic paean, referring to Afghanistan’s long, if bloody history, and culminating in the final verse, which also echoes the notion of palimpsest that so frequently appears in travel writing and political commentary about Afghanistan:

This blood on every bush,
These graves every few steps,
This is my proud history,
These ruined walls.

In like fashion, the September 2008 poem “On the occasion of the 89th Anniversary of the British Occupation” (126-7) provides a highly emotive and nationalistic tribute to the Afghan homeland – and to Afghanistan’s historic triumph on the battlefield. The 2008 poem “Daughter of the West” (153/4), meanwhile, is a strong example of purely jihadist propaganda that depicts the West – and by extension all Westerners – as both vile and the cause of “a showcase of blood” and misery, “the music of groans”:

A calamity has emerged from the Western gloom;
Blood is streaming in every direction; America has come out.
Heads are lying in every place, body parts are coloured red with
blood;
The gunpowder strip is red; Europe has come out.
A group of animals called NATO have come out;
The Crusader world has come out for the murder of Jesus.
They have ruined human villages; they are throwing bombs at
them;
They are taking out the roots of Islam; cholera has come.
They are sitting at Pharaoh's throne with arrogance;
Woe is here from the house of the oppressed nation.
A showcase of blood is presented along with the music of
groans;
The red daughter of the West has come out; she dances naked.
They seek logic from the barrels of guns;
This speech has come from the Western culture's text.
Talk with the language of flames; put steps on the fiery footprint;
O mujahed, endlessness has come from this platform.

This is a very sophisticated poetic work, a carefully constructed yet highly emotive mixture of historical and religious references and allusions as well as vividly rendered (even in translation) stereotypes that reinforce notions of Western immorality, arrogance, and inhumanity as evidenced by the "ruined

human villages” of Afghanistan. As in other poems in the collection, the allusion to “Pharaoh” reinforces the historical notion of an implacable, faceless, and ruthlessly unjust enemy.

The 2008 poem “Separation” (99) similarly expresses distress at the foreign occupation of Afghanistan and, in reifying fundamentalist belief in Islam, also reveals a kind of reverse Orientalism:

The cruelty of the cruel has fallen on me.
Someone has fried me on the spit of the fire.
I can't accept Western rules;
I have a good clear system in my shari'a.
God's law is the path of my life;
I distinguish between the East and the West.

Very few of the poems in the collection express anything other than complete confidence in the Taliban's ultimate victory. At the same time, the poems that the collection's editors present in the section “Discontent” do include poems that voice frustration over the country's difficulties, exhibited most clearly in a May 2008 quatrain (117):

The world today is better than yesterday,
Tomorrow will be better than today.
Alas, Afghans don't know how to go forward;
They are slipping backwards into dust.

This particular poem expresses more than discontent, stepping beyond more characteristic statements of national hubristic pride to reveal a deep pessimism

about the country's circumstances, injecting a rare and uncharacteristic sense of self-doubt in what otherwise is a collection of fiercely indomitable poetic sentiment.²³

If much of the poetry crafted by members or followers of the Taliban is strident or rhetorical, taking the form of militaristic nationalism or fervent Islamic religiosity, the poetry of the Taliban also can be biting satire, as in the 2008 anonymous poem "Condolences of Karzai and Bush" (118), presented as a wry love poem that also provides a shrewdly wrought commentary on the post-2001 Afghanistan-U.S. relationship. One can, in a somewhat different form of artistic expression, realize this as a kind of Punch and Judy or *Spitting Image* puppet routine, playing to the masses with comedic, but targeted intent:

Karzai:

O hello, my lord Bush;

Now that you are gone, who did you leave me with?

Bush:

My slave, dear Karzai!

Don't be upset; I am handing you over to Obama.

Karzai:

These words make me happy.

Tell me, how long will I be here?

Bush:

²³ The Asia Foundation's 2015 *Survey of the Afghan People* found that 36.7% of respondents nationwide said their country was moving in the right direction, down from 54.7% in 2014. This represented the lowest level of optimism recorded over the past 10 years (5).

Karzai! Wait for a year;

Don't come till I send someone else there.

Karzai:

Life is tough without you my darling;

I share in your grief; I am coming to you.

Bush:

As for death, we'll both die;

Alas, we'll be first and next.

Karzai:

Give me your hand as you go;

Turn your face as you disappear.

Bush:

Sorrow takes over and overwhelms me;

My darling! Take care of yourself and I will take care of myself.

Karzai:

Mountains separate you from me;

Say hello to the pale moon and I'll do so as well.

Similarly, sparing neither occupier nor puppet ruler, the 2007 poem "Slave" by Danesh (119) pours vitriol on Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's American-backed President. In a few short lines the poet, while chastising the country's President, invokes Islamic piety, nationalistic pride, and both Biblical and contemporary history:

Karzai! You sold the country for a few dollars.

As you are a wrong-doer, to whom should we complain?
In our beloved country, you spread adultery and wine-drinking;
Karzai! Really, you hammered the heirs of prophets;
Jews and Christians have come to this dear country of saints.
Karzai! At every moment the Prophets seems upset;
You jailed many religious scholars in Cuba's Bay!
Karzai! They are treated cruelly there.
When Danesh observes such cruelties
Karzai! Everyday he hopes for death while he prays.

Whose prayerful death is ambiguous: it could be that the poet Danesh prays for jihadist martyrdom; equally, however, it could be that he would welcome the end to President Karzai's rule, by whatever means.

Likewise, the poem "The cries of forty-one countries reach the sky" (154-5) is filled with rancour. In addition to its bitter bite, the poem is interesting in that it decries democracy – the rallying cry of the member states of the occupying International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) – as an alien and wrong-headed policy ill-suited to Islamic Afghanistan. The poem also is notable for its reference to Muntazir Zaidi, the Iraqi journalist who became an instant popular hero in 2008 when, during a Baghdad press conference, he threw his shoes at President George W. Bush, a profound insult in the Islamic world. The poem concludes

As you present a medal to the dog with a name;
Your insult in the shape of a dog approaches ghazi [warrior]
Amanulla.

Be prepared for Afghan accountability and that of Allah,
Your time will surely reach as far as the trash can.

Here, in one of only a very few instances in the collection, one questions the faithfulness or accuracy of the translation; the final line of the poem would be more powerful or evocative – in English – if “the trash can” had been replaced with “the garbage pit” or, perhaps “the dung heap.”

