

Juggling Afghan Mothering in the Diaspora

A Case Study of Two Mothers in Southern California

In this paper I will present preliminary research on the impact of politics and war on Afghan mothering in the U.S. diaspora. What makes the position of Afghans as refugees unique in the U.S. is that they are fleeing their home country of Afghanistan to become refugees in the very country that is at so-called war with theirs. Here I will present two interviews with Afghan mothers in southern California to discuss their experiences of migration to the U.S., where one refers to herself as an “immigrant” and the other as a “refugee.” I will elaborate on their experiences as diasporic mothers through their differences based on the wave of migration from Afghanistan, and more importantly as experiences based on the U.S.-Afghan conflict and the perceptions of Afghans and Muslims in the U.S.

Global politics has held Afghanistan hostage for nearly a century (Ahmed-Ghosh 2006, 2003) but recent decades have led to massive devastation of the country, economically, politically and culturally. In this paper I will present preliminary research on the impact of politics and war on Afghan mothering in the U.S. diaspora, specifically through two case studies¹ in southern California. I will, through an ethnographic analysis, discuss the lives of two Afghan mothers, whose gendered experiences are different due to the wave of migration from Afghanistan and due to Afghanistan’s geopolitical location through history. This discussion will be framed by a concept of “home” that is complicated and nuanced in its understanding because of geopolitical shifts that create dilemmas for Afghans in terms of “what they left behind,” and “how to grapple with a sense of home,” through multiple migrations/dislocations.

What makes the position of Afghans as refugees unique in the U.S. is that they are fleeing their home country of Afghanistan to become refugees in the

very country that is at so-called war with theirs. This is further complicated by post-9/11 hostilities, stereotypes, and suspicion of Muslims in general, and Afghans in particular, leading to their marginalization in U.S. For refugees in general, one cannot discuss their adjustment, or lack thereof, to the U.S. as a homogenous group. Their experiences, lifestyles and expectations from their families, communities and the larger society are determined by their gender, class, ethnicity and age. Specifically for Afghans, waves of migration have been a result of Afghanistan's occupation and interventions by the Soviet Union (1978-1989) and the U.S. (2001 to present), and additionally by the U.S./Afghan conflict.

Migration patterns are based on "push" and "pull" factors. Conflicts in recent decades have provided the largest number of immigrants through refugee programs. It is important to understand the definitions of "migrants" and "refugees." Urvashi Butalia, who has done extensive research on women refugees during India's Partition in 1947 and more recently among people in Kashmir, delineates one as "claiming an element of choice, and the other an element of coercion" (140). For this paper, this distinction is important because of its direct relationship to mothering. Here I will discuss two mothers who see themselves as products of migration patterns for diverse reasons and therefore define themselves through this experience differently. One mother sees herself as an "immigrant" having arrived in the U.S. in 1980, while the other mother sees herself as a "refugee," having entered the U.S. post-9/11.

For Afghans the first wave of out-migration occurred when the Soviets occupied Afghanistan in 1979. Those Afghans who had invested or banked their money outside Afghanistan had enough resources to buy an air ticket and leave for the West. Middle-class Afghans moved to India, and those with meager resources walked to either Iran or Pakistan. The second wave of migration was in 1992 when the Mujahideen² took over the country with U.S. assistance. In 1996, when the Taliban³ took control of the Afghan government, there was a third wave. A fourth wave of migration started on October 7, 2001,⁴ when the U.S. started bombing Afghanistan. Since then internal migrations and remigrations from one refugee camp to another still continues globally for Afghans.

Immigration by waves of refugees and class plays an important role in the Afghan mothers' location in the U.S. For all migrants and refugees, the process is highly gendered, however, the experiences of refugee women cannot be homogenized. As Zeina Zaatari, through her research on Palestinian refugees, contends, "experiences of motherhood are also constantly shifting, adjusting and morphing given their dislocations and socio-cultural and economic environments" (35).

Under such circumstances, in my interviews with Afghan mothers in San Diego, California, I found a range of responses despite the fact that any talk

of mothering always led to the political reasons for leaving Afghanistan and to a fracturing of their families because of war. Most of the responses also led to a discussion on “back home” for these women because mothering was not just about their taking care of their children but entailed their struggles to find an Afghan identity as wife and mother in the diaspora. Before talking about Shahida’s⁵ and Habiba’s⁶ experiences, I will discuss briefly the concept of “home” (George; Khattak). Though not a new concept, it is one that is relevant in a more nuanced interpretation to this discussion.

