Chapter 1

Women and History
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All the four novels are closely linked with the political and historical happenings of Afghanistan so they can prove an interesting reading if read from the Historicist point of view or even from a New Historicist angle reading what American critic Louis Montrose calls “the textuality of history, the historicity of texts” (Barry 172). The novels, though literary texts, supply the readers a good amount of historical, social and political truths of Afghanistan. History has not been treated as a mere setting but comes live in the pages of the texts. If read from this perspective, which is quite inescapable, one feels motivated to go through the socio-political history of the country with a special emphasis on the position of women in different eras. Though they are not historical novels in the strict sense of the word, the title of the thesis demands a parallel study of literary (the novels) and non-literary (the history of the country) texts. Both the novelists have drawn in abundance from the historical happenings of Afghanistan. Juxtaposed with the history of the country, the novels give a better and more clear understanding of the subject as Peter Barry writes, “... for the aim is not to represent the past as it really was, but to present a new reality by re-situating it” (175). Gayatri Spivak claims that there is no defined line separating literature and history. While history appears closer to the truth than literature, literature gives readers a sense of the real (336). Besides the novels have been taken by the readers less as pieces of literature and more as pieces of history of the country in which they are set. Jessie M. Nixon writes:

The fact that novels like Kite Runner, A Thousand Splendid Suns, and The Swallows of Kabul have become national bestsellers and educational tools suggests that they have broken the barrier of literature and history: readers approach these novels as history and literature simultaneously. The huge
popularity of this literature demands that we take a socially responsible turn towards a critical analysis of the content. We need to understand the dangers associated with making assumptions about another culture based on a piece of literature. (5)

The political turbulence in any country has a direct affect on its social and cultural set up. Afghanistan, a country which has been “for over 200 years . . . the object of Western myth, a land little understood but romanticized by many in Europe and America” (Wali 6) has witnessed authoritative monarchs, numberless coups, mass revolts, fundamental sweeps and external interferences since time immemorial. Of late after 1973 when the monarchy ended, Afghanistan has seen a lot of political turmoil. The unstable political history of Afghanistan which had been marked by power struggles, armed revolts and mass uprisings had a direct bearing on the social fabric of this multi-ethnic country, especially on the position of women, particularly the rural women. History of Afghanistan stands a testimony to the fact that the issues related to women have always been among the important factors for unstable polity. A cursory examination of history reveals that at various junctures, the issues related to women have been the only reason behind the fall of a particular regime.

Successive Afghan governments have failed to achieve their goal of building a strong and unified nation, the linguistic, myriad ethnic and cultural diversity of the nation being among important factors responsible. Moreover the presence of various tribes and difficult terrains has added to the problems of establishing a strong centralized government. Invasions and migrations have left an extremely complex ethnic, linguistic, tribal and cultural mélange in Afghanistan. Pashtuns who were called Afghans for the first time by Persians are numerically the majority and politically dominant group. Louis Dupree lists and describes about twenty groups:
Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Aymak, Farsiwan, Brahui, Baluchi, Turkomen, Nuristani, Kohistani, Pamiri, Kirghiz, Gujar, Moghol, Arab, Qizilbash, Hindus, Sikhs and Jews (57).

At present American supported government rules Afghanistan, yet the citizens do not perceive visible sign of improvement. About this government, Thomas Barfield says, “The most successful model of Afghan governance employed the Swiss cheese approach, in which regimes expected their writs to run completely only in the most populated and economically prosperous parts of the country” (337-338). Even Islam has not been able to do the job of unifying the country to the extent it should have done because of the ethnic and linguistic groups which in one way or the other have proved stronger than the religion. Angelo Rasanayagam quotes an English general Sir Henry Rawlinson:

The nation consists of a mere collection of tribes, of unequal power and divergent habits, which are held together, more or less loosely, according to the personal character of the chief, who ruled them. The feeling of patriotism, as known in Europe cannot exist among Afghans, for there is no common country. (xvi)

Monarchy in Afghanistan

Afghanistan, the land of Pashtuns, got its name from a synonym for the word Pashtun, ‘Avghan’ or ‘Afghan’ from the ancient Persian rulers. Afghanistan emerged as an autonomous political entity when Ahmad Shah Abdali popularly known as the father of the country got the command of Kandahar from the Persian conqueror Nadir Shah in the middle of 18th century. By the time of his death in 1772, it was the largest West Asian empire after that of the Ottoman Turks. Ahmad Shah derived the legitimacy of his rule from a Great Assembly (Loya Jirga) of representatives, elders
and warriors of the various *Pashtun* tribes who enthroned him as *Padshah* in Kandahar. He was bestowed with the title of *Durri-i-Dauran* (Pearl of the Age). He is said to have had a dream which inspired him to change his title to *Durr-i-Durran* (Pearl of the Pearls), thus becoming Ahmad Shah Durrani (Rasanayagam xv). He gave sound reward to his loyal followers and thus secured the adherence of the Afghan chiefs who might not have otherwise accepted his leadership as history proves that Afghans had not accepted any rule without resistance.

So it was natural that the most popular of Ahmad Shah’s sons would become the king and thus the success depended on how much support each of his son could muster from the influential tribal leaders and other ethnic groups. He was succeeded by his favorite son Timur who moved the capital from Kandahar to Kabul. After Timur’s death in 1793, fratricidal struggles for the succession continued until Dost Mohammad, a strong scion of the powerful *Barakzai* branch of *Abdalis*, the *Mohammadzais* appeared on the scene. During this period due to power struggle among Timur’s sons the empire disintegrated. This period has been called a cycle of ‘fusion and fission’ by Louis Dupree in his book *Afghanistan*. During this period the non-*Pashtun* clans like *Mirs* of Sind, *Khans* of Baluchistan and *Uzbek Begs* escaped Kabul’s control. The Amir of Bokhara captured Balkh and Punjab and Kashmir were lost to Sikhs under Ranjeet Singh. Thus Dost Mohammad was left to rule Kabul and Ghazni only.

The British advent was earlier made easy by Ahmad Shah’s elimination of Marathas who would have been the only powerful obstacle for the British after the decline of the Mughals. Later on it was in fact Dost Mohammad (also called *Amir ul-Mu’minin*, Commander of the Faithful) in 1836 who appealed for British help to hold
back Ranjit Singh and his Sikhs of Kashmir from invading Afghanistan. In the mean
time Russian Czars had begun under Peter the Great, and then under Catherine the
Great to expand their empire at the advantage of the declining power of the Ottoman
Turks. They began to penetrate central Asia through Syr Darya (Jaxartes). It was this
fear of their coming which led to British intervention in Afghanistan as Russia was
the only country at that time that could have overtaken Britain in terms of power. First
British thwarted the Persians, who with Russian support attempted to retake Herat and
second British sent in troops to occupy Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad. However the
British suffered badly—in what was later called the First Anglo-Afghan war—because of
the fierce hostility of the population and their increasingly effective armed attacks on
the British garrison. In this context Rasamayagam writes:

During this ‘Great Game’ as Kipling called it, Afghanistan became a buffer
state. The rivalries of two imperial powers led them to contain each other by
fixing ‘strategic frontiers’, which were later endorsed bilaterally in the
Anglo-Russian Convention of St Petersburg of 1907, a treaty that was part of
realignment of European alliances constituting ‘the march of folly’ described
by Barbara Tuchman that led to the First World War. (xviii)

After Dost Mohammad, Afghanistan fell into the hands of many incapable
rulers; first to Dost Mohammad’s son Sher Shah, then from one brother to another:
Afzal Shah and Azam Shah. It was finally in 1880 that Afzal Shah’s son Abdur
Rehman Khan was recognized as Amir of Afghanistan by the British in 1880 after the
stiff resistance of the local populace against a short but tyrant rule of General Roberts,
a British, in 1879. About Abdur Rehman Khan’s period Thomas Barfield writes, “The
power base of this new elite stood in sharp contrast to the old feudal aristocracy,
although it remained largely Pashtun in origin” (168). He was brought back from exile
of about 11 years which he spent in Samarkand and Teshkent. Abdur Rehman Khan
opened a number of madrassas, besides a number of places for the memorizing of the Quran were set up, called *dar-ul-hifaz* (Shahrani 69). He introduced a series of legislative reforms and tried to reinstate women’s divorce and hereditary rights of widows. According to Helena Malikyar, "... for the first time in the history of Afghanistan, royal decrees were issued compelling the male population to abide by the prescriptions of Islam as far as women were concerned." (qtd in Riphenburg 410). Valentine M. Moghadam throws light on his legislative reforms, “He also modified a law pertaining to child marriages, permitting a girl who had been given in marriage before she had reach the age of puberty to refuse or accept her marriage ties when she attained full age” (216).