While also exuding bitterness and alienation, the 2008 “Poem” (156) also inverts Pashtunwali, the Pashtun ethical code that emphasizes hospitality and asylum, as well as justice, bravery, loyalty, righteousness and honour (including, supposedly, the protection of women, or at least a Pashtun male’s view of a women’s “honour”). The poem concludes:

But suddenly a guest came;
I let him be for two days.
But after these two days passed,
This guest became the host.
He told me, “You came today.
Be careful not to return tomorrow.”

While the poem could possibly be interpreted as bitterness over how the Taliban’s Pashtunwali extension of hospitality to Osama Bin Laden led the country to war, it is more likely that the poem refers to the post-2001 occupation of Afghanistan by the U.S. and its NATO (and other) allies. And, indeed, the now 15 years of Western military engagement in Afghanistan, and the attendant

insecurity brought about by a never-quelled insurgency, has displaced thousands in their own land.

The poems “Afghanistan is the home of Afghans” (165-6) and “Islam’s Heroes” (167) express a keenly felt sense of Afghan invincibility. The 2008 poem, “Home of Heroes” (170) invokes the frequently used trope of Afghanistan as “the graveyard of empires” (phrased as “the graveyard of the enemies” in the poem) to demonstrate how “The unbelievers have always been defeated on your [Afghan] soil”, and promising that “The white flag of faithful Afghans [i.e. the Taliban] will be hoisted once again.” The poem “Good News” (171) presents similar sentiments, but focuses less on Afghan bravery and invincibility than on the moral corruption and decline of the West:

These are the days of insolence and the White House’s collapse;
These are the days of the collapse of the infidels’ coalition.
The signs of disunity appear among these forces . . .
. . . These are the days when the Satanic armies are drowned.
Bush arrived impudently and wouldn’t listen to anyone;
His economy is ruined; these are days of happiness.
He didn’t learn from Gorbachev’s defeat;
He is disgraced in the world; these are days of shame.

While none of these verses are great poetic works, there nevertheless is a kind of mastery in how these Taliban poets repeat and repeat again the same themes and preoccupations but in ever-new ways with different, but always readily understood, historical or contextual allusions that play on popular Afghan

sentiment. Although many of the poems may seem to be one-noted, they strike responsive chords that resonate throughout their Afghan audience, invoking pride and national honour in the face of foreign occupation.

Indeed, several of the poems in the collection express resentment against what is perceived as foreign occupation or tutelage, as with the 2007 poem “Warning”, by the poet Turab (176), which concludes:

I am a Muslim who has been granted Afghan zeal;

I cannot accept to become your agent.

The cruelties of Bush and Gordon Brown;

I cannot tolerate this for Afghans.

Turab is speaking to all the kuffar [unbelievers]

I cannot allow you to remain in my country.

The 2008 “Pul-i Charki Prison” (186), by poet Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, invokes an infamous Afghan prison as a potent symbol of foreign oppression and ongoing conflict. A striking polemic, the poem is one of the strongest in the collection, blending Islamic and nationalistic zeal with incisive political commentary:

May Allah come down upon your walls, O Pu-I Charki

prison;

Fear has seeped out of your courtyard once again.

May your stones and foundations be cast into the fires of hell;

You put foreigners’ weapons on your shoulders to kill me.

Once again, cruel leaders turned their daggers red with our

blood;

Once again, the disgraced have brought the tanks of the Western
Satan.

The cloaked magician wanders like a beggar,

Trying to find some more forces to kill me.

The green parrots of the United Nations are mute;

Those who talk of Human Rights have sealed their mouths shut.

We are hooked up to our enthusiasm; look at our firm
determination.

We don't fear death, nor suffer pain from our wounds.

We dedicate our heads to Islam.

May death come a hundred or a thousand times on this path.

Ahmadi says, O Allah, take our revenge from them!

Or make us stronger than them, to cut off their heads.

The poems of the Taliban are meant mostly, and perhaps almost exclusively, for an Afghan audience. Whereas other poems in the collection require little explanation for a foreign reader – apart from references to historical characters and significant battles or other events in Afghan history, mostly addressed by the book's Glossary – “Pul-i Charki Prison” does demand some explication. The “cloaked magician” almost assuredly refers to President Karzai, known internationally for his sartorial flare, usually wearing Pashtun *peran tonban*, a loose pajama-like tunic and trousers, a green or purple-striped silk Tajik *chapan* over his shoulders, and topped with an Uzbek astrakhan hat (made from the fleece of an unborn karakul lamb), thus blending the dress of

Afghanistan's three major ethnic groups.²⁴ "Wanders like a beggar,/Trying to find some more forces to kill me" refers to Karzai's many foreign trips during the initial years of his rule to secure additional foreign military support for his fledgling government.

The reference to the muted "green parrots" likely conflates the camouflage uniforms of ISAF coalition troops with the United Nations which, at least to the Taliban, cannot be seen as neutral; indeed, the UN's pro-democracy, pro-human rights, pro-women's rights stance and its close collaboration and proactive engagement in electoral processes and state-building renders the UN less than impartial in the Taliban's efforts to reinstate its Islamic Emirate. The line "We dedicate our heads to Islam" could be another mis-translation, in that "hearts" would be a more conventional expression of devotion. However, it foreshadows the poem's final line, which refers to an increasingly preferred means to execute one's enemies (and with gruesome cell-phone videos of such beheadings often accompanied by sung *taranas*).

Another strong poem in the collection is the anonymous "The young bride was killed here" (197-8) dating from August 2008. The poem takes as its inspiration a well-known (and since repeated) incident where a Coalition bombing/drone strike, supposedly targeting insurgents, instead killed several members of an Afghan wedding party.²⁵ Once again, the poem skilfully mixes pity

²⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/31/world/a-nation-challenged-celebrity-conducting-diplomacy-with-flair-and-a-cape.html>

²⁵ See BBC. "Roadside bomb kills 18 wedding guests in Afghanistan"; Engelhardt, Tom. "The Wedding Crashers: US Jets Have Bombed Five Communities in Afghanistan"; and Wafa, Abdul Waheed and John F. Burns. "U.S. Airstrikes Reported to Hit Afghan Wedding."

for ordinary Afghans brutalized by war with scorn for “The slaves of the English” – the Afghan army – here depicted as shamed collaborators. As with other poems in the collection, foreign forces are here characterized as “Pharaoh”, reinforcing the historical notion of an implacable, faceless, and unjust enemy. This poem is perhaps the most emotive in the entire collection, including for its ironic reference to human rights. The poem also is a skilful piece of propaganda, building on a widely held sense of righteous outrage: “Because they have killed our relatives”.