A Complicated “Home”

A discussion about home is not just about land/country but about culture, kinship and family, it is about a sense of familiarity, language and food. The transporting of some of the above to a new location is still not seen as being able to create a home because of the fragmented nature of migration and immigration, and because such a move entails a renegotiation of such institutions on western terms. In her work on Afghan refugees to Pakistan, Saba Khattak “discusses the constant disruptions in the uniform meanings of home for Afghan refugee women due to the direct impact of war” (117). Khattak adds that this divide keeps shifting according to the political and socio-economic context of the time and place. The state is part of the public arena, but it impacts and controls the private sphere, thus creating flux in any definitions of home. In situations of conflict, a gendered analysis of the impact of war is rarely discussed. Studies and research focus on men as warriors and women and children as refugees who do not impact decisions on wars. As Khattak deduces from her research, “The leaving of home is not only about acquiring security, it is also symbolic of leaving behind a sense of identity, culture and a personal and collective history. Displacement from home and country evoke a deep sense of loss and resentment as well as despondence” (122-123).

In the following sections I will talk about the concept of “home” through the interviewees’ responses to topics on kinship, cultural adaptation, and their own identity issues. But before I do that I will go off on a small tangent which is integral to Afghan mothers’ identities in the U.S. One cannot talk about Afghan mothering without mentioning fatherhood, especially among refugees and immigrants where these roles are defined not just by traditional Indigenous cultures and extended households, but also by their location in the diaspora as defined by the U.S./Afghan conflict. The discussion on fatherhood is vital because it is reflected in the mothering process for migrants and refugees. The western construction of the emasculated Afghan male, through his treatment of Afghan women (oppressing them by keeping them covered, illiterate and by limiting their mobility) in Afghanistan, and through the projection of all

Afghans/Muslims as “terrorists” in the West, directly impacts the status of his family and women leading to the complexity of mothering in the U.S. where these women have to keep these issues in mind while raising their children in the U.S. The breakdown of both gendered cultural expectations and indigenous kinship structures redefines gender roles within their new country leading to differential burdens for both.

Afghan Fathering

Global politics and conflict impact family dynamics and arrangements. For Afghans, mothering is not an autonomous act but is impacted by how men and women in their community are perceived by the larger society. Both parents locate themselves in that dynamic and accordingly raise their children. For Afghan mothers, then, mothering becomes more nuanced and complicated.

As refugee men, especially from son-centered countries such as Afghanistan where they are entitled from birth being born male, the loss of status and stature in this new country leads to changing behavioral patterns and interpersonal relationships within the newly formed family structure. Afghan men start experiencing racism and Islamophobia since they are seen as recent refugees and are recognizable through beards, and some through their brown skin and accents identifying them as Muslims. This is problematic for many men because besides coming from gender-entitled backgrounds in Afghanistan, they also come from economically and socially privileged backgrounds but have lost that social and economic standing in society through their constant migration journeys. Added to this disempowerment is also a sense of emasculation because of their inability to sufficiently provide economically for their families in the U.S. Many Afghans have relocated from previous refugee camps in Pakistan, India, and Iran where they were unable to acquire education and employment skills. Language barriers make it harder for them to find “decent” jobs in the U.S. This economic loss of status impacts the mother who is unused to the loss of status of the family in the Afghan community.

This is further compounded through Afghan men’s lack of participation in the protection of their homeland from foreign invasions. Migrating to the U.S. has also added to their guilt and inability to fight for their country (Afghanistan) against the occupiers (U.S.). While living in the U.S., Afghan men have to confront the masculinist discourse of the West which emasculates the Afghan man by showing up the deteriorating status of women in Afghanistan constantly in the media, thus implying that the Afghan men are not capable of taking care of their women. Afghan women in the U.S. are seen as oppressed and victims and hence the U.S. went to war to “liberate women.”

Additionally, the Afghan father has to assume parenting roles that he would

not have engaged in necessarily in Afghanistan. For example, women's lack of English language, lack of mobility because they do not drive and/or are veiled, and low self-confidence in public communication have compelled Afghan fathers to negotiate the "so-called private"/public sphere on behalf of their wives and children. Examples are fathers' participation in the children's schools through arranging admissions, helping with homework, and attending of parent-teacher meetings, and negotiations with children's doctors. If their children engage in extra-curricular activities it becomes the father's responsibility to fulfill those duties too. Fathers are also called upon to do groceries, and other household chores that either women or servants⁷ did in their homes in Afghanistan. All of the above heightens mothers' dependencies on their husbands, while also having to physically and psychologically deal with their husband's loss of status in the larger western society. This rearrangement of family dynamics negatively impacts both mothers and fathers but places a bigger burden on mothers and the mothering process.