Grandson of Dost Mohammad, Abdur Rehman Khan was well aware of the Afghan situation and is quoted as: “How can a small power like Afghanistan, which is like a goat between the two lions, or a grain of wheat between two strong millstones of the grinding mill, stand in the midway of the stones without being ground to dust” (qtd. in Arney 121)? Between 1881 and 1901 Abdur Rahman Khan with the help of the British ruthlessly crushed ethnic dissent and attempted to create a strong centralized state. The country’s borders were established according to the strategic needs of the imperial powers rather than the socio-political needs of Afghanistan’s diverse groups (Rostami-Povey 9). Abdur Rehman was succeeded by his son Habibullah Khan (1901-1919) who luckily came over without any resistance; an unusual event in Afghan history. Actually Abdur Rehman had quite wisely kept all his other sons away from Kabul to avoid a clash. Habibullah Khan had a personal fascination for Western inventions. He continued with his father’s efforts of modernization of Afghanistan, although in a limited way. His father had already set up some small scale industries and Habibullah started adding modern facilities to
them. Habibullah Khan hired foreign technicians for mining industry, got a road built and commissioned an American engineer to build the country’s first hydro-electric plant. About him David B. Edwards writes, “Habibullah was a modernist in one sense—he liked Western inventions, be they automobiles, photography, or golf; but he had little time for the political and social agendas that modernists brought with them and that began to sweep through his kingdom in the first two decades of the century.” (58). He gave the powers back to religious leaders who were stripped of it till now by his father. He declared Afghan independence and partially succeeded to remove the limitations on his country’s sovereignty such as the right of the British to oversee its foreign affairs imposed in the Treaty of Gandamak in 1879 signed by the then ruler Yaqub Khan under the British pressure. He started diplomatic relations with many countries without prior consultations with the viceroy (Lord Curzon). Although with a limited financial back up, he tried to bring a great deal of social and economic reforms. Besides he has the credit of keeping Afghanistan largely peaceful in spite of the World War over head. Though the tribal and religious leaders of Loya Jirga supported the war against the British in the war, he was clear in his policy of neutrality. When a Turko-German mission tried to persuade him to attack British in India and the Russians in Turkestan in return of a vast quantity of arms and gold, the astute Amir held a correspondence with British in India and demanded that in return to his neutrality despite the internal pressures, they should give up the Treaty of Gandamak which gave them the control of Afghanistan’s foreign relations. When things did not work this way “he eventually signed a totally unrealistic draft treaty in which he pledged support for the central powers in return for no less than twenty million pounds in gold, 100,000 rifles and 300 cannons” (Ewans 116). He did not
survive to see the British control removed as he was assassinated on a hunting trip in 1919.

One of his sons, Amanullah Khan (1919) came to throne on 27th February, 1919 and he later proved to be the first ruler who was determined to drag his nation into the 20th century at any cost. However he lacked the political shrewdness and wisdom of his father and thus his clumsy efforts to modernize Afghanistan ended in grief and anarchy, all this despite the fact that he had a knowledgeable advisor Mahmud Khan Tarzi (1865-1933) in his court. Amanullah Khan who later got the title of Ghazi (Islamic Victor), declared war against the British after the latter’s denial of granting full freedom to Afghanistan and fought the less known Third Anglo-Afghan war of May 1919 in which the British army used the military aircraft and dropped bombs on Kabul and Jalalabad. It later led to the Treaty of Rawalpindi in August 1919 in which Afghanistan got freedom to conduct its own affairs for the first time.

**First Step towards Women Emancipation in Afghanistan**

For the first time in Afghanistan, a king proved to be a believer of a democratic set up, although partially as Amanullah Khan established a council of ministers and adopted a constitution in 1923. He used the issue of women’s position in Afghan society as a proxy to push for wider political and religious reforms. His decrees regarding women, compulsory education for all and co-educational schools angered the religious conservatives and there were ominous signs of revolt. Mahmud Khan Tarzi resigned in 1925 after his advice of proceeding cautiously was ignored by Amanullah. Amanullah visited many European countries and was the first Afghan ruler to visit the Soviet Union. After this grand tour, photographs of Queen Soraya were circulated in Afghanistan in which she was unveiled and wearing evening dress
at a European state reception party. There was a provocation in the already angry mullahs and reaction was that the king has turned against Allah and Islam and Afghanistan needed to be liberated from him (Rasanayagam 21).

For the first time some solid steps for the emancipation of women were taken by king Amanullah Khan in the 1920s. King Amanullah and his wife Queen Soraya opened the first school for girls in Kabul in the 1920s and the school (called Malalai) had enrolled 800 girls by 1928 (Nojumi, Mazurana, Stites 62). He tried to put an end to the seclusion of women by discarding the traditional veil which Afghan women had to wear in public. Zohra Yusuf Daoud, who is an alumna of one the schools opened during this period says, “The king gave all women the option to remove the veil, a garment not like the all-encompassing burqas we see today, but a traditional veil that covers only the wearer’s head” (107).

Amanullah’s revolutionary wife Queen Soraya also encouraged the king to arrange for the modern education which was till then a prerogative of the male population only. Zohra Yusuf Daoud quotes Queen Soraya’s address to a group of women on Afghanistan’s seventh independence anniversary in 1926:

Do not think . . . that our nation needs only men to serve it. Women should also take their part as women did in early years of Islam. The valuable services rendered by women are recounted throughout history from which we learn that women were not created solely for pleasure and comfort. From their examples we learn that we must all contribute toward the development of our nation and this cannot be done without being equipped with knowledge. (107)

Amanullah established a centre called ‘Association for the Protection of Women’ a kind of consultant body with the main objective of dissuading the people from ill treating women and bringing them at par with men in the field of education.
Through this body he wanted to put forth compulsory education for all and specially stressed on the need of emancipating the women.

After an official trip to European countries, Amanullah announced a series of reforms before *Loya Jirga* (Grand Assembly) which was composed of leading tribal and religious leaders. He called for a western style constitutional monarchy, a cabinet of ministers, an elected lower house and a nominated upper house. He ordered the separation of religious and state powers. He imposed monogamy, compulsory education for all and co-educational schools. However the *Loya Jirga* rejected his proposals. As an avantgarde for the upliftment and modernization of the society in general and women in particular he convened his own *Loya Jirga* of loyalists. In this context Martin Ewans writes:

Amanullah’s tragedy was that he was a man who was long on reformist zeal and short on worldly wisdom. Despite his many attractive qualities, he was arrogant, impatient and impulsive, and had increasingly surrounded himself with incompetents and sycophants. While he was concerned to root out corrupt practices, these were, paradoxically, increased through his creation of bureaucracy that was, inevitably, susceptible to corruption and nepotism. (134)

All his reckless concerns of modernizing Afghanistan coupled with his lack of knowledge of the intricacies of his tribal country led to armed revolts which forced him to flee to Turkey. A power vacuum was created and a Tajik bandit by the name of Habibullah got hold of Kabul for about nine months. Also known as the ‘Bacha-i-Saqao’ meaning ‘the son of a water carrier’ he sent a reign of terror all around. Even the religious leaders who were strongly antagonistic to Amanullah Khan got alienated from him. Nadir Shah, a powerful member of *Musahiban* tribe with the help of his brothers led one of the armed struggles against him and soon succeeded and occupied
Kabul in 1929. Although with a show of reluctance, Nadir Shah accepted the throne with the tribal support and later was endorsed by a full Loya Jirga. He built up a strong army, gave religious clerics lucrative posts, built roads and communications. He made the religious law of the Hanafi School of Sunni Islam the official law of Afghanistan. On economic side he did a lot to reform the declining Afghan industries. He started import and export trade and opened the first bank in Afghanistan by the name of Bank-i-Milli. He reopened the schools and sent back the young Afghan women and men to studies abroad who were earlier called back by Bacho-i-Saquo.

