Migration reflected through Afghan Women's Poetry

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Abstract

Landays are two line poems that are most often written by anonymous Afghan women. Intense distillations of emotion and everyday preoccupations, they reveal the struggles faced by those whose husbands, on whom they are forced to depend, migrate. While Pashtun women are increasingly becoming visible in the economy, politics and society, social norms still dictate that most of these women should remain at home, uneducated and dependent on male family members, so that the migration of their husbands renders their lives even more confined. However, while the anonymous form of the poems allow women to complain about the constraints they face, it also permits them to merge as active participants in

their lives, urging suitors to go abroad to earn the money necessary for marriage, to bring back gifts and to remain faithful.

Introduction

Although political, public and scholarly attention has largely focused on migration from Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in 1979, in fact Afghans have migrated within the region and further afield since before Afghanistan existed as a state. Afghan men have been traders, labour migrants and wandering scholars for centuries, and for centuries Afghan women have waited for them to return, when they have not been forced to leave themselves.

Inevitably, this social phenomenon has found its way into that most famous and powerful expression of Pashto emotions and experience – the Landay: pithy, powerful two-line poems that speak of love, honour, war and separation. Landays, or tappas as they are also known, have long been composed by Pashtuns[i], especially by women and by those who are not literate. Pashtuns distill their entire social world into these short poems that 'lilt from word to word in a kind of lullaby that belies the sharpness of their content, which is distinctive not only for its beauty, bawdiness and wit but also for its piercing ability to articulate a common truth about love, grief, separation, homeland, and war'[ii]. As Majruh notes, 'the great originality of

this popular poetry is the active presence of woman….here she imposes herself above all as creator'[iii]. In Afghanistan (and parts of Pakistan) Pashtun men and women socialize separately, and women compose, sing and trade landays when they gather to fetch water from a well or river, or when they gather together to celebrate weddings or births, and the anonymous nature of these verses allows the women great freedom of expression.

To explore the place of migrants and migration in Afghan oral culture, Shinwari collected Landay from old and new anthologies, from social media and from family, friends and colleagues and with Schuster, translated them into English. Women's voices dominated our sample, with the Landays primarily the work of those left behind by migrating men, and here we concentrate on these female voices and what they tell us of their experience of migration, which most often is that of waiting and watching:

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

The poems offer an important window into a world usually hidden from a wider public. However, Landay are not preserved in the same way as written poems, but transmitted orally, and so as Manali points out, are 'in a constant state of revision and adaptation commensurate with the

changing social and political circumstances'[v] in which it is composed, spoken, shared, and adapted. Oral poetry is dynamic and vibrant, reflecting the immediate life experience of the composer and reciter, and offers an incomparable window into a culture that is largely illiterate[vi]. In particular, in Afghanistan, written literature is the realm of an educated elite, but Landays, though collected and celebrated by scholars, remain the property of the wider population and are regularly exchanged via social media.

There is no aspect of Pashtun life which remains outside the subject matter of Landays, which are incredibly versatile and deal with many different themes, including that of migration. In general, Landays are composed more by women than by men, and that is certainly the case in these Landays, which reveal the very gendered nature of the migration experience.

Left behind and refugee women

The voice most often heard in the Landay is of the woman left behind by a husband or betrothed who is forced to leave by poverty or war, and whose life is made more difficult because of his migration. A major cause of displacement from Afghanistan is the series of conflicts that began with the arrival of the Soviets in 1979, followed by a civil war, the Taliban regime

and the ongoing war between the Afghan government and various anti Government groups, including the Taliban an ISIS. These forty years have seen whole families flee to Iran and Pakistan. However, to our surprise, we found few explicit references to war itself in the Landays. One example was a reproach to a husband – presumably because he, like many Afghans in Pakistan in the 1980s, returned to fight as a Mujahed (a holy warrior), leaving his wife behind in the camps:

حُما وطن کې بمباری شوه
جانانه لاړې زه دې چاته پریخودمه
There is bombardment in my homeland
O' lover you left and now who will care for me[vii]

The only other explicit reference to war was in Majruh's collection, with the woman in exile reminded by the changing leaves of the home she has left behind:

It is springtime; here the leaves are sprouting on the trees
But in my home the trees have lost their foliage under the hail of enemy bullets[viii]

Traditionally, women did not migrate alone (at least, not in the Landays) and until forced to do so by conflict, did not accompany their husbands. However, we did find a handful of older verses in which a couple leave together:

ستا د نیستی پیغور یې راکړ
مینه ملاتړه چې بل وطن ته حُونه
They are laughing at your poverty O' my beloved

Let's get ready to go to another land[ix]

Another verse speaks movingly of the need to be kind to each other in exile, since the experience can be particularly isolating for women who have no close family and who would be confined to her home:

اشنا بد راسره مه کړه
زه په پردي وطن کي يو تا پيژنمه
Don't be cruel to me, O beloved
I know only you in this alien land[x]

Don't leave me

However, the largest group of Landays are written by those women left behind in Afghanistan and include references to all stages of the migration experience from departure, through the period of absence to return. Prior to departure, the woman who is to be left behind, most often a wife or fiancée, sometimes a sister, pleads with the prospective migrant not to go:

مسافري سخته خواري ده
زما زاري ده ياره مه ځه له وطنه
Migration is full of trials, my beloved
I beg you not to leave your homeland[xi]

Throughout the Landays there is a strong awareness that the one who leaves will suffer, but many of the verses written by women voice fears about the suffering they will endure as women alone, without a husband to care for them. While the following verse may be the words of a woman in

love, it may equally indicate her fears of how how difficult life is likely to be without her husband

مسافرې ته دي ځان جوړ کړ
چاړه راوخله ما حلاله کړه مينه
You are getting ready to migrate
But before you go, my beloved, take a knife and slay me[xii]

Once married, brides are obliged to leave their families and go to live with their husband's families, where they can feel abandoned and vulnerable.

چې مسافر شي ما به پريږدي
بيا به د بل په کور کې ژوند څنګه کومه
He will leave me alone when he migrates
How shall I live without him in a stranger's home?[xiii]

Purdah, the seclusion of women, is still practiced in many Afghan households, in particular in rural areas. Unless accompanied by a husband or maharam (close male relative), women do not venture into the public sphere. When a husband leaves to seek work, or to study, a woman becomes dependent on her in-laws, with whom she lives, to take her to the bazaar or to social events such as weddings. However, social norms dictate that such outings are few for left behind women, to minimize the risk that her honour (and that of her husband and his family) would be compromised, but also because the wives and mothers of her father or brother-in-law would have first call on his time. Having an absent husband shrinks a woman's world to her home, so unsurprisingly some Landays contrast the freedom enjoyed by their husbands with their own situation

مسافرئ ته دي ځان جوړکړ
له کنډو واوښتي راپرې دي ښودل غمونه
You migrate freely
You crossed the mountains and left the worries to me[xiv]

Although cousin marriage is common, and so her husband's family may be known to her, a daughter-in-law's status is often very low and dependent on the presence of her husband.

Go, stay safe and faithful, and bring me…

However, the women in the Landays are not all unhappy or resentful. There are sixteen Landays (out of 700) in our collection that offer encouragement to those migrating, indicating that migration is a normal and expected part of life, an accepted survival strategy and may bring benefits[xv]. A common theme is the need to find the bride price, that is, the money, jewelry and household goods that are given to a bride and her family by the prospective groom:

هندوستانی شه روپی راوړه
په کورنیو روپو مې مور نه درکوینه
O my lover; go to India to earn your fortune
My mother will not give me in marriage for a handful of rupees[xvi]

This may be read as an indication of the pressure on men to follow in the footsteps of other successful migrants who have been able to bring back the rewards of migration. While migration is painful for the ones left behind

and the one who leaves, it is also a source of gifts, presumably gifts that other migrants have brought to other wives:

په سفر ځي خدای ته دي سپارم
که راته راوړي د کشمير شينکي شالونه
You are going on migration, May Allah protect you.
And if you could bring me the green shawls of Kashmir…[xvii]

Given the long established necessity of migration, the role of the women becomes that of reassuring the travelers that they will remain faithful and will wait till their return.

مبينه ځه الله دي مل شه
زه شينکی خال او زلفي تالره ساتمه
O' my beloved, go in the protection of God
For I will keep my face tattoos and hair for you[xviii]

پر هندوستان خوشحاله گرځه
زه به دا توري سترگي ستا په نامه ساتمه
Freely wander in Hindustan
For I shall keep my black eyes for you[xix]

These women are promising to be veiled and not allow any other male to look on them. Other verses written are designed to comfort and reassure the migrant:

زړه دی آرام که مسافره
بوی می د باد په لاس درواستاوه مينه
Make your heart feel calm, traveler
I have sent you my perfume through the air[xx]

The pain of separation

Whether because of the pain of a prolonged separation from a loved one, or because of the difficulties of being without a husband, the Landays are replete with expressions of the heartache caused by their husband's absence and longing for his return:

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[xxi]

آشنا زما په سفر لاړو
یاقوتی اوښکې په توښه پسې لیږمه
My lover went on a long journey
As a gift, I sent my diamond tears to him[xxii]

مسافري دې ډیره وکړه
په زړ سنګینه یاره نه دې یادیدمه/ په زړه کافره څنګه دې زه نه یادیدمه
You have migrated once again
Why doesn't your hard heart miss me[xxiii]

In some cases, the journey abroad which was expected to last months turns into years, so that some Landay speak sadly or bitterly of time wasted in waitig:

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[xxiv]

په ما دې تیر د ځوانۍ وار کړو
ستا دې رانشي د دکنه مورانونه
You wasted my youth
And you send no letters from Deccan[xxv]

There is a strong sense in these verses of time passing, of youth, beauty and passion wasted as there is no one with whom to share sensual delights:

مسافري دي روزي مه شه
زه دي په سپينه خوله ويده پريښی اوومه
May your migration be fruitless
For you left me asleep with these ruby like lips[xxvi]

يار می کمکوتي مسافر دی
دا سپينه خوله به زه سوغات ورته ليږمه
My young lover is a migrant
I would send him my mouth as a gift[xxvii]

There are a number of Landays that speak of the fear of betrayal, that the migrant has prolonged his absence because he has been seduced by another woman:

د هندوستان لور ته مه ځه
ته به ګني خوری ما به هيره کړی مينه
Don't go to Hindustan
You will eat sugarcane there and will forget me[xxviii]

In some cases, the absent husband does create a second family, and for families, especially wives and children, this is a frightening prospect, as it threatens his capacity to provide for the family left behind. A further fear is that the migrant will not be able to go home, that he or she will die in exile

د مسافر د ارمان مرګه
سر بی بالښته خوله سپيره وی په ګردونه
The death of the migrant is terrible
His head is without a pillow while his mouth is full of dust[xxix]

که مسافر خاورو ته لاړ شي
په زړه کي بې پاتي ارمان د جانان شينه
If the migrant dies

He carries his beloved's unfulfilled desire to the grave[xxx]

This second verse carries within it the awareness of the devastation the migrant's death means not just for him but also for those who will not see him again – life as the wife of a migrant is difficult, but that of a widow is worse.