Kinship and Mothering

Besides increased dependency on men in the family, one of the major setbacks for Afghan immigrants/refugees, specifically women as mothers, is the breakdown in the kinship system. There are as many disadvantages for women who live in extended households as there are advantages, but from my interviews it was apparent that in a foreign land, the lack of familial and social networking support systems places extra burdens on mothers. The breakdown of familiar support systems can be seen in different ways. For Afghan immigrants who came in the first wave of migration, choice (push and pull) played a major factor, and the pull came from already migrated relatives. For post-9/11 immigrants, the push factor was war, and the multiple displacements before they arrived to the U.S. led to frequent rupturing of the extended family system and in many cases of the nuclear family, too. In the following sections I will compare the lives of Shahida (immigrant) and Habiba (refugee) within the framework of their "acceptance" to the U.S. filtered through U.S./Afghan relationships over the last few decades. I discuss these two experiences of mothering to highlight how historical political relations and wars between the Afghans and the Soviets, and later with the U.S., influence their lives in the U.S.

The "Immigrant" Mother

Shahida and her family's migration to the U.S. is an example of an era when the U.S. was "embracing" Afghan immigrants. First, because the Afghans were fleeing Soviet-Occupied Afghanistan, it behooved the U.S. to give them "shel-

ter.” Second, at that time, Islam as a religion or Muslims as a group were not vilified or seen as a threat to national security. Nadira,⁸ a 37-year-old Afghan immigrant, interpreted her mother’s interview and elaborated on many issues garnered from the interview. Shahida mentioned that when they migrated to the U.S. from Kabul in 1980, the first wave of migration, they landed in Los Angeles where her husband had some relatives. Shahida and Nadira prefer to refer to themselves as migrants rather than refugees. This is because according to them they left “willingly”⁹ once they had an opportunity to migrate even though the Russian occupation had occurred and many people were fleeing Kabul. Shahida’s relatives had migrated to the U.S. a decade before the Russian occupation and were able to find him a job in Los Angeles. Shahida’s family lived with their relatives in Los Angeles on arrival to the U.S. as an extended household. While there was a bit of decline in their class status compared to their wealth in Kabul, Shahida’s family continued to have a relatively comfortable life in the U.S. Coming from a secular-left political background, the family was not very religious and therefore adopted western ways easily. The upper-middle class and elite in Kabul were quite westernized in dress, education etc. so the shift to the U.S. was not such a big culture shock. Those who were in the first wave of migration in the early 1980s and had the means to move to the West had less traumatized lives and cultural adjustment issues because they already came from modernized families in Afghanistan.

But the sense of home for her mother remained a major issue. For one, she had an independent household in Kabul and did not have to live with her in-laws. This, the mother felt, gave her freedom to run her house and bring up her children on her own terms without “interference” from the in-laws. Though they lived in a single family home in Kabul, the mother’s relatives, sisters and parents lived nearby and helped out with the children and other chores. Shahida’s family also had a couple of servants who did the bulk of the housework. Mothering her children, she said, was not seen as her sole responsibility, nor did she consider it burdensome. Neither was she dependent on her husband to help her out with household chores and childcare. Mothering for Shahida in Afghanistan was not a function she thought of as a separate part of her life that needed deliberate thought and action. It was a communal activity that was part of her life back home.

On their move to the U.S., Shahida had to adjust to a very different lifestyle because for the first time she physically lived in an extended household and most importantly had to engage in household chores. While she was not too fond of the relatives she lived with, because they treated her differently since she was from a different ethnic community, mothering of the young children was easier (in retrospect) because they were part of an extended household and an Afghan community. The family ate Afghan food everyday and they

all spoke Dari, and visited the mosque once in a while. Basically, they mainly socialized with other Afghan families. This helped Shahida retain her Afghan social status and eased her process of parenting. For Shahida, maintaining her upper-middle class Afghan culture and transmitting it to her children was of prime concern. Shahida was not yet part of the anti-Islam and anti-Afghan double whammy!

But when the situation in the extended household became too tense and Shahida started feeling uncomfortable, the family moved to San Diego. Here in the cultural and social anonymity of a neighborhood that was basically a white middle-class neighborhood with a sprinkling of African-American families, Shahida was totally lost. The children, after the initial cultural shocks, adjusted to the culture of the neighborhood and school. They did not have many Afghan friends and socialized mainly with the diverse school friends. Their economic class also suffered because both parents had to work hard to provide for the family. This, according to Shahida, led them, but especially her two younger sons, to “stray away” from their roots, and identify more with the African-American children¹⁰ in school, which led to a lifestyle that the parents could not comprehend. The mother felt she had failed her children. She felt that their “straying off” was because she was not home enough to take care of them. She felt keenly the lack of family support and the lack of extended kin members. Mothering for Shahida suddenly became a “process” that she deliberately and consciously engaged in and was impacted by.

Shahida’s class background in Kabul also played an important role in her mothering activities and identity. In San Diego, Shahida had to burden it all and also try to negotiate with children whose culture she found alienating. Her frequent attempts to instill Afghan cultural values of respect for the elders, obedience to parents, and single-minded devotion to academics were regularly met with resistance. Such discussions and coercions would end up with the mother and father expressing their frustrations through soliloquies on how wonderful their upbringing had been, how great Afghanistan was, and how the extended household was equally responsible in the enculturation of children. The kin group was frequently evoked to talk about strong family ties and sharing of familial responsibilities, kin groups were evoked to talk about the sense of duties and sacrifices family members made to uphold the extended household and their honor. Shahida’s father died four years ago, continuing to yearn to go back to Kabul. Shahida’s mother made her first trip to Kabul in 30 years last year and came back with a sense of resignation that her home now is San Diego. Kabul was unrecognizable to her and she did not identify with the city and its destruction.

In San Diego, the Afghan community was very small and scattered in the early 1980s. Shahida’s parents were liberals who did not practice Islam nor

veil themselves. Shahida's family did not feel discriminated against by their neighbors or the children's school in San Diego. In fact, they were seen as "exotic" Middle Easterners. But ironically, today, while Shahida has reconciled to calling southern California her home, she and her family in the last decade continue to be seen as "Afghans" and "Muslims."

The "Refugee" Mother

In contrast to Shahida, the interview with Habiba about her role as a mother in the U.S. was steeped in the impact of war in her country and the U.S. The political landscape in this country had shifted dramatically post 9/11 leading to a distrust and suspicion towards Afghans and Muslim immigrants and refugees.

Habiba came to the U.S. from Pakistan having migrated there in 1992. She and her husband's family had left Afghanistan when the Mujahideen took over Afghanistan, and the ensuing civil war led to a second wave of migration. She moved to Pakistan and was married to her husband there. Habiba's family had also moved to Pakistan and was living in a refugee camp for some months. Later they found a very tiny house in which eight members of her family lived. She came from an upper-middle-class family but lost much of their wealth when they moved to Pakistan. In Afghanistan, they had to leave their house, land and possessions and flee their town overnight. The family was able to marry off three sisters to men from similar class backgrounds. The younger sons, though, grew up mainly in the refugee camps and did not receive adequate education and therefore no decent jobs.

Habiba's in-laws, who had also temporarily moved to Pakistan, decided to return to Kabul despite the harsh conditions because they just could not adapt to the refugee camps and "preferred death" to the humiliating living conditions. While her father-in-law returned to his ancestral property, he had no job and his refugee sons had to repatriate living expenses, further adding to Habiba's husband's economically-strapped situation in San Diego. When the opportunity arose, they migrated to the U.S. Since Habiba had some relatives in Southern California she was able to move there with her family.

Habiba's experiences of migration differ greatly from Shahida's because Habiba's family moved from one refugee camp to another leading to multiple dislocations. On this journey to the U.S., Habiba's family lost their economic resources, were not able to achieve the level of education her husband would have wanted, and came to the U.S. as refugees forced to live in low-income housing. This was a culture shock to Habiba because now she and her family were seen as "poor people" by the rest of the Afghan community in San Diego. This was one of the main reasons that Habiba felt conflicted about and

it created an identity conflict for her. She tried to compensate for this loss in her class status by ensuring that she and her family wore expensive clothes, they bought a television the size of a wall, and entertained frequently. On her shoulders was the burden of keeping up pretenses, which they really could not afford. Thus, she as mother and wife had this added burden.

In Pakistan, Habiba also was exposed to a more conservative form of Islam which was seeping into Pakistan. She and her family started following the Islamic dictates of the state and most importantly the Afghan refugee community. Habiba came here post 9/11 with two very young children and was suddenly confronted with a country about which she had no clue. What she confronted was a strong anti-Afghan and anti-Islam environment. Habiba does speak English and has become confident to go out and negotiate the public world. Her attempt at partial assimilation was to adopt the western dress of pants and shirts though they are modest. She does not wear a headscarf except when she went to Afghanistan or when she visits the mosque. As the girls have grown, there has been a shift in their dress. Now both the older girls wear jeans (full length pants) with long sleeved shirts. When I talked to Habiba about these changes, she proudly claimed that they need to know their roots and also that they are good Muslims. Habiba is very conscious of not letting the children stray from their Afghan roots. This is visible in the foods they eat, language they speak at home and frequent calls to family members in Afghanistan. Despite their strained economic situation they have prioritized going back to Kabul to meet family every few years. The biggest influence of Afghan culture in the home is Afghan TV. There is a channel out of Los Angeles which has 24 hours Afghan TV shows and Indian Bollywood¹¹ films. Given this home environment, the children are reminded of their roots constantly.

Amongst recent refugees to the U.S., especially from camps in Pakistan, bringing up Islamic children is seen as the most important responsibility of the mothers. Even though there is a preaching of Islam being a unifying faith for all Muslims, cultural delineations are maintained. Recently an Afghan mosque was built in southern California even though two large mosques already exist in the city. Habiba is relieved by this because she sees the mosque as the substitute for the extended family. Her children spend substantial amounts of time over the weekend in the mosque doing various activities as well as reading the Quran. The mosque does not act solely as a religious institution, but is also seen as a community center. For Habiba, this is a boon because she now has a larger Afghan society to help her acculturate her children. The mosque is also a contributor to Habiba's creation of the "home." It symbolizes for her the religiosity that she grew up with and further imbibed in Pakistan to become a better mother. The mosque is used mainly by recent immigrants as a community space to meet their people and to provide Islamic and cultural classes

to Afghan-American children. It has also become the “watering hole” for new immigrants who are provided services from the community. Habiba’s children spend time there doing activities and attending Islamic school. Habiba cooks and takes food to the mosque for those who do not have enough.

For Habiba mothering is very tiring and she would like to have some help. She misses her older sisters and aunts who would have given her this support if she were in Afghanistan. Habiba’s ageing father-in-law also lives with her and she is expected to perform the duties of a good daughter-in-law, too, based on Afghan standards. Habiba and other Afghan mothers thus end up mothering not just their children but also older relatives. Habiba’s insistence of raising her children as Afghans and Muslim, according to her is to help them feel proud of their heritage. She does not feel welcome in the U.S. She is well aware of the stereotypes and discriminations her community faces and therefore she works extra hard to keep them within the fold of the Afghan community in San Diego.

The harsh reality of camps in Pakistan to the not so economically harsh but socially estranged society of the U.S. created its own problems for Habiba. What got most complicated in this process of mothering for Habiba was the concept of home. Is home for them Afghanistan where they were born and spent their early formative years, or Pakistan, which despite harsh conditions protected them from the violence of Afghanistan, or the U.S. which has provided them shelter from both the vulnerable and precarious situations of Pakistan and Afghanistan. For mothers to deal with these dilemmas makes them less grounded, more vulnerable and definitely confused in the mothering process. This process is further complicated by the perceptions of her children who are born here or came here early enough to be socialized into western society that they now call their home.

Hence coming as adults, women as mothers face a harsh reality of alienation, suspicion and a very different culture where they do not necessarily speak English, nor understand the western culture. Social disruption caused by wars have thus created contradictory spaces for refugee women in the U.S. where many have had to look for work (coming from backgrounds where they did not leave the house) while simultaneously limiting their social spaces with controls over their dress and lifestyle etc. Even as greater cultural control over women’s bodies and sexuality is exercised by the community in the name of national honor, limited economic resources compel men to allow their women some access to the public space.

Conclusion

For Afghan mothers, the home becomes their cocoon through which they juggle the enculturation of their values to their children with their new-found

cultural expectations and exposures to a society which is different from theirs. For the mother who stays at home so-called western culture is alien because of she is rarely exposed to it. Nevertheless, the culture she has been imported into is perceived as hostile to her and by her because of her ethnicity and religion. Habiba is constantly talking of returning home (Kabul). As pointed out by Khattak, this desire is constantly expressed by refugees since this sentiment is “accompanied by various recollections and depictions of home representing peace and plenty—an important coping mechanism as there is hope that this memory can be revitalized sometime in the future” (123). Habiba sees this as necessary because she still harbors the dreams of one day returning to Afghanistan. Her family left to flee the war, not because they were seeking a better life in the U.S. Thus, once peace returns to the region, the family would like to return.

An interesting comparison of the two mothers’ diasporic experiences was also how they perceived what they left behind. For the immigrant, memories still abound of the peaceful, beautiful and modern Kabul, while for the refugee, memories are cluttered with images of conflict, scarcity of food items, and leaving all their possessions behind when they fled. This in turn has resulted in differing desires to return for Shahida and Habiba. For Shahida, the country she knew has been destroyed and so “returning” is not an option since for her, “it does not exist anymore.” For Habