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Witnessing through Verse: Afghan Women's Poetics of Resilience

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Abstract

This paper challenges prevalent narratives that depict Afghan women solely as oppressed and suppressed individuals by highlighting the narrative of resilience found within the literature produced and refined by women, past and present. It does so through the works of the pre-modern Persian poet Rābiʿah Balkhī, as a source of inspiration and the most well-known and respected poet, alongside the poetry of two modern female poets writing primarily in Persian: Nadia Anjuman and Mahbouba Ibrahimi. The paper examines how these poets, living across different periods, express themselves and reflect on the violence inflicted upon them and others rendered helpless in the face of aggression. By closely analysing their poetry, this paper aims to examine how each poet articulates a distinct response to violence and how their work functions as a form of knowledge production that challenges dominant narratives surrounding Afghan women and their struggles. Through close reading and critical analysis, it aims to shed light on the role of poetry in shaping societal discourse and perceptions, particularly in the context of political aggression and cultural vilification, through the lens of the poetics of witnessing.

Keywords: Afghanistan, poetry, Rābiʿah Balkhī, Nadia Anjuman, Mahbouba Ibrahimi, knowledge production, Afghan female poets

For decades, both international and domestic narratives have often associated Afghan women with themes of suppression, oppression, restricted freedom and enforced illiteracy. However, amidst these apparent conclusions lies another narrative, closely intertwined with the lives of Afghan women: resilience. What accounts for this contrast? And how should scholars evaluate the coexistence of these qualities in women's voices? In addressing some of these questions, this article seeks to closely analyse the poetic voices of three female poets writing primarily in Persian – one pre-modern and two modern poets. It examines how they perceive themselves and their surroundings, and how their work contributes

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to a broader societal understanding. Specifically, this article investigates how these poets bear witness to political aggression and cultural vilification through their poetry, and how this act of witnessing itself becomes a form of knowledge production. Rather than focusing on historical or diplomatic representations of Afghan women, particularly those framed by the media or Western discourse, this study turns to literature, where their poetry has long conveyed their truths, struggles, and intellectual agency through their voices.

Allowing these poetic voices to speak of their values, self-worth, education, struggles and participation in knowledge, this paper closely examines the poetry of Rābiʿah Balkhī (tenth century), Nadia Anjuman (1980–2005) and Mahbouba Ibrahimi (born 1977). Through a close reading of their selected poems, the article focuses on how each poet expresses herself and reflects on the violence inflicted upon her and her female counterparts, often with remarkable insight. The analysis begins with the works of Rābiʿah Balkhī, who set the stage for female Persian poets to explore themes of love and poetic agency. It then turns to Nadia Anjuman, whose poetry reflects her experiences under the first Taliban regime in the 1990s, and it concludes with Mahbouba Ibrahimi's recent work, which addresses the condition of women – as mothers – under the Taliban's second rule following the fall of Kabul in August 2021. All translations of the poems featured in this paper are my own, or otherwise stated, accompanied by the original Persian texts for reference.

Women and poetry in Afghanistan

To this day, the importance of poetry in Afghanistan retains the same cultural prominence it once held in the broader cultural landscape of Greater Khorasan, where Persian literature first emerged in the ninth century (de Bruijn 2009: 1–2). Despite prolonged domestic instability, continuous conflict, enduring religious violence and continued migration, Afghanistan has remained committed to preserving and cherishing the classical canon of Persian literature, alongside other Persian-speaking nations such as Iran and Tajikistan (see Ahmadi 2004: 408). The rhythm and rhyme of Persian poetry are deeply embedded in the cultural memory and linguistic expression of the Afghan people (Olszewska 2007: 205f.). Through difficult journeys across borders, seeking small rooms in neighbouring countries, Afghan migrants travelled with their memorised verses of Rumi, Neẓāmi, Hafez, Saʿdi and Jāmi, to name but a few. Amid the uncertainty of displacement, as parents and children grappled with the dual challenges of survival and a persistent thirst for knowledge, poetry continued to serve as a revered and enduring source of meaning, memory, and connection.

This enduring source of meaning, however, is complicated by the fact that there has always been a gendered dimension to the cultural transmission of Persian poetry – one that prompts the question: Who owns poetry? For women of my mother's generation and my own, spanning the 1960s to the 1990s, poetry was often heard behind closed doors, recited in male gatherings. Although women did not always have direct access to this powerful form of expression, they listened closely and absorbed its music. This raises a compelling thought: Does poetry retain its power even when it is only heard in echoes? My maternal grandmother, Taj Begum, despite being unable to read or write, was a careful listener. She could recite poetry from memory. Even in the final stages of her life, dementia could not erase those verses from her memory. This was how ordinary families like mine engaged with literature – through oral tradition, repetition and enduring reverence. At an institutional level, the Afghan Persian literary scene has continued to be vibrant and dynamic since the early 1900s, beginning with poets associated with the newspaper *Siraj al-Akhbar* and evolving into what Ahmadi (2008: 119) describes as "a heterogeneous literature of resistance" during the 1980s (see also Fani 2022).

It is also true that since the emergence of the Persian literary tradition, public literary spaces have been overwhelmingly dominated by men, who controlled the power of poetic expression and thereby the production of knowledge. Consequently, women were generally excluded from these literary arenas, appearing only in rare instances where they possessed "very powerful and influential" political authority, "such as Malik Shah's wife Tarkan Khatun, who in fact competed and outmaneuvered Nezam al Molk [assassinated in 1092] on the crucial question of succession to Malik Shah" (Dabashi 2012: 108). This omission of women – beyond the occasional instances of political influence, particularly women writers and poets in a male-dominated literary sphere – persists into modern times. Men continue to be portrayed as the primary creators and consumers of literature, while women are often relegated to the role of passive recipients. However, as this article argues, poetry belongs to all who bear witness to history – especially those who capture such moments, whether in public or in private – fully aware of the risks they face. Through this act of witnessing, they become poets who contribute to a unique form of knowledge production.

Persian-speaking female poets have long been part of this intellectual tradition or the poetics of witness, dating back to the first woman to write poetry in Persian, Rābiʿah Balkhī, in the tenth century. Although Rābiʿah cannot be neatly categorised within modern national identities – she was neither Afghan, Iranian, Tajik, nor Turkic in any contemporary sense – her legacy as the mother of Persian literature transcends borders. For the purposes of this article, she is honoured not through a nationalist lens, but as a foundational figure whose impact remains deeply inspiring to Persian-speaking female poets to this day

– including myself, a scholar of classical Persian literature, a poet writing in English, and a translator of Persian poetry into English. In this sense, Rābiʿah also serves as a methodological anchor, shaping the article's interpretive framework and approach.

Rābiʿah Balkhī and the birth of women's language of love in Persian poetry

Rābiʿah lived in the tenth century, which makes her a contemporary of the renowned poet Rūdakī, who is celebrated as the father of Persian literature (Davis 2021: xii, Dabashi 2012: 80–90). At the same time, Rābiʿah is known for her love of a slave boy, which was later interpreted as a mystical love of eternal meaning (Davis 2021: xiii). In general terms, just as Rūdakī is recognised as the father of Persian literature for composing its earliest known verse, Rābiʿah Balkhī may likewise be regarded as its mother, having also contributed some of the earliest examples of Persian poetry (Mojadadi 2017: 88; Anar 2023: 167–182).

Unlike Rūdakī, however, Rābiʿah did not hold an official position as a court poet. Nonetheless, she was closely associated with the court and appears to have had access to the literary and cultural resources characteristic of the courtly milieu. She was the daughter of the local ruler known as Kaeʿb – referenced in her poetry through the self-designation "daughter of Kaeʿb" – who governed the region of Balkh, located in present-day Afghanistan (Mojadadi 2017: 86). As Davis (2021: xxiii) observes, she "grows up at a provincial court where we can presume she had access to whatever literary learning was available to her time and place." Her position as a ruler's daughter – "a princess, not a court employee"– suggests that she was well-educated in literature and the arts, enjoying privileges that enabled her to contribute meaningfully to the early formation of the Persian poetic tradition.

Nevertheless, a key distinction separates these two early poets: while Rūdakī was a public poet who could proudly present himself across the kingdom as a celebrated literary figure, Rābiʿah could never assume such a public role. As a woman, she was expected to remain within the domestic sphere, rendering her a poet of private spaces (Davis 2021: xxiii). As modern readers, we may never have known her as a poet were it not for the circumstances of her tragic death – "her brother, Hareth [had] cut her throat and left her in a bath-house"– where she bled to death and where, according to legend, she inscribed her final verses in blood, dedicating them to love and to her beloved, the slave boy Bektash (Davis 2021: 3, Mojadadi 2017, ʿAttār / Rūḥānī 1960). It was only after her death that her poetry, initially centred on human love, was first recog-

nised and then reinterpreted through a mystical lens. Her verses were transformed into allegorical expressions of divine love, a shift shaped by later male poets and writers who dominated both courtly and public Sufi literary circles. Among these were the prominent Persian poets ʿAttār (early thirteenth century) and Jāmī (fifteenth century), who played a central role in mythologising Rābiʿah's life and work (ʿAttār / Rūḥānī 1960: 182–194, Jāmī 1991: 392–393).

> ʿAwfī [a thirteenth-century Persian scholar, historian, and poet] portrays [Rābiʿah] as a boy-chasing intelligent woman, and authors such as 'Attār in his poems and Jāmi in his biographical dictionary of Sufis, Nafahāt al-ons, were responsible for converting her image into that of a mystical poet. (Sharma 2009: 151)

But who was Rābiʿah, at her core? What did her poetry represent, and how did it shape her identity – and she, in turn, shape it? If poetry is to be seen as the cause of her downfall, when does poetry become dangerous? Who has the power to render it dangerous, to feel its impact, and to determine its limits? And more fundamentally, why does poetry become dangerous at all?

Dick Davis (2021: xxiii) characterises Rābiʿah as "an amateur poet," primarily because she was not paid for her poetry and did not depend on it for her livelihood. However, the absence of a professional identity in poetry must be understood within the gendered constraints of her time. Even as a courtly princess, Rābiʿah could not publicly claim poetry as a profession, as women were rarely encouraged – and often actively discouraged or prohibited – from engaging in literary expression. One might argue that poetry in the hands of women has long been viewed as subversive or dangerous, both historically and in contemporary contexts. Had Rābiʿah been afforded the same public space and audience as her male counterparts, her work might have been read and respected by the same literary circles that revered poets like Rūdakī. It is therefore not her courtly privilege that rendered her an "amateur," but rather a society that feared the power of a woman's voice – particularly when it spoke of love, rage, trauma, and healing in the public sphere.

In the cases of Rābiʿah and Nadia (to whom I will turn next), poetry became dangerous the moment it moved beyond private spaces and entered the public realm. Both poets were recognised not only for their words – words of love in Rābiʿah's case, and, as we will later see, poetic rage in Nadia's – but also for their agency as witnesses through poetry. Yet rather than being celebrated for their artistic expression and testimonies, they were punished. Their poetic voices, instead of being honoured, became grounds for social and political retribution, revealing the risks faced by women who claim authorship and visibility through the poetics of witnessing. Here, I am borrowing the concept of the "poetics of witness" from Carolyn Forché in her book, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, which discusses how the act of writing poetry is an event that not only recounts trauma or an unforgettable emotion but also embodies it. As Forché writes:

> The poetry of witness frequently resorts to paradox and difficult equivocation, to the invocation of what is not there as if it were, in order to bring forth the real. That it must defy common sense to speak of the common indicates that traditional modes of thought, the purview of common sense, no longer make sense, or only make sense if they are allowed to invert themselves. In the face of our increasingly unreal reality, then, fabulation, the writing of the blatantly fictitious, becomes the recourse of those who would describe the everyday. (Forché 1993: 40)

Carolyn Forché highlights the transformative power of poetry as a means of bearing witness to social, political, and religious injustices, resisting historical erasure through acts of remembrance. In this light, Rābiʿah emerges not as a passive subject within poetic tradition, but as an active voice and agent of love. She writes from within her experience of injustice, asserting authorship through testimony. In the following examples, Rābiʿah demonstrates her command over the poetic space. While her poems may have been intended as private and intimate – addressed specifically to her beloved, Bektash – they nonetheless reveal a profound inner strength. Through this, Rābiʿah positions herself as an empowered subject within the dynamics of love, not merely its object.

