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Representations of Exile in Afghan Oral Poetry and Songs

Abstract

In our examination of the representations of exile in Afghan popular culture, we focus in particular on popular poetry and song lyrics in Farsi, one of the national languages of Afghanistan. This article concentrates on the voices of exiles, their self-representation and their descriptions of life far from their homeland. We argue that, in addition to offering catharsis and expressing collective suffering, the verses are also used to urge return and, more recently, to voice complaints to and about host societies, as well as critique the Afghan government for its failure.

Key words: Exile, migration, Afghanistan, Dubaiti, Poetry, popular songs, Oral culture

Introduction

In a recent article in this journal, Schenstead-Harris (2017) asked ‘What does poetic discourse yield to studies of migration? What use is poetry to a person who migrates?’. This paper offers a response to these two very different questions through an exploration of Afghan popular poetry and songs.

There is a large and growing body of literature on Afghan migration, and yet there are very few Afghan scholars working in this field, meaning that the experience of Afghan exiles is most often mediated through the work of foreign scholars and reaches a relatively limited and select audience, very few of whom are Afghan. In contrast, there is a wealth of poetry and song written by Afghans in exile that speaks to Afghans everywhere, and that captures and communicates directly and powerfully what it means to *be* a migrant in a way that social science literature cannot (King et al. 1995), except perhaps for auto-ethnographers such as Khosravi (2010). Exile here is used to describe those, or the situation of those, who have been

forced to leave and who cannot return (though circumstances may and do change). So in response to Schenstead-Harris's first question, we mined Afghan popular poetry and songs as a way 'to provide greater depth to our understanding of the way migrants view their own migration, their host society and the place they have left, as well as how they are viewed by the host society' (Baily and Collyer 2006: 167).

Schenstead-Harris's own response to the second question is that poetry is a text that speaks, remembers those who are lost, and maintains cultural consciousness. In what follows, we have recourse to a body of popular poetry (and song) by migrants for whom these verses are a distillation of their experience, evidence of their 'self', a weapon of attack, a means of policing or resisting social norms, and above all, a part of their daily discourse, whether composing or reciting (Mills 2013; Loewen 2010; Doubleday 2007).

Poetry as Data

A strong concern in forced migration studies has been the drive to push back against the dehumanising and stereotyping of asylum seekers, refugees and forced migrants. In recent years, scholars have turned to the arts and collaborative artistic practices with forced migrants as a way of giving voice to and humanizing them (Jeffrey et al. 2019; O'Neill et al. 2018; Olszewska 2015; Rodriguez 2015; Esses et al. 2013). Along with the visual and performative arts, poetry is increasingly used as a research tool, with researchers inviting research subjects to compose poems on a given subject (Bishop and Willis 2014) or crafting poems from interview transcripts or their own fieldnotes, using poetry to present the data (Prendergast 2009; Furman 2006). The goal is to 'capture' or 'present' the feelings of the research subjects and/or those of the researcher. There are a number of ethical issues with this approach. Done well, it can be a cathartic and positive experience for both participants and researchers (O'Neill et al. 2018). Done badly, it privileges and foregrounds researchers appropriating the experiences of research subjects.

In particular, when the research subjects are not involved in the production of the artefacts, these methods run the risk of eliding the two senses of representation distinguished by Spivak (1988: 275) in which the researcher is both 'speaking for' and 'representing' the subject in artistic form, rather than allowing them to speak for and represent themselves. In analyzing already existing poetry by exiles themselves, we try to reduce our influence over the exiles' expression of their own experience. We have treated poems and songs as data, because when authored by migrants, they 'are powerful documents that possess the capacity

to capture the contextual and psychological worlds of both poet and subject' (Furman et al. 2007: 302). The material is still interpreted (and in this paper translated) by the authors, and there still remain distancing layers of interpretation between the poem or song and the reader of the article, but the interventions don't change the data itself. Those speaking through these verses include 'superstar' exiles like Sarkhosh and Darya, young Afghans in Iran and in Europe, and anonymous composers whose verses have been collected in anthologies. The language is popular rather than the more formal Farsi of literary works.

Nonetheless, Caron warns that 'using what might be provisionally called subaltern...poetry...for social history' (2011: 179) is problematic for two reasons. The works here have been collected and analysed by an Afghan scholar of literature in exile (the first author), and while many are composed by and widely known among Afghans in exile, some are taken from anthologies, reflecting the focus and interests of the collectors. 'Can the Subaltern speak' (Spivak 1988) when her words are collected, extracted, selected and interpreted by others? To what extent does an Iranian/Western education distance someone from her community?

The second challenge is to ensure that the poetry (and songs) are not read as decontextualized snapshots, but instead are located in 'the active context of the poems' (Caron 2011: 179; White 1995). Farsi poetry and songs are notable for their unremitting melancholy (while those in Pashto works were leavened with humour and mischief – see Schuster and Shinwari forthcoming). In her study of young Afghan poets in Iran, Olszewka (2015a: 65) explains that there are three levels of sorrows shaping the poetry: a political, religious and normative context that decrees 'sadness to be the appropriate demeanour of [the citizens of the Islamic Republic of Iran]' due to the martyrdom of Imam Reza; the feelings of exclusion and insecurity felt by Afghans in Iran; and the refugee intellectual who sees him/herself speaking on behalf of the masses, from whom s/he feels estranged. In contrast, the verses discussed below have more in common with the sentimental songs of Algerian, Irish or Mexican migrants from *Ya-I-Rayah* to *The Fields of Athenry* to *El Corrido de Pensilvania*. The verses here express both the melancholia and nostalgia that is common to exiles everywhere and through the generations, but they do so through particular references – many recall the perfumes of home, but the Irish longing for the smell of rain coming in from the sea is replaced by the Afghan longing for jasmine and poppies.

The context in which these poems and songs have been created is one in which migration has long been a survival strategy in the face of conflict, discrimination and poverty. The primary destinations, Iran and Pakistan, initially offered refuge for very pragmatic

reasons including cheap labour, cannon fodder for the Iran-Iraq war and in the case of Pakistan, financial support from the international community (Safri 2011; Adelhah and Olszewska 2006; Kronenfeld 2008). The poems and songs discussed here rage against the instrumentalization of Afghans by the countries in which they seek refuge, often directly, as we will see below. Those who fled to Iran had their expectations raised by Khomeini's proclamation that 'Islam knows no borders', while Pashtuns expected hospitality from co-ethnics across the disputed Afghan-Pakistan border (Safri 2011). Nonetheless, neither country permitted Afghans to become citizens, both imposed economic and political restrictions on activities, and in each case, Afghans have suffered discrimination and abuse (Monsutti 2005). Hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been, and continue to be, arbitrarily detained and deported, and families torn asunder.

The poems and songs examined here contribute to a deeper understanding for social scientists of this experience (King et al. 1995). But to return to Schenstead-Harris' second question – what use is poetry to a person who migrates?

The Functions of Oral Culture for Exiles

The 'uses' of verse include the maintenance of culture, a release of emotion and the transmission and challenge of social codes and norms. Afghan oral culture plays an important role in the maintenance and assertion of a cultural identity in exile, even where there is a shared linguistic and religious identity (Olszewska 2007, 2013, 2015a). Baily notes that music 'can be used to assert and negotiate identity in a particularly powerful manner' (Baily 1994: 48). He describes how musicians within Afghan communities in California and in Mashhad preserve and protect a repertoire of traditional music, even as the younger generation introduce new styles and themes. Olszewska has described how for the young men and women in poetry circles in Mashhad, the poems offer an opportunity to reject an imposed identity (Afghans as illiterate, fit only for menial labour) and to re-define their identities as poets, that most respected of professions in the Persian world (2007; White 1995).

The poems and songs discussed in this paper offer their composers and performers catharsis (White 1995), a means of expressing a range of sentiments: attachment to home, love for those left behind, loneliness, despair and nostalgia. They 'provide a source of comfort, a partial antidote to the hostility experienced in the new society, reinforcing and responding to feelings of nostalgia' (Baily and Collyer 2006: 171). In other words, it seems as though the composition and recitation of poetry and songs serves a therapeutic purpose

(King et al. 1995). In addition to being personal expressions of the pains associated with exile, they are also expressions of collective suffering (Olszewka 2015b), in which the poet testifies to the pain and abuse experienced by all those who share her position as a refugee, an Afghan in exile, a victim of discrimination.

In recent years we see that popular culture has also become a vehicle for disappointment, frustration and rage, as the speakers attempt to shame their inhospitable hosts, but also on occasion, their own government. Those writing on oral culture have long stressed the importance of this medium not just as a means of expression, but also of communication to those inside and outside the group (Baily and Collyer 2006), as poets, singers and performers urge insiders to remember their identity and outsiders to treat them with respect.

