" My beloved will come today or tomorrow " Time and the 'Left Behind'

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> The sound of the *bukhari,* a tin stove used for warmth and boiling water, being scraped clean in preparation for lighting, pulled me from a deep sleep. Sakina[1] saw that I was awake and began to sing what sounded like a lullaby. She keened the names of her husband, her son and nephews, interwove them with place names – Istanbul, Germany, France and the song became a lament. She was calling for them to come home, to come back to the family, telling them she missed them, the children missed them and the house was empty without them. I pulled myself upright, huddled in the *kampal* and sat listening in the white light from the window as the snow fell softly outside. Her tears gathered on her eyelashes, then slid down her cheeks. Her voice broke on a sob. We sat in silence for a moment, and then she got up to empty the bucket of cinders. When she returned, she said 'no one wants their children to leave. We want them to go to work in the morning, and to come home every evening to eat the food we cook and play with their children. But here there is no work – only fear'. At that point, her husband had been gone seven years, her son five and her nephew three. (*Schuster Fieldnotes, Pule Khumri, December 2012)*

Introduction

For centuries, Afghan men have been driven from home by poverty, and more recently by various forms of persecution (Safri, 2011). Throughout this time, women in particular have waited for fiancés, husbands, fathers and sons to return, their lives sharply constrained by the absence of adult men on whom they have traditionally had to depend for protection and provisions. The Soviet Invasion in 1979 caused whole families to flee, as they have continued to do from the successive conflicts afflicting Afghanistan, mostly to neighbouring Iran and

[1] All names have been changed.

Pakistan. As the men returned to fight, or moved on looking for work, women, children and the elderly were left behind in camps or the towns where they had settled. Still more recently, Afghan families have waited to be sent for, to join male family members in Australia, North America and Europe, to begin a new life abroad. While it has been clear for some time that migrants are as likely to be women as men (Morokvasic, 1984) (Phizacklea, 1983), and Afghan women do go abroad to study, or as part of family units, it still remains extremely rare for Afghan women to move alone[2], especially without papers. At a time when it is more and more difficult to get visas, and when the journey has become more and more dangerous, many Afghan women are left behind and obliged to wait to be sent for, or at least for a visit from loved ones who manage to get papers.

In recent decades, these periods of waiting have been dictated more and more by states determined to control who, how and for how long people enter their territories. While refugees have the right to bring their families to join them 'immediately', with some honourable exceptions, bureaucrats do little facilitate reunification, when not actively working against it. In particular, since 2017 (?), European states have shifted towards grants of subsidiary protection that do not carry the right to family reunification. Those with 'lesser' status have to satisfy income and housing conditions that keep families separated for years.

As states keep asylum seekers at a distance, trapping them in 'a powerful geography of exclusion' (Mountz 2011) that ruptures their lives, it is important to remember the collaterally excluded. Those that are left behind create 'new mental maps (and clocks)' through their connections to the time-space of family members abroad (Leutloff-Grandits, 2017, p. 124) and are sustained by 'the changing dynamics of hope created in the meeting point between their everyday lives and geopolitical realities' (Brun, 2015). Faced with these realities, families in Afghanistan try to minimize risk and maximise success, deciding who should leave and with whom, and whether it is better to travel alone, sparing wives, children or elderly parents serious physical dangers, but risking prolonged separations, or to travel together risking serious harm, but perhaps increasing the chance of being able to stay. The borders are felt and negotiated in homes across Afghanistan, first as families make these decisions, and then as families wait to hear whether those who have left have reached safety and are yet in a position to send for them. But these excluded are utterly invisible because rendered immobile in their own homes.

The Left Behind

[2] Afghan boys make up by far the largest proportion of unaccompanied minors arriving in Europe. Occasionally, a girl does travel alone, but it is more common for women to travel in family groups and to become separated en route, either by the smugglers, or at borders as some family members may it through but others are trapped behind the fences.

Khosravi (2018) has described the time stolen from migrants deported from Europe, from those held in detention and forced to wait in limbo. But time is also stolen from those 'left behind'. The lives of the left behind are marked by waiting, a waiting that is heavily gendered. While boys and men also wait to be sent for by fathers, fiancées or wives, their situation is different to that of their mothers and sisters, as patriarchal norms send them into the streets to look for and take up employment, or to go to school or the bazaar in spite of the risks of becoming 'collateral damage' in the ongoing conflict (Mountz 2011). However, women and girls are much less likely to be able to move around. In particular, the risk to life and limb, means that women are increasingly obliged to lose their time at home in passive, protracted waiting over which they have no control, trapped by the patriarchy of both sending and receiving states.

