



Questions of Temporality, Existence and Identity: An Exploration of Afghan –American Women’s Poetry

Dr. Dona Elizabeth Sam

Department of English (FIP), Baselius College, Kottayam, Kerala
Corresponding Author: Dr. Dona Elizabeth Sam

ABSTRACT: *Over the centuries, poetry, rather than merely being a vital part of Afghan culture has taken upon itself the role of representing the complex reality of everyday life in Afghan society and politics with poignancy. Though much writing has emerged from literary writing accomplished for a certain audience living in the west, continuous historical strife has led to the emergence of writing from voices within the Afghan context; those belonging to different social classes, genders and ethnic groups along with those who have moved out of the precincts of the nation-state. Throughout the years of political strife, civil wars and confinement under Taliban, one of the main ways by which the voices from within could speak back was through written words almost always done so at great personal risks. A good number of the women who composed poetry were refugees, especially those in the US. Their life writings, as representation and as a form of agency depicted the politics of movement, transcendence and transgression. Uprooted from their homeland, the unitary ideas of oneness, the agonies of withdrawal and loss – all of these elements worked at odds with the cultural shocks, transnational ethics and an interpolated notion of home and belonging in a new land.*

Afghan women, often viewed as 'dissidents' have shared life mainly through poetry as they have been doing so for generations. In a society where the majority happen to be illiterate, these women writers became agents of social change, translating their feelings into complex expressions of resentment. How does poetry as a medium revive a sense of belonging for these women under struggles of displacement, estrangement and liminality? Apart from representational forms of struggle in a new land, there are battles of the mind, that of memory and crucially, that of time. This is where I address the questions of temporality and existence and its correlation with identity which come into conflict within these individuals who are in movement. Agency, therefore, is not only the poet's capability to resist through poetry but also to express her opinions and feelings whether they be along the paths of normative liberalism or not. The freedom created within these individuals, in a distant unknown land, through their writings/confessions occupies a highly contested terrain of cultural and literary discourse, as time and again, freedom for/among women has procured for itself through enormous struggles a large place in history. In consideration to such questions of existence, I attempt to research the multifaceted aspects of time, time consciousness and belonging in contemporary Afghan-American women poets like Zohra Saed, Lida Abdullah, Jahangir Ahrary, Sahar Muradi and Donia Gobar.

KEYWORDS: *Afghan women, belonging, existence, identity, temporality*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Time and the experience of time is not always just a matter of physical time, but is deeply rooted in the consciousness of time, that which gives one both perceptions of the self and of the world. Phenomenology offers to humanities an investigation of time which constitutes one's existence, being and identity. Husserl conceived that every human experience is temporal and revolves around "life-worlds." To comprehend time, we often consider the external, objective time, that which is common but to comprehend temporality one ought to consider a rather different dimension, that which allows for a temporal structure of lived experience, a phenomenon quite not visible or linear in understanding. While the human person's struggle with time to make sense of one's being-in-the-world was on the increase, studies on temporality have come to play a major role in grasping global movements and one's epistemological understanding of the self and others along life's journey. In a world on the move, how does physical and spatial movement affect one's sense of time and how does one's sense of time affect movement as in the case of Afghan American women? An individual's view of time is not

merely a matter of comprehending the past, present and future but also a self awareness which drives in a desire to distinguish one from the other. When in a predicament of alienation, one might not follow these distinctions, but unconsciously thrive in their unity. As a "life led outside habitual order" (Said 1984), Afghan women as exiles, refugees and expatriates in the US have struggled with different dimensions of a new land, cultural heritage and lifestyle, wherein each individual undergoes a fluid, persistent formation of the being; of which there are cardinal issues of temporality.