The poems and songs in our sample serve to communicate to those left behind the sufferings of the migrant and the loneliness of exile. However, more recently, the poems and songs also offer warnings to potential migrants of the specific dangers of the journey, especially beyond the neighbouring countries, as well as the hardships of life as an asylum seeker in camps across Europe, as demonstrated in this song by Sharif Hashemi, a refugee in Germany.

چه روزهای بدی دیدیم در این راه
چه جوانهای کاکه غرق شدند در دریا
گپ هایم واقعیت است ای وطندارا
در دل هسته بسیار چه رقم کنم اظهار
بین یونان و ترکیه غرق شد خیل وطندار

We have suffered so much on this journey
So many young men drowned in the sea,
Oh my compatriot! I tell you the truth.
So much to tell, so hard to put into words
Between Turkey and Greece, we have lost so manyⁱ.

(Hashemi 2016)

Scholars (Dupree 1978; Mills and Ahary 2006) have written of the role of oral culture in transmitting the cultural codes and social norms of a society. We can see this at work in the poems and songs by and about migrants, in which the duties of migrants to remember their loved ones, their culture and homeland is constantly underlined. They serve to reassure those

left behind that they are not forgotten, but they also model how migrants are expected to feel – homesick, lonely, nostalgic and irrevocably loyal to their homeland. Since 2001, there has also been an increase in the number of works reminding the exiles of their duty to return and reconstruct their country. In what follows, we illustrate these functions in more detail, beginning with the self-perceptions of the exiles.

Mosāfer, Gharib, āvāra, mohājer: Traveller, Itinerant, Wanderer, Refugee

In popular poetry and songs, Afghans describe themselves as *mosāfer* ('traveller'), *gharib* (itinerant), *āvāra* ('wanderer' or 'vagabond'), or more rarely *mohājer* (religious refugee). The most common term is *mosāfer*, which is used to describe different kinds of 'traveller'. Its root is *safar*, meaning journey or voyage. It may be used to describe a 'traveller' who leaves for a precise destination for a fixed period of time, such as someone who goes on a pilgrimage or a visit for personal or business reasons. However, it may also describe one who leaves home for an indeterminate period, whether for work or in search of refuge. However it is used, *mosāfer* conveys the temporary nature of this mobility, which will end sooner or later with a return to home.

Gharib (itinerant) is a more emotive term meaning poor and needy, but also refers to a foreigner or a stranger. Slobin (1976: 43) points out that 'the notion of poverty is linked to that of travelling, wandering, becoming a stranger', in particular in the sense of itinerant labour (that may or may not include crossing a border). *Gharib*, like *āvāra* (wanderer), has a strong emotional impact, conveying the sense of one who is lost, rootless, torn from his home and uprooted. Farhad Darya in the 1990s uses both terms when he sings:

من افغانم غریبم بی مکانم
من از آوارگان جاویدانم
نه امیدی نه امروزی نه فردا
من آواره ترین مردمانم

I am an Afghan, itinerant, without a place
I am an eternal wanderer
I have no hope, no today and no tomorrow,
I am one of a wandering people

Mohājer is derived from *Hijra*, a reference to the Prophet's exile from Mecca with his followers on 16 July 622.ⁱⁱ It was used by the Iranian authorities to describe Afghans fleeing the Soviet invasion. However, in Pakistan, *mohājer* is usually reserved for those Muslims who fled to the newly created Pakistan state in 1947 following partition. Instead, the authorities preferred to use the term *mosāfer* for the Afghan arrivals (Safri 2011). Later, Afghan refugees in Pakistan did choose to describe themselves as *mohājer* but its use tends to be specific and political. In oral (as opposed to literary) culture, it is rarely used.

Life in exile

Exile is central to many cultures, both as reality and metaphor. In cultures shaped by Abrahamic religions, banishment from the Garden of Eden is a common metaphor used to describe the pain of exile, and exile (life outside Eden) is barren, lifeless, hot and dry, a form of death (Buruma 2001: 32).

Poems and songs studied here share this perspective. Where the place of exile is referenced at all, it is usually briefly and in negative terms, with no reference to its advantages or beauty, except indirectly and always in unflattering contrast to those of home. Descriptors include 'this country', 'this foreign land', 'this alien land', 'this land of foreigners', 'exile' or simply 'here'.