Amanullah was later shot dead by a high school student in 1933 in what was described as revenge to the murder of one Ghulam Nabi Charki who was his political opponent. His French educated son Zahir Shah became the king at an early age of 19. He was only kept on the throne as a monarch and it were his uncles who ruled. The king’s uncle Hashim Khan who had been appointed prime minister in 1929 continued till 1946 when he was replaced by his brother Shah Mahmud. The new prime minister released many political prisoners as an attempt to legitimize the regime which led to elections for parliament in 1949 in which 40% of 120 members elected were educated. This quasi-liberal parliament did open some windows with the appearance of newspapers and some political movement. It resulted in the formation of a loosely organized political association called ‘The Movement of Enlightened Youth’ with its manifesto which called for the eradication of anachronistic customs and ideas, the grant of legal rights to women, accountability in the government, formation of political parties and economic development. This party could not muster enough support as the unlettered general population remained unreceptive to their secular ideas.
Daoud Khan, the king’s cousin and brother-in-law assumed prime ministership in 1953 and later on played an important role in the politics of Afghanistan. As Afghanistan was in need of dire external economic and military assistance and to which USA was indifferent, Daoud Khan, an extremely dynamic leader, immediately turned to Soviet Union for help who granted Afghanistan all the help in the fields of military and economic areas. Although it was doubted that this alliance could tempt the Russians towards Afghanistan but Daoud Khan was confident that there would be no takers of Communism in his country. Soviets also supported Afghanistan on the issue of Pushtanistan which had already made the relationship with Pakistan sour. By 1955 Soviets gave numerous loans to the Afghan government for various development projects which included roads, tunnels, hydro-electric plants, irrigation dams, canals etc. However these projects had a great psychological and propaganda value for the Soviets as they started entering Afghanistan in a very organized manner and Daoud Khan could not perceive the implications of this friendly interference. This step was speculated as test case for the Russians who were, after the death of Stalin, strategically interested in the Third World to increase their area of dominance.

Although Daoud Khan was in favour of women emancipation but he was not reckless like Amanullah and he avoided quite cautiously the wrath of religious fanatics. He had gathered around him many religious scholars who contemplated quite carefully on every reform put forth by him. When it was concluded by his government that purdah or veil has no Islamic sanction, he did not promulgate the decree but acted unofficially by placing the royal women unveiled on the podium to review a military parade. Although the result was a revolt by the mullahs but it was ruthlessly crushed by arrests and severe punishment. Before this event, women had been appointed for singers and announcers in the Radio Afghanistan and a delegation of Afghan women
attended an international women's conference in Colombo in 1957. In 1958 a woman was included in the Afghan delegation to UN in New York. A number of women were recruited to serve as receptionists and hostesses in the national airline, Arianna. It was during this period that women voted for the first time in the election of 1965 (Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites 84). By the early 1970s, 111 co-educational schools were opened in Afghanistan. In Kabul, there were 51 co-educational schools, 7 girls' middle schools, and 5 girls' high schools. Outside Kabul, there were 36 middle schools in 19 provinces and 11 girls' high schools in 10 provinces. From the early 1970's until 1992, school enrollment slowly increased (Emadi 73).

Due to the continuous strife with Pakistan on Pashtunistan issue, Afghanistan lost 40% of its revenue during the years 1961-1963 and this loss led to a chaos which ultimately showed Daoud Khan a way to resignation on 9 March, 1963. Dr Mohammad Yousaf was appointed prime minister by the king and the first major announcement by the new prime minister was the drafting of a constitution by a committee of seven members. In September 1964 a *Loya Jirga* of 452 members was convened to discuss and adopt the new constitution. This *Loya Jirga* was the most representative of all assemblies in Afghan history till date. It was adopted after heated debates but it remained limited to a minority of Afghan intellectuals with almost no relevance to the 90% of illiterate population who were rural and tradition bound. However, the importance of the constitution cannot be denied as it laid a foundation for almost all the future constitutions including the present one in Afghanistan. It introduced the bicameral system of governance with an elective house *Wolesi Jirga* and an upper house of nobles, *Meshrano Jirga*. When Yousaf Mohammad was confirmed in the office, it led to accusations and protests from many quarters. In such a violent protest three students got killed outside the house of prime minister. In an
emergency like situation Dr Mohammad Hashim Maiwandal was appointed the prime minister in 1965 and was requested by the king to form a new government as the reform minded members of Wolesi Jirga demanded a complete break from the past. During this tumultuous period there was a great amount of development in the field of education, politics, economics and press. The first college in Afghanistan by the name of Habibia College which was already established in 1904 and was modeled on Aligarh Muslim University was further developed and renovated. Further the number of students at primary level increased from 91,414 in 1950-51 to 942,787 in 1978. Similarly the number rose from 4908 to 106,544 at secondary level and from 461 to 21,118 at tertiary level. First co-educational institution of Afghanistan was opened in 1961 which is still considered as Daoud’s major contribution to women emancipation (Rubin 119).

There was an advent of press and media in Afghanistan and a lot of newspapers and weeklies started appearing. Louis Dupree lists about thirty privately sponsored weeklies which appeared, disappeared and reappeared during this period. He further lists about six political groupings of this period (601). It was during this period that the Marxists with a support of USSR formed People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) which later on broke into two distant groups- one around Babrak Karmal and another around Noor Mohammad Taraki. The factions in whom the differences were personal and not political came to be known as Parchamis and Khalqis.

Amidst a strong resentment from conservative elements, in 1965 a group of six women joined to form Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW) with the main objective of eliminating illiteracy among women, forced marriages and
bride-price. They achieved success to some extent as four of them get elected to parliament in the election of 1970 but soon with an increased hostility from mullahs, their activities stopped and the organization became less radical and was renamed All-Afghan Women’s Council in 1986 (Moghadam 232). However they managed to achieve the legal right for women to study abroad and work outside the home (Moghadam 225).

Besides this period witnessed the formation of Jamiat-i-Islami (Society of Islam) in 1965 under the auspices of the Head of the Department of Theology of Kabul University, Ghulam Mohammad Niazi. This Society of Islam also split between the moderates and extremists. The moderate group was led by Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masood and the radical group by Gulbaddin Hekmatyar. Burhanuddin Rabbani was recently killed on 20th September, 2011 in a suicide attack by a turbaned bomber. At the time of his death he was “Chairman of the High Peace Council- leading the year-old Afghan effort to negotiate with the Taliban” (Joshua, “Former Afghan President Rabbani Killed in Suicide Attack”). Days after his killing the present Interior Minister of Afghanistan Bismillah Mohammadi blamed Pakistan and told the parliament, “Without any doubt, ISI was involved” (Joshua, “Clear Evidence of ISI hand in Rabbani Murder: Kabul”).