The dust jacket for this extraordinary collection of Taliban verse claims that it is the poems’ “impassioned descriptions – sorrowfully defeated and enraged, triumphant, bitterly powerless or biting satirical – and not the austere arguments of myriad analysts that will ultimately define and endure as a record of the war in Afghanistan” (dust jacket). If this statement is somewhat hyperbolic, the further assertion that “Taliban poetry is concerned not with politics, but with identity, and a full, textured, deeply conflicted humanity” does need to be questioned. While a proud Afghan (or Pashtun) identity certainly is at the forefront of many of the poems, the majority of the poems in the collection demonstrate the kind of unquestioning, fundamentalist zeal for which the Taliban is noted. At the same time, several of the poems in the collection do present the

Although Western media reports about the Afghanistan conflict ubiquitously refer to the “blood and treasure” expended by ISAF coalition countries, and maintain a body count of Western soldiers killed in Afghanistan, there has been less attention to civilian casualties; the United Nations only began systematically documenting civilian casualties in 2009. A February 2016 UNAMA report cites 21,323 civilian deaths and 37,413 injuries in the seven years to end-2015. In 2015, 62% of the 3,545 non-combatant deaths and 7,457 injuries were attributed to “anti-Government elements”, largely as the result of suicide bombings or other attacks.

more human faces of those associated with the Taliban as a political movement, as well as an expression of Pashtun culture. Thus, as Devji indicates in his Preface, “Now that the coalition forces are preparing to withdraw from Afghanistan without achieving any of their goals, such arguments are about to fall silent in any case, and a new society will have to be built from the kind of consciousness that is on display in this and other poems that may be said to constitute the literature of the Taliban” (11). Devji claims that the poems in the collection represent a truth “so simple as to be unanswerable” (11). While this significantly overstates the importance of the poetry of the Taliban, the collection does make an important contribution to the post-9/11 representation of Afghanistan and its peoples, as well as to Western understanding of the Taliban as a political and cultural entity.

In one of the more thoughtful reviews of the collection, commentator Robin Yassin-Kassab of *The Guardian* defended its publication as “a brave and very useful project. It offers the reader a perspective on the conflict through the Other’s eyes. It offers the human element, and as such is worth more than a library-full of cold [political] analysis . . . The emotions are true in the poets’ hearts, and in those of their original audiences, even if they appear strange to Western minds” (Yassin-Kassab). In summing up the collection, he notes, “The book’s complex interplay of modernity and tradition, puritanism and sensuality, parochialism and globalism, is fascinating, and many of the poems are fascinating in their own right, as works of art” (Yassin-Kasab).

Contemporary Pashtun verse is not limited, however, to white turbaned Talibs.²⁶ A 16 August 2013 *New York Times* article by Azam Ahmed profiled Matiullah Turab, a Kandahar garage mechanic and one of Afghanistan's most famous living Pashtun poets (Azam Ahmed). According to the article, "With his unflinching words, Mr. Turab, 44, offers a voice for Afghans grown cynical about the war and its perpetrators: the Americans, the Taliban, the Afghan government, Pakistan" (Azam Ahmed):

War has turned into a trade

Heads have been sold

As if they weigh like cotton,

And at the scale sit such judges

Who taste the blood, then decide the price. (Azam Ahmed)

As indicated in the article, taped versions of Turab's poems have spread virally, especially among his fellow ethnic Pashtuns. Remarkably, the poet is all but illiterate, constructing his poems in his head while working in his motor garage, and then relying on memory to declaim the verses, with others recording his recitations. Although fiercely Pashtun – proud ethnicity being a characteristic of most Afghans – Turab has no love for the Taliban, excoriating them as follows:

O graveyard of skulls and oppression

Rip this earth open and come out

They taunt me with your blood,

²⁶ As noted in collection's Glossary (224), *Talib* is the singular form of Taliban. Literally "one who has knowledge", it refers to a religious scholar (primarily used for the Sunni clergy) who has been educated in the religious "sciences" (the *Qur'an*, the *sunna*, and the *hadiths*, etc.).

And you lie intoxicated with thoughts of virgins. (Azam Ahmed)²⁷

The *New York Times* article notes that even though Turab's "social affiliations are narrow and divisive, his poetry has mass appeal. Mr. Turab reserves his charity for ordinary Afghans, weighed down by the grinding corruption and disappointment that have come to define the last decade of their lives" (Azam Ahmed). The article further notes that in Afghanistan "poetic aphorisms are woven into everyday talk, embraced by Afghans from all walks of life. In pockets of Kabul, it is not uncommon to see men hunched together as they transfer audio files of readings over Bluetooth from one cellphone to another" (Azam Ahmed).

4.2 Afghan Women's Poetry

Although the majority of the poets cited in the collection *Poetry of the Taliban* are male, there also is a strong tradition of Pashtun female poetry, particularly of *landays*, whose literal translation from Pashtu is "the short one" or, alternatively, a "short, poisonous snake". *Landays* resemble Japanese haiku in their strict adherence to a set number of syllables and lines. Given the prevalence of illiteracy in Afghanistan, the *landay* is a mostly oral form, meant to be recited or sung, often accompanied by a small hand drum. Griswold characterizes the poetic form as "folk couplets" (Griswold 3), or "an oral and often anonymous scrap of song created by and for mostly illiterate people" (3). An ancient form of poetry, dating back to the time of Silk Road caravans, the

²⁷ It is commonly believed that those who martyr themselves for their religion, including suicide bombers, will be met in heaven by black-haired virgins. For an interesting background on such interpretation of the Qu'ran, see: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/04/opinion/martyrs-virgins-and-grapes.html>

tradition has not, until recently, been available to Western audiences. 2003 saw the publication of *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, a collection of poems, mostly *landays*, by anonymous Pashtun poets first translated into French by Sayd Bahodine Majrouh, a famous Afghan male poet, and then subsequently translated into English by Marjolijn de Jager of New York University's Translation Department. Even though twice removed from their original Pashtun, the translated *landays*, as well as Majrouh's detailed explication, provide further insight into Pashtun culture, and particularly the circumstances and perspectives of Pashtun women. More recently, a collaboration between American poet and journalist Eliza Griswold and British photojournalist Seamus Murphy brought new attention to Pashtun women's poetry, including through a June 2013 issue of the on-line *Poetry Magazine* that was devoted solely to the *landays* collected and translated by Griswold and illustrated by Murphy's starkly beautiful photographic images.²⁸ Griswold subsequently published the collection in book form under the title *I Am the Beggar of the World: Landays from Contemporary Afghanistan*.