ده ای ملکا مسافر و غریبم او خدا جان
بی یارو بی کس و قوم و غریبم او خدا جان

Dear God, I am a lonely itinerant in these lands

Dear God, I am an itinerant without friends, without family

(Sarkhosh, n.d.)

آواز قناری و هوای چمنم نیست
اینجا وطنم نیست

I miss the song of the canary and the air of the desert,

This is not my home, this is not my home

(Surood, n.d.)

The songs of Afghan immigrants from the 1980s and 1990s such as those of Sabouri, Faiz Karizi, Ustad Amir Mohamad, Jawad Ghaziar, Wajiha and Sarkhosh all describe the place of exile as lacking in warmth, welcome and human contact:

به این ملکهای مردم تبسم بی تبسم
با این دستهای خالی سیالی بی سیالی
نه قولی نه قراری نه پارک زرنگاری
نه باغ و کوچه باغی نه میل و نه دماغی

Here in another's homeland, there is no smile for me
With my empty hands, I have no joy to share
No promises to meet, no rendez-vous in Zarnegar Park

(Sarkhosh, n.d.)

On the one hand, the place of exile is depicted negatively just because it is not home, it is unfamiliar and loved ones are far away, but also because of the treatment of Afghans in those places. In spite of the official welcome initially extended to Afghans immediately following the Soviet invasion, many suffered considerable deprivation and discrimination (Monsutti 2004; Safri 2011).

Even decades after their flight, they remain in a precarious situation, treated with mistrust and suspicion by hosts. 'Return' by the poet Kazémi is addressed to the people of Iran, and details not just the regular abuse meted out to Afghans, but the important contribution of Afghans to the reconstruction of Iran after the Iran-Iraq war. The opening lines, now a part of popular culture, and incorporated into more recent songs by Taher Khavari, Sonita Alizada, Assad Badi, are enough to evoke in listeners images of the hardships experienced:

غروب در نفس گرم جاده خواهم رفت
پیاده آمده بودم، پیاده خواهم رفت
طلسم غربتم امشب شکسته خواهد شد
و سفره ای که تهی بود بسته خواهد شد

At twilight, in the hot breath of the road I will go
I came on foot, and I will leave on foot
Tonight I have broken the spell of nostalgia
The empty tablecloth will be folded and packed

(Kazemi 2009)

A number of young Afghans have turned to rap to protest against the abuse and violence meted out in detention camps like Safid Sang in Eastern Iran, where many Afghans are held before being deported back to Afghanistan, as in the 'Rap on collective suffering' by Taher Khavari, an exile in Iran until 2010. Sousan Firouz, Afghanistan's first female rapper, details the small everyday humiliations experienced by Afghans in Iran:

ما هم آدمی بودیم، پس چرا توهین شدیم
موش آزمایشگاهی، هر گوشه زمین شدیم
در کشور همسایه، افغانی کثافت
در صف نانوايي شان، فرد اخريں شدیم

We are human beings, why did you humiliate us?

We were treated like laboratory rats in every corner of the world.

In neighbouring lands they called us « Dirty Afghans »

In the queues at the bakers, we were the last to be served.

(Firouz 2012)

Faced with a 'here and now', which is at best unfamiliar and indifferent, at worst hostile and brutal, the migrant orientates himself back towards home, that time when he was surrounded by familiar faces and places. This increasingly idealised 'home' represents all that is missing from exile, and in particular the ties that bind the exile to her ancestors (Tourn 2009: 64).

The idealisation of home

The poetry and songs of exile reawaken and reinforce memories of home – especially those tied to particular places, evoking sights, smells and sounds.

مادر من وطن بود آغوش گرم من بود
به هر طرف موج گل لاله و یاسمن بود

My homeland was my mother,

A warm lap, perfumed with jasmine and poppies

As in the Sarkhosh song cited above, home for the first generation is anchored to specific places, such as Zarnegar Park in the centre of Kabul. In another song by Haroun Yousofi, named places are contrasted with the beauty of home:

پاریس قشنگست ولی نیست چو کابل یا غزنه و زابل
لندن به دلاویزی هرات کهن نیست این خاک وطن نیست
در میمنه و قندوز و فراه و بدخشان در تپه پغمان
لطفیست که در دهلی و برلین و یمن نیست این خاک وطن نیست

Paris is beautiful, but it's not Kabul, Ghazni or Zabul
London is not as pleasant as ancient Herat
This land is not my land
In Maimana, Kunduz, Farah and Badakhshan,
In the hills of Paghman,
There is an elegance not to be found
In Delhi, Berlin or Yemen

