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NIGHT LETTERS

by Carol Rose

Under the cover of darkness one recent night, the following notice was posted on the walls and buildings around Peshawar:

WARNING
Young Afghan Mujahideen Guerrillas

This is to inform all Muslim refugees, those who have left their homeland to safeguard their pride and protection of their honor. It is evident that the moral and Islamic principles and conditions are being deteriorated day by day and unconfident conditions prevail here. The Afghan girls and women wander in streets and around the foreign agencies. They have some sort of affinities and relationships with Jewish atheists [sic] and other infidels. Since Islam vigorously condemns such affinities, it recognizes the perpetrators as culprits and infidels. These kinds of relationships create immorality and prostitution which lead to adversity and misfortune.

In order to prevent such evil and unbearable acts, the Afghan nation is, for the first time, warned to immediately stop these indecent acts. If they are repeated the responsible authorities will be obliged to proceed in accordance with the principles and provisions of Islamic "sharia" [religious law] and the mujahideen will launch a comprehensive action in this regard....

The following terms are announced for all refugees:

1. No Afghan girl or lady is henceforth allowed to work with non-Muslim foreign agencies and wander around.
2. The parents, brothers, uncles and other close relatives are directly responsible for their families. If such acts are repeated, misfortune and severe punishment will be extended to them.

(Translated from Dari)

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The Afghans called the warning a "night letter" -- *shob nama* in Persian. The name reflects a bizarre twist in Afghanistan's recent history. Ten years ago, "night letters" were political tracts that Afghan women posted on the walls and buildings of Kabul calling for resistance to the Soviet invasion. Women were chosen for the dangerous propaganda missions because they could wander through the streets at night, carrying the posters hidden under their all-enveloping capes or *burqas*.

It has been three years since the Soviets left Afghanistan. Yet millions of Afghans remain in exile, economically squeezed by cuts in foreign aid that have reduced rations and boosted unemployment. Mujahideen political leaders, meanwhile, are chauffeured from their marble mansions to press conferences where they denounce one another and the West. The *Jihad* is over, but there is no peace. And the enemies in the "night letters" have become the women.

"We don't know who is behind these letters, so we come to work each day feeling at risk," said one Afghan woman. "I'm never sure if perhaps one day I will simply disappear."

Some Afghan women refused to talk with me about the letters. "They are too afraid," said a Western intermediary. "They don't want to talk about it. I'm sure you understand the danger."

But dozens of women were eager to have their voices heard by what they called the "outside world" -- as long as their names were not revealed. In one month, I met with more than 20 Afghan women, sometimes in small groups, sometimes in private interviews. As I listened to their stories, my views of Afghan women underwent a profound change. Beneath the faceless, formless anonymity of the *burqa* -- the head-to-toe veil worn by many Afghan women when they leave the house -- I met individuals as opinionated and dynamic as anywhere in the world. Confronting my prejudices of Afghan women as meek and oppressed, I discovered women with tremendous courage and deep commitment to their families, their country and their religion.

Afghan women in exile include doctors, engineers, educators, journalists, farmers, tailors, midwives, nurses and other professionals. Many hold jobs while raising their families, often fending for themselves because their husbands, fathers, brothers or uncles have been killed in the war. Most important, thousands of Afghan girls are going to school while in exile. It is this generation that will one day rebuild Afghanistan.

"We want to make a stand, we want to work," said a 22-year-old teacher, pounding her fist on a table. "I know it is dangerous, but I want to <u>do</u> something with my life, to be recognized by my name. And if the men want to ignore 55 percent of the nation, how do they expect to reconstruct Afghanistan?"

A Culture of Fear

The night letter wasn't the first threat to Afghan refugee women. Two years ago, a group of Islamic religious leaders, or *mullahs*, issued a *fatwah* -- religious decree -- warning Afghan women not to work for foreign agencies.

So far, there have been no reports of women being punished for violating the *fatwah* against working. But in recent months, a number of prominent Afghan male intellectuals and moderates working with Western agencies have been assassinated in Peshawar. Most recently, an Afghan man was executed at gun-point in broad daylight as his young son looked on. The alleged reason for the assassination: he worked for an American relief organization that sponsors female education. Soon after his murder, the night letter appeared -- threatening the male family members of Afghan working women.