As noted in the book's introductory chapter:

A *landay* has only a few formal properties. Each has twenty-two syllables: nine in the first line, thirteen in the second. The poem ends with the sound "ma" or "na". Sometimes they rhyme, but more often not. In Pashto, they lilt internally from word to word in a kind of two-line lullaby that belies the sharpness of their content, which

²⁸ A short video on Pashtun *landays*, based on the collaboration between Griswold and Murphy, can be found on YouTube as follows: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XMIT9ST4n8>

is distinctive not only for its beauty, bawdiness, and wit, but also for the piercing ability to articulate a common truth about war, separation, homeland, grief, or love. Within these five main tropes, the couplets express a collective fury, a lament, an earthy joke, a love of home, a longing for the end of separation, a call to arms, all of which frustrate any facile image of a Pashtun woman as nothing but a mute ghost beneath a blue *burqa*. (3)

Like the *ghazals* and *taranas* of classical Afghan poetry, then, as well as the poetry of the Taliban, Pashtun women use *landays* to articulate a range of themes, including romantic and even sexualized love, natural beauty, patriotism, male and female honour, exile, faith, and battle and death. Although a quite different poetic form, some of the *landays* in the collections above can be compared to the *ghazals* and *taranas* of the Taliban.

For example, the following *landay* emphasizes the importance of bravery, but from a female perspective:

Who will you be but a brave warrior,
you who've drunk the milk of a Pashtun mother? (107)

Or this invective, almost spit in bitter, but helpless derision:

May God destroy the White House and kill the man
Who sent U.S. cruise missiles to burn my homeland. (121)

Or this less bitter, but more personal version of the same, which also imparts a kind of weary helplessness in the face of superior military power:

May God destroy your tanks and your drone,

you who've destroyed my village, my home. (125)

The following two *landays* again offer a female perspective on the Afghanistan conflict.

My lover is fair as an American soldier can be.

To him I looked dark as a Talib, so he martyred me. (73)

This *landay* is notable because it plays upon a much earlier version of the same poem, which used "British" rather than "American". And then there is this exquisitely rendered poem:

Because my love's American,

Blisters blossom on my heart. (73)

Neither poem refers to romantic love. Rather, both poems concisely address extreme ambivalence to foreign military presence, the first referring to the kind of collateral damage the war has inflicted on Afghan civilians but, by using the word "martyred" rather than "killed" or "murdered," rooting the poem in a kind of clash of civilizations, with "To him I looked dark as a Talib" clearly establishing a kind of oppositional otherness. The second poem is no less skilled, although it is somewhat harder to unpack its many layers of meaning. The *landay* could express the aspirational appeal of "American" ideals of freedom, democracy, and human rights, and the idea that in the context of Afghanistan these ideals become either thwarted or corrupted, resulting in a blistered, wounded, or broken heart. The poem's inherent ambiguity gives it great power.

Like the poetry of their male counterparts, female Pashtun poets can use the *landay* form to impart social commentary, but in a much more direct, and

often pithier fashion, due to the *landay's* condensed length. For example, in only sixteen (translated) words, the following, remarkably anti-Taliban verse is, indeed, like a coiled serpent:

May God destroy the Taliban and end their wars.

They've made Afghan women into widows and whores. (129)

The *landay's* first line is all but astonishing in its unexpected bluntness; while many Afghans do not support the Taliban, few likely would curse them, and particularly by so directly invoking God or Allah. But the second line contains the sting, criticizing the Taliban, pious upholders of Islam and Afghan virtue, for making Afghan women not only widows, but whores. It is an astounding assertion, which gives the *landay* its bite. Another remarkable *landay*, by a fifteen year old poet, excoriates the Taliban, but promises passive revenge:

You won't allow me to go to school. I won't become a doctor.

Remember this: One day you will be sick. (52)

Two very similar *landays*, perhaps by the same poet, or perhaps one poet riffing off the other, provide similarly barbed social commentary about President Karzai's rule:

Hamid Karzai came to Kabul

to teach our girls to dress in Dollars. (137)

Again, in a limited number of words, and in an almost nursery rhyme fashion, the poet provides a sharp rebuke to the country's president, with the *landay's* second line economically suggesting both foreign economic domination and moral decline, almost bordering, as with the earlier anti-Taliban *landay*, on a suggestion

of prostitution. The second poem mirrors the first, with another pointedly direct criticism of President Karzai and a further comment on Afghanistan's moral decline, as well as a reference to economic migration to Iran, given chronic unemployment and lack of economic opportunity, with "our girls" transposed to the somewhat more personal "our sons":

Hamid Karzai sent our sons to Iran
and made them slaves to heroin.²⁹ (137)

These *landays* are so carefully wrought that one can almost grasp how the poet(s) weighed and evaluated each word as she developed the poem with both precision and concision.

In a country and culture where women's voices are so suppressed, *landays* provide women with a rare form of expression. As Griswold notes in the introduction to her collection of *landays*, a woman will compose or construct a *landay*, usually in her head (due to widespread female illiteracy), to then share with other women during communal work (such as washing clothes in streams or undertaking gardening or animal husbandry activities) or as part of social occasions such as weddings (which are sex-segregated), with the best *landays*

²⁹ In 2015 Afghanistan was the source of some 85% of the world's opium production; in recent years it also has become one of the world's most addicted societies, with an estimated 1.6 million drug users, or about 5.3 percent of the country's total population, one of the highest rates in the world. Nationwide, one in 10 urban households is thought to have at least one drug user (in the city of Herat, near the Iranian border, it is one in five). Despite the escalating problem of addiction, Government funding for treatment and outreach is less than \$4 million a year, with fewer than 28,000 formal treatment slots available nationwide.