My invitation to you is a wish that your God makes you a lover,	دعوت من بر تو آن شد کایزدت عاشق کناد
onto you, a stoned-hearted, unkind human, like yourself.	بر یکی سنگین‌دل نامهربان چون خویشتن
To know the pain of love, the fear of desertion, you must bear sadness,	تا بدانی درد عشق و داغ هجر و غم کشی
when you twist into desertion you will know my value.	چون بهجر اندر بپیچی پس بدانی قدر من
(author's translation)	(Mojadadi 2017: 89)

Rābiʿah is fully aware of her value – as both a poet and a lover. In this poem, she claims not only the right to express love but also to begin it and to judge its true nature. She presents herself as the active partner in the relationship, calling on the beloved instead of waiting to be desired. Her love is met with a beloved who does not live up to the role of a true lover, which she finds unacceptable. Through this contrast, Rābiʿah makes a clear distinction between active and passive love. For her, a real lover must both start love and endure its pain. The poem describes love as kind and warm – qualities the beloved lacks, remaining cold and indifferent. Only by experiencing suffering, as she has, can he become a true lover; yet she suggests that chance has passed. By taking this stance, Rābiʿah defines herself as an expert on love – both as someone who loves and as a poet who shapes its meaning.

In another intriguing poem, she takes charge of the time and space where the beloved arrives, once again taking an active role.

That Turk walked through my door, with a smirk,	ترک از درم درآمد، خندانک
that agile good-looking, little guest.	آن خوبروی چابک، مهمانک
(author's translation)	(Mojadadi 2017: 88)

Using playful language, Rābiʿah recalls the moment she notices her potential beloved entering through the door. Fully alert and self-assured, she confidently asserts her active role – most notably by referring to the Turk as a "مهمانک" (*little guest*). In this scene, Rābiʿah embodies what Sharma (2009: 151), citing ʿAwfī, describes as a "boy-chasing intelligent woman." However, in the absence of her immediate audience, the Turk is seen walking through the door. The poet claims to have ownership of the space; the little guest enters through her door. The poet sets the distinctive roles – she is the lover, initiating the game of gaze, while the beloved is put in a position to please and perform his role through a smirk. In the subsequent poem, in contrast to the confident, assertive lover who initiates desire, Rābiʿah also now appears as a lyrical figure shaped by solitude and emotional vulnerability. Yet this shift does not diminish her authority; rather, it reveals another dimension of her poetic self – one who bears witness to the complexities of love, longing, and disillusionment. Her verses carry the weight of lived experience, offering not only feeling but knowledge – knowledge drawn from the tension between passion and pain, agency and absence.

I, once again, brought his love into a snarl,
all efforts resulted useless.
Like a young unbroken horse, I didn't know
by pulling harder, the rope holds tighter.
Love is an infinite, invisible sea,
how can anyone swim on, o wise one.
If you want to bring love to an end,
then you be patient on all things unpleasant.
You must see the ugly, think goodness,
you must consume poison, savour sweetness.

(author's translation; also see Davis 2021: 4–5)

عشق او باز اندر آوردم به بند
کوشش بسیار نامد سودمند
توسنی کردم، ندانستم همی
کز کشیدن تنگ‌تر گردد کمند
عشق دریایی کرانه ناپدید
کی توان کرد شنا ای هوشمند
عشق را خواهی که بر پایان بری
بس بباید ساخت با هر ناپسند
زشت باید دید و انگارید خوب
زهر باید خورد و انگارید قند

(Mojadadi 2017: 90)

In this poem, Rābiʿah addresses a third-person reader rather than the beloved. Her voice is more restrained, and her tone more subtle and introspective. Rather than emphasising power dynamics or asserting her own status, she turns inward, reflecting on the nature of love itself. As she clings more tightly to her ideal of love, the emotional tensions surrounding her deepen. Yet even in this more subdued register, her active voice affirms her agency within the realm of love. Drawing from personal experience, she engages critically with love, examining both what it is and what it is not.

The poet defines love as an infinite, invisible sea, an image that suggests not only love's vastness and depth but also its nonexistence. Through this imagery, the poet defines love as a situation we fall into, only to discover its absence. Unlike an event, which prompts humans to act and react, this situation cannot be controlled. The poet also suggests that love alters our state of being, such that we must retrain ourselves in order to escape it. She advises that to avoid

being in love, our sense of preferences and likings must reject all the things we perceive as good when in love. We must regard the things we never liked as good – and likewise, whatever once seemed bitter to our palate, we must think of as sweet. In one interpretation, these lines could also reflect elements of societal norms and expectations. That said, the poet suggests that both being in love and not being in love are conditions marked by their own kind of suffering. One involves love's boundlessness; the other, total submission to pre-existing norms, which the poet does not want to comment on any further.

In the same manner, Rābiʿah's love of poetry – and her love for Bektash – remain safe only so long as she has no audience, as long as she stays private and unknown. A few accounts relate to the historical moment when Rūdakī briefly meets Rābiʿah and learns of her poetry and poetic soul (Mojadadi 2017: 92, ʿAttār / Rūḥānī 1960: 191–192). As soon as he returns to Samarqand to his court, he mentions a female poet from the city of Balkh and praises her poetic craft. But more than anything else, Rūdakī recites the content of her poetry, concerning her experience of love, in public (Mojadadi 2017: 92, ʿAttār / Rūḥānī 1960: 191–192). ʿAttār writes that Rūdakī recites, "With a hundred hearts, she is in love with a slave-boy / like a bird in a trap, she is. // She does not wish to eat or sleep / all she does is write lyrics and ghazals. // (ʿAttār / Rūḥānī 1960: 191–192). This private experience, once proclaimed and captured in verse, is suddenly exposed to the public ear, making poetry a risky undertaking, particularly for a woman in love who bears witness to the transformative power of love alone. For Rābiʿah, this love is the very reason for writing poetry. In the following poem, we witness yet another violent act of love, once again claimed to be inflicted by the poet herself, as she describes her own loss of sense in the claws of love. Through experience, she becomes an expert in the philosophy of love, and it is this knowledge, born of love, that she seeks to impart.

