

Thoughts on Afghanistan in 5 parts

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1. March 2003

It's around 10pm, and pitch black. There are no streetlights. I am in a large Land Rover with an assortment of journalists, aid workers and diplomatic types. We're lost. Streets have no names, they all look exactly the same: rows of brown adobe walls high enough not to be seen over, punctuated by small, indistinguishable, metal gates that mark entrances. Then someone hears a faint sound that may be music. We drive towards it and soon it's unmistakable. Drum and bass beats throb into the emptiness surrounding us. We start to see a few parked cars, then more and more. Outside one gate there are people milling around. Armed guards look on furtively, scanning us intensely as we file in. Inside are a small courtyard, and a two-story house filled with crowds of trendily-dressed people, mostly in their 20s. Alcohol is flowing like the newly rain-filled Kabul River and all kinds of smokes fill the air. The first person I meet is a man who's set up a mini-mobile circus for kids, where they make up their own stories, costumes and performances. The aim of the circus, he says, is to make children laugh. Excitedly he shows me pictures on his laptop of kids who've had their legs blown off by landmines, now wearing stilts in these outrageous, long, pointy, brightly coloured hats and costumes. They look amazing. Other people I meet are setting up radio stations, building water pipes, bringing in laser-eye surgery equipment, de-mining the still mine-infested countryside, opening trendy restaurants. They all seem incredibly bright, motivated, articulate and thrilled with whatever it is that they are doing. It gets late and the dancing gets hot and heavy. The lights are down low, the music up loud. Not an Afghan in sight. Welcome to Kabul 2003. Or at least one section of it.

2.

Afghanistan doesn't really make the headlines anymore, unless one of the hundreds of international aid workers or American troops is attacked, or if more than thirty Taliban are killed in the East, in the South, always in mountain caves. We hear nothing of the struggles of everyday life; the small, mundane things that are made almost insurmountable by the destruction wrought during the last twenty-five years of war. We hear little about how people manage without running water, without electricity, little of the 'reconstruction effort', its successes and failures. We hear little of the fate of Afghan women who were so recently used to galvanize the US call to war. We are told that they are now 'free', and can go to school, get a job. Not about the daily terror they face, the fear of being abducted or raped, of forced marriages, and of the continuing tradition of violence, physical and mental, against them. We hear nothing of the past violations, the years of attacks, torture, deaths, fuelled largely by outsiders, and what the consequences of their actions are now. Did they just disappear? Did everyone just forget about these atrocities, and who committed them? Did they even really happen? Is it possible to just bury the past, hope that its consequences won't erupt out of the earth and start afresh?

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Afghanistan has not been publicly talked about, let alone set up. There are no inquiries for 'healing'. No trials for war criminals. Instead, war criminals are the ones who have had a mantle of legitimacy conferred upon them by the international community, and are back in power, guns in hand. International power alliances and corporate media are participating in a Bury and Forget Past Crimes

Commission, but for Afghanistan this is merely business as usual.

History has been re-written for the Afghans by CNN, by the BBC, by men thousands of miles away who sit in plush offices making decisions that affect the life and death of ordinary Afghan people. But their way of writing history is curious: they do not strive to include as much information as possible, but the least amount. They want to reduce this history to one paragraph, one sentence, one line if possible, easily said and more easily digested in the space of the sixty seconds they have to utter it.

So what we see most often now is a history of omission, of erasure and/or substitution. It might actually be a good project to document the progress of erasure in corporate media: In the 1980s we knew this about Afghanistan, now we know this even less.

A History of Forgetting

Example:

In the 1980s the religious fundamentalists, referred to in this text as Islamists, who threw acid in the faces of women, sliced off their breasts and partook in other unspeakable acts, were promoted by western governments and mainstream media as Afghanistan's freedom fighters, bravely resisting the Soviet infidels. Their independence struggle was branded a 'jihad', a good snappy, jingle/logo that the CIA latched on to, and used, to bring good Muslims from around the globe to unite and fight the good fight. Many people responded to this not-so-holy-call, most of them poor, uneducated, unemployed. The pay was good, in addition to three meals a day, and clothes on their backs. The cause could not be faulted. Though there were true '*mujahideen*', Afghans that resisted the occupation independently, it was the zealots who received the bulk of the \$6 billion dollars in training, arms and funding that the U.S poured in, first covertly, then overtly. These mercenaries fought hard and long with US bought guns, matching funds from Saudi and Pakistani support and direction. It was a proxy war for the US, and no body bags filled with Americans flew home. Communism was going to be defeated, at any cost, by Afghans fighting for their own country, Muslims fighting alongside their brothers, against the godless evil of communism. At least a million Afghans died over this 10-year period, at the end of which the US cried victory over the Soviets.¹