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/world/asia/that-other-big-afghan-crisis-the-growing-army-of-addicts.html?_r=0 Traditionally, opium has been used to treat pain and other medical ailments, to alleviate hunger, or even to lull colicky infants. Long years of war and very high levels of unemployment and outmigration (including to Iran) also have contributed to increased use of opiates, posing a further challenge to Afghanistan's longer-term reconstruction and development. Anna Badkhen's 2012 book *The World is a Carpet* compellingly documents the effects of opium usage at the village level.

committed to memory and then shared or elaborated as they become part of the culture (Griswold 5). The *landay* form, then, can be seen as a unique cultural adaptation that gives voice to Pashtun women, allowing them to express things that they cannot say openly or directly. Because the *landays* are recited and shared rather than attributed to their authors, *landays* are collective, thus providing the safety of anonymity to their actual authors. This collective anonymity gives the Pashtun female poet, or, indeed, any woman who hears or shares or elaborates or embellishes a *landay*, great scope. Pashtun women use the *landay* to break free from the cultural, social – and male dominated – strictures that so govern their lives. In her review of *Songs of Love and War*, Angelina Merisi notes that for Pashtun women the two-line *landay* verses serve as

a release mechanism from the oppressive confines of their culture, which they understand as one that requires their absolute obedience and silence within a male-dominated society. Out of the repressive state of veiled hushed existence comes a response of torrential exuberance through witty, profound, tragic and sometimes cruel two-line verse. (Merisi)

Indeed, the fact that these anonymous Pashtun female poets are breaking with accepted cultural norms may contribute to the brevity of the form: the poets know what they can get away with, and thus make every syllable, every word count. In many ways the *landay* can be compared with carpet weaving, another exacting and mostly female pursuit; each word, like each knot, deftly executed.

If the previously cited *landays*, addressing themes of war or providing biting comment on Afghan political and economic life, are both interesting and powerful, it is the *landays* that speak of the plight of Afghan women that are even more interesting and more powerful. As R. Goldenstein, another reviewer of *Songs of Love and War* enthused in an on-line review, “Defiant, rebellious, poignant and heart-wrenching, these two line poems allow a view into a world that is little known or understood” (Goldenstein). The *landay* form, emerging from its particular cultural context, gives expression to the hardships, oppression, and disempowerment endured by most Afghan women. The resulting poems can be sad, sardonic, lushly romantic, overtly sexual, raucously bawdy, acerbic, or satirical. They can explore rage, sarcasm, irony, loss, separation and desire. Some are humorous, others bile-filled; many are tragic, others read as aphorism.

Some of the *landays* in the translated collections express romantic love. The following example, in its simple expression of human experience, has a lush, almost Shakespearean quality:

My heart said this to me: “I have no role to play,
It is the eyes who, watching, made me fall in love.” (Majrouh 59)

Or this example of the pain of unrequited love:

Oh lute that I would like to see demolished!
It’s me he loves, It’s you that lies moaning in his arms. (Majrouh 58)

In large part because of their condensed form, the *landays* in the collections that explicitly deal with sexual desire are passionate, and often intensely erotic:

I could have tasted death for a taste of your tongue
watching you eat ice cream when we were young. (Griswold 57)

Or:

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

It is not made of sugar that might be dissolved. (Majrouh 6)

The first *landay* is little short of scandalous, revealing the sexual desires of a young Afghan female. The second poem is only slightly less adventuresome, in that its poet unmask herself as sexually aggressive. But if these *landays* give open expression to female sexual desire, the form also can reveal the many betrayals, injustices, and inhuman treatment that is the lot of many, if not most, Afghan women. For example, the following *landay* addresses the cultural norm of arranged and often forced marriage, including of very young girls:

When sisters sit together, they always praise their brothers.

When brothers sit together, they sell their sisters to others.

(Griswold 61)

This poem reveals much about Afghan cultural mores, and the *landay's* parallel structure beautifully highlights the very different expectations placed on Afghan girls and boys. At a deeper level – different layers of meaning being perhaps the signature characteristic of the form – the poem also speaks to how little females are valued in traditional Afghan culture. The following *landay*, meanwhile, addresses a related problem, young women given in marriage (or sometimes sold, or passed off to settle a debt, or to resolve some dispute between families and tribes), often to a much older man, and frequently as a second wife:

Young men, defend me, defend your very honor!

My father is a tyrant who throws me in an old man's bed.

(Marjough 59)

And then there are these two *landays*:

My body belongs to me;

to others its mastery. (Griswold 87)

Or,

My body is fresh as henna leaf:

green outside; inside, raw meat. (Griswold 65)

These two *landays* are remarkable in the similarity of their sentiment; in their first lines both express a sense of identity or self-worth that in the poems' second lines is utterly destroyed, leaving both poets as nothing more than casually abused chattels. Much the same notion is expressed in another *landay* that while less bitter, still indicates a woman's subjugation:

My lover wants to keep my tongue inside his mouth,

Not for the delight of it, but only to establish his steady

rights on me. (Marjough 17)

Another *landay* goes beyond domination to address the endemic problem of domestic violence (which in recent years has been taken to horrendous extremes in Afghanistan, including excision of ears, noses, lips, and tongues; burnings by fire or acid, etc., and at the hand not only of husbands, but of the husband's family members):

See the dreadful tyranny of husbands:

He beats me and then forbids my weeping. (Marjough 67)

This two-line poem is another example of how a *landay* expresses a shared and instantly recognizable experience or feeling, the plural “husbands” in the first line personalized into “he” in the second. It also is an example of how the sentiment is turned into aphorism, to be traded knowingly among other women. In a different cultural context, it could be women sharing their common domestic problems over cups of coffee although interestingly, though so subjugated and so constrained by cultural boundaries, the Pashtun *landay* allows a much freer admission of the problem of domestic abuse.