Increasingly scholars are focusing on the costs imposed on the 'left behind', including the 'not (yet) migrants' (Elliot, 2016, p. 102) who share many of the challenges facing forced migrants, in particular those in protracted displacement due to conflict. The concept of protracted displacement is understood as a particularly acute form of 'protracted uncertainty', framed by the concepts of 'waiting' and 'hope' (Brun, 2015, p. 20). As Elliot puts it 'the life of the migrants' spouse is characterized by a particular type of expectant and urgent waiting – a waiting that is often extended across years' (2016, p. 105).

تاوی نن څم سبا به راشم
جانانه میاشتی دی شمیرم تیر شو کلونه
You said I am going and will return soon
I counted the months but now years have passed since your migration
(Shaheen, 1994)

Those 'left behind', the involuntarily immobile, have no idea when the waiting will end. They live in an uncertain, future-oriented present, framed by conflict and fear, in which time leaches away.

'Left behind' is a term that has come to describe those wives (Aysa & Massey, 2004), parents (Fuller, 2017), children (Dreby 2007) and, less often, husbands (Hoang and Yeoh 2011) who are left behind by migrants. Some of that work has examined the impact of being left behind on family structures, on gender roles, on economic relations (references), and on the temporal and spatial immobility imposed on these women by virtue of their gender and the absence of husbands and or fathers (Brun, 2015) (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015), though less soon those left behind in countries in conflict. The migration of husbands from some patriarchal societies can create a space for women to move into the labour market, should economic conditions and social norms permit (Aysa & Massey, 2004), with this access to wages allowing them greater agency and participation in family decision-making. This has certainly occurred in Afghanistan, but to an extremely limited extent, as we discuss below.

This paper draws on work conducted in Afghanistan since 2012, including a study of what happens to those forcibly deported and their families (2012-2013), and two related projects (2016-2018) in which we analysed the place of migration in Afghan oral culture and

conducted interviews with members of 18 families over 18 months to explore their fears, hopes and plans for the future.

WAITING AND WATCHING

تکل به کله د راتلو کړي
زه دي د لاري څوکیداره کړم مینه
When will you decide to come back to me
You have made me a watcher of the way

For centuries, Afghan men have left home as *gharib*, itinerant workers, peddlers, traders, and merchants, leaving families behind for months or years (Slobin, 1976), a phenomenon reflected in *Landay*, the two line poems common in Afghan oral culture (Schuster & Shinwari, tbc) and frequently composed by anonymous women (Griswold & Murphy, 2014). Migration, whether to the next valley, to the big city or across porous borders was an important survival strategy for the poorest (Monsutti, 2005) and a source of wealth for rich merchants and traders. For some, like Tagore's *Kabuliwala* (2005), these were seasonal journeys, from which men would return every winter having sold dried fruit, and the carpets woven and shawls embroidered the previous winter by members of the family. They would bring back money for a bride price, or goods to sell in the market, enjoying an affectionate return:

مسافری نه په خیر راغلی
اول خوله درکړم که دې جیب ولټومه
Welcome, my beloved migrant,
Shall I kiss you first or search your pockets?
(Laiq, 1982: 444)[3]

For the less fortunate, *gharib kardand* (becoming an itinerant work or trader) meant years in exile, separated from all that was familiar, from those who depended on them, and surrounded by strangers who neither knew nor cared for them. The 'separation from family [that] is an expected consequence of migration' (Khosravi 2011, 22) was felt as keenly, if not more so, by the women left behind:

روح مې په تن کې ځکه پایی
زه ورته وایم اشنا نن سبا راځینه
I sustain my soul in my body by deceiving it
that my beloved will come today or tomorrow
(Benawa,1958: 49)

[3] The verses cited here are *Landay, the* anonymous two line poems in Pashtu, most often composed and shared among women. The names cited refer to collections by Benawa (1958), Laiq (1982) and Majruh (2003), though the latter does not provide the original Pashtu version. Aside from the Majruh verses, all other translations of the Landays were a collaboration between Schuster and Shinwari, and the interviews were translated collectively by Hussaini, Hosseini, Rezaie and Schuster.