One night, I was so drunk, unaware of my state,	شبی بد مست بودم حال خود دیگر ندانستم
I sucked on his ruby lips, couldn't tell wine from the goblet.	مکیدم سخت لعلش را می از ساغر ندانستم
I sucked on his lips for too long, they bled,	مکیدم آن قدر لعلش که از چوشیدنم خون شد
he cried, for it had ached, yet I, the faithless, didn't know.	ز دردش گریه می کرد و من کافر ندانستم
As a punishment for my wrongdoing, they should behead me,	به جرم آنچه بد کردم سرم باید برید از تن
why couldn't I tell his lips apart from the lip of the goblet.	لب او را چرا من از لب ساغر ندانستم
He told me that my craziness bled his heart out,	به من گفتا که دیوانهگیهایت دلم خون کرد
I apologized and said, O my love, I just didn't know.	به پاسخ عذر کردم گفتم ای دلبر ندانستم
I became senseless from excitement and didn't fear it, but	به جان آمد دلم از شوخی و بیباکیاش اما
having no patience, I didn't know any other solution.	به غیر از صبر کردن چارهی دیگر ندانستم
Each day, with fear, that playful child goes to school,	رود هر روز در مکتب ز ترس آن کودک طناز
my heart bleeds to see her go, o mother, I don't know why.	دلم از رفتنش خون گردد ای مادر ندانستم
Why have you, o Rābiʿah, gone ruined from this goblet of wine,	چرا ای" رابعه" مست و خراب از جام می گشتی
indeed, I did wrong, what else could I do? I didn't know.	بلی بد کردم آنچه کردهام دیگر ندانستم
(author's translation)	(m-bibak.blogfa.com)

Love has rendered the poet senseless. She cannot tell the difference between reality and her inner desires. In confusing the two, there is an act of emotional violence that results in (metaphorical) bleeding. As a state, love is more than an emotion; it becomes a consuming force in overwhelming and reshaping the poet's state of being. With love, she is in a complete state of drunkenness. She is no longer the active agent; the wine (a metaphor for love) has taken control of her senses. Similar to her previous statement about love being an unbounded sea, she has swum very deep in it. This constant state of "ندانستم"(*I didn't know*) also shows her perplexity about her actions. All she can do is take the blame and accept the consequences of her actions, thus acknowledging her wrongdoing. Here, for the first time, the poet apologises not for her state of being but for the violence caused by her state of senselessness. She confesses: "I became senseless from excitement and didn't fear it, but having no patience, I didn't know any other solution." Here, then, she compares her condition to that of a mother who wishes for her child to attend school but fears the child's playful or coquettish nature. The child may serve as a metaphor for her beloved, who longs to learn more; yet the poet, adopting the perspective of a mother, fears that this desire for knowledge may ultimately drive the beloved away. Consequently, her heart bleeds, embodying a complex interplay of emotions toward the beloved: reluctant patience, anxious longing, persistent fear, and a poignant yet hopeful passion.

The theme of love is not only central to Rābiʿah's poetry but also its most perilous element. Among the crowd, when Rūdakī praises the poet, now identified as the daughter of Kae'b, her brother Haris [or Hareth] is also present (Mojadadi 2017: 92). He returns home to Balkh and punishes Rābiʿah, who has now become publicly known as the lover of a slave boy. He confines her to a bathhouse, where she is found with cuts on both wrists and eventually bleeds to death (Mojadadi 2017: 92).

I wish my body found the news of my heart,	کاشک تنم بازیافتی خبر دل
I wish my heart found the news of my body.	کاشک دلم بازیافتی خبر تن
I wish I could reach you in safety and peace,	کاشک من از تو برستمی به سلامت
alas, how could I be liberated, to do so in the first place.	ای فسوسا! کجا توانم رستن
(author's translation)	(barabady.blogfa.com)

In the poem above, Rābiʿah confesses the power of love to obscure the rational mind (here, indicated in the image of the heart) and compromise the physical body. Love, and by extension, poetry, endangers both mind and body when it reaches the wrong audience. The world of privacy, safety and peace collapses once the poetics of witness moves beyond the private sphere. Having witnessed the impact of love, something forbidden to her by societal norms, Rābiʿah can no longer find liberation, whether in private or public spaces.

As modern readers, we might be inclined to ask whether Rābiʿah's poetry speaks beyond her own experience. Yet her work resists any such generalisation. Her poetic voice is highly personal and rooted in individual experience rather than collective identity. She does not claim to represent other women or speak on behalf of a broader community of lovers. Instead, she writes from the specificity of her own desire, pain, and imagination. This is precisely what makes her legacy so powerful: Rābiʿah is remembered not for being part of a tradition, but for boldly asserting her own voice as a woman who embraced both love and the consequences of loving. Her poetry reflects not only an affection for the beloved, but also a deep engagement with poetry itself – as a space of self-expression, playfulness, and creative authorship. Her imagination is grounded in the human rather than the divine. For this reason, the later framing of her poetry as mystical warrants careful reconsideration. While such a reading may elevate her literary status, it risks obscuring the emotional clarity and embodied experience that define her work. Rābiʿah was the first known classical female Persian poet to carve out a literary path in a male-dominated tradition. She consistently positioned herself as a poet first and a lover second. The knowledge conveyed in her verse emerges from lived experience and intellectual cultivation – as seen, too, in the work of later poets such as Nadia Anjuman and Mahbouba Ibrahimi, who similarly transform personal experience into poetic witness.

Nadia Anjuman and her words against political aggression

Unlike Rābiʿah, Nadia Anjuman was a twenty-first-century poet. Thus, her poetry relates to the modern form of poetics of witness, also to political violence and religious persecution, which resulted in her death in November of 2005 (Gall 2005). For Nadia, love, in all forms, as an act of total devotion, is a foreign subject. However, she writes intensively about "شوق", *desire* or *yearning* of the soul for something more liberating, like writing a poem, even if it does not grant her an audience. In her poem, "عبث" (*In Vain*), we see how Nadia writes of the realities she is facing and her desires, despite all her constraints as a woman and, more importantly, as a female poet.

In the poem below, which is a hallmark of Nadia's poetic talent and truth, the words evoke the brutality of her time. In this remarkable poem, Nadia situates herself in a place where no one cares. There is no outer world (a reference to the international communities) to sympathise with her, or the inner world (within Afghanistan, anyone in particular) to help her. She is forgotten on all fronts, and she knows that her voice, words and singing do not matter. She is born a victim, in vain, and thus she must remain silent, but at the same time, she sings, and with this poetic singing, we witness her witnesses. The one

I have no desire to open my speech, of what should I sing,	نیست شوقی که زبان باز کنم از چه بخوانم
this time, I am the hated one, whether I sing or do not sing.	من که منفور زمانم چه بخوانم چه نخوانم
What could I say of honey, when there is a poison in my throat,	چه بگویم سخن از شهد که زهر است به کامم
for it is the blow of that oppressor, pressing my mouth.	وای از مشت ستمگر که بکوبیده دهانم
There is no sympathiser in the whole world for me to entreat,	نیست غمخوار مرا در همه دنیا به که نازم
whether I cry, whether I smile, whether I die, or stay alive.	چه بگریم، چه بخندم، چه بمیرم، چه بمانم
This is now me and this corner of captivity, with sorrows of failure and regret,	من واین کنج اسارت، غم ناکامی وحسرت
for I was born in vain, and a seal should be placed on my tongue.	که عبث زاده ام و مُهر بباید به زبانم
I know, my heart, that there will be springs, seasons of pleasure,	دانم ای دل که بهاران بود وموسم عشرت
What is made of me, with my clipped wings, who cannot fly.	من پربسته چه سازم که پریدن نتوانم
It's been a long time since I was silenced, but the song is not forgotten in me,	گرچه دیریست خموشم نرود نغمه ز یادم
for this time, with whispers, I free speech from the heart.	زانکه هر لحظه به نجوا سخن از دل برهانم
It will be a memorable day when I pierce this cage,	یاد آن روز گرامی که قفس را بشگافم
getting my head out of this dismissingly secluded life and sing joyously.	سر برون آرم ازین عزلت ومستانه بخوانم
I am not that weakened willow, shivering with each blowing wind,	من نه آن بید ضعیفم که ز هر باد بلرزم
I am an Afghan daughter, rightly so – forever I retain my roar.	دخت افغانم وبر جاست که دایم به فغانم

(author's translation) (Mojadadi 2017: 119–120)

element of hope is freedom; despite her clipped wings, she looks forward to leaving the confines of her cage to fly outside.

Despite the constraints and oppressions she faces, Nadia still knows the song. When she claims she has no desire to speak or sing, she is, paradoxically, affirming that songs reside within her, expressed simply by opening her mouth, even if no sound emerges. The act of "بخوانم" (*I sing*), which can also mean (*I read*, or *I study*), becomes not only a gesture of vocalisation but also one of learning and acknowledgement. This stands in contrast to "نخوانم" (*not [to] sing*), highlighting the tension between expression and silence. Singing, in this context, is inseparable from Nadia's poetic nature – an intrinsic gift. What's at stake is her claim to power and the right to learn, to sing, both of which her society resists. Through the contrasting images of honey and poison, she reveals her internal conflict: an ingrained hospitality born of poetry, and an outward hostility shaped by repression.

Even though the poem is a self-directed speech about her worthlessness, it speaks of a collective experience witnessed by the poet herself. It is directed to those who, like herself, have been silenced for too long, "but the song is not forgotten" in them. In bringing this collective experience into her poem, Nadia becomes the ultimate poet of yearnings, who also believes in the power of poetry to grant freedom to anyone yearning for it, one day. In this sense, for Nadia, poetry functions as a form of liberation that simultaneously serves as a mode of knowledge production. Those who engage with her work encounter and partake in this knowledge.

Within the strands of her poetic persona, Nadia embodies both the intellectual and educational conditions of her time. Born in Herat in 1981, she was

only 25 years old when she "died from her injuries after being beaten" (news.bbc.co.uk; Gall 2005: web). A keen learner of literature, Nadia was among a group of education enthusiasts who could not be stopped from pursuing their education during the first Taliban regime in 1996 (Mojadadi 2017: 106). As the Taliban took full control of the country, Nadia continued in an undercover learning centre, publicly known as the so-called Sewing Circle of Herat (Mojadadi 2017: 104; also see Lamb 2004). In pretending to sew, Nadia stitched her words into a poetics of witness, inscribing them as a form of knowledge for future generations. Through the articulation of her unsilenced inner voice, Nadia reclaims poetry as her original linguistic and expressive medium. In all her poems, she bears witness to a time when education for women was forbidden under the oppressive rule of the Taliban (Mojadadi 2017: 105), a reality strikingly similar to the current situation in Afghanistan.

In the following poem, "فریاد بی آوا" (*A Voiceless Scream*), we gain insight into Nadia's sense of communion with her fellow women, which also echoes the truth of current injustices in Afghanistan.

It is the green steps of the rain that makes the sound!	صدای گامهای سبز باران است!
they reach here from the road, this time	اینجا میرسند از راه، اینک
bringing a few thirsty souls, from the skirts of the desert, dust-filled	تشنه جانی چند دامن از کویر آورده، گرد آلود
their breaths are mirage-merged	نفسهاشان سراب آغشته
agitated	سوزان،
their drying throats, and smoked with dust	کامها خشک و غبار اندود
they reach here from the road, this time	اینجا میرسند از راه، اینک
the pain-nurtured daughters, their bodies tormented	دخترانی درد پرور، پیکر آزرده
as joy has departed from them,	نشاط از چهره ها شان رخت بسته
their hearts are old and deserted	قلبها پیر و ترکخورده
neither a smile appears in the lines of their lips	نه در قاموس لبهاشان تبسم نقش میبندد
nor does a drop of tear fall from their dry eyes.	نه حتی قطره اشکی میزند از خشکرود چشمشان بیرون
Dear God!	خداوندا!
I do not know if their voiceless screams	ندانم میرسد فریاد بی آوای شان تا ابر
reach the clouds, to the heavens?	تا گردون؟
It is the green steps of the rain that makes the sound.	صدای گامهای سبز باران است
(author's translation)	(Anjuman 2005)

In this poem, Nadia's primary subject matter is the few thirsty souls, which she later calls "pain-nurtured daughters, their bodies tormented" – once again, a reference to those yearning for freedom. Their voices are in vain, for they cannot even reach the heavens. Initially, we believe the poem is about Nadia's mourning for the thirsty souls, but in essence, it can also be about the yearnings and struggles of those thirsty souls. It is in the juxtaposition of the thirsty souls' motion of walking or pouring like the rain, while simultaneously being so far away that "their breaths are mirage-merged". Here, the poet is the ultimate observer; she witnesses the pain-nurtured daughters' constant yearnings

and never-ending struggles. She is one of them; thus, she does not know whether "their voiceless screams could reach the clouds, to the heavens", for hers has not yet reached there. The echo of such companionship comes down as Nadia proclaims that "it is the green steps of the rain that make the sound". The *sound* here is unlike the *voiceless screams*, for Nadia knows there is a resonance that is the opposite of silence in their collective witness.

In a different poem, "زهراگین" (*Poisoned*), we get a distinct image of the poet. This time, she is a public poet criticising the unfair political situation in the country, focused on a central theme of how the state of education is harmed.

That night,	آنشب ...
in the private party of scorpions	در محفل خصوصی گژدمها
a heated and bitter conversation	یک بحث داغ وتلخ
continued for a long time	دیری ادامه داشت
The premise *Injecting poison into the*	موضوع (زرق زهر به اندامهای علم!)
figures of knowledge	در انتخاب سم
in choosing the potion	سامان نمیگرفت وبه مطلب نمیرسید
they didn't agree, they couldn't get close to a purpose	ناگاه از آن میان
Suddenly, from among them	یک تن کبود ز شتر از اصل نسل خویش
a grey-bodied one, ugliest of all in his offspring	چون تیغ بر گشاد زبان
like a dagger, he opened his mouth	گفت اینچنین
he said it, this way	
The night is passing quickly	شب در گذشتن است و مجال درنگ نیست
we should not delay	تا چشمهای طعمه بخوابند
when the eyes of our prey fall asleep	خیزید و نیشگاه بجویید
arise and find bodies to sting	میراث مانده بر من
I have inherited	یک شیشه از هلاهل چندین هزار ساله جدم
this thousand-year-old glass bottle of	ایثار گرمنم
poison from my ancestor,	
for that I will sacrifice myself	
(author's translation)	(Anjuman 2005)

The poem starts by setting the stage for a private gathering where the poet appears as a witness. She reports on the private conversation, which is no longer private since the poet discloses it. Here, the matter disclosed is the heated and bitter discussion on how to poison knowledge-seekers and harm the status of knowledge itself. The underlying fact is that it must be a collective effort of the evildoers to poison, but the poet claims that there is no solid agreement between the discussants "in choosing the potion". The poet makes her judgement and recalls how among them, "a grey-bodied one, ugliest of all" talks and presents his bottle of potion from an ancestral custom of "injecting poison into the figures of knowledge".

This is a powerful metaphor: to inherit "this thousand-year-old glass bottle of poison." The "bottled poison" may symbolise an oppressive ideological pattern – contained within collective consciousness – now ready to be injected or infused into the present. It evokes more than just a historical reference to how

Afghan society has treated women, as "bodies to sing" for centuries. It suggests that this poison was once deliberately bottled, contained, and preserved, only to be passed down through the generations. Nadia was writing these poems during the first rule of the Taliban, from 1994 to 2001. This poem certainly relates to the Taliban – "the grey-bodied one, ugliest of all in his offspring" – and their ruling against the education and movement of women.

> The assault on the status of women began immediately after the Taliban took power in Kabul [in 1996]. The Taliban closed the women's university and forced nearly all women to quit their jobs, closing down an important source of talent and expertise for the country. It restricted access to medical care for women, brutally enforced a restrictive dress code, and limited the ability of women to move about the city. (US Department of State 2001)

Despite the brutality and violence inflicted on women's rights and, thus, education during this period, Nadia's poetry is a testimony to her unshaken belief in the power of her voice as a form of knowledge production for the next generation encountering her poems. And there is no surprise when she says, "I am not that weakened willow, shivering with each blowing wind, / I am an Afghan daughter, rightly so – forever I retain my roar." Her roar is heard through the words she shared with the world in a collection of poetry called "گل دودی" or *Conospermum* (usually translated and referred to as "Smoked Flower"), published in 2005 (Mojadadi 2017: 119). Her second collection was published posthumously by her brother Shafi Nourzaei and the rest of the literary circle of Herat under the title "یك سبد دلهره" or *A Basket of Dreads* in 2006.

We can only imagine Nadia's joy in witnessing the world's noticing Afghan suffering and responding by acting against Taliban rule in November 2001. She returned to university and started her studies in the Faculty of Literature (Mojadadi 2017: 113). She witnessed the regime changes and the freedom to be a publicly recognised poet (Mojadadi 2017: 114). Though not fully a political poet, Nadia's poetry is inspired by the political scene, corresponding to the time's aggression and injustices. In other words, to use Forché's terms, Nadia's poetry is both personal, "calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss" and political, indicating "a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary" (1993: 31). Though, as seen in her poetry, this personal emotional loss is collective. And what's more intriguing in the case of Nadia is that this private and public (be it political) poetry resulted in her death in the year 2005. This was when Afghanistan became a republican country with a head of state in full power to implement the rule of law (Mojadadi 2017: 115–116). However, Nadia's horrific death because of domestic violence speaks of this intermingling of private and public spheres. Not to mention that it was her husband who tortured and killed her, mainly for the public poet she had become by 2005, right after the publication of her first collection. Nadia is certainly one of those poets who Forché would say "suffered and resisted through poetry itself" (1993: 31).

Mahbouba Ibrahimi and her motherly words of comfort

A contemporary Afghan female poet, Mahbouba Ibrahimi, was born in 1977 in Kandahar (SwedishPEN/Opp 2022: Web). Her poetry relates to Afghanistan's recent history and the Afghan people's sufferings on a global scale. Mahbouba has lived in Sweden since 2011 (SwedishPEN/Opp 2022: Web). However, her literary connection in the country made her a well-known poet among literary circles in Afghanistan and Iran, where she grew up and became a poet like many diaspora Afghan poets (Olszewska 2007: 203–224). Writing mainly in the Persian (Dari) language, her latest poetry collection was published a month before the Taliban's arrival in August 2021. While her books were left uncirculated, Mahbouba shared with me her desire to reach a global audience through her poetry in a brief interview conversation over WhatsApp in May 2024. As a full-time teacher, Mahbouba writes poetry in her spare time whenever she is inspired. As her translator (from Persian/Dari into English), I can attest to her love of words that record the collective experiences of pain and misery at the hands of aggressors.

Unlike Rābiʿah, who wrote primarily in the ghazal form, and Nadia, who also aspired to write in the ghazal form and occasionally wrote in free verse, Mahbouba writes exclusively in free verse. This is a deliberate choice of form. She cannot rely on traditional forms or contrived rhythmic schemes to express her pain and desires. Instead, Mahbouba relies on this unique form of free verse and employs a much more straightforward poetic language. She does this by introducing simple, everyday objects to convey deeper and more essential aspects of life. Forché writes that poetry, "to be the witness of lived experiences, of breath, will have to resort to a language more suitable to the time" (1993: 42). In a similar vein, Mahbouba turns to ordinary objects, such as the magnifying glass in her poem "ذره بین" (*A Magnifier*) to evoke the profound pain of displacement and separation, as well as the longing for close connections.

The poem remains beautiful in its simplicity and powerful in its underlying message. As an object with a magnifying quality, on the one hand, the magnifying glass in this poem is used as a tool to measure the extent of the truth, which is that of the poet's sense of loneliness and insignificance. Through her son's curious eyes, the poet reconnects with a world that is too deeply familiar to her but still new and unknown to him, who at the time is also too intrigued by the world he engages with through the instrument. The magnifying glass, on the other hand, represents the mother's appetite to educate and caution her son about their fate. She warns him that: "The truth / Cannot / Be so fierce and large /… So, remove your magnifying glass… Otherwise / We both will be lost / In these twisting roads…"

My son buys a magnifying glass	ذره بین خریده پسرم
He places it on the smallest things	می گذارد روی ریزترین چیزها
It makes his world ten times bigger	و جهانش را ده برابر بزرگ‌تر می کند
The truth	واقعیت
Cannot	نمی تواند
Be so fierce and large	این قدر سهمگین و بزرگ باشد
My little son!	!پسرکم
The fuzz on the peach skin	پرز روی پوست هلو
Is as insignificant	همان‌قدر ناچیز است
As that of our loneliness	که تنهایی ما
In this gigantic land	در این سرزمین بزرگ
The legs of this fly	پاهای این مگس
Only	فقط
With the help of a magnifying glass	زیر ذره بین
Can make us feel bad	حال ما را بد می کند
And sorrows	و غم ها
Only when	وقتی
We talk about them	درباره شان حرف می زنیم
So, remove your magnifying glass	ذره بین ات را
From the lines on my palm	از روی خط های کف دستم بردار
Otherwise	وگرنه
We both will be lost	در این جاده های پر پیچ و خم
In these twisting roads	گم می شویم
Do not pay attention to the petals	نه به گلبرگ ها دقیق شو
Nor to the glittering snowflakes	نه به دانه درخشان برف
For life	زندگی
Mostly	اغلب
Shows its sharp edges	لبه های تیزش را نشان می دهد
So, stand a little further away!	کمی دورتر ایستاد شو

(Fayyaz, Swedish PEN/Opp 2022) (Swedish PEN/Opp 2022)

This cautionary message to the son – to not observe the world too closely – can also be read, in hindsight, as a reflection on accepting one's fragmented and uncertain state of being in the world. Looking very closely, she thinks the truth, which is "so fierce and large", can be revealed and the poet, as a mother, cannot bear the effect it might have on the son. The truth is that their shared sense of loneliness, in the poem, is as insignificant as the fuzz on peach skin. By encouraging her son to maintain a certain distance, the poet seeks to protect the son from knowing their inconsequential existence. Thus, the knowledge conveyed by the poet lies within the cautionary message itself, warning us against confronting the truth too directly or intimately, and instead encouraging a more cautious, if not carefully distanced approach.

In another poem, "پوز پلنگ", *The Cheetah*, Mahbouba imparts a different sort of knowledge to her daughter. As a reflection of her own life, Mahbouba evokes the image of the cheetah, an animal typically symbolising grace, agility and courage, only to subvert its usual connotations, using it instead to convey her sense of restlessness. This restlessness, in turn, also suggests a state of heightened

The cheetah that wakes up in my bed	یوز پلنگی که در تختخواب من بیدار می شود
Knows	می داند
Today it must run faster than the train	امروز باید سریع تر از قطار بدود
I tell my daughter	به دخترم می گویم
for the forest, put on your boots	برای جنگل پوتین هایش را بپوشد
Soldiers	سرباز ها
should take care of themselves first	باید بیشتر از خودشان مواظبت کنند
I pour milk into my son's glass	شیر می ریزم در گیلاس پسرم
Starting today, the days are getting darker	از امروز روزها تاریک‌تر می شوند
At the bright sunny hours, he should play outside	ساعت ها آفتابی باید بیرون بازی کند
I gaze at my mouth in the mirror	دهانم را در اینه نگاه می کنم
Triangular words	کلمات سه گوش
Broken – they jump out	شکسته بیرون می پرند
They've left the corners of my lips wounded	و گوشه های لبم را زخم کرده اند
One day	یک روز
everything will get better	همه چیز بهتر می شود
and my grandchildren will not remember	و نوه هایم به یاد نمی آورند
that they were born in a rough war	پس از جنگی سخت به دنیا آمده اند
sinking at the bottom,	رسوب
From inside my children's rooms	از اتاق های بچه ها
I collect half-emptied glasses	گیلاس های نیمه خالی را جمع می کنم
Coca Cola	کوکا کولا
Orange juice	آب پرتقال
with fatigue, sinking at the bottom	رسوب ملال
For days I have remained at the base	در ته مانده روزها
Today with much difficulty, I crawl under the beds	به زحمت می خزم زیر تخت ها
and I pull out	و لباس های ناشسته را
the unwashed clothes	بیرون می کشم
This bird is getting heavier	این پرنده دارد سنگین می شود
Its feathers start falling	و پر و بالش می ریزد
My son full of concerns, advises	پسرم با نگرانی توصیه ی کند
do not get old, mother!	! پیرنشو مادر
I say to him:	می گویم
Birds never age	پرنده ها که پیر نمی شوند
they only forget	فقط فراموش می کنند
their wings and	بال هایشان را
where in the kitchen	کجای آشپزخانه
they have left them.	جا گذاشته اند
(Fayyaz, SwedishPEN/Opp 2022)	(SwedishPEN/Opp 2022)