Come Home

Given the difficulties that women face when their husbands are abroad, and the fear that they may not see them again, it is unsurprising that there are so many Landays pleading with them to return home:

مسافری پرپږده راګرځه
نورمې په سپینه خولګی مه پرپږده ګردونه
End your migration and return home
Don't leave dust on my white lips any more[xxxi]

مسافري دې ډیره اوکړه
کور ته راځه چې ماشومان دې یادوینه
You have done enough of migration
Now return home - the children are missing you[xxxii]

Since the experience of waiting for a migrant husband to return as recounted in these Landays is overwhelmingly negative, it is unsurprising that the most joyous are those that celebrate return:

مسافر ګله ستړی مشي
ږومبی خولۀ واخله بیا به ووایي حالونه

Welcome home, my wandering lover
First take a kiss; you may talk afterwards[xxxiii]

مسافری نه ستړی می شی
اول خوله درکړم که دی جیب ولټومه
Welcome! On your return from migration
Shall I kiss you first or should I search your pockets[xxxiv]

The successful return of the migrant brings more than gifts and wealth, it restores his wife to a greater degree of freedom and improves her status.

The function of migration landays

Landays offer emotional release to those who compose and recite them. They express fear, grief and loneliness, love and loss, as well as anger and resentment that the wives of migrants may not be able to voice directly. However, it is also important to acknowledge the issue of self-censorship and the representation of self in the Landays. Landays are not only a means to express emotions, but also to communicate with listeners, to signal to others what the singer is feeling. It is important not just to feel, but that others should know what is felt.

In a country like Afghanistan, where the majority of the population is illiterate, oral culture is a key means of communicating the system of values, codes of behaviour and the adverse consequences of breaching such codes[xxxv]. In the collections of Landays, we noticed that the anthologists idealised the dominant social norms codified in Pashtunwali[xxxvi]. Some of

the Landays may be idealized representations of what the faithful, left behind wife *should* be and feel, that is, patient, understanding, supportive and loving:

مسافري په جمع زړه کړه
خولګی مي ستا ده که زهٔ خاوري شم مينه
Enjoy your life in migration
For my mouth is yours until I am in my grave[xxxvii]

These Landays indicate how migrants and those they leave behind should behave and how they should feel. The role of women is to wait faithfully, watching and always prepared for the return of their beloved:

د مسافر اشنا د پاره
تلي مي سوځي په غرمو ولاړه يمه/ زه په لمر ولاړه يمه
The soles of my feet are burning
because I am waiting for my lover in the noontime[xxxviii]

While men are expected to go abroad when necessary, these Landays serve to remind them that they have family waiting for them, that they should return and they should be faithful. However, there also is a strong strand of rebellion against cultural norms, with women railing against the fate or family that takes their beloved from them, and leaves them vulnerable in their absence. And underlining Griswold's characterization of Pashto women as passionate, strong and far from submissive[xxxix], we also see them rage against the husband who wastes their youth and leaves them to bear family burdens alone.

Conclusion

It is not surprising that these Landays continue to circulate among Afghan Pashtuns since the emotions voiced remain the same today as they were fifty or more years ago – the fear of abandonment, and the loneliness and vulnerability of the women left behind The only distinction that we found between the earlier and later Landays was the absence of joy in the later ones. All the teasing and urging of migrants to go and bring back tokens from abroad belong to era before the Soviet invasion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the later verses are uniformly sad, marked by melancholy and nostalgia.

In a paper of this length, it is simply not possible to do justice to the richness of the Landays we collected, to the powerful imagery and the diverse themes, but we hope that we have given at least an indication of the insights they offer. These verses revealed the concerns and preoccupations of a people for whom migration is a constant and complex phenomenon. On one hand it is a necessary evil, necessary given the precariousness of their lives and the inability of many families to find work and safety at home, and an 'evil' because it ruptures that pillar of Pashtun life – the family – and leaves women in particular exposed and vulnerable. On the other hand, for centuries, migration, forced or chosen, has provided families with a means to survive, to find safety and in many cases to thrive.

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[i] Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Two line poems, dobaitis, are also written in Dari, Afghanistan's other national language, but the structure and rhyming rules are not so strict as in the Landays.

