Veiled Rebellion

Afghan women suffer under the constraints of tribalism, poverty, and war. Now they are starting to fight for a just life.

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**By Elizabeth Rubin**

Twenty-five years ago an Afghan girl with green eyes haunted the cover of *National Geographic.* She became the iconic image of Afghanistan's plight, a young refugee fleeing the war between the Soviet-backed communists and the American-backed mujahideen. Today the iconic image of Afghanistan is again a young woman—Bibi Aisha, whose husband slashed off her nose and ears as punishment for running away from him and his family. Aisha fled to escape beatings and other abuse.

Why do husbands, fathers, brothers-in-law, even mothers-in-law brutalize the women in their families? Are these violent acts the consequence of a traditional society suddenly, after years of isolation and so much war, being hurled into the 21st century? And which Afghans in this society are committing the violence? There are significant differences between the Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Pashtuns, the most populous and conservative group and the one that has dominated political life since the 1880s.

In the Pashtun crescent, from Farah Province in the west to Kunar in the northeast, life was—and in many ways still is—organized around the code known as *Pashtunwali,* the "way of the Pashtun." The foundation of Pashtunwali is a man's honor, judged by three possessions—*zar* (gold), *zamin* (land), and *zan* (women). The principles on which the honorable life is built are *melmastia* (hospitality), *nanawati* (shelter or asylum), and *badal* (justice or revenge).

The greater a Pashtun man's hospitality, the more honor he accrues. If a stranger or an enemy turns up on his doorstep and asks for shelter, his honor depends on taking that person in. If any injury is done to a man's land, women, or gold, it is a matter of honor for him to exact revenge. A man without honor is a man without a shadow, without assets, without dignity.

But it is not generally acceptable for Pashtun women to extend hospitality or exact revenge. They are rarely agents. They're assets to be traded and fought over—until they can stand it no longer.

At a shelter in Kabul for women who have escaped domestic abuse, I heard about a girl from one of the richest Pashtun families in a province bordering Pakistan. She fell in love with a boy from the wrong tribe. Her father killed the boy and four of his brothers, and when he discovered that his own mother had helped his daughter escape her father's wrath, he killed his mother too. Now he is offering a $100,000 reward for his daughter's dead body.

These are extreme actions by an extreme man. But many Pashtun men perceive that their manhood and very way of life are under assault—by a foreign military, foreign religious leaders, foreign television, international human rights groups—and they hold fast to traditions that for so long have defined what it means to be a Pashtun man.

One day in a Kabul bookstore I found a collection of *landays*—"short ones"—the two-line poems the Pashtuns recite to each other at the village well or at wedding celebrations. The book, originally published as *Suicide and Song,* was compiled by Sayd Bahodine Majrouh, a celebrated Afghan poet and writer assassinated while in exile in Pakistan in 1988. He first collected women's landays in his native Kunar River Valley. Majrouh, a humanist, found glory in these cries from the heart, which defy convention and in many ways mock male honor. From cradle to grave, the Pashtun woman's lot is one of shame and sadness. She is taught that she is undeserving of love. This is why, Majrouh wrote, landays are "a cry of separation" from the idea of love and a revelation of the misery of misalliance.

A woman's husband is often either a child or an old man forced on her through tribal bonds:

*Have you with your white beard no shame? You caress my hair and inside myself I laugh.*

Tauntingly, a woman lances a man's virility:

*In battle today my lover turned his back to the enemy. / I am ashamed of having kissed him last night.*

Or voices her frustrated desire:

*Come, my beloved, come quickly and be close to me! / The "little horror" lies in slumber and you may kiss me now.*

The "little horror" is the man a woman is forced to marry, a kind of dupe. Only without his knowledge will she find true love. As Majrouh understood them, Pashtun women, for all their submissiveness, have always lived in a state of deep craving for rebellion and for the pleasures of earthly life. He called his book *Suicide and Song* because these two acts are how they protest their anguish. In Majrouh's time the two methods of suicide were poison and drowning. Now they are poison and self-immolation.

The Afghan Parliament recently drafted a law intended to eliminate violence against women, who are beginning to reject old cultural practices and assert themselves in public and in private. I went to the Kabul home of Sahera Sharif, a Pashtun and the first female member of parliament from Khost. "No one knew a woman could put up campaign photos and posters on the walls in Khost—men didn't allow women to even have jobs in Khost," she said.

As a girl, Sharif stood up to her father, a conservative mullah, locking herself in a closet until he allowed her to go to school. She lived through the civil war between competing mujahideen groups, who ravaged Kabul before the Taliban conquest in 1996. She witnessed unimaginable cruelty and many deaths. "Much of the violence and cruelty you see now," Sharif said, "is because people are crazy from all these wars."

After the Taliban fell in December 2001, Sharif started a radio station to educate women about hygiene and basic health. More radically, she volunteered to teach at the university in Khost (a first there). She took off her burka (another first) and stood before the male students teaching them psychology. They blushed. And so she began to reeducate them.

As we talked, I could see what an inspiration Sahera Sharif has been to her 15-year-old daughter, Shkola, who interrupted her mother to show me a photograph of a woman in a magazine. The woman was lying with her throat cut, murdered by her husband's family. The woman's mother, mad with grief, had begged the magazine to publish the photograph. "I became crazy from this picture," Shkola said. "I saw it over and over like a film."

Shkola is studying Islamic history and law. She intends to become a lawyer in order to help women defend themselves against violence and injustice. In the meantime, she is scouring books from Iran to find stories for children "like you have," she said. "We have almost none here. So I'm translating them into Pashtu, and I'm also writing a novel."

In various corners of the country—in Khost and Kandahar, in Herat and Kabul—I've met young women like Shkola. They're writing not the old landays but poems and novels, and they're making documentaries and feature films. These are the new stories women are telling about their lives in Afghanistan.

Found at <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2010/12/afghan-women/rubin-text.html>