With the ouster of the Soviets in 1989, the US left too. There was no repatriation of fighters from other countries, who now knew nothing except how to fight. There was no disarmament program: the country was awash with the latest arms technology – the most modern machinery Afghanistan possessed by a long shot. Afghanistan was left with no reconstruction help and with fundamentalist groups armed to the teeth.² They fell into fighting amongst themselves. News of these internecine battles dropped off the radar in the West. There was an almost complete news blackout for at least four years until the Taliban began to make their appearance.³ Thousands of Afghan civilians were killed during this period, but who in the outside world really knew or cared about it?

Then Came September 11, 2001

Now those very same freedom fighters are 'Islamic terrorists'. Gulbuddin Hekmaty, Abd Sayyaf, Osama bin Laden, those who once received the bulk of US and Pakistani support

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are now called, by the US administration, the world's "greatest threat to peace". Corporate media follows the lead of the US government in denouncing them as extreme, fanatic, and worst of all, Evil.

Corporate media makes no inquiries. It assumes that there are no dots to connect over the evolution of a 'movement'. 'Evil' is a blanket term that renders cause and effect irrelevant: Evil just exists, and one must either overcome it, or be overcome by it. It's a Manichean view of the world, the 'you're either with us or against us' logic that denies complexity, cause, dialogue, engagement, and imagination. In this case it doesn't even ask why so many disaffected young people are joining the ranks of Islamists. It's as if even asking the question will somehow make this 'movement' worthwhile of inquiry; give it credence as a phenomenon with an evolution that grew out of certain circumstances; raise it above its current status of being 'terrorism' – a random and chaotic force that has no reason for being except its inherent evil – that must be stamped out at all costs.



3.

"Afghanistan has experienced atrocity after atrocity for the last twenty years. First it was the Soviets who came destroyed and left. Next the mujahideen destroyed and killed, then the Taliban did the same, then the Americans, and now the mujahideen are back".

- Nilab, RAWA member, March 2003⁴

I keep watching the news, watching reports about Afghanistan, watching documentaries – about the women, about aid groups, health care issues, fighters, trying to catch even a glimpse, a hint, of an essence of feeling, but it is elusive, it cannot be captured, just as it is impossible to describe heat or cold: you can only know it if you have experienced it and even then it is impossible to describe. So with pain. So with the irrevocableness of loss: it is impossible to 're-vocalise' the depth of sadness over lives disrupted and lost. It is impossible to capture or re-present. How does one even begin to approach the extent of feeling

over the destruction not only of one's own life, but also of one's family, community, homeland? And of knowing that it is impossible to restore anything from the loss created.

Ordinary Afghan people have suffered, and the next wave of suffering came even before they had no time to get over the first one, supplanting the old suffering with new, without any time for recovery, for processing, for physical, mental or emotional reconstitution.

Recently, war trauma experienced by western journalists and war reporters has been getting some attention as a cause for concern. But there is little of this attention on the population that suffered the war.

A 2001 World Health Organisation report estimated that 60% of Afghanistan's population suffers from mental disorder. "Twenty-three years of war have ravaged the health of psychosocial functioning of the people in Afghanistan. Killings, executions, massive persecution, forced internal displacement, fear of mines, have left an indelible mark on the population ... There are virtually no opportunities for treatment under the current circumstances".⁵

According to this and other reports, women are particularly susceptible to depression, as a large percentage of them have suffered atrocities such as kidnapping, forced marriage, rape, amputation, torture and other abuses. Anxiety disorders, nightmares, fear of loud noises and fear of the future are some of the overt symptoms of their condition.

A 1997 UNICEF report states that 97% of Afghan children have witnessed the violence of war. Another 60% or so have lost a close family relative.