There was an open rivalry between the Marxists and the Islamists with the latter in better books of public and with massive student strength in ‘Organization of Muslim Youth’. This Islamic backlash took the form of attacks on the women wearing western dresses. The mullahs declared that women should remain indoors and when they came out without a veil, acid was sprinkled on their faces. These excesses were mostly practiced by the Gulbaddin Hekmatyar led faction.
End of Monarchy and Growth of Communism

On 17 July 1973, the rule of King Zaheer Shah came to an end when on a holiday in Europe he was disposed of by his former prime minister and cousin Daoud Khan. In this context, Martin Ewans quotes the prophetic words of British ambassador in Afghanistan of that time:

... if the relaxation in the control of the press and the gradual introduction of a liberal political system should lead to an up-surge of anti-government sentiment and a factious opposition, there is certain to emerge a group with supporters among the royal family urging a return to strong government under Prince Daoud and, possibly the suspension of the constitution. (176)

The forecast did prove a reality when Babrak Karmal of the Parchami faction of PDPA helped Daoud Khan to gain power because he considered Daoud’s revolution as carrying out the program of PDPA. This alliance did not last long and the first to suffer Daoud’s wrath were the people who might have helped him. They were the leaders of the preceding democratic government- Dr Mohammad Yousuf, Musa Shafiq and Hashim Maiwandal. Two major drawbacks in Daoud’s foreign policy were his unalterable friendship with the Soviets and his perennial interest in Pashtunistan issue. When Bangladesh got separated from Pakistan in 1971, there was an uprising in Pashtuns and Baluchs and Daoud exploited the situation by setting camps to train and arm Baluchi freedom fighters. Pakistan retaliated to this action by bombing in Jalalabad and Kabul and by encouraging Islamists and other anti Daoud factions. On the other side, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto successfully prevailed on the USSR to use their influence to settle the Pashtunistan issue and Daoud was politically forced to negotiate with Pakistan in the interest of the whole region. This forced negotiation which led to Daoud’s disillusionment had immediate repercussions on his foreign as well as
domestic policies and Daoud began to purge his inners circles of *Parchamis* which resulted in the unity of the two bitterly opposed factions of PDPA. To avoid the possible aftermath, Daoud set up his own party under the banner of National Revolutionary Party but could not muster enough support. The Communists under *Khalq* leader Hafizullah Amin planned for a coup but the real practical precipitated with the murder of *Parcham* ideologue Mir Akbhar Khyber who was shot dead by two unidentified gunmen during the night of 17 April, 1978. Even before the actual d’État coup and Daoud’s death, Major Aslam Watanjar (in Pastu) and Abdul Qadir (in Persian) announced on the Radio Kabul that ‘a military council’ headed by Abdul Qadir had taken power and that the future policy would be based on the sacred teachings of Islam. There was no mention of Marxism or socialism in this announcement which formed the real base of this often called “Saur Revolution” (Rasanayagam 70). Daoud Khan was killed in the same year and thus started the reign of the communists in Afghanistan which later became a cause of thousands of killings. Three days after the coup, the formation of a Revolutionary Council of the People’s Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was publicly announced with Noor Mohammad Taraki as vice chairman. The Council had its first meeting on 1 May, 1978 and the portfolios were allotted to both the *Parchamis* and the *Khalqis* with Taraki as prime minister and Babrak Karmal, Hafizullah Amin and A. Wajanjar as deputy prime ministers. About this formation of government, Raja Anwar writes, “What the party had done was to set up not one but three governments within the government in an effort to maintain what it thought was a political balance . . . In other words, three mini cabinets were three distant and conflicting groups” (112). The Communist influence was soon felt when The Revolutionary Council was replaced by the Russian styled politburo where Hafizullah Amin could not find a place and this
led to an unending alteration between the two factions. Finally after a long struggle of about six months the overall control was taken by Khaliqs and the main leaders of the Parcham faction including Babrak Karmal were offered to live in a glorified exile as ambassadors.

Valentine M. Moghadam places ‘Saur Revolution’ in the family of revolutions that also included Vietnam, Cuba, Algeria, PDRY and Ethiopia (92). Although many efforts were made by the minority communist government to bring a real revolution in the country but their lack of knowledge of the inner workings of the rural class resulted in mass uprisings. PDPA claimed that their literacy programmes provided basic education for over 18,000 Afghan women- yet the adult literacy rate for females was just 5 percent in 1979. UNESCO estimated that in 1979, 88.2 percent of urban women over the age of 25 had no schooling while 99.2 percent of the same aged rural women had no schooling (Emadi 52). The communist government tried to safeguard women’s rights but without the proper understanding of Afghan tradition. They failed to perceive that any attempt to disturb the status quo regarding women would be countered by the religious mullahs whose influence has always been greater than the mainstream government. Actually “PDPA was unable to mobilize adequate financial and human resources for its social reform agenda” (Burki 54). The most controversial part of the reforms put forth by the government was related to the rights of the women which were relentlessly opposed by the religious scholars. The mutual consent of bride and groom, the minimum marriageable age for boys at 18 and for girls at 16 and the upper limit of 300 Afghanis placed on the Maker provoked a bitter controversy and were seen as a frontal attack on the tradition and religion of rural Afghanistan (Emadi 100). Although this decree granted women exclusive rights to seek divorce, divorce was not an option for most Afghan women. First, in Afghan society, divorce
is viewed as a “social stigma” and by divorcing her husband a woman would “dishonour” her family (Emadi 98). Second, divorce affected child custody laws. Moreover women seeking justice as plaintiffs before the law also faced difficulties as the law courts were not themselves in proper order. Besides domestic abuse could not be raised as the basis for a divorce because there were no legal codes that criminalize domestic abuse or violence within the home. This implies that criminal charges could not be laid against the man in cases of domestic violence and judges often ignored domestic abuse unless the injuries were severe. Women were routinely sent back to abusive spouses and told to come to an agreement.

If a woman seeks a divorce through the official courts, she stands to lose her *mahr*, which are the assets or financial goods that a man transfers to her at the time of marriage. *Sharia* law views *mahr* as a mandatory obligation of Muslim men and says that no law can take the *mahr* away from women; this system is also codified in Afghan civil law. However, in most divorce cases in Afghanistan women are not allowed to keep their *mahr* after divorce due to custom and the weakness of the rule of civil law. (Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites, 97)

The uprisings against the communist mainstream were brutally repressed by the government with about 50,000 to 100,000 disappearances (Roy 90). With Pakistan under the military ruler Zia-ul-Haq interfering by helping the local refugees to turn into guerilla fighters, Taraki and Amin flew to Moscow in December 1978 to seek its military help thereby paving a safe and uncontroversial way to the Soviet military influx that had by now formed a strong military base in Afghanistan.

**The Soviet Rule**

During the mid 1979, there arose a disagreement between Hafizullah Amin and Mohammad Yousaf Taraki thereby breaking the *Khalqis* into two groups. There
was a series of bizarre incidents with different versions ending in Taraki’s murder and thus started Amin’s days in power. Most of the country was in rebellion and there were military and financial difficulties. Hafizullah Amin turned to Pakistan and the USA without much success. Amin had been never in good books of the Soviets due to his suspicious US inclination and Soviets considered the departure of Amin as the best option to bring normalcy in the region. Besides he was seen as an obstacle in their way of invading Afghanistan and was thus removed instantly. In spite of a major opposition at international level, the first battalion of Soviet infantry landed in Afghanistan in December, 1979 which “represented largest Soviet military operation since World War II and the first extension of the Brezhnev Doctrine outside eastern Europe” (Moghadam 207). During the years of the Soviet invasion, the Soviet-controlled government committed grave human right violations against Afghans. In rural areas, where the bulk of the fighting took place, the Soviet fighters would torture women for information against the resistance groups. In the urban areas, women who peacefully protested against communism risked incarceration, torture and even execution. The Russian soldiers would infiltrate into Afghan classrooms, women’s gathering and youth organizations to search for opposition to their ideology. Many Afghan women often became the target of the Russians and were jailed. Male jail guards, employed by the communist government, would sometimes sexually molest jailed women often in front of the male prisoners. The international pressure and the condemnation by the Security Council of United Nations did not deter the Soviets. On 27 December Amin and his family became unconscious after taking lunch prepared by their Russian cooks and as was later narrated, Amin was killed by the Russians while fighting.
Babrak Karmal was appointed new prime minister and he left no stone unturned to gain internal acceptance of the people of Afghanistan with a more stress on rural inhabitants. He promised elections, a multi party system, land reforms and amnesty to returning refugees. Eden Naby writes:

Karmal took several purely symbolic but conciliatory steps to clean the tarnished religious image of the PDPA. Among these were to redesign the national insignia to include once more Islamic symbols removed in 1978, to launch a show of personal piety for lack of which he personally had previously been condemned, to set up a clerical establishment from among Afghans previously unheard of as religious leaders, and to accuse the resistance of the destruction of Islamic sites and of use of Islam for political purposes. (799)

In spite of his promise to release of all political prisoners not much was done on ground as most of the prisoners released were Parchamis and the executions and disappearances continued. All this led the state into a political cataclysm and further deteriorated the already bitter relations between the Parchamis and Khalqis and the latter left no opportunity to blacken the already tarnished image of the government.

The Advent of Mujahidin

Due to Soviet interference, there grew a bitter hatred among the local populace against Marxism and ultimately against the Russians. As a result many resistance groups called Mujahidin (from the Arabic mugahid, meaning struggler) (Burki 54) were formed to push Russians to leave Afghanistan. Pakistan started expanding its support to these local guerillas which had by now gained the espousal of other countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt and Israel. The US also started supplying arms and aid to these militant groups with a hidden agenda of pushing Soviet out of Afghanistan. Weeda Mansoor writes, "It may surprise Westerners that
these fundamentalists form the backbone of the Northern Alliance, which the West has chosen once again to support since September 11 [2001].” (71). When inquired about the US support of Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, one of the most uncompromising Mujahidin commanders, a US official in Pakistan explained, "Fanatics fight better" (Cordovez and Harrison 62-63). These resistance groups which were against the Soviet as well as traditional Islamic leadership came to be collectively called Mujahidin about whom Eden Naby wrote in 1988:

Out of the forge of war is evolving a new Afghan nationalism, a reworking of ethnic relationships, new sub-structures of political relationships, and most significantly, an Islamic ideology. This new ideology has a closer intellectual kinship with Islamic movements across the rest of the Muslim world than with any past expressions of Afghan Islam. (789)

These groups were assorted in their opinions with only a single similarity-opposition to the Soviet backed Babrak Kamal. Angelo Rasanayagam (103-104) mentions about seven major such Mujahidin groups. They are:

1. *Hizb-i-Islami* - Mostly *Pashtuns* with a solid support from Pakistan and heavily involved in drugs manufacture and trafficking. Leader of this group was the radical *Ghilzai Pashtun* Gulbaddin Hekmatyar.

2. Another *Hizb-i-Islami* – Under the leadership of Younis Khalis it was a breakaway from Hekmatyar faction with some support from Pakistan.

3. *Jamait-i-Islami* - A moderate group of mostly *Tajiks* under Burhanuddin Rabbani with another commander Ahmad Shah Masood who later gained international reputation. The group had good relationship with Iran.

4. *Ittihad-i-Islami Bara-i-Azadi Afghanistan* (Islamic Union for the Freedom of Afghanistan) - This group had little success in military operations and had main
support from Saudi Arabia. The main leader of this faction was Addal-Rab al-Rasul Sayyaf.

5. *Harkat-i-Inqilab-i-Islami* (Islamic Revolution Movement) - This group had a strong Sufi following and was largely composed of *Pashtuns*. The leader of this group was Molvi Nabi Mohammad.

6. *Mahaz-i-Milli-i-Islami* (National Islamic Front) - This group was the supportive of King Zahir Shah and the leader of this faction Sayyid Ahmad Gailani traced his descent from Prophet Mohammad.

7. *Jabha-I-Nejat-I-Milli* (National Liberation Front) - This group did not get much popularity and had neither good relations with Pakistan and nor with Saudi Arabia. It was led by Sebghatullah Mujadidi.

Although the number of Mujahidin increased and reached a whooping 150,000 in 1980 but they were not united. There was a rigid stand on all the sides and Sunni-Shia strife formed the main reason behind this lack of understanding. Moreover, the usual ethnic and linguistic diversity also added to the division. Many attempts were made in Pakistan and elsewhere to unite the Mujahidin but it bore no fruits. A particular problem in this regard was the hard attitude of Gulbaddin Hekmatyar who was never ready to accept any proposal by the other Mujahidin groups. However, the resistance towards the Soviet increased with every passing day with more and more people joining the cause. Thousands were killed and arrested but the Afghans were determined to oust the Communist regime. Russians used all their efforts and modern weapons but every strategy was answered effectively by the Mujahidin. As the Russian army was not trained to operate in such harsh and mountainous condition so it fared badly. One of the chief strategies used by Russian agents was to pose as
Mujahidin and penetrate into their groups. One such notorious agency was KHAD under the leadership of Dr Najibullah, a staunch communist. Not much is known about the war between the Mujahidin and the Soviets because the reporters could not cross into Afghanistan; however the official records put the Russian causalities at 15,000 killed and 37,000 wounded. Soviet replaced the passive Babrak with Dr Najibullah and started motivating the Mujahidin for an interim government but in vain. In February 1988 in Geneva Accord, Mikhail Gorbachev declared that the Soviets would withdraw over a ten month process starting on 15 May, 1988. However the Soviet did not adhere fully to this accord signed on 14 April, 1988 and continued interference until its disintegration in the early 1990s, one of the reasons being the Afghan fiasco.

During all these years of war there was almost no stress on women rights but the educational standard of the capital city increased though at a slower pace and women in Kabul achieved great gains in access to education and employment by the 1990s. Many co-educational schools were opened and women made up 70 percent of teachers, 50 percent of the civil servants, and 40 percent of the capital’s physicians (Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites 84).

It was predicted that Najibullah regime would collapse in the face of Soviet withdrawal and Mujahidin pressure but it did not happen owing to division and later on fighting among the Mujahidin groups. Due to the lack of a true nationalist identity and lack of political experience, Najibullah was not popular enough among common populace as Eden Nady writes:

The new leadership represented by Najibullah belongs to a generation that has matured within the ranks of the PDPA. They have no national experience, in the legislature for example, but have served only within party ranks.
Najibullah’s service as head of KHAD during the Soviet occupation renders his loyalty to his own country even more suspect... His limited national credentials render Najibullah’s credibility in using nationalism or Islam as a basis of appeal for reconciliation questionable. (800)

Najibullah called the Loya Jirga twice, first in May 1989 and then in 1990 to offer inducement to the Mujahidin commanders but every effort failed. Even interference from Pakistan and America did not help and the internal struggle continued with mainly Hekmatyar (Pashtun) at the centre of the problem due to his hostile attitude towards Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masood (Tajiks) and Abdul Rasheed Dostum (Uzbek). Women and children, especially in the rural areas lived in fear of rape, violence, kidnappings and forced marriages without any laws or judicial authority to protect them. There is no data to confirm the vast number of rapes and the degree of violence perpetrated by the Mujahidin. In fact, many sources believe that the period of the civil war was more violent for women than under the Taliban due to the extreme numbers of murders and rapes by the Mujahidin (Rostami-Povey 26). Under the Mujahidin, women education suffered badly. By 1993, girls’ access to education tumultuously decreased as the civil war and Mujahidin forced the closure of many girls’ schools. In some areas, the various factions prohibited women from attending school and working outside the home. In this regard Saba Gul Khattak writes:

Although progress in women’s rights in Afghanistan was undeniably slow, it was reversed when US backed Mujahideen took over in April 1992. This government had no national policy on women’s rights- indeed it was itself hardly a viable government, as fighting among different factions led to a complete breakdown of order. (19)
A provisional government under the aegis of Islamic Jihad Council with Sebghatullah Mujadidi as its head was formed. Mujadidi was planned to step down after two months to pave a way for an interim government for four months under Burhanuddin Rabbani during which elections were to be planned. But this optimistic plan failed due to the strong hold of Hekmatyar and his demand of removal of Ahmad Shah Masood and Abdul Rasheed Dostum from the government. Eventually Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran brokered a peace deal in Islamabad which called Hekmatyar for prime ministership but he was prevented by the forces of Masood and Dostum to enter Kabul thereby inviting a fierce battle among the Mujahidin groups. In 1994, United Nations interfered and tried to place an interim government comprising of all the parties under a former Tunisian minister, Mohammad Mestiri with even Hekmatyar getting ready to accept the proposal but by then everything got cut short by the appearance of a hitherto unknown group - the Taliban, who were generally considered as a product of general disillusionment with Mujahidin.