alertness: "it must run faster than the train." The cheetah thus becomes a metaphor not only for herself but also for her daughter, who seems to have inherited the same instinctive drive. The poet-mother, while addressing the readers, recounts what she tells her daughter: "For the forest, put on your boots/Soldiers/ Should take care of themselves first." This is yet another cautionary tale, distinct from the one she shared with her son about observing the world too closely. By calling her daughter a soldier, she implies the importance of self-reliance, staying alive, being alert and remaining cautious. The line "For the forest, put on your boots" emphasises the importance of preparedness. It is as if the poet-

mother intentionally introduces the daughter to reality rather than trying to shield her from it. In the subsequent lines, she turns her attention to the son, encouraging him to go outside in the sun. In her solitude, she then contemplates her "triangular words". The concept of *triangular words* is rooted in three interrelated realities as she perceives them: her own struggle to outrun the metaphorical train, her daughter's readiness to protect herself and her son's need to embrace the simplicity of playing in the sun.

Toward the end of the poem, very gently and gracefully, she turns inward with a sense of hope: "Everything will get better/ And my grandchildren will not remember/ That they were born in a rough war." Here, these three realities emerge from a single source, "a rough war". For the poet, to forget the harshness of that war is to be freed from the burden that she, her son and her daughter must bear witness to this reality. In the rest of the twelve lines, the poet tells us about her routine chores of cleaning the rooms and picking up objects from under the beds. But today, the poet confesses that "with much difficulty, I crawl under the beds", describing her frailty. Referring to herself as a bird, she notes that she is "getting heavier/ Its feathers start falling". Here, she relates to her inevitable ageing and weakness, visible to no one except her son, who "advises/ Do not get old, mother!" Once again, the poet-mother initiates a gentle conversation, telling the son that she is not ageing, only becoming more forgetful. While we, humans, do not visibly see birds ageing or becoming frail, we do observe feathers falling, never to be gathered or claimed again. This metaphor is both beautiful and poignant. Through her words, the poet leaves a lasting impression for her children to carry forward as her memory fades.

Amidst the recurring motifs of the magnifying glass and the cheetah, there emerges an underlying poetic desire both to bear witness to the past and, at the same time, to forget, or perhaps to consciously disremember it. This tension leads to a significant conclusion: Mahbouba is not a political poet, nor does she seek to convey explicitly political messages. Instead, she inhabits a simple domestic space, where her children become her closest companions and the central focus of her emotional and poetic reflection. Even the past to which Mahbouba refers, particularly the "rough war", bears no explicitly political inclination. If her poetry shows any awareness of political realities, it does not appear as direct commentary, but rather as a way of protecting her son from the harsh realities she has lived through. Nevertheless, the poet's immigration status remains an integral and inescapable aspect of these poems.

Unlike Rābiʿah and Nadia, Mahbouba writes from a position of exile, composing her work in her mother tongue, Persian / Dari. As Forché observes, exile "is as much a linguistic condition as it is a question of citizenship" (1993: 43). Living in Sweden, her poems may be alien to the national context surrounding her. But what constitutes her poetic world remains deeply familiar and rooted within her own identity. She refuses to let her linguistic displacement – or the

implications of her citizenship status – diminish her creative or intellectual output. This resilience is the very wisdom she imparts to her daughter, her son, and, by extension, to her readers: to "put on [our] boots" and prepare for the rough journey through the metaphorical forest of life. This aspect is unique to Mahbouba's work. Unlike Rābiʿah and Nadia, it is her profound engagement with domesticity and motherhood that defines and elevates her poetry. As an educator by nature, Mahbouba offers poetic testimony to the past and present, not as lament, but as a form of enduring knowledge.

Conclusion

Throughout time and across cultures, literature and history have always shaped one another: history provides literature with its context, while literature influences how history is remembered and understood. In the vast landscapes that now stretch across Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan, history is conveyed through the melodies and echoes of Persian poetry. There is so much to learn about the past and present through the voices of the poets, and most importantly, through the voices of the very few female poets, who write from the most intimate spaces where societal norms and tradition are kept sacred. In turn, these women have taken the opportunity to define and refine those spaces, even though their poetry remains on the edge of societal norms. A woman is not supposed to be loud or appear in the public eye – with publicity comes scrutiny and thus dishonour. This is linked with the belief that poetry equals love, which is why poetry is a synonym for the heart. Any matter of the woman's heart spoken and shared in public is dangerous; a woman's expression of love, and thus her poetry on that subject matter, becomes dangerous once it is out in public. This danger is almost always inevitable. Rābiʿah's poetry was read out loud. Therefore, in the public's eye, she needed to be punished by death.

In the same way, Nadia's collection of poetry reached a wider audience all around the world. Her poems gained increasing exposure for the extent of truth and echoes of injustice they conveyed to her readers. She participated in literary circles, shared her work and received praise and recognition. And that was dangerous. The question of familial honour was raised in both unfortunate cases. Rābiʿah was killed by her brother, while Nadia was killed by her husband. What is left of them is poems that serve as a witness to the injustices and extremes they faced. For the poet Mahbouba, even though exile is brutal and isolation bring despair, poetry is not dangerous for her in her public appearances. If anything, her only wish is for her poetry to reach audiences of all backgrounds. She believes that her poetry conveys the global human struggles of displacement and the never-ending search for one's true home.

For many decades, foreign invasions, domestic violence, ethnic cleansing, forced displacement, migration, religious persecution and aggression have entered the poems of Afghan poets against their will. But poets have not given up, just like Rābiʿah Balkhī – the mother of Persian literature – who, despite the risks associated with writing, continued to compose poetry, recognising the enduring power of poetry. Nadia wrote in another oppressive period, and she kept writing poetry as an act of rebellion against the regime's violence against women and their education. Mahbouba continues to write during her displacement, but she writes for the next generation about a hopeful future. Despite writing in entirely different periods, in the case of all three poets, there is one common thread in their experiences as female poets: the constancy of struggle and suffering. And yet, they have persisted in witnessing and writing, in recording and retelling their experiences. Even though the world stood against their words, they did not give up on their voices and judgement of what was right and wrong. This is the lesser-known story of Afghan women. Their education, lived experiences, and the purpose behind their lives – all expressed through their poetry – serve one common purpose: knowledge production, despite the consequences.

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