In a Pakistani refugee camp I met a ten year old Afghan boy whose father had lost an arm in Afghanistan. The boy didn't want to go to Afghanistan because he thought everyone there would lose an arm. A young Afghan girl told me she wanted to forget the past,



because it was so horrible to think about. Then she added that the past wouldn't forget her.

How do children who have never experienced a safe, secure environment grow up? What do children who have seen their parents blown up, who have lost limbs, or have witnessed horror but never peace, think about the world? How does one rebuild when hearts and minds are shattered and bloody? "How can things so terrible, such personal and historical traumas be over? Is it possible for them to be consigned to an untroubled or untroubling past?"⁶

The pain and trauma of twenty-three years of war remains unarticulated and unexpressed. After a while, perhaps, the suffering cannot even be expressed, it becomes unutterable, and is literally un-speakable: it is too terrible to speak of. The memory of an entire people is rendered silent. But what happens to the past in such silence?

4. "Remembering is an Act of Resistance"⁷

This phrase resonates with the Afghan women I speak of. There is an overwhelming sense that their stories will not be remembered, that 'History' will not remember things the way they remember them. From minute details to the big things: why did fighting break out to begin with, the fact that perpetrators of attacks have gone unpunished, the fact that their lives have been stolen from people, the feelings of despair, rage, anguish, helplessness, none of this ever makes History. They are eager for their stories to be told, to be recorded, and documented. Besides validating their experience, the survival of their remembrances resists the twisting of facts, resists falsities that are re-presented as 'truth', resists the re-writing of History by dominating governments and corporate media who need events to fit their narrow, self-serving view of the world so that their power remains intact. These remembrances resist erasure of the way things happened.

5.

Flying from Delhi to Kabul one passes the Hindu Kush mountains, a view so spectacular one might think one's died and gone to heaven. Not an hour later, you might think you've landed in hell. Nothing prepared me for Kabul airport. Adorning the runway, as we screeched to a slow taxi, were bombed-out, burnt-up, mangled civil and military airplanes that

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looked like prehistoric carcasses of gigantic beasts, their shapes obscenely twisted out of recognition, their guts splayed out for all to see. Though only machines, the violence that had been done to them was shockingly visceral. One couldn't help but think about people, flesh and blood, who must have experienced the same violence, or worse. As we were disembarking, a seasoned journalist that I'd been sitting next to on the plane saw my expression, patted my back and said, "Don't worry, you'll get used to it".

I never did get used to it. I couldn't get over the ruins that overwhelm the city, the burnt-out tanks that litter the countryside, the remnants of buildings and streets, wreckage of people with missing limbs and crushed faces.

Kabul is full of wild contradictions, surreal juxtapositions, and paradox. Devastating ruins sit in a stunning location; majestic mountains that surround the city and seem right up in your face. The poverty and deprivation is matched by unrivalled hospitality and grace. A palpable feeling of excitement in the air, the sincere desire and hope for a chance to reassemble lives stands in stark opposition to an underlying sense of uncertainty, fear and tension.

In Kabul, certainly, extraordinary work is being done that makes a positive dent in the lives of individual Kabulis. Aside from the availability of more schools and basic health care, there are also extraordinary people who are approaching the issues of how to imagine a city and build it from ground up with striking creativity and innovation. Many young Afghans have opportunities they couldn't have dreamed of a few years ago: training in media production, driving lessons for women, markets are buzzing with activity, beauty shops and photography studios, both banned under the Taliban, are booming with business. But these are just surface changes.

The lives of foreign workers play out practically in a bubble, mimicking the colonial structures of 'expat' life in many other countries of the third world. While the areas they live and work in now have electricity and running water, Afghan populated areas have virtually none. Foreigners can spend time in the cosy comfort of a couple of cafés serving cappuccino and chocolate croissants, with internet connectivity and satellite television (where US special ops guys watch either Fox International or the Fashion Channel non-stop), and a swirl of expensive restaurants and social activity that is justified by the sentiment that life has to be liveable for them to be able to work in Kabul.

But life for most Afghans remains bleak. The reconstruction efforts are much too little, far too late. And they rest on the tip of a seething volcano.