Women under the Taliban

Taliban (plural of Talib, which in Arabic means “student” and implies those who seek Islamic knowledge) (Burki 54) took the reins power in their hands in 1996. The Taliban movement, which later became a thorn in flesh for the West, mostly comprised of Afghan refugee students from madrassas (religious schools) in Baluchistan, Peshawar, Quetta and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan (Mertus 56). A story of their origin reads that a guerilla commander in Kandahar region raped and killed three women in July 1994 and a mullah by the name of Mohammad Omar was asked by the local people to take revenge on the commander. Mohammad Omar proceeded to recruit a group of local religious students who
executed the commander and dispersed his militia. In Afghanistan: A Short History of its People and Politics, Martin Ewans finds the religious roots of Taliban in India in The Islamic School at Deoband. He stresses that under the influence of this school, many offshoot madrassas were opened in the frontier areas bordering Afghanistan. After a span of time these madrassas became divorced from their parent body and felt alienated. Later with the disturbance in Afghanistan these madrassas attracted the young, mostly orphan Afghans who found these institutions attractive. With the advent of modernization, the products of these madrasas hardly found any career and were thus drawn into the Taliban movement owing to their “narrowly circumscribed” education (265). Angelo Rasanayagam traces their origin under the ulema and village mullahs and denies the theory of an upstart movement. He writes about their association with religious schools, mosques, shrines and all kinds of Islamic activities (177). Another historian traces the following account:

Part of the Taliban mythology is that Mulla Umar committed himself to forming the Taliban one day when he came across a carload of people by the side of the road who’d been robbed, raped, and killed by former mujahidin who had taken to preying on the people in their area. (Edwards 293)

Most of the Taliban were tribal Pashtuns with either a little or no knowledge of Afghan culture and thus they embodied a combination of Pashtun and Islamic teachings. The Taliban captured the cities of Afghanistan in a surprisingly quick manner and the degree of their skill and organization led to a substantial conclusion that former Afghan forces and Pakistani military support or presence was there.

For Pakistan, domestic compulsions forced it to come out in support of a faction that was predominantly Pashtoon speaking. The strong affinity between the Pakhtoons of Pakistan with those in Afghanistan ruled out any settlement that saw the emergence of a non-Pakhtoon dominated coalition. (2914)
Besides their common borders, ethnic, cultural and historical relationships added to Pakistan’s interest in keeping the Afghanistan undivided as the then interior minister Nasrullah Babar said on October 22 1996, “we in Pakistan will face the repercussions of a divided Afghanistan in perpetuity” (qtd in Navlakha 2914). Assistance to Taliban came from America as well with an American company UNOCAL planning to build an oil pipeline from Turkmenistan. The main motive behind US support was its intention, “to extend its dominance over the direct trade routes to central Asia which comprises one of the richest sources of oil and natural gas sought after by the multinationals, thereby extending US influence over the central Asian republics at the expense of Russia” (Navlakha 2914).

In a very interesting observation, Robert McElvaine, a history professor, wrote in the Washington Post that a kind of religion motivates the Taliban, but the religion in question, I’d say, is not Islam [but] insecure masculinity. These men are terrified of women” (qtd. in Brison 437). The Afghans were at the moment fed up of killings and they saw some hope in the Taliban and this support of the common Afghans accounts for their unprecedented success. In this regard Gautam Navlakha writes:

However, it is not their ideology that won them accolade. Taliban was seen as a force that was capable of replacing warring faction. For instance, prior to Taliban’s takeover the city of Kabul was divided between factions which demanded their pound of flesh. In addition, the battle for control over Kabul continued causing massive loss of life. In last three years alone, reportedly 30,000-40,000 persons died in Kabul due to internecine fighting. In this sense some reports suggest people saw in Taliban a possibility of an end to the civil war. It is this that accounts for the speed with which they took over 70 per cent of the territory in a little over one year. (2914)

However, he believes that the surfacing of the Taliban owed much to the sustenance extended by Pakistan. He quotes Jane’s Defence Weekly:
Pakistan's direct support, direction, planning, command and control have been critical to Taliban's success in overrunning Kabul". He quotes further, "What we have seen is a remarkable level of sophistication of command and control over a range of fast moving fronts, and it simply defies belief that Afghan mullahs are capable of this sort of planning, organization and execution. (2915)

Taliban soon imposed strict Islamic laws in a radical sense and particularly women were excluded from all the scenes of public life. Women education was banned and they were barred from serving in the offices. Although the number of rapes and murders perpetrated against the women decreased, the Taliban deprived them of a human existence. The women were required to wear a long veil called burqa which covered them from head to toe thereby denying them any identity. Although the concept of burqa was there before the Taliban but they made it a mandatory dress for the women and any dereliction was dealt seriously. There was severe beating, whipping and verbal abuse by the religious police wherever there was any deviation from the set laws. There was a complete ban on cosmetics, high heel sandals, riding bicycles and motorcycles, playing and sports and presence of women in radio and television. Taliban banned women gathering and it was required to paint the widows in black so that women could not be seen from outside their houses. Women were not allowed to wear bright colors as these colors were termed sexually attractive and there was a complete ban on television for both men and women. In defense of their regressive policies, the Taliban issued the following statement, "the fact of the matter is that no other country has given women the rights we have given them. We have given women the right that God and his Messenger have instructed, that is to stay in their homes and to gain religious instruction in seclusion" (Emadi
126). All these edicts by the Taliban led to an even more deteriorated status of already suppressed Afghan women, affecting every part of a woman’s public and private life.

However it is important to note that oppression did not start with the Taliban, and oftentimes oppression was a partial result of the patriarchal and tribal-based family structure. Although most of the anti-women rules practiced by the Taliban were formulated by the Rabbani-Hekmatyar government in 1992 but they were not discussed. Taliban were criticized out of bounds by one and all and a need to save the Afghan women from them was felt but one wonders on the curious silence of the international community and particularly the feminists during the civil war and Mujahidin period in the 1980s and early 1990s. Such an echo, one finds in Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood:

> It was striking how a number of commentators, in discussions that preceded the war, regularly failed to connect the predicament of women in Afghanistan with the massive military and economic support that the US provided, as part of its Cold War strategy, to the most extreme of Afghan religious militant groups. (341)

One would have expected that feminists around the world would have rallied around the idea of equality for Afghan women, criticized the Mujahidin, the US and even the Kabul government, and come to the aid of Afghan women as they did during the Taliban period. Hirschkind and Mahmood explain by quoting an example:

> ... as late as early December, the Feminist Majority website remained stubbornly focused on the ills of Taliban rule, with no mention of the 2.2 million victims of three years of drought who were put at greater risk of starvation because US bombing severely restricted the delivery of food aid. Indeed, the Feminist Majority made no attempts to join the calls issued by a number of humanitarian organizations- including the Afghan Women’s
Mission- to halt the bombing so that food might have been transported to the Afghans before winter set in. (341)

Unfortunately this did not happen. Two possible reasons could be provided to this silence on the part of the feminists. Firstly the feminists might not have viewed the Mujahidin as misogynistic; instead they might have perceived the Mujahidin as the liberators of Afghan women from the Soviet Union. A solid reason in support of the statement lies in the books and literature written in support of the Mujahidin during that period. Secondly, Western feminists have always associated the concept of women’s rights with Western women and not with the women of The Third World. Besides Islamophobia may also have been one of the reasons. Even media played a great role in portrayal of not so bad an image of Mujahidin as that of the Taliban later.