"My brother had to come back from Australia because there were no men living with me and my mother," said one woman. "Now I am afraid for him. If they hurt my brother or my mother I will commit suicide. What else could I do?"

Said another: "I want to be killed rather than kidnapped because if I am kidnapped my family will lose face and people will say that their daughter has had relations with foreigners."

Fear is exacerbated by the anonymity of the threats. No one knows for certain who is behind the warnings: those who kill Afghans in Peshawar are never caught.

"We all wonder who did this," said one Afghan woman. "We wonder if it is the secret police or KHAD [Kabul secret police]. Is it someone who is against the mujahideen or someone within the mujahideen?"

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) can do little to protect Afghans. Like all United Nations agencies, it exercises its authority only through member states -- in this case, Pakistan.

"The United Nations says that the government of asylum is responsible for protecting those to whom it gives asylum," said Nicholas Morris, Chief of Mission for UNHCR in Pakistan. "UNHCR can express its concerns to the government and hold it responsible for security. But on incidents that are intra-Afghan, the government of Pakistan lets the Afghans sort it out themselves by traditional methods -- an approach that can be challenged when Afghans are assassinated on the streets of Peshawar."

Nancy Dupree, who has lived and worked with Afghans for most

of her life, is a leading Western scholar on Afghan women.

"These threats against women are cyclical, they come, everyone feels upset, then the issue disappears for a while," she said. "What disgusts me is that they haven't changed their rhetoric at all -- just the same dumb slogans every time. The only difference is that these days there are more personal 'poison pen' letters, the purpose of which is to terrorize. They are very effective, too, especially when they come just after bumping off a lot of Afghan men."

Dupree said she thought most of the threatening letters were written by "young one-time mujahideen."

"These young boys wanted to go to *Jihad* [holy war] as soon as they get permission; it is a macho thing. But now the spirit of *Jihad* is gone and the political leaders are giving them no leadership, no role models. They are neither emotionally or technically equipped to take a job. So instead they are careening around Peshawar looking for something to do. It is their version of whistling at girls, only it is more vicious. Instead of making off-color sexist remarks they are making off-color religious remarks.

"This last letter I believe may have been programmed by the *Mullahs*, who whip up the boys at Friday mosque," she added. "The young boys are the most fervent about religion; they believe they are protecting womens' morality and Afghan society from Western influence. The sad thing is that they are so young and represent an entire generation. If they were old we could just wait for them to die off."

Poets and Heroines

In a room shaded from the mid-day sun by shuttered windows, an Afghan woman sat on a floor cushion, threw off her veil and inhaled slowly on a cigarette.

"I hate this place," she sighed. "I never used to wear these pajamas or this *chadar* [veil], but now I must wear it or they will kill me. But I won't cover my mouth [with the veil]. Islam says only that I must cover my head."

She is older than the other Afghan women with whom I have spoken. Educated in the 1960s, she remembers Kabul before the war and during the early days of the anti-Soviet resistance.

"The mujahideen succeeded in throwing out the Russians only because the ladies helped," she said. "We cooked for them, treated their wounds in our homes and found medicines for them. We used to put up night letters telling the other women how they could help the mujahideen. We put them up right under the noses

of the Russians! Some women were captured and are still in jail in Kabul."

Stories celebrating the courage of Afghan women date back hundreds of years. Typically, these heroines are portrayed as nationalistic mother figures whose wisdom and poetry inspired their sons or husbands to greatness. Rather than fighters in their own right, Afghan women are considered symbols of honor -- of the nation and of the family.[1]

Moreover, the spokesmen of the Afghan feminist movement usually have been men. In the 1920s, King Amanullah advocated monogamy, the removal of the veil, the abolition of seclusion for women, and compulsory education. He was overthrown by conservative religious and tribal leaders in 1929, and his reforms were dropped.

Thirty years later, in 1959, Prime Minster Muhammad Daoud announced the voluntary removal of the veil and an end to seclusion. The 1964 constitution guaranteed women the right to vote, compulsory education and freedom to work. By the 1970s, Kabul's elite met and mixed freely at night clubs and discotheques -- particularly after the first two communist revolutions in 1978 and 1979, before the Soviet invasion.

Remembering life in Kabul before the war, the Afghan woman with whom I spoke closed her eyes and tilted her head back, smiling as if in a dream: "I wore a green miniskirt to my wedding! It was a love marriage [as opposed to an arranged marriage]. We invited our friends to our house and danced and danced until four in the morning."

Some Afghan women have prospered under the Communist regime in Kabul. According to a survey by Micheline Centlivres-Demont, women hold half of the lower and intermediary level positions in the Kabul administration and constitute 55 percent of the students at the University of Kabul. In part, says DuPree, this is because most of the men have been conscripted into the Army.

The Kabul government's efforts to force literacy programs in the Afghan countryside in the early 1980s met with fierce resistance, as did public demonstrations involving women:

> "Girls continued to be exploited in a very public manner in street demonstrations and volunteer projects -- activities which would have been considered unacceptable for girls in

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[1] For a full discussion of Afghan women in history see: Nancy Hatch Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric and Afghan Women," in M. Nazif Shahrani & Robert L. Canfield, Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan, IIS, U. California, Berkeley, 1984.

> the past. Now they were not only acceptable, but patriotic as well. One immediate result of such deviations from traditional behavior patterns was an increase in aggressiveness, a basic personality trait among Afghan women....the traditionalists watched with horror and became even more convinced of their contention that if women were educated and allowed to move freely in society, sexual anarchy would result."[2]

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was met with fierce resistance by men and women alike. On April 27, 1980, a girl named Nahidah shouted anti-government, anti-Soviet slogans at a passing parade of Soviet and Afghan officials, sparking an anti-government riot. Nahidah and 70 other people were killed that day and she was immortalized as an Afghan heroine.

Despite these tales of female bravery, the Soviet invasion also intensified the pressure on Afghan men who believed it was their duty to protect the honor of their homeland -- symbolized by their women. Many who joined the mujahideen thus accepted and imposed on their wives and daughters the traditions of the veiling and seclusion as long as they were exiled in a foreign land.

For Afghan women who remember life in Kabul before the war, the adjustment to life in exile was particularly difficult.

"I am not political, but I know that communism is not bad," said an Afghan woman in her forties. "What the communists did -- bringing in the Russians -- was bad. But the theory of communism is freedom and democracy, which is a lot better than these mujahideen leaders who say: "*Khaza pa'kor ya pa'gor*" -- 'Ladies should be in the house or under the ground'."

In contrast to the older women I met, Afghan women in their twenties spoke fervently of their belief that women must obey the dictates of Islamic life and Afghan tradition.

"All the people are thinking the mujahideen are against women, but they are not," said a woman who fled her homeland as a child. "It is just a misunderstanding. They mujahideen have schools for Afghan women and projects for women. We shouldn't just follow what people say, but what we see in fact.

"I went to America and learned that the only women who have high values and good rights are Afghan women," she added. "There is a big difference between external freedom, like dress, and internal freedom. Our Afghan sisters in America have fewer freedoms because they cannot live like Afghans."

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[2] ibid, p. 322.

Freedom within Borders

"There is nothing un-Islamic about women working," said an Afghan woman who punched the keys of her computer as we spoke. "Our prophet's wife worked with the prophet on the battlefield. And in any case, we don't act 'inappropriately' -- even according to male ideas of what that means."

Like many women with whom I spoke, the computer operator works exclusively with other women behind high walls. She is driven to and from work in an office van equipped with curtains to shield her from male on-lookers.

In addition to these precautions, Afghan working woman often wear a *hijab* -- a black coat that covers the body and has a head scarf that fits tightly over the hair with a veil that stretches from ear to ear, revealing only their eyes. Some women said they preferred to wear the *hijab* because it is "Islamic." But many expressed their distaste for the unwieldy *hijab*, saying that is an "Arab" costume rather than Afghan. They say they wear it only to avoid criticism from men.

"We must rescue ourselves from the dangers," said one woman, tucking a loose strand of hair under her *hijab*. "When we go to shops, we must be completely covered. There can be no discussions with men and we must especially never laugh with a man. We must show that working women are not bad, but good."

Said another: "I am not allowed to go to friends' houses or to my relatives because I have made a choice to work. Actually, I don't want to go because I want to show that working women are not girls who go around too many places."

All of the women with whom I spoke said they had permission to work from a male member of their family. Nonetheless, many face continual harassment because of their jobs.

"Some of my relatives make rumors against me, but never to my face," said one woman. "They criticize my father by saying that he depends on women. They are just jealous."

Said another: "I have to be careful in discussions with my uncles, but I want so badly to discuss my rights under Islam! Islam says that male and female should have equal education. I want to tell my uncles that this [repression] is not Islam, it is cultural. I want to say to them that I follow not my uncles, but Allah. I respect my uncles, but in Islam I know that it is written that I can do this [work]."

Other women say their husbands encourage them to work, particularly if it brings money to the family.

"My husband has less salary than myself, but I never show my husband that I am the best," said a woman with a conspiratorial smile. "I put both our salaries in a box and he buys the things we need from the bazaar. The Afghan man wants to be the king of the family and have the woman ask him for money. I do that. But when I work late, he cooks for the family -- of course we don't tell anyone about that."

Opting Out

In addition to the generational differences between Afghan women, the war and exile has affected village and city women differently.

"The rural women have demonstrated in exile how strong and capable they are, that they are not chattel," said Dupree. "They have withstood emotional and personal turmoil. Many have coped, often alone for the first time in their lives. They have made decisions on their own and learned that they don't have to suffer through childbirth. They have gained in strength and vision. These are women who will demand to be counted in a future Afghanistan."

In contrast, said Dupree, "A generation of urban women who took for granted that they would be educated have left for the West because they couldn't take being shut up. This has led to a serious deterioration of the professional resource base."

Resettlement is a last resort, however, since most Western countries have strict standards on immigration. In April 1991 the United States closed a program in which Afghan refugees were considered for resettlement based on family reunification or former employment with the U.S. government. Since then, only refugees who "are in immediate danger of loss of life" and represent a "compelling interest" to the United States, such a political prisoners and political dissidents, can be considered for resettlement.

"In specific cases of credible threats UNHCR will intervene to relocate or resettle an Afghan woman to another city in Pakistan or to another country," said Pierce Gerety, Deputy Chief of Mission for UNHCR in Pakistan. "We don't know how often these threats are effective and truly discourage women from seeking our help."

Given the United States' reluctance to host Afghan refugees, UNHCR officials frequently look to Australia and Norway to assist Afghans who are in danger.

"We don't have a particular category for women, but we work with UNHCR and if they say that someone is in immediate danger we

will pay for their plane fare and resettlement. Within two weeks we will have them in Australia," said Roy Clogstuon, counsellor for the Australian High Commission in Islamabad.

"I never have a chance to see Afghan women," he added. "But I hear of working women who are warned that acid will be poured on their face or their families are threatened."

Resettling women poses unique problems for UNHCR. Said a former U.N. officer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity: "It is difficult if a woman comes in for resettlement because we can consider only a nuclear family for resettlement. If it is a widow or a divorced woman with children, how do you assess that she is better off in a strange culture rather than in her own society with her own language and family backing?"

Another legal protection issue regarding Afghan women concerns forced marriages. "If the woman comes to us with a separate claim against her own family, we risk turning the whole clan against us," said the U.N. official. "Our mandate says that we must consider cases on an individual basis, but this is not an individual society. Especially not for women."

The issue is one of cultural relativism. "Afghans, including most women, generally don't believe that outsiders should have any say in how individuals are treated in the family or tribal unit," said Gerety. "From a Western secularist viewpoint, we have legal instruments that assume an individual has a right to protection and is a subject under international law. But the community, whose norms we are pledged to respect, doesn't accept that viewpoint."

Afghan women with whom I spoke voiced skepticism about seeking protection from the United Nations or western countries. "To seek asylum is a bad thing to do. When half of a family resettles, the other half of the family remains here in twice as much danger as before," said one woman. "People who get asylum in western countries will never be allowed back to Afghanistan. Everyone hates them."

Another woman warned that any attempt by the UNHCR to intervene in cases of forced marriage would be a disaster. "It would make more problems for all women if they interfere in family problems. It will make especially big problems for women who work in foreign organizations because we always get blamed when women seek asylum.

"Instead of spending money on resettlement, the rich countries should spend more on education," she added. "Relocation is not a lasting solution -- it protects ten or 20 women and starts lots of rumors in the community. Why don't they spend the money on building a university for the women here?"

"Forced marriage isn't such a big problem for us anyway," said another woman. "In our society, no one wants to marry a woman with education."

The Harshest Critics

To my surprise, most Afghan women with whom I spoke said that women -- not men -- were to blame for any threats against themselves or their families.

"I read the first *fatwah* that was issued and I must say that most of the conditions in it were true," said one educated Afghan woman. "We don't follow all of the conditions of Islam all of the time, and that is when we make problems for ourselves."

In many instances, Afghan women associated proper female behavior with Afghan nationalism. Sacrificing their personal freedom was a price many seemed willing to pay in their struggle to defend Afghan culture from Western influence.

"In Kabul before the war we forgot our culture," said one woman. "We lost something of ourselves and thus lost our country. Once we win our country back, we must not lose our culture again.

"We must have a big meeting and decide what women will wear," said one woman. "If any Afghan woman does not agree with us we will give her a warning. If she continues to resist, we will do something against her. It will be difficult to impose this [dress code] on Afghan women in America. But it is not impossible."

Said another: "Most foreign people think that Muslim women are not lucky. They are wrong. We have many rights, but certain things must be accepted: to cover ourselves, to be not touching men, to not laugh too much, to not go here and there. This is our culture, and if a woman obeys these laws she can do anything! The fault of many Afghan women is to act like a foreigner and that is not good. If she faces any problems, she has brought them upon herself."

Afghan women are also looking to one another to solve their problems. In December 1990, a group of 115 Afghan women, representing a wide spectrum of mujahideen political parties, organized a forum to discuss ways to "enhance future roles for women" after they return to Afghanistan.

That forum was the first of many meetings among professional Afghan women in Peshawar. "We are getting to know each other, to know our problems and exchange ideas," said one forum member. "Most important, we want to show the world that the Afghan women

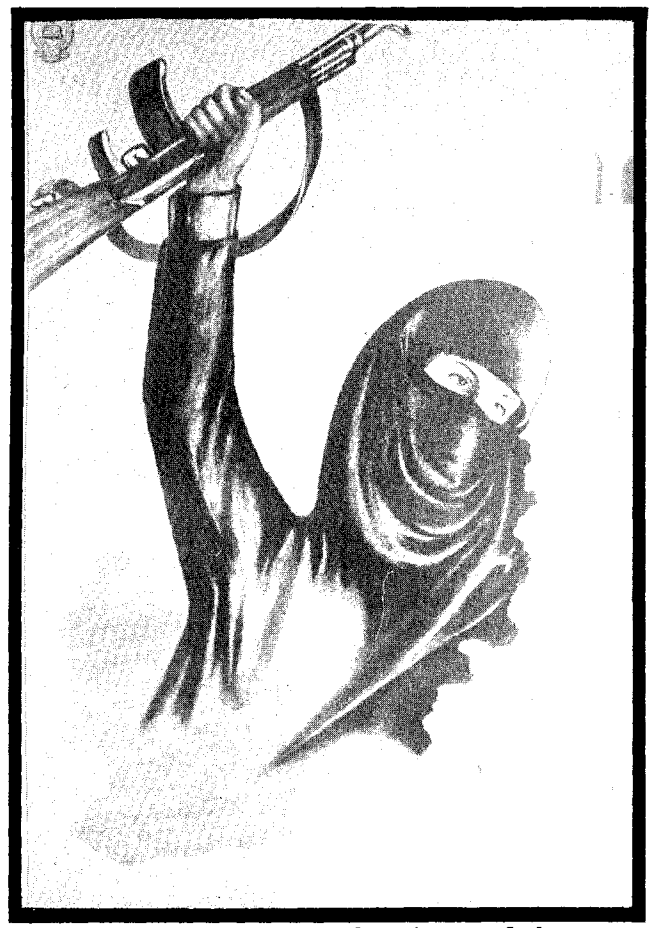
speak with one voice."

The forum has been meeting regularly for the last year, with no objections from mujahideen leaders. This year organizers plan to establish a Center for Afghan Women that will bring together women from all parties, organizations, and schools on a more permanent basis.

Cooperation is only the beginning of the challenges ahead for Afghan women in the post-war era. Equally important will be their role as peace-makers between Afghans who joined the resistance and those who stayed in Kabul.

"It will be up to the women to stop the killing once the mujahideen go back to Kabul," said an older Afghan woman. "Only a mother can say to her son: 'There was a war and your brother was your enemy. But now he is your brother again so stop the killing'."

"A man will not listen to his wife, but his mother is the second God for him," she said. "He will listen to his mother."



Mujahideen Poster showing Afghan Woman in a Hijab