In an interview with Weeda, a representative of RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, the indefatigable women's rights group) in December 2001, she stated: "The Northern Alliance members have cut their beards and their hair, they have put on western suits and are now presentable to the world. But they have not changed their way of thinking. They are anti-democratic, anti-woman and anti-modern. No fundamentalists (Islamists) should be included in government. If they are, there will only be more corruption and killing. Nothing will change and the rule of the gun will be the only law in Afghanistan".

Almost two years after the fall of the Taliban, Islamists make up the majority of the new government of Afghanistan. There is no law except the rule of the gun, and corruption and killing by government forces is widespread. Regional warlords have tremendous power in their areas, and the central government which holds sway only in Kabul is deeply fractured.

There has been no disarmament of local militias or factions. The Taliban are gaining in strength, sometimes working in cahoots with the US' biggest ally during the Soviet occupation, Gulbuddin Hekmatyr.

One would think that the US administration would learn from the recent past and heed RAWA's call of having no Islamists in the new government. No such luck. Or logic. Not only does the US not support this notion, one could argue that they are once again actively promoting Islamists to power. The US is still funding regional warlords who undermine the central government and the handpicked President, Hamid Karzai.⁸ Even within the central government, the US is tacitly supporting Islamist elements. One can only assume that with all the US' heat and anger over fundamentalist Islam, with all its rhetoric of helping the Afghans build a democratic nation of peace and stability, in actuality a peaceful Afghanistan does not serve US interests. It seems that a fractious, unstable, terrorized Afghanistan serves US interests better.

Talking to people in Kabul, it seems that President Karzai is generally liked. Although Afghans seem to know that Karzai has been a friend of the CIA for many years, and, during the Taliban period, he served as an advisor to UNOCAL (the American-based oil company looking to build Central Asian gas pipelines), they say that he isn't a war criminal like the others, he hasn't killed innocent people. He might even be a good man, but no one knows for sure. He has no power. He cannot do what he wants so people don't even know what he really does want.

Certainly Karzai's power is limited. Driving around Kabul one sees enormous billboards, erected on the hillsides, of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the Islamist leader of the Northern Alliance. In shops, businesses, even in government offices, one sees photos not of Karzai, but of Massoud. It is obvious who rules Kabul.

Inexplicably, Europeans, especially the French, love Massoud. They consider him to be the Che Guevara of Afghanistan, the handsome, well-dressed Lion of Panjshir, a hero. So what if he was responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilian Afghans – it was war and he was the good guy. Not so. The best that can be said about Massoud was his military acumen. His participation in civilian rule during the presidency of Rabbani (1990-92) was a bloody mess, when over 25,000 people were killed in Kabul alone and the city completely razed by rocket shelling between forces of Massoud and Hekmatyr.⁹

Massoud was assassinated a few days before September 11. It is his progeny who now surround Karzai and hold powerful positions: the Defence Minister, Mohammed Qasim Fahim (whose animosity towards Karzai is well-known, as well as his brutal methods of control – Kabulis shudder at the mention of his name), Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, and Education Minister Younis Qanooni are all former Northern Alliance commandos. Their high positions are payment for helping the US offensive against the Taliban in 2001. Unfortunately, their agenda doesn't seem so different from that of the Taliban. Recently their looting of land, and Taliban-era methods of intimidating citizens have come to the attention of international human rights groups and even the UN.¹⁰

There are many other ministries that make up the government. They compete with each other rather than work in a spirit of co-operation. There is much fighting and backbiting, with each ministry accusing the others of corruption and ethnic nepotism.

Of Major Concern is the Judiciary.

"Afghanistan's legal system has collapsed ... There are few trained lawyers, little physical infrastructure and no complete record of the country's laws. Under successive regimes, laws have been administered for mostly political ends with few protections of the rights of individuals to a fair trial".¹¹

Karzai had an opportunity to positively influence the legal system with his appointment of the Supreme Court Chief Justice. He even promised to keep in line with Afghanistan's constitution (the Bonn Agreement signed in December 2001 re-established the 1964 Constitution of Afghanistan) which states that the Chief Justice be under sixty years old, and that he be educated in all sources of Afghan law, religious and secular. However, Karzai re-appointed Fazl Hadi Shinwari, an ally of the Saudi-backed pro-Wahabi Islamist leader Abd Sayyaf. Shinwari is in his eighties and does not have formal training in secular sources of law.¹²

Shinwari had been in Pakistan for forty years teaching in Taliban Deobandi *madrassas*. He was brought back to Afghanistan in 2001 – by the Americans. Once appointed, he moved quickly to consolidate his power, packing the nine member Supreme Court with 137 sympathetic Islamist mullahs, bringing back the Taliban's dreaded Department of Vice and Virtue and calling for Taliban-style punishments to implement Shari'a law.