In 1996 the UN under Secretary paid a three day visit to Afghanistan. Until then most of the outside world was clueless about the happenings in Afghanistan as there was no media presence to cover the atrocities perpetuated by the Taliban. However a sensational video showing a stoning scene, clipped clandestinely under the cover of a burqa by an activist of RAWA (Revolutionary Association for Women of Afghanistan) stirred the whole world. Many of the Western countries, primarily America started interfering on the pretext of saving Afghan women. However America had many concealed reasons to interfere as Gautam Navlakha writes:

The US did entertain the hope, initially, that Taliban would quickly restore order in Afghanistan, either unite the entire country or exercise hegemony in the event of national reconciliation, which would allow the US to extend its dominance over the direct trade routes to central Asia which comprises one of the richest sources of oil and natural gas sought after by the multi-nationals, thereby extending US influence over the central Asian republics at the expense of Russia. (2914)
The growing power of Taliban was seen as a threat by the global community and many pressures were put on them to yield to Burhanuddin Rabbani government who was controlling one third of the total country. Afghan embroilment in global terrorism was a great concern because during Soviet occupation, thousands of Islamic militias from the Middle East were encouraged to participate both by Pakistan and America without any thought that they might turn to subversion in their own countries or even attack the USA.

**American Interference in the Politics**

On 7 August, 1998 American embassies were bombed in Kenya and Tanzania killing and wounding hundreds of people. Without much proof in hand, America doubted the hand of Arabian born Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden behind the attack and demanded his handover from Taliban who rejected the demand outrightly. Many sanctions were put on Taliban to weaken their position. It was after the episode of 9 September, 2001 that America started bombing Afghanistan in search of Osama bin Laden and Mohammad Omar on 7th October, 2001. Arline Lederman writes in this regard, “Osama bin Laden cleverly manipulated the Taliban for political power. They were mostly poor foot soldiers from primitive and impoverished homes. It was easy to work them into frenzy over what they were taught to believe was religious truth” (55).

Although America failed miserably in its operation named ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’, but it toppled the strong Taliban hold and placed a new ‘Interim Authority’ of 30 members in place to look after the affairs. About ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ an analyst writes, “In fact, as the 10th anniversary of the start of Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan was clocked on October 7, the region looked even more unstable. Last year had been the bloodiest in Afghanistan since
2001, and 2011 is racing to outdo 2010 body count” (Joshau, “Tightrope act on the Durrand Line”). Terming Operation Enduring Freedom’ as longer than “the First and Second World Wars combined,” another columnist ridicules, “Operation Enduring Freedom has turned out to involve a lot more endurance than was ever envisaged, and precious little freedom” (Bunting).

The new government under a pro-royalist Pashtun Hamid Karzai was formally recognized in an agreement called “Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan” also known as “Bonn Agreement” on 5 December 2001 (The Europa World Year Book 1: 511). After about six months in December 2001, a Loya Jirga of about 1600 members was convened and Karzai was formally elected as the president of Afghanistan. After the completion of his tenure, elections were held on 9 October, 2004 in which he again got the majority. United Nations placed a good number of International Security Assistance Force drawn from nineteen countries there to maintain peace and assist the local government in establishing itself. In August 2003 NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) forces replaced the INSAF. With a puppet government in position the conditions became stable to some extent but after 2005 the Taliban again started showing their strong presence. Thousands of lives were lost due to miscalculated targets by the foreign forces and now even America, the leading power in Afghanistan has realized the futility of war, so there are some apprehensions that America may withdraw in near future. In fact recently Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Secretary-General of NATO has stated that there would be a phased transfer of security responsibility to the Afghan government by the end of 2014. He acknowledged that the allied forces would remain there in a supportive role beyond that and would not be involved in combat operations as they are now (Calmes and Erlanger 7). Afghan imbroglio has been the worst ever war for America in terms
of casualties of American soldiers which are about 100,000. There is a widespread opposition to American presence as on one hand it is spending billions in Afghanistan in the name of development and on the other it is killing thousands of civilians on the pretext of flushing out the Taliban and other militants. A clearer picture of Afghanistan comes to light when in the highly exaggerated lines by George Bush:

For several years the people of Afghanistan have suffered under one of the most brutal regimes in modern history- a regime allied with terrorists and a regime at war with women. Thanks to our military and our allies, and the brave fighters of Afghanistan, the Taliban regime is coming to an end. (qtd. in Saba Gul Khattak 19)

Saba Gul Khattak analyses the above lines in an ironic manner:

Omitted from this lofty discourse was the fact that Northern Alliance soldiers, those "brave fighters of Afghanistan," have a reputation for looting and rape that makes Afghan women distinctly uncomfortable. Ignored in Bush’s celebrations of victory was the fact that over the course of just one month, the US dropped over half a million tons of bombs-approximately 20 kilograms of high explosive for every man, woman and child in the country. (19)

Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, put out a statement saying, “The people of the world need to know that in terms of widespread raping of girls and women from seven to 70, the track record of the Taliban can no way stand up against that of these very same Northern Alliance associates” (qtd. in Hirschkind and Mahmood 344). Talking about the year 2006, The Europa World Year Book lists about “3700 fatalities (around one-quarter of which were civilians) had occurred in Afghanistan that year as a result of the ongoing conflict, a significant and alarming
increase compared with the previous year” (1: 514). In February 2008, US intelligence officials reported that 10% of the Afghan land is still under the Taliban occupation and 60% was under the tribal leaders with only 30% under the Karzai government (Europa 1: 515). The responsibility for weak central government lies on the shoulders of present government which has failed to deliver in spite of the Western support. In fact “far from acting as a state builder, Karzai adopted a patrimonial model of the state in which its offices and resources were redistributed on a personal basis to buy the support of existing power holders or play them off against one another” (Barfield 272).

Sima Wali, herself an Afghan writes:

The failure of the West to influence events in Afghanistan cannot be attributed only to the growth of extremist Islam and tribalism. Rather, it is a direct result of the long standing inability of the Western institutions to adjust to the realities of what needs to be done and to listen to the voices of the vast majority of Afghans, who are capable of ushering in democratic change and are willing to do so. (1-2)

In the year 2009, the U.S. President Barack Obama sent more troops to Afghanistan and the Taliban continued to resist now with a new name of ‘Haqqani’ after the death of Osma Bin Ladin in Abbottabad, Pakistan in a mysterious over night operation by American soldiers on May 2011 (Walsh, MacAskill, and Burke). “Schools have been bombed, including perhaps orphanages like the one described in Hosseini’s novels, and readers know that innocent civilians, including women and children, continue to lose their lives as the country remains unstable” (Stuhr 67). Again the media guesses on the basis of some proofs that Pakistan is helping the Taliban to unite. In a recent news item, a journalist for The Hindu published an official report by NATO commander Brigadier-General Stephen Clark and claimed,
“Taliban insurgents may be receiving weapons, ammunition and combat equipment from elements in Pakistan army” (Swami).

The future of Afghanistan is still uncertain. "An international conference on the future of Afghanistan was convened in London, United Kingdom, in late January, 2010 and was attended by officials from around 70 different countries and organizations, including President Karzai, the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, the new US Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton" (Europa 1: 516). Another conference was held in Bonn on 5th December, 2011 which was boycotted by Pakistan. Hamid Karzai showed uncertainty about the future of Afghanistan and demanded that “Afghanistan will need the financial support of the international community for at least decade beyond the 2014 departure of international troops” ("Let us firm up gains: Karzai" 13).