As noted above, the *landays* in *Songs of Love and War* were twice translated, first from their original Pashtun into French and then, somewhat later, from French into English. The *landays* presented in *I am the Beggar of the World* had a no less difficult rebirth, transcribed from oral presentation to written Pashtu, then translated from Pashto word by word into sometimes nonsensical English. From these literal versions Griswold worked with a handful of native Pashto speakers – academics, writers, journalists, and ordinary women – to confirm both the language and meaning. Griswold notes that “my versions rhyme more often than the originals do, because the English folk tradition of rhyme proved the most effective way of representing in English the lilt of the Pashto” (10). How faithful the resulting “translation” remains to the original can only be discerned by someone fluent in both languages. But Griswold’s *landays*, like those in the Marjough collection, seem masterful in conveying at least a sense of the original, resulting in often striking and stunningly effective poetry.

This is particularly true of the poems that combine themes of female subjugation and sex. Earthy, often bawdy, these *landays* represent an unblemished or unvarnished slice of Afghan life.

Unlucky you who didn't come last night,

I took the hardwood bedpost for a man. (Griswold 17)

Although it is unclear whether the original Pashto has the same play on the word "come", this *landay* is both ribald and mocking, an example of what Griswold notes as the ability of Pashtun women poets to subvert the otherwise strict social codes which circumscribe their lives, "simultaneously seducing men and mocking their weakness at the very skills with which they're supposed to display the greatest strength" (18). A *landay* from *Songs of Love and War* is equally derisive:

Never shall I take an old man as a lover.

He wastes the night just planning things and in the
morning calls himself robust. (30)

If this poem were recited to the "old man" in the poem it would be emasculating and the poet might well be beaten; hence, the only consolation she gets is to share the poem with other women who share, or understand, the common experience. The following two *landays*, meanwhile, express similar derision for much older husbands, commonly referred to as "little horrors", presumably in reference to their impotence:

Have you with your white beard no shame?

You caress my hair and inside myself I laugh. (Marjough 17)

Or,

The “little horror” does nothing – does not make love,
does not make war.

At night, no sooner is his belly full, he climbs in bed
and snores until the dawn. (Majrouh 45)

Another *landay* from Griswold’s collection is even less kind, and is expressed in even more bawdy terms:

Making love to an old man
is like fucking a shriveled cornstalk black with mold.³⁰ (7)

Although the *landay* is an ancient form of Pashtun folk poetry, it has proven to be an amazingly mutable form, used to express common themes of importance to Afghan women, but in a contemporary context. For example, the following *landay* seamlessly incorporates Afghan traditions (such as women trading *landays* – and presumably ribald jokes – while collecting water or washing clothes at a stream) with modern-day life:

Daughter, in America the river isn’t wet

Young girls learn to fill their jugs on the Internet. (Griswold 35)

Indeed, the explosive increase in cellular phone and other telecommunications usage, with nearly half of Afghanistan’s impoverished population having access to a mobile telephone, has created a new or wider audience for *landay*.

Griswold’s and Murphy’s *Poetry Magazine* article indicates that one Pashtu *landay* Facebook page – moderated by a male, interestingly – has more than twenty thousand “likes”, attesting to the continued popularity of the form.

³⁰ As an example of the challenges posed by translation, Griswold notes that the literal first rendering of this *landay* “went something like this: Love or Sex or Marriage, Man, Old / Love or Sex or Marriage, Cornstalk, Black Fungal Blight. In other words, mystifying” (7).

Griswold and Murphy also note that when someone posts a *landay*, others post their own, or revise or rework another. Thus, as noted in Griswold's initial Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting web posting, "Within a matter of hours, *landays* morph and are remixed by different readers: a process that used to take decades, even centuries" (Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, "The Poetry of Afghanistan's Women"). The following *landay* more than illustrates the point:

I lost you on Facebook yesterday.

I'll find you on Google today. (35)

If modern technology is changing what has been for untold generations the directly shared oral tradition of the Pashtun *landay*, there has been no corresponding change in the situation of most Afghan women. Certainly the enrolment of girls in schools has dramatically increased since the overthrow of the Taliban (although it should be noted that any increase over no enrolment is dramatic). But as of 2016, the hard-won steps towards a greater measure of female equality and empowerment in Afghanistan are in danger of being reversed. In January 2014, for example, the Afghan parliament voted in favour of a change to the criminal code that would ban the relatives of someone accused of a crime from testifying in court. The legislation only requires presidential signature to come into effect. If enacted, human rights proponents indicate that it would weaken the already tenuous rights of women and girls. Without relatives being able to act as witnesses, it is feared that cases of domestic violence would become increasingly difficult to prosecute. Speaking about the proposed legislation, Kimberly Motley, an American lawyer who practices in Afghanistan on

mostly on human rights matters, claimed that if enacted, “It decriminalized all things domestic, basically.”³¹

As much as Sayd Bahodine Marjough is to be credited for his 1994 collection and translation of Afghan *landays*, his introduction to *Songs of Love and War* unintentionally, but markedly, points to how women are devalued in Afghan society. He seems to truly appreciate Pashtun women’s poetry, or to at least find it interesting, but his analysis is never better than patronizing:

There is no yearning whatsoever here toward an unknown, unfathomable, and incommunicable heaven. Nor is it devoted to praising the lord. No image appears of an absolute master who holds the life and death of his subjects in his hands . . . Wordplay, elegance of feelings, metaphoric preciousness – rhetorical exercises that Persian literature sometimes pushes to absurd limits – are not expressed either.

On the other hand, something simple and very basic is constantly affirmed here. The song of an earthly human being with its concerns, worries, joys, and pleasures; a song that celebrates

³¹ “U.S., EU, Blast Afghan Law on Domestic Violence.” *Wall Street Journal*. 12 February 2014 and David Jolly, “Outspoken, American, and a Woman; lawyer in Afghanistan stands out.” *New York Times*. 05 March 2016. *Web*. A July 2012 interview with Ms Motley on CBC Radio’s *The Current* can be found at: <http://www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/episode/2012/04/25/the-remarkable-legal-career-of-kim-motley/>

Another example of the clash between Western values and entrenched Afghan cultural mores is revealed in a (translated, sic) February 2014 Azadi Radio report: “Fatema Kazimi, head of the Women’s Affairs department in Afghanistan’s central Bamyán province, along with two other employees of the department, has been dismissed by the Bamyán city court. The dismissed provincial women’s affairs department also includes head of Bamyán’s safe houses for women. The dismissal comes after the two female staff of Bamyán women’s affairs department had helped a girl living in one of the Bamyán safe houses to marry a boy. The girl in the safe house who has married the boy is said to have been engaged to another boy.”