[ii] Eliza Griswold and Sean Murphy, *I am the Beggar of the World: Landays from Contemporary Afghanistan* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2014, p14

[iii] Syed Bahauddin Majruh, *Songs of love and war: Afghan women's poetry* Other Press, New York 2003, px. This collection did not include the original Pashtu verses.

[iv] Suliman Laiq, *Pashtu Landay* New Kabul, Peshawar 1982, P145

[v] Interview with Mr Najib Manali, poet and Cultural Affairs Director at the Office of the National Security Council, 4 April 2017

[vi] Hanif Khalil, Pashtoon Culture in Pashto Tappa *Unpublished Doctoral Thesis.* National Institute of Culture and Historical Reseach, Quaid i Azam

University, Islamabad 2011; Qaisar Khan, Qasim Bughio and Arab Naz, An Analysis of the Language of Tappa and its role in Gender Identity Formation in Pakhtun Society *BIOINFO Sociology,* 1(1), 2011, p9-14

[vii] Ali Akbar Saayad, *Da gham sawee Faryadoona: Tappay (Melancholy's scorched laments: Collection of Landays)* Zed Books, Peshawar 1995, p45

[viii] Majruh op cit p43

[ix] Laiq op cit p327

[x] Laiq ibid p82

[xi] Laiq ibid p444

[xii] Salma Shaheen, *Rohi Sandaree [Pashtu songs]* Pashtu Academy, Peshawar 1994, p228

[xiii] Saayad op cit p69

[xiv] Laiq op cit p443

[xv] Alessandro Monsutti, Migration as a rite of passage: Young Afghans Building Masculinity and Adulthood in Iran. *Iranian Studies* 40(2) 2007 p167-185.

[xvi] Laiq op cit p482

[xvii] Laiq ibid p129

[xviii] Laiq ibid p454

[xix] Laiq ibid p138

[xx] Laiq ibid 298

[xxi] Abdur Rauf Benawa, *Landaye* Askari, Kabul 1958 p49

[xxii] Laiq ibid p83

[xxiii] Laiq ibid p444

[xxiv] Laiq ibid p263

[xxv] Laiq ibid p134

[xxvi] Benawa op cit p46

[xxvii] Laiq op cit p493

[xxviii] Laiq ibid p264

[xxix] Laiq ibid p257

[xxx] Saayad op cit p69

[xxxi] Laiq op cit p443

[xxxii] Munaza Shaheed, Retrieved from *Facebook* 18 March 2017 https://www.facebook.com/100003705585805/posts/1011697592297084/

[xxxiii] Laiq op cit 442

[xxxiv] Pashto Landay, *Hewad Afghanistan* http://www.hewad.com/landay/m-y.htm

[xxxv] James Caron, Reading the Power of Printed orality in Afghanistan: Popular Pashto Literature as Historical Evidence and Public Intervention. *Journal of Social History, 45*(1), 2011 p172-194; Louis Dupree, *The Role of Folklore in Modern Afghanistan*. American Universities Field Staff Reports, Hannover, New Hampshire; Griswold and Murphy op cit; Margaret Mills and Ahrary, A. (2006). *Folklore of Afghanistan.* http://www.khyber.org/culture/a/Folklore_of_Afghanistan.shtml [Accessed 10 April. 2017].

[xxxvi] Sumela Ahmadzai *Pa Pakhto Landayo keh da khazo da zwand da zeny masayello serehnah (Research on some issues of women's lives in Pashtu Landays) Unpublished thesis.* Kabul: Academy of Sciences 2014; Shah Jehan, *Pa Pakhtu Adab keh da Mermano Barkha (Women's contribution to Pashtu Literature)* Pashtu Academy, Lahore 1993; Khalil, op cit

[xxxvii] Laiq op cit p443

[xxxviii] Laiq op cit p257

[xxxix] Griswold op cit