Afghan Women in Historical context

Afghanistan is a country with deep patriarchal roots and a tribal-based family structure. In Afghanistan, family is at the heart of the society. Often, the balance of tradition, family, and Islam has collided with women’s rights. Man has always assumed the role of ruling and war, woman of the domestic affairs and the care of the child. It has been there for centuries and any interference in the set up is seen as a serious threat by both the Afghan men and women. All this has happened because it is in conformity with the culture of Afghanistan and has been sustained and confirmed by the experience and reason of times immemorial. Weeda Mansoor, a native member of Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan says, “Afghanistan is the world’s most forgotten tragedy, the Afghan nation the world’s most forgotten
population, and her women the most strangulated, ill-fated, and deprived segment of Afghan society (68).

In the tribal-based family structure, society deems women as the “receptacle of honour” (Ahmed-Ghosh 3). All the “Nang and Namoos” (Stuhr 58) i.e. the pride and honour of the tribe is identified with a woman and if on any occasion the honour of a woman is violated, she is considered as a liability on the family and is usually secluded from the rest of the members with a strict punishment. Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites quote historian Barnett Rubin who says Afghan men “see women as the repository of their honour, and any sign of sexual misconduct—especially, but not exclusively, adultery—is a political threat to the honour and strength of a family” (93). Much of this cultural role regarding women originated from the *Pashtunwali code* (an ancient ethnic custom and a tribal code of Afghanistan). According to *Pashtunwali code* it is the absolute duty of men to protect the respectability of women. Throughout history, the preservation of women’s honour through tribal laws often superseded any constitutional law or progressive reform that would have benefitted Afghan women. “According to local customs and cultures in Afghanistan, women are considered to be the symbol of a household’s honour, and it is the responsibility of men to protect this honour. Consequently, today among rural Afghans the practice of *purdah*, or seclusion of women from men, is widespread” (Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites, 36). Even women view their identity as central to their family’s identity and not in separate individual spheres. To rural women, the value of individual identity is a foreign concept.

In Afghan society, community and group identity dominates. In rural areas in particular, the concept of individual identity is non-existent. Even in urban areas and among the educated upper and middle classes, as well as among the
Diaspora communities in the West, communal identity is strong. This communal identity has an enormous impact on gender relations. Women see themselves as an integral part of the family unit shaped by Afghan culture and tradition. They do not see their needs as separate from the needs of their families. Thus, traditional gender relations are complex. (Rostami-Povey 17)

The male dominated local customs and the negative impact of decades of war determine the position of women in modern Afghan society and as a result women remain secluded in the private sphere and have little or no involvement in public life. In addition, the expansion of rural customs to urban areas first under the Mujahidin and then under the Taliban along with the rigid interpretation of Sharia at present by the tribal leaders help to perpetuate an ideology that limits the role of women in public or civic events. Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites write:

> This gender inequality stems from the cultural, social, economic, and political discrimination against Afghan women and the widespread and systematic failure of nearly all forms of official and traditional government and governance systems to protect and uphold the rights of Afghan women and girls. (35)

Women have never participated publicly in decision making processes in Afghanistan. They are admonished to be modest and obey the orders of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. “Many scholars of Islamic societies point out that although women have a curtailed public role, they have a powerful voice within their households. While this may be accurate in other parts of the Muslim world, we did not find this to be true in our research of rural Afghanistan.” (Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites 91). Although nomadic and peasant women play an important role in the domestic economy by working in the fields and by doing other menial jobs but they are secluded in the same way as the urban women.
Women are usually not allowed to freely mix with the strangers and the genders are strictly separated. This culture of separation is rooted in the local interpretation of gender relations based on religion (i.e., mahram and hijab) as well as the influence of customary issues. Because of the segmented gender spheres, rural Afghan women are discouraged from talking to or interacting with men who are not their relatives. Strict expectations regarding the appropriate role of women in Afghan society inevitably lead to conflict when these codes are broken. Repercussions occur for the women involved, for families who believe they have been dishonoured, and for the communities that become embroiled in conflict (Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites 94).

Zohra Yusuf Daoud who became Miss Afghanistan in 1972 is quoted by Rostami-Povey:

Although all women had the right to vote, not all women were allowed to exercise this right. Although theoretically women had the choice not to wear the veil, not all women were permitted to make that choice. Although theoretically all Afghan women had a chance of an education, not all women could seize that opportunity. Islam wasn't keeping these women from moving forward; the traditionalists and cultures were women's greatest obstacles in their quests for equality. (12)

In an essay by the only Miss Afghanistan in the history of her country, she says about the pre Soviet rule:

They [women] were treated like human beings. Once women are a productive part of society of Afghanistan, helping the nation grow. There was a time when women worked side by side with men in the field just as there was a time when they worked side by side with men in parliament and in universities. Women once had a voice in Afghanistan: they were heard and acknowledged. (Daoud 103)
According to the 1964, 1976, 1987, and the 1990 Constitutions of Afghanistan, it has been clearly mentioned that Afghan women were equal to Afghan men. In the 1964 Constitution, Article 25 stated that all Afghan people without any discrimination or preference have equal rights and obligations before the law. While Article 25 did not specifically use the word “women”, political scholars have noted that the use of “All Afghan people” implied both women and men and was a progressive statement for that time.

The level of participation of women in society is susceptible to political involvement, manipulation, or restriction, and the appropriate role of women in public and private life has long been at the source of revenge killings, tribal conflicts, and the overthrow of regimes. The portent and sensitivity of the position of women in Afghan society demonstrates that Afghan women are far from insignificant in the broader political landscape. (Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites 35)

Culture and systems of governance have severely curtailed the human rights and livelihood options open to rural Afghan women and girls. Although, the restrictions on women were exaggerated by the media during the Taliban regime, these practices were there for centuries with deep roots embedded in Afghan history and somewhere the Afghan women feel these restrictions as a part of their existence and hardly ever think of coming out of them. Saba Khattak writes, “While no one contests that Taliban edicts denied women their rights across the board, the root causes of Afghan women’s oppression, personified for a few years by the Taliban, reside elsewhere” (22). There are also cases where women feel threatened if somebody comes to their rescue. Human rights reports written during the Taliban era spoke of the imposition of harsh conditions for urban women. However, it does not imply that rural women had greater leniency or better living conditions. The fact is
that many rural women were already living under conditions similar to those imposed by the Taliban, but in urban areas the codes were imposed by their husbands, brothers and village leaders.

Despite the rhetoric of liberating Afghan women by USA and other western countries, not much has been done to improve the status of women. Although the US government acts complacently with the self imposed burden of liberating brown women from brown men, nothing has been done so far on ground. Gloria Steinem writes:

In the wake of September 11, the Feminist Majority Foundation, the leading U.S. women's group supporting the Afghan women's resistance movement, has been pressuring the U.S. State Department to use that movement to distribute humanitarian aid now and to create a democratic coalition in the future. Instead the Bush administration has focused on a bombing campaign that has killed more civilians than terrorists, and has helped to unify Islamic countries against us. (67)

The US advocates bombing them in order to liberate them and in this affair adds to their miseries. In this context Saba Khattak writes:

The US representation of Afghan women as a hapless illiterate lot who were not even allowed to laugh out loud, stripped of rights and by extension of consciousness, is as colonial as the British idea of the White Man's Burden. Furthermore, the betterment of Afghan women's lives is no longer a central theme of Bush administration pronouncements, as the Taliban and the strengthened patriarchal culture in conjunction with the war were perceived to be the problems. (22)

In fact the deteriorating security situation with the recent news of Taliban again raising their head has severely affected the rights and opportunities for women. Moreover, the presence of the NATO security forces increases the already dangerous situation for women. Afghan women do not feel themselves safe with foreigners all
around them. Without a reliable security system in place, women rights organizations and development projects cannot operate safely. In many cases, the uprising Taliban attacks again resulted in the closures of schools, offices, health facilities, and development projects.
Works Cited