nature, mountains, valleys, forests, rivers, dawn and dusk, and night's magnetic space; a song that feeds on war and honor, too, on shame and love, on beauty and death. (x)

If Marjough does acknowledge that it is the female “part of the community that is maliciously left uncultivated” and extolls the “profound and pure restraint of the women’s *landay*” (Marjough xii) other of his comments make it seem as if he was reading (much less translating) a different body of verse, or perhaps, as an Afghan male, he simply is incapable of seeing the many layers of meaning embedded in each exquisitely crafted twenty-three syllables. Instead, he tends to idealize, and certainly patronize, Pashtun female poets:

If they are simple and frail, as beautiful as the wild flowers of the surrounding plains and mountains, it is because they are born without having been sown in orderly fashion, they are unprotected and without any affectation. In a strict sense, they exist off-screen – off the cultural screen that is exclusively for men and, consequently, off the social screen. The feelings and ideas they convey, however, leave absolutely no doubt as to the gender of their authors: a Pashtun man could not evoke some of the intrigues, even as a parody. (xii)

Despite such florid comment, Marjough truly seems to value the *landays*, and his introduction to the collection offers some useful insights. For example, he notes, “It is a fascinating face that emerges from these texts in which women sing and speak about themselves, about men and about the world around them. Theirs is

a proud and merciless face that is in rebellion” (Marjough xiii). Here he seems to recognize that the multi-layered *landays*, in all their wit and bitter irony, represent Pashtun women’s response to the often horrible circumstance of their subjugation. Indeed, he writes:

In fact, what causes most of their suffering is the moral side of their subjugation. They feel repressed, scorned, and thought of as second rate human beings. From the cradle on, they are received with sadness and shame – shame that does not spare the mother who gives birth to a daughter. The father who learns of such an unwelcome arrival seems to go into mourning, whereas he gives a party and fires off a salvo of gunshots at the birth of a boy. Later, and without ever being consulted, the little girl becomes monetary exchange between families of the same clan. She [a Pashtun girl] spends her entire life in a state of inferiority, subordination, and humiliation. Even her husband does not stoop so low as to eat with her. (xiv-xv)

While on the one hand Marjough seems to have real cultural or sociological insight – and sympathy – for these anonymous Pashtun women, he also can be terribly obtuse, as well as horribly condescending, by asserting that “there is no trace of the word ‘soul’ in her vocabulary”, implying any higher religious (and hence masculine) notion of a “spiritual entity, independent of body and superior matter” is above her ability (20). Similarly, he states, in an over-wrought and chauvinist fashion, “True daughter of the earth, the Pashtun woman seems to

think that death is a simple return to elementary things – to wind, dust, grass, water, and fire. The hereafter does not haunt her. There is not a single female *landay* that expresses either the hope or fear of another world” (22).

In the introduction to his collection of *landays*, Majrouh correctly indicates that very often the *landay* subverts Pashtun cultural codes. But if the form allows women to protest against their circumstances, if only among themselves, there is sad irony: the same poetic form that gives Pashtun women voice seems to preclude them actually realizing any measure of “liberation” or “empowerment”. Rather, their *landays* might be appreciated (mostly amongst themselves) and even widely shared or adopted as part of a collective memory, but to no effect on their actual lives, still subject to prevailing (and male dominated) cultural mores. “*Landay* belong to women,” notes Safia Siddiqi, a renowned Pashtun poet and former Afghan parliamentarian in an on-line article: “In Afghanistan, poetry is the women’s movement from the inside” (Pulitzer Centre, “Afghanistan: On Love and Suicide”).

Majrouh acknowledges the fact that Pashtun women are “subjected to double physical and moral oppression” (xiv) and asks the question, “In the face of such conditions, of such ancestral restraints, what could her reaction be? Apparently it is total submission” (xv). He then suggests that “She accepts and suffers the value system that makes her just an object among so many others” but with a growing indignation and skepticism “feeding her rebellion” (xv). He concludes, “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” (xv).

Although it is clear in subsequent paragraphs that Marjough is not speaking metaphorically, it is unfortunate that he did not delve more deeply, in that none of the *landays* in his or the other collections available in English specifically deal with the matter of female suicide. However, as a number of recent accounts have revealed, there seems to be a sad link between these often-fierce fragments of poetry and the equally tragic deaths of some of the Pashtun women who created them.

As one blogger noted in 2012, “Poetry is still inextricably linked with death for the women of Afghanistan.”³² Similarly, in a May 2012 *New York Times Magazine* article, “Why Afghan Women Risk Death to Write Poetry,” Griswold recounts the story of how one promising young poet found voice by calling from her rural village in Herat to read her poems to an Afghan women’s literary society based in Kabul. But when her brothers overheard her reading her poems about love they assumed that she had a suitor or that her honour was otherwise impugned and beat her and destroyed her notebooks. Some accounts say that two weeks later she committed suicide by self-immolation; other accounts indicate that one of her brothers murdered her by slitting her wrists as if she had committed suicide. On a visit to Herat Griswold visited her grave.³³ The girl’s greatest legacy might be this bitter *landay*:

You sold me to an old man, father.

³² <http://poetry.about.com/b/2012/05/03/secret-poems-on-the-phone-line-to-kabul.htm>

³³ Griswold recounts this story in a Youtube video:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOPVdmNUmE>

May God destroy your home, I was your daughter. (75)

This could be simply one more tragic tale from a country long burdened by misery. But it is far from an isolated case. As detailed in Chapter 2, Christina Lamb's book, *The Sewing Circles of Herat*, takes its name from Lamb's discovery, during the Taliban era, of a so-called sewing circle that was in fact a cover for a women's literary group. Lamb clearly was taken with the women's unquenchable desire to be something other than *burqa*'d ghosts, and portrays them as bright, dedicated young women. Of the four she mentions by name, two died by their own hands, and one apparently was set on fire by her family, reportedly because she, too, had attempted suicide, and while pregnant. The sole survivor of the four promising writers subsequently emigrated to Iran, where she teaches and has published a collection of short stories (unfortunately not yet available in English).