(Yousofi 2014)

In this song, home is associated with natural beauty, elegance and pleasure that is lacking in exile. While there are many references to war in oral culture, there are very few references to the poverty or lack of opportunity that displaced millions of Afghansⁱⁱⁱ, and where they exist – they should not be an impediment to return, as in this traditional verse:

بیا کن ای برادر در وطن کار
ز مزدوری بکن بر اجنبی عار
اگر در گلشن بیگانه باشی
از آن گلها بود به در وطن کار

Come and labour in your own land!
It is shameful to work for strangers
Better to slave on the thorns of your own land
Than rest in the garden of a stranger

(Shahrani 2010 :71)

Paradoxically for those who fled war and poverty, 'home' is idealised as a refuge from the injustices and ill-treatment experienced in exile.

بر این زخم و بر این دردهای غربت
چه سازم جز وطن درمان و مرهم

For the wound and suffering of exile,
I know no other remedy but home.

(Khavari 2013)

This imaginary distant home is constructed as the opposite of the hostile state of exile in which the migrant finds himself. However, there is a difference in the way 'home' is represented in the works of first and second generation exiles. While for the first generation of migrants who left in the 1980s, home is a concrete place, a village or a park that is stored in one's memory, for the second generation, born and or raised in exile, who have no memories of Afghanistan, the 'home' to where one dreams of 'returning' is more abstract:

اگر چه دورم از وطن سرايم
اگر چه نمى رسد به گوشه صدائيم
ترانه هايى را برايت سرايم
اگر چه نديدم روى ميهنم را،
گرچه كه به غم بود زندگيم اما
كس نديده در غربت زنده بودنم را
نغمه هاى خوبت در دلم بخوانم
قدر آرامش را در وطن بدانم،
در وطن وطن بميرم در وطن بمانم

I have never seen my homeland
My life has been spent in exile
But this life in exile is not living
Oh my country ,I sing your songs
And wish for peace at home
And wish to live at home
And wish to die at home

(Khavari 2013)

In the works of the second generation, *watan* ('home') is the focus of all their expectations and aspirations, an idealised imagined space of refuge and serenity in which one does not find any concrete references to particular places or memories.

Exile as Loss

The dominant image of exiles furnished in popular poems and songs, from earlier migrant workers to refugees from recent wars, is that of an individual characterised by dispossession and loss. The terms used by migrants to describe themselves are overwhelmingly negative in the sense that the migrant is lacking something. In Farsi, the prefix 'bi' means 'without' or '-

less'. We found many descriptors of migrants such as: *bi kas* ('friendless'), *bi yār* ('companionless'), *bi āshyān* ('heartless'), *bi khān-o mān* or *bi makān* ('placeless'), *bi mayhan* ('without a country'), *bi watan* ('homeless'), *bi sāmān* ('without tranquility'), *bichara* ('without recourse'), *bi zabān* ('tongueless' [without language, unable to speak]), *bi setāra* ('starless'), *bi tarāna* ('songless'), *bi shour* ('passionless'), *bi bahār* ('without spring'), *bi tabassom* ('unsmiling'). The adjectives include: *āvāra* ('wanderer'), *sargardān* ('lost'), *mahzoun* ('sad'), *delgir* ('wounded' or 'afflicted'), *zār* ('emaciated'), *nālān* ('weeping'), *nātawān* ('impotent'), *khār* ('humiliated'), *mofles* ('poor'), *gong* ('mute'). This is how migrants describe themselves, constructing an image of someone dispossessed of the tangible and intangible wealth bestowed by her place of birth.

The Loss of Home

This feeling of loss takes different forms tied to the place and time of exile, but is primarily to do with being uprooted from all that is familiar, from all that is known, from where one is known, from home. To illustrate this, the image of the nightingale, a migrant bird, and the metaphor of a rooted flowering plant are frequently used to capture the pain of exile, as in this verse from before the 1978 coup:

بلبل به وطن چون گل صد برگ بود
 از بی وطنی رنگ و رخم زرد بود
 مردم میگن حال غریبی چون ای؟
 ای حال غریبی بدتر از مرگ بود

The nightingale in her nest is a flower in bloom

But my face is wan. Far from my home

They ask me, 'how fares your soul in exile?'

But my soul is lifeless in exile.

(Kiomars 1991:71)

The comparison of an individual in the bosom of his family to a flower in bloom suggests that health, vigour, blossoming depends on the nourishment that comes from one's place of birth. But far from home, the migrant is pale and weak, slowly dying like a plant pulled from the earth. The exile finds himself in unfamiliar surroundings, in a place that is not his, deprived of friends and family, living among strangers for whom he is no one and nothing,

and who have neither respect nor affection for him. He appears as a being without a star, in absolute solitude:

به ملک دیگران بیگانه هستی
کسی مهر تو را در دل ندارد
کسی نام تو را بر لب نیارد
کسی دست تو را نمیفشارد
به شهر بی محبت رفاقت بی رفاقت

You are a stranger in another's land
Where no one keeps you in their heart
Where no one caresses your name with their lips
Where no one grasps your hand
(Sarkhosh, n.d.)

Sarkhosh's song from the 1990s evokes the loneliness of the Afghan exile, without recognition, respect, affection or even existence in someone else's homeland. This sense of alienation resonates in many poems and songs:

آتش به زبان دارم و کس هم سختم نیست
اینجا وطنم نیست اینجا وطنم نیست

My tongue tastes only bitterness,
Where should I find one who understands me,
This place is not my home.

(Surood 2013)

Here Delagha Surood, exiled in Europe, refers to the barrier of incomprehension that isolates the migrant. In another song Faiz Karizi refers to himself and all those forced to leave their country as 'mute' and 'wordless'. In 'This land is not my home', Haroun Yousofi also explores this alienation, which for him is not only a matter of language, but also the lack of recognition for his culture in his place of exile (London)

من بهر کی خوانم غزل سعدی و جامی دیوان نظامی
در شهر غریبی که در آن فهم سخن نیست این خاک وطن نیست

To whom should I sing
the ghazals of Saadi, Jami ou Nezami?
These words have no meaning
in this foreign town.
This land is not mine.

(Yousofi 2014)

In various formulations, the poems and songs underline that the exile is not at home, and can and should never be at home in exile. Implied more or less directly is the sense that to create a new home would be a betrayal of *watan*, the homeland.

Loss of Freedom and Mobility

Paradoxically, the second loss that appears in these verses is that of freedom and movement. Migration becomes a dead end, a time and place characterised by immobility and confinement, while simultaneously forcing the migrant to continue his journey:

غریبی سخت مرا دلگیر کرده
فلک بر گردنم زنجیر کرده
فلک از گردنم زنجیر وردار
که غربت دامنم را گیر کرده

This wandering weighs on my heart -
Destiny has placed a chain around my neck.
Destiny, take this chain from my neck!
My feet are bound to wander in exile.

(Doubleday (translated by Jafari/Schuster) 2010:54)

Here, destiny has led the migrant into exile, understood as a place of imprisonment from which there is no escape, because return is difficult or impossible (Baily and Collyer 2006: 170). A recurrent expression is that of *konj-e ghorbat*, literally ‘a corner of exile’ but the image is one of a narrow alley, a dead end, conveying the sense of the narrowness of the space occupied by the migrant and the inability to move freely:

قفس تنگه نمی تانم پریده
وطن دوره نمی تانم رسیده
خداوندا وطن پاینده باشه
نگار نازوک من زینده باشه

The cage is too narrow, I cannot spread my wings

My homeland is too distant, I cannot reach it

Oh God! Preserve my homeland

Protect and keep my beloved!

(Khavari, 2003 :302)

This image of a trapped bird far from home in these two early verses remains common in more recent poems and songs:

با شهپری بشکسته اسیر قفسم من، محتاج خسم من
این شوکت بیگانه هواخواه تنم نیست اینجا وطنم نیست

Wings clipped, trapped in a cage

Dependent on others.

This foreign luxury is not to my taste

This place is not my home.

The images of 'clipped wings', of a prison and chains, evokes the impotence and enforced immobility of the migrant, and the suffocating space in which he lives, as in the 2011 song 'Migrant' by Nabi Delnawaz, a young Afghan living in Europe:

آه غم دوری از وطن دوری ز مادر
شده در دست و پایم همچو زنجیر

The grief of separation from my motherland

Is like a chain around my feet and my hands

(Delnawaz 2011)

The Loss of Youth and the Waste of Life

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the previous discussion, migration is also associated with the loss of youth and of an appetite for life. Much like the plants referred to in a previous section, the migrant uprooted from his homeland ages quickly. Leaving the place of one's birth, where one has spent one's infancy and youth, signifies a shift to another stage of life. While Monsutti (2007) has written of migration as a rite of passage to adulthood, in these songs and poems there is no such positive connotation. Instead, exile wearies and ages the migrant:

خاک غربت مرا دلگیر کرده
جوان بودم مرا سخت پیر کرده
جوان بودم جوان تازه بودم
مرا پژمرده و تحقیر کرده

The land of exile has weakened my heart,
It has stolen my youth
I was young, so young
But exile has withered me

دلم را بی کسی درگیر کرده
مرا از زندگانی سیر کرده
تمام عمر من آوارگی بود
که غربت چهره ام را پیر کرده

Loneliness has crippled my heart
Stolen the pleasures of life
My life has passed wandering
And exile has withered my cheeks

(Khavari 2013)

Khavari describes the effects of migration and exile as unremittingly negative. Others echo this pessimistic view, associating migration with death. A popular proverb describes migration as a 'half-death'. For many Afghans, migration was and is a step into the unknown with no guarantee of return.

از خانه برآمدیم و گفتم خدا
از یار عزیز خود شدیم زنده جدا
یاران و برادران مرا یاد کنید
کردم سفری که آمدن نیست مرا

I left my home and gave myself up to God's will
I left my beloved and my friends
Oh keep me in your memory
I am making a journey from which I will not return

(Kiomars 1991:58)

This fear of ending one's life in exile is a recurring theme and haunts migrants, often focusing on the simple concrete rituals of burial and mourning – those rituals that should be carried out by close family members:

از غربت اگر مرگ رسد در بدنم
آیا که کند گور، که دوزه کفنم؟
تابوت مرا جای بلندی ببرید
شاید که رسد بوی وطن در بدن من

Place my coffin on a high peak,
That the perfume of home may anoint my body.
If death should take me in exile,
Who will dig my grave, who will sew my shroud?

(Kiomars 1991:72)

To die alone in a strange land is to die without recognition, without someone to mourn one's passing. It signifies the non-realization of what is assumed to be every exile's dream – the return home.

The Dream of Return

Across all generations, regardless of the period or the reason for migrating, a constant theme of poems and songs is the wish to return home – only such a return, to familiar and much-loved people and places, can alleviate the pain of exile and restore the exile to his former self.

دلم دارد هوای شهر کابل
هوای کوچه و بازار کابل

My heart longs for the air of Kabul again,

Its streets and its bazaars

(Darya, n.d.)

In migration literature, this focus on return is referred to as the ‘myth of return’, which is a ‘subjective certainty independent of the reality’ (Tourn 2009: 61) that many migrants do not return. In other words, the return evoked in these poems and songs is not a concrete goal for which one plans, but instead ‘an attempt to imagine a future’ (Tourn 2009: 61) in which the uncertainty and loneliness of exile come to an end. As noted above, the desire to ‘return’ to a place one has never been, to a ‘home’ that is abstract and exists only in the imagination, is found among the second generation of migrants, who, though born in exile, are not allowed to call Iran or Pakistan home. Khawari sings frequently of homesickness, for which ‘the only remedy’ is return.

بیا که بوریم به وطن اینجی گذرو نموشه
خاک غربت هرچی باشه خاک از مو نموشه

Let us go home to our land

We cannot live here

This land of exile will never be home

(Khavari 2012)

In Farsi, the word for soil or earth is also used for grave, so the return to the land is not just to the earth or the soil, but to the earth and soil in which parents and grandparents – the exile’s roots - are buried. It signifies a return to the place where one belongs.

دَ عید خوبه آدم آغیل خو باشه
پیش قوم و خویش و فامیل خو باشه

سر خاک شیرین آغی خو موری
ده چیل دختر اروزگو اگه شد

How happy I would be this Eid

to find myself in my own village

Among my nearest and dearest, among my family,

To visit the grave of our beloved grand-mother
To make a pilgrimage to the Forty Daughters of Uruzgan^{iv}

(Khavari, 2014)

In many songs, a common trigger for the expression of the desire to return is the arrival of a letter carrying news of the family or the beloved, as in the song of Safoura. In this song, recorded by many professional and amateur singers, a letter from his aged mother with news of his fiancée strengthens his desire to return home. The lyrics describe his preparations and the joy he imagines on seeing his beloved once again.

However, poems and songs, especially since the withdrawal of the Soviets, are also used to urge return as a moral duty as in these very recent anonymous verses posted on a blog:

وطن بی ما و تو آباد نموشه
ز چنگ دشمنان آزاد نموشه
اگر عشق وطن در دل نباشد
دل غمگین مو هرگز شاد نموشه

Our homeland will not be rebuilt without you and me
She will not be freed from the clutches of her enemies.
If we do not have in our hearts a love for our motherland
Our grieving hearts will never find joy.

It seems that this pressure worked in some cases – at a performance by Kabul University Theatre Students based on the data we collected (and which reduced the entire audience, many of whom had lived in exile, to tears), members of the audience told us that the call of Sarkhosh and Darya had influenced their decision to come back from Iran.

However, in work post-2016, the promise of return seems to ring hollow as the situation in the country has deteriorated. In 2016, in a widely seen interview with Deutsche Welle, President Ghani stated that he had no sympathy with migrants, that it was the duty of Afghans to stay (or return to Afghanistan) and rebuild their country (Schuster 2016). In the most recent songs, this demand by Afghan leaders that the exiles return has been heavily criticised including by young singers who give voice to the despair, fear and frustration of a

population devastated by attacks, unemployment and corruption. Perhaps emboldened by a culture in which poets have a licence to criticize (Olszewska 2007), a performer on the talent show Afghan Star in 2016 directly attacked President Ghani's call for Afghans to return to their homeland.

آفه مردم میمیره آیا نیسته بس
بازم مهاجرا ره میگی بیا پس
اینجه بر مردم کار نیسته محیا
اونا پس بیایه که چی بمره آیا؟

So many Afghans dying daily – that's not enough?

You demand that the migrants return.

Here where there is no work

You ask the refugees to return? To die here?

(Mobarez, n.d.)

At the same time as return to Afghanistan becomes less possible, young Afghans are frustrated by the hostility in European states. Hamid, an asylum seeker living in the Netherlands, waiting for a decision on his case, raps:

هر روز که از خواب بیدار میشم
می دانی نمی خوام چشمم را باز کنم
هر روز بیدار شم کی ها را صدا کنم
اگر نا امنی نبود ده وطن چرا آواره شدم
چهار سال عمرم رفته بر باد
غم دوری از خانه نبود یک روز شاد
چشمای مه باز نشد باز هم کمپ میروم
هر روز ترس استرس برای جواب زندگی

Everyday, I wake up but

my eyes refuse to open,

I wake up, but what's the point?

If my country was safe, why would I have left

I have lost four years of my life.

Oh the agony of being far from home,

of never having a happy day.

why should I open my eyes in this camp.

Every day I wait in agony
for an answer to my application.

(Hamid 2014)

Hamid describes the years lost in exile, the pain of separation and need to justify to a sceptical host why he left Afghanistan. These popular songs and poems are expressive of the experience of their authors, and speak both for the exiles and to specific audiences, whether it is those left behind, those thinking of leaving, host societies or their own governments.

Conclusion

In summary, we argue that popular culture allows us to hear how ‘migrants view their own migration, their host society and the place they have left, as well as how they are viewed by the host society’ (Baily and Collyer 2006) precisely because they are used by those in exile to comfort those suffering from homesickness, to reinforce the attachment of the migrant to home and tradition, to call for a return to home and to voice frustration and anger as well as nostalgia.

In Afghan oral culture, migration is represented as a tragedy, a bitter and painful experience both for those who leave and those left behind. These poems and songs are narrations of suffering, communicating bitterness, distress, grief and the longing for return. Here migration is never chosen, whatever the precipitating factor. If war was the main cause of the massive exodus of Afghan men, women and children after the 1979 Soviet invasion, in the years before, poverty and the search for work to enable the survival of the family obliged men to leave their homes and families. As we have seen, the representation of migration is relatively homogenous up until the past five years, when more contentious voices begin to make themselves heard.

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ⁱ All translations are by Jafari Alavi & Schuster

ⁱⁱ The flight of the Prophet is a key element in the origins and diffusion of Islam, with the Hijra marking the official beginning of Islam and the start of the Islamic calendar.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is contrast to the Pashto Landays, many of whom explain that the migrant is leaving because of poverty or to find the money to marry (Schuster and Shinwari 2018), and to written poetry in Dari/Farsi. In the latter, poverty, social injustice, inequality and corruption are themes, especially after 2001.

^{iv} A placename