Landay are replete with women pleading with an absent beloved to return. While this may be a son, it is most often a husband, her verses reassuring him of her fidelity and love:

ر هندوستان خوشحاله ګرځه
زه به دا توری سترګی ستا په نام ساتمه
Freely wander in Hindustan
For I shall keep these black eyes for you (Wn)
(Benewa 1958)

مینه څه الله دې مل شه
زه شینکی خال او زلفې تالره ساتمه
O' my beloved, go in the protection of God
For I will keep my face tattoos and hair for you
(Laiq, 454 :1982)

In these verse, which pre-date the Soviet invasion, the singer promises to remain veiled and avoid the gaze of other men as demanded by social norms. Until the 1970s, it was relatively rare for women to go abroad (to the next village, much less another country) and hundreds of verses describe the period of waiting and attest to the expectation that the male migrant would go and return home, and the role of women was to wait modestly, watching for the moment she sees him, always prepared to welcome him home.

زلفی ول ول که سترګی توری
د مسافر لالی د غږ دی رابشینه
Smooth your hair and beautify your eyes
There are rumours that your migrant beloved is returning
(Laiq, 1982, p. 304)

Other persistent social norms specify that a bride moves to her in-laws' home, even if her husband is abroad, and leave some of these young women feeling very vulnerable. In the interviews, daughters-in-law whose husbands are abroad, described how they were expected to do an unfair share of the household chores and had to tolerate abuse and harassment since their husband was not there to defend them. Some older *Landay* reflect this vulnerability, cursing him for leaving her alone with her in-laws and family responsibilities.

چې مسافر شې ما به پریږدې
بیا به د بل په کور کې ژوند څنګه کومه
He will leave me to migrate
How shall I pass life without him in a stranger's home?

ای مسافره کور ته راشه مسافری ته دې ځان جوړکړ
له کنډو واوښتې راپرې دې ښودل غمونه
You migrate freely
You crossed the mountains and left the worries to me
(Laiq, 1982: 443)

This norm of sole male migrants, and families left behind, changed following the Soviet invasion, as whole families and whole villages were displaced to neighbouring countries (Safri, 2011) (Centlivres & Centlivres-Demont, 1988) (Centlivres, 1993). Those who went to Iran were initially welcomed and largely self-settled. Though men and boys had sometimes to travel to find work, or left their families to fight in the Iran-Iraq war, on the whole, Afghan families stayed together. In Pakistan, the Afghan refugees were at first settled in camps, where many of the men were armed to return to fight in Afghanistan (Dupree, 1988), leaving their wives among strangers and without *maharam*.

ځما وطن کې بمباری شوه
جانانه لاړې زه دې چاته پریخودمه
There is bombardment in my homeland
O' lover you have gone and now who will care for me
(Majruh, 2003)

For those women left in Pakistan while the men returned to Afghanistan as *Mujahedeen*, the practise of *purdah,* the demand that women keep themselves apart, made life in the refugee camps where people were crowded together, extremely difficult (Dupree, 1988).

At different points over the past decades, driven to an extent by the discrimination and hostility described in Kazimi's *Bazgasht* (Return), Afghan men have also returned home from Iran and Pakistan, to see whether a more permanent return would be possible, or travelled onwards to Europe and elsewhere, in each case, leaving their families in Iran or Pakistan (Safri, 2011). As a result, women headed households in the Afghan diaspora are becoming more common, and some of these 'left behind' Afghan women share similar experiences with their sisters in Mexico (de Synder, 1993) (Aysa & Massey, 2004), the Philippines and Vietnam, as they take up employment and take charge of decision-making. Nonetheless, it is important to understand the socio-economic context of women's lives in Afghanistan, where social norms, insecurity and economic instability make them and their children highly dependent on their husbands, or in his absence, his family.

Among the families in our project there was an understanding that remittances, or the repayment of debts incurred, would not happen quickly, and that those left behind would be dependent for an initial period on the income-generating activities of younger brothers or on the extended family. Where the boys in the family were ill, or abroad, women's roles did evolve. Although economic opportunities for women are extremely limited in Afghanistan, two young women in our study had made it into the labour market. In the Ahmadi family, the absence of the sons (one of whom was away in the army, while others were working in Iran) and the father's declining health meant that the responsibility for family decisions had shifted to the mother and eldest daughter, who was now working as a nurse. Although Narges enjoyed her work, the attack on the hospital where she worked frightened her and the rest of the family, but the deteriorating economic situation in Iran meant she, her sisters and parents were dependent on her salary.

Literacy among Afghan women remains low at about 17%[4], as does employment[5]. Though there is some work available in teaching or nursing (as with Narges), and housekeeping (often the profession of widows or wives with husbands abroad), this is almost exclusively in Kabul or Mazar. Aside from the social norms that privilege the male breadwinner model, and the desire to protect women from the high levels of street harassment, the physical risks of being caught up in an attack or an explosion have severely curtailed women's movements outside the home, while men have no choice but continuing working in order to support the family. Our two women researchers, Hossaini and Rezaie, who interviewed family members (and were themselves objects of fascination as they visited homes across Kabul), were told repeatedly, by all the women they spoke to, that their days were spent waiting for the safe return of family members from work or from school - 'we cannot go to Kote Sangi or Shar e Nau. It is like being in prison' (Kavita, interviewed by Rezaie). But among those whose fathers, husbands or brothers were abroad, the confinement was worse, as without male companions they could not go to weddings, funerals or even the bazaars.

Scholars have described the waiting inflicted on people seeking asylum (Conlon, 2011), (Mountz, 2011) and argued that this waiting is not just passive. Brun (2015) speaks of active waiting and women working in the fields and caring for children and elderly relatives. Our study was conducted in Kabul, so we cannot speak of the situation of rural women, but in urban contexts with limited employment opportunities and high levels of existential fear, the time spent in waiting is largely passive and confined to caring roles.

Among the families, there were also two young men engaged to women abroad. Although these young men had much greater freedom than the women we encountered, nonetheless they were disempowered by the 'waiting'. One in particular saw no point in continuing his studies, since his qualifications would not be recognized in the US. Instead, as his mother explained 'his feet are bound while he waits – he cannot move forward'. For the left behind, there is a strong sense of time wasted, '"paused", "interrupted", "on hold"' (Brux, et al., 2019, p. 19), especially when the absence of husbands stalls the normal markers of time such as the birth of children.

> *Pule Khumri, Baghlan Province. 2012*
> 'I want Latifa to marry Ahmed. Tell him he should ask for her'. I looked at Sakina, Latifa's mother and Ahmed's aunt. 'Ahmed doesn't have his papers yet. Do you

[4] There is high variation in literacy among women, indicating a strong geographical divide. The highest female literacy rate, for instance is 34.7%, found in the capital, Kabul, while rate as low as 1.6% is found in two southern provinces of the country (2017 http://www.unesco.org/new/en/kabul/education/youth-and-adult-education/enhancement-of-literacy-in-afghanistan-iii/)

[5] Since 2016, the overall figure is 40%, but there are no reliable figures for female participation in the workforce https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/unemployment-rate-spikes-afghanistan.

want Latifa to end up like you – alone, waiting for a husband you haven't seen for seven years? Bringing up children who don't know their father?'.

Pule Khumri, Baghlan Province. 2015
Ahmed finally receives a 1 year residence permit and returns for one month, during which time he marries Latifa.

Paris, 2019
'They think I have a girlfriend here, that I don't want to bring her. They don't believe me about the rules and problems. They say "look at Bilal – he brought his wife after two years". My aunt is complaining that she has no grandchildren. Latifa is complaining that she cannot go out, that her life has stopped. Please, go and explain to them that I am doing everything I can, but it is difficult. You know how it is. We have to wait, but inshallah, she will come next year'. (*Schuster Fieldnotes*)

TIME AND THE 'LEFT BEHIND'

د هندوستان سفر دی ځار شه
زما په تور اوربل کې سپین اولګیدنه
The journey to India shall be cursed for you
My black hair turned grey waiting for you
(Laiq, 1982: 263)

As described in Landays, and during fieldwork with Afghan families, during this period of waiting, life is suspended as wives, mothers and daughters (and more recently, fiancés) focus their hopes and plans on an uncertain, unknown future. But as Brun points out, hope is a double-edged sword, sustaining people in the here and now, but also preventing them from moving on. In this future- and elsewhere- orientated present, the young people see no point in investing in their own future or that of Afghanistan, and so an engagement to someone abroad led in some cases to young people abandoning their studies.

'Nation-states advance their own politics of location by imposing immobility on others' (Mountz 2011: 394), and not just those confined in camps, reception centres or hostels, but in homes around the world, in Kabul and Ghazni and Laghman. As Griffiths et al note 'there exists a strong relationship between power,the state and time' (2014), as receiving states dictate how long wives and children wait to join husbands and fathers.

And yet though life is suspended, 'everyday time' (Brun, 2015) continues to pass as those waiting see their youth fade.

شیرین اشنا می مساپر شو
تر ګلاب سره ووم له نارنجه ژیړه شومه
My sweet beloved migrated
I was redder than rose and now I am yellower than a lemon

This resentment among women that their youth and beauty is wasted can be found in the older Landays collected by Benawa and Laiq, which speak of red lips now white with dust, and black hair turned grey.

تا د دکن سفر قبول کړو
ځما په تور اوربل کی سپین اولګیدنه
You decided to leave for Decca
Waiting has turned my hair from black to gray
(Shaheen, 1994)

But now the waiting is complicated by the need for documents and a certain level of income, and the capacity to negotiate hostile bureaucracies. Ahmed from Pule Khumri, had arrived as a minor in France, but in spite of recognising that he should not be returned to Afghanistan, the state had decided to give him a student visa rather than refugee status. For nine years, his has had to renew to papers annually. He trained as a carpenter, but was unable to earn enough to pay for a large enough apartment. Latifa, and thousands of young Afghan women married to migrants in Europe, hear the promise 'soon I will bring you…' often as they wait for husbands and fiancés to negotiate bureaucracies determined to keep family reunion to a minimum, and to ensure these young women and their children (potential or actual) do not become a burden on the state, and that their fathers and husbands are capable of making a contribution to the economy as well as their families. This ignores of course the potential contributions to the neoliberal state of all family members, including the childcare provided by grandparents that will permit both parents to work.

THEN AND NOW

In our research, we found that the pain caused by separation from loved ones was a constant motif, whether in poetry, songs, or interviews, and from whatever era. We also found that in the past and present, the lives of women left behind by Afghans forced to migrate was curtailed to a greater degree than that of men. So there was a significant degree of continuity. However, we noted a significance discontinuity. While the analysis of oral poetry revealed many pleas from the 'left behind' for the migrant to return home, in our interviews with families, all of whom had family members abroad, the pain of separation was ameliorated by the knowledge that those family members were safe, that they had survived the journey and they were no longer at risk in Afghanistan. In contrast to the voices in the poetry, the families in the project were unanimous in urging the family members not to return home. Mamelekat, for example, told us 'whenever my brother calls me from Sweden and me how much he misses us, I tell him "don't worry. At least, you are safe there. Try not to be sent back to Afghanistan."' (*Hossaini interview, Nasiri family, 4th visit, 2017)*.

All of the authors, throughout the research and in our personal lives, heard family members in Afghanistan use the phrase "at least you are safe there" in response to complaints about how difficult life is in exile. Having someone abroad who is safe, means one less person to worry about and someone who may be able to 'work hard there for your family back in Afghanistan' (*Hossaini interview, Nasiri family, 4th visit, 2017)*.

Two other novelties emerged: the switch from granting refugee status to granting subsidiary protection, discussed above, and the increase in forced return, whether through deportation or so-called 'voluntary' return, which means all the waiting and resources invested are wasted, and the individual returns to a situation of uncertainty and risk. In particular 2016, the EU and its member states, signed the EU-Turkey deal, which rewarded Turkey for taking back those trying to get to Europe and deporting Afghans, and the Joint Way Forward, which rewarded the Afghan government for accepting deported Afghans and discouraging irregular migration. As a result, the number of Afghans deported, overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, men, has increased, made the time the 'left behind' spend waiting, much more uncertain and precarious.

Keeping family reunion low makes it easier to deport. This brutal and expensive process (Schuster, 2005) is more likely to target single young men – once they have wives and children, or elderly parents, expulsion is that much harder. The impact of deportation on these families is often catastrophic. Elliot describes how the promise of being able to take someone 'out' is a part of the bride wealth in Morocco (2016, p. 107), so too in Afghanistan, when parents negotiate a match, a son (or a daughter) who is in Europe is considered a catch, and deportation robs the individual, his family and his bride of all the potential invested in their imagined future. All the money, time and waiting, the house not built and the children not born, are wasted.

CONCLUSION

While waiting and watching for the return of loved ones has a history as long as migration, due to the lack of security in Afghanistan, recent decades have seen this become a waiting to be called to leave, to join family members abroad, and calls for migrants have been superceded by calls for them to stay away and to stay safe, just as the states hosting them are plotting to both return those who have left and prevent others from leaving.

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