Or, in a remarkably similar story, in a Huffington Post Politics interview, Dr. Humaira Qaderi, a writer, university professor and senior advisor to the Afghan Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, recalls:

During the reign of the Taliban, I had two close girl friends: Lida and Shakiba. Lida could have been a great poet, but she couldn't bear the inequalities of our society. She killed herself by self-immolation. Shakiba did the same. Many were waiting for me, the third corner of the triangle, to burn myself. I remember my little brother asking me once, "When are you going to burn yourself"? (Huffington Post Politics)

Or, again, writing about his and Eliza Griswold's collaboration in presenting contemporary *landays* to the Western world, photographer Seamus Murphy tells of how

A group of women from Helmand discussing *landays* in a refugee camp insisted on burying Eliza's mobile phone in a sea of cushions to ensure no recording could be made of their voices. They didn't want recognition. They said they could be murdered if their husbands knew what they were discussing with outsiders. The significance of this separates our worlds. (Murphy)

Murphy's comment underscores what remains Afghanistan's profound Otherness, even after fifteen years of intense Western engagement. The collection – and translation – of *landays* from contemporary Afghanistan (with Griswold's collection accompanied by Murphy's evocative photographic images), provides an otherwise unseen glimpse into the world of Afghan women.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

*Tears are streaming down my face,
I cannot forget Kabul's snow-topped mountains.* (Majrouh 52)

The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent American-led effort to punish al Qaeda and its Taliban hosts brought renewed international attention to Afghanistan, a distant land that for the better part of twenty years had been mostly ignored by the Western world. As Corrine Fowler notes, Afghanistan was “shunted back into the limelight” (Fowler 3). The West’s sudden reengagement with the country, both militarily and politically, as well as through massive reconstruction and development support, made Afghanistan the focus of a great deal of reportage, with journalists and analysts reporting not only on Western operations but also trying to present or interpret the country and its people to a Western audience.

Fowler claims that the title of her 2007 *Chasing Tales* “is intended to convey the circulation, and indeed the circularity, of ideas commonly found in travel writing and journalism about Afghanistan” (23). She notes, however, that the title “relates primarily to ideas’ substance rather than to their representation” (23). She also indicates that “The ‘tales’ component of the title stresses the derivation of those ideas from fictionalized sources, particularly the writing of Kipling” (24). As explored in the thesis’ introductory chapter, nineteenth century notions of Afghanistan – including representations of Afghanistan being a hard and hostile place, with Afghans variably portrayed as untrustworthy and murderous – have been given privilege over more recent experience and

analysis. As detailed in that chapter, too much of contemporary reportage has been distorted through the lens of earlier Afghan-British encounters, almost as if present-day reporters and correspondents were looking through nineteenth century spectacles. Security-conditioned lack of access to the country and its people has reinforced the tendency towards easy use of often negative stereotypes or tropes rather than more careful analysis. As outlined in the first chapter, then, recent reportage about Afghanistan has followed well-trodden paths, with little charting of new territory, or the production of new thought about Afghanistan. Rather, the repetition of oft-repeated constructs has too often served as the basis for what is presented as insightful analysis.

Although Fowler's deconstruction of reportage about Afghanistan is otherwise incisive, the introductory chapter also gave attention to how, in addition to Victorian notions about the country, Orientalist thought has shaped contemporary representations of Afghanistan, something Fowler only alludes to. In particular, Edward Said's *Orientalism* and his subsequent *Covering Islam* was used to detail how Orientalism has influenced writing about Afghanistan, and particularly Western coverage of the War on Terror, including the West's ongoing military and political engagement in Afghanistan.

Chapter 3 traced such influences in the writing of four Western female journalists or writers: Christina Lamb, Åsne Seierstad, Anna Badkhen, and Veronica Doubleday. In particular the chapter considered how these writers alternatively gave voice to, and also expropriated or appropriated the voices of, Afghan women. Consideration also was given to the moral ambiguity and ethical

challenges inherent in reporting about women's lives in Afghanistan, when Western notions run hard against entrenched Afghan cultural norms and when the voices of Afghan women are used to parrot or otherwise underscore equally culture-bound Western perspectives on matters of gender and women's rights. Given Lamb's long association with the country, the chapter also considered how her years of reportage affected her views of Afghanistan, as well as her ambiguous, never-quite-stated assessment of the country's likely future.

In order to give some balance to Western coverage about Afghanistan, the thesis considered Afghan voices – albeit in translation – through the medium of Afghan poetry. Chapter 4 analyzed a number of poems contained in a remarkable 2012 collection, *Poetry of the Taliban*. Chapter 4 also considered equally remarkable collections of Pashtun *landays*, short, incisive poetic aphorisms composed mostly by females. Such analysis revealed, in ways not addressed through other reportage about the country, specifically Afghan notions of love, family, honour, and the consequences of ongoing conflict. The analysis, particularly of poetry by members of the Taliban, revealed a strident “Occidentalism” in counterpoint to the Western world's Orientalist view of Afghanistan and its people.

In 1945 George Orwell wrote that “indifference to objective truth is encouraged by the sealing-off of one part of the world from another” (Orwell qtd. in Glavin). Orwell's “sealing off” is not so different from the willfully blinkered thinking that Edward Said dissected some thirty years later in *Orientalism*. Although Said's 1979 work does not specifically reference Afghanistan, and

historical, literary or other examples from Afghanistan are not included in the scope of his examinations, Said's identification of Orientalist thought, together with Victorian notions about Afghanistan, continue to shape Western reportage, and consequent understanding of Afghanistan.

In his attempt to make sense of the most recent Afghanistan conflict, historian Terry Glavin asserts that there is a "vast distance between the way the world really is and the way accounts of that world enliven the public imagination" and, specifically, that "between the real Afghanistan and the imaginary one, there is a chasm" (2). In this, and in my reading of contemporary works about Afghanistan, I fully concur.

Overall, then, the thesis has detailed not only how Afghanistan has been represented in the post 9/11 era, but also provides a guide as to how to interpret such discourse, allowing us to better "read" the reality of present day Afghanistan. In answer to the question posed at the outset, I do not believe that it is possible to find congruence in different depictions of the country, because such representations come from quite different experience and through different cultural lenses or perspectives. While I do believe that it is possible to look beyond difference to find both similarities and mutually exclusive and equally convincing counter-narratives, the point more is to consider the different modes and forms of representation and to refuse to be blinkered or unduly influenced by one over the other. No country, or people is "knowable," and none less so than Afghanistan. Glavin suggests a chasm, whereas Afghanistan's recent history more suggests a lack of bridges.

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