For women this is truly a nail in the coffin. Their mobility and opportunities are already severely restricted. Now, if they report abuse and by some miracle it reaches court, they have no chance of retribution. If a woman is beaten or raped, the overwhelming attitude is: "What did she do to provoke this action?" She is held responsible while the perpetrator is considered merely reactive. Shari'a law is used to support this belief. Women who do report abuses are often put in prison, purportedly as protection for themselves. The Women's Ministry is also of no help. It is highly ineffective and is considered a device by Karzai not to deal with women's rights: it exists only in name, to keep the international community at bay. It has no implementation power and no legal jurisdiction. The most it can do is make recommendations, but even this is questionable since many women working at the ministry are deeply conservative themselves.

Most ominously perhaps, Chief Justice Shinwari announced in October 2003 that talks between the government and "moderate elements" of the Taliban were taking place, supposedly to limit the Taliban's destructive activities.¹³ 'Moderate elements of the Taliban' is like saying 'moderate elements of the Nazis'. It seems that the way is being paved for Taliban re-entry into the governing of Afghanistan.

The Supreme Court has also effectively taken justice for past crimes off the agenda. This in turn has contributed to a sense among commanders that they can act as they wish with no risk of punishment, and so they carry on their human rights abuses across the countryside with impunity.¹⁴

Which brings us back full circle. Why is there no call for a Truth and Reconciliation Committee? Why are there no trials for war criminals? How can we justify the re-instatement of people we know are war criminals?

How easily we as members of the international community forget about the suffering of the Afghan people. We refuse to look at Afghanistan with depth and complexity, instead

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consoling ourselves with the donation of pennies that go towards a nebulous 'reconstruction'. Not asking difficult questions about the profoundly complicated situation of Afghanistan doesn't mean they don't exist. It is unrealistic for international powers, who have once again contributed heavily to the installation of destructive structures of power in Afghanistan, to expect anything other than the worsening situation that is rapidly unfolding there.

NOTES

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2. "Conversation with Journalists", Rahimullah Yusufzai, *The Dawn*, Pakistan, and Shahin Shaheed, *The Nation*, Pakistan (December, 2001).
3. Ingalls, Dr. Jim. "Western Interests in Afghanistan and their Consequences for Afghan People: A Critique of US Media Coverage" (July 6, 2000) <http://www.sonaliandjim.net/politics/index.html> (November 30, 2003).
4. Interview with Nilab (pseudonym) of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (March 2003).
5. World Health Organization, "The Invisible Wounds: The Mental Health Crisis in Afghanistan", Special Report, Central Asia Crisis Unit (November 6, 2001).
6. Punter, David. *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000). Paraphrasing of a description of 'trauma', pp. 66-67.
7. Bell Hooks
8. Human Rights Watch. "Afghanistan: Warlords Implicated in New Abuses", Press release (July 29, 2003)
9. Human Rights Watch. "The Second Phase: from the Geneva Accords to the Mujahideens Civil War" Backgrounder on Afghanistan: History of the War, October 2001 <http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/asia/afghan-bck1023.htm> (November 30, 2003).
10. "UN U-Turn on Afghan Land Grab", *BBC* (September 14, 2003).
11. International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan: Judicial Reform and Transitional Justice", *Asia Report* No 45 (January, 2003). <http://www.crisisweb.org/home/index.cfm?id=1631&l=1> November 30, 2003
12. *Ibid.*
13. Tarzi, Amin. "Afghan Administration Reportedly Opens Negotiations with Taliban", Radio Free Afghanistan, (October 8, 2003) <<http://www.azadiradio.org/en/dailyreport/2003/10/08.asp>> (November 30, 2003).
14. International Crisis Group. "Afghanistan: Judicial Reform and Transitional Justice", *Asia Report* No 45 (January, 2003).