The discourses which centre on diaspora have nevertheless mostly been discussions of binaries of the self and the other, of homeland and the new land, of the old and the new, of homogeneity and heterogeneity. This I believe has penetrated its way into humanities and humanitarian concerns beckoning a rapid increase in interest in the affairs of diasporic communities in different parts of the world. An engagement with the Afghan American women's literature has demanded something different from the mere battles of existence in a nexus of cultures and cultural backgrounds. There is a shifting understanding of temporality in Afghan American women's poetry, including notions of the past (historicity), present and future. The focus of this paper is on questions of temporality that Afghan women portray through poetry and how they grapple with the non-linear, Husserlian inner time conscious. To clarify a consideration of how temporal relations are represented through poetic narrations through the use of synchronous narration, flashback and memory of the homeland is necessary. Also, I draw on the thematic reflections of questions of temporality in these poems in eliciting a certain understanding of the "self" embedded in notions of temporality. The concept of self-identity which emerges from one's temporal consciousness implies a person's capacity to integrate different time frames in order to establish a narrative-based identity through their verses.

II. REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PAST

Zohra Saed in "Nomad's Market: Flushing Queens" presents to the readers a world of their own in Queens, New York. Born in Jalalabad and raised in Brooklyn, she, along with other second generation Afghans in America, struggles to come to terms with an identity and self that has become neither their own nor that of the world of their parents'. There is a pervading spirit of distance and displacement within the poem. Though miles away from their homeland, the "nomad's market" bears marks of their nation with pictures of Afghan maps and Afghan pop singers hung up in the stores. An interesting image is that of the mothers and aunts who dance in the living room, indicating her detachment from the whole culture of her parents, whereas the younger generation have already adapted themselves to the requirements of a foreign land. Juxtaposed to this situation, she pictures the image of "...beautiful women/ singing folk songs from Jalalabad/ and Kandahar, decked in gold,/ eyes swept with surma." whose eyes are averted from facing the public eye; without much dancing and their husbands vigilant. Here, the articulated present comprises of metaphorical representations of the past through media. The shaping of time, and of how the past becomes relevant in the present and vice versa is one of the main themes of the diasporic poems. Instead of repression, the poet receives an overarching sense of herself and her identity through her observation of different generations and thereby manages to integrate her past and future into the present.

The stark contrast between the women at Queens and at their homeland, suggests a strand of patriarchal thinking which prevails in their homeland, indicating the difference in freedom that the expatriates enjoy as compared to those in their homeland. The poet also brings into picture how one cannot escape temporality, the sense of belonging to a place in a particular frame of time as seen in her ability to draw the shopkeeper's son to her- "The shopkeeper's son/ circles around me, pretending to/ rearrange layers of velvet prayer mat" again to be faced by a complete twist in thought, where the intimacy is thoroughly challenged in the last line- "He has spotted another exile..." - bringing one to the truth that the expatriate does not belong but remains to be an exile in another nation. The physical and moral constraints which a new culture imposes on such individuals often contradict their willingness to assimilate either temporally or spatially. Questions of temporality here largely depend on the poet persona's simultaneous and shifting acts of commemoration and anticipation as seen in the stream-of-consciousness flow of experiences laid out in the poem. Saed reflects on the social institutions and customs of the new world which impinge on an individual and the generations which follow. "Voices: Archives of Spines", another detailed poem, quite prosaic in style centres on the historical conditions from which the expatriates have escaped. Versified as an anecdote, the poem narrates the speaker's countenance with her distant family who have arrived as guests. The poet's curiosity in her family's experiences in their homeland drives her to archive their voices, tasting "the past from which we have escaped with our lives"; a past of war and loss. Such revisitations to the past in Saed's poems are often not deliberately oriented towards memory. It can either be "expanded and unpacked, or it can be condensed into the present moment only...The disadvantage of this way of seeing temporality through the eyes of the present is that it makes the independence of the past difficult to

explain”¹. Saed, here does not follow a synchronic pattern of events but works through flashbacks. Creating an identity of their own, poetry like that of Saed empowers women in an attempt to heal their war-stricken homeland, expressing profound patriotism, revealing resentment for dogma, patriarchy, religious hypocrisy and a deep-rooted romanticisation of Afghanistan and its stunning landscape. Whether writing in Persian (Dari), Pashto or English, their words echoes a yearning for space, carrying their images and identities across the globe. Issues of temporality therefore affect the personal autonomy of Afghan women. The weighing down of the past and the struggles of the present have resulted in a failure to experience or execute agency and rather exhibit a different temporal structure wherein each timeframe and each identity within the particular timeframe is passively and actively stumbled upon from time to time, leading to a disturbed and fragmented identity. Such fragmented identities are characterised by a different and shifting outlook on the self, inconsistent relationships with oneself and others as is visible in Saed. Hence, the sense of temporal continuity that one achieves affects one's identity as a distinct identity seems to require a conscious effort to apprehend social reality through temporality.

III. TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS OF THE PRESENT

On a similar note, in “Kuchis”, Lida Abdullah conquers the spirit of life by means of a synchronic narration of events in an unimagined shift to a new culture in a foreign land wherein the speaker goes back in time to reflect upon her life in Afghanistan as a young child of eight who was made to make a wish on her birthday. Little did she realize then of the impending condition of being a refugee or quiet distinctly the uncertainty of future. There was not much to wish for in those days, but now as an exile/refugee, she has plenty of dreams, but is stopped by the truth that they are in vain, bounded by a natural desire to go back in time:

My mother tells me to light a candle and make a wish.
What wish did I have at the age of 8? What kinds of
wishes do children have at that age? Now, I have many,
which drop in the spaces I leave behind.

Abdullah's personal sense and issues of temporality resonates a conflict of retention and protention², where a distinct retention is not possible as it is overlapped by the present and also protention. Within the present temporal space, the speaker shows her vulnerability, her lack of understanding of how one loses a country. Narrated like a short story, the poem reflects the speaker's agony. Through the imagery of the darkness and dampness of the mosque, and the dead body lying there, there is an atmosphere of emptiness and loneliness that is conveyed. She becomes grateful for those things she does not remember, for she does not want to revive those unpleasant days, the desire to lose temporal consciousness of being.

Ahrary's two short poems- “Peace” and “Promise”- employ a series of similes and metaphors to portray the speaker's state of mind, presumably in a foreign land which she does not belong to. In “Peace”, a poem of fifteen lines, a desperate calling for peace, the poet compares herself/the expatriate to an enervated man, a wounded bird, guilty conscience, hungry child and thirsty creature. “Promise”, an even shorter poem, addressed to some unknown person/a lover hoping for his/her return is also a beckoning for those times, a calling for the past which still remains embedded in the present, which I would like to refer to as a concomitant effect of retention. As such, the poet expresses her dismay at it not returning in its promised time-

Remember you promised....
You will be back
Winter is gone
Birds are back home
Spring sun is shining
But...
You are not here
You are not back.

When time gives one a sense of perception of presence and existence, it is evident that for these women the temporal dimensions have been disrupted whereby an objective outlook on time becomes impossible. The absence of stable dimensions of reality has changed the parameters of their outlook on time, placing them within different, distinct but overlapped and intertwined spaces of time. Such poems have evaded the symmetry of

¹ David Couzens Hoy in *The Times of Our Lives*, opens a series of questions on the past and its flow and its means of change in his critical discussions on temporality. (Reflections p. 136)

² Husserl in his phenomenology of temporality defines retention not as memory or a mere representation of memory but as a time consciousness which allows for an act or lived experience to retain itself in the consciousness and extends to the near future. Protention is defined as one's anticipation of the future. Retention and protention are hence two main temporal aspects which frame a person's perception.

time, wherein the speakers attempt to comprehend the rupturedness—Saeed and Abdullah explore it in their visions of the past and the present while Ahrary's concept of time revolves around the seasons and puts into practice the ever present notion of time—waiting. Along with the temporal issues latent in these poems, it is also essential to reconsider what writing poetry in certain temporal spaces means to Afghan American women. "All writing in part recreates some prior event or feeling; the act of describing, especially in poetry, both reproduces in words a visible external provocation and adds a new item to the totality of available reality." (Spiegelman 4) The poetry of Afghan women comprises of a careful perusal of the world not just with the eyes of an observer but also with that of an artist, constantly in search for a meaning. Mostly confessional, and some anecdotal, these poems venture into creating a space which summons the readers to perceive the world through their eyes as part of a meaningful existence beyond the treatment of human beings as mere temporal objects.

IV. HOME, MEMORY AND ASSIMILATION

Afghan women in diasporic locations often played a major role in keeping their tradition alive and also in the preservation of cultural practices. Memory was a key tool in such preservations and transformations of their lives (a temporal dependence for existence, identity and acceptance) and also the lives of others in the family wherein most women were nurturers and educators in the past. Geographically and socially uprooted, these Afghan women voiced their disavowals in a system quite unclear to themselves and to the readers. Their disavowals followed different patterns at specific points in time; while few choose to move away from the past in an attempt to disown it, others thrived only with what the past holds for them. Such conscious rejections may have shown to exhibit a culture of formation of new meanings in existence. Disclaiming knowledge of their existence and asserting little knowledge of their whereabouts was a mechanism which allowed for a rather complacent positionality. Other poets like Shakila Naseer, her poetic concerns either disavow a past or cling onto complex appropriations of a homeland. As such, the concept of "home", in all its elusiveness creates a blurred line of assimilation. Naseer in "An Oath" addresses all especially the wandering people, the homeless, poor, mournful mother and "brave soldier falling for his homeland" and even swears at nature, the Holy Books and finally God that she shall not give away her beloved homeland. The strong affection for her homeland and her unwillingness to lend "even a tiny piece of soil" is not a disavowal of the past but of the present; claiming her authority over what she once held. Another one of her extremely short poems, "Thirst" versifies the predicament of what might be read as the state of a refugee. She compares herself to a "fallen fish on a faraway, empty shore, without hope, without wish." The speaker speaks to the roaring wave to rescue her or else by which she will die of thirst. Not only does the notion of a homeland bring a sense of melancholy to the poet, but the past and the present have evolved into a continuum, rather than two detached worlds easily and increasingly merged within the temporal consciousness. The premises on which such systems of disavowal function is frequently inhibited by impressions of separation and unforgetfulness: "Tears are streaming down my face,/ I cannot forget Kabul's snow-topped mountains"(Majrouh p.52). On the other hand, In "Notes on the Disappeared", Ghani shatters such systems of disavowal and explores the necessity of crossing one's temporal sense of identity.

Measure the erasure
that meets our dissent.
We must not forget that
compliance is consent
Your silence
will not protect you
when the border moves. (Muradi and Saed 12)

V. CONCLUSION

Movement therefore exemplifies the intentionality of the poet's mind articulating differing temporalities to make possible an existence of the self as a temporal being often disavowing a personal and distinct sense of time but rather shaping the self within the continuum of time. Each poem as a narrative recalls, recounts and reassesses the past, its meaning and coherence and also anticipates the future, placing the personas at the crossroads of stratified time. The conscious or unconscious structuring of time, therefore links one to her coherence of identity, what she becomes or has become. These subjectively constructed realities of these Afghan women poets have been formed as a conglomeration of different objective and subjective truths/realities/representations of the personal and the historical demands with respect to temporality. Unending injustice for generations has made these communities (in the case, Afghan American) into a physical and emotional conflict zone. The very few voices which have spoken out from the nation have contributed to the procured image. Michael Humphry proposes that it is the voice of the victim which contributes to the truth, if it exists and that such voices generate "violence stories". With alterations of subjectivity that occur with different violent stories, shifts in power also occur not only at a national or societal level but even at the personal level. Eventually, it's

the ensemble of extreme events/ lived experiences which tend to rule or conquer the minds of those who have directly or indirectly been a part of it. While the normal course of events is disturbed, both temporally and spatially, it is met with powerlessness on the part of the victim and also, quite clearly a physical or psychological upheaval demanding a representation which has been done so mainly in the form of poetry. All the more, opposed to the common person’s notion, they disrupt the norms and attempt to produce and regulate their own spaces through such transformative poems within the complex framework of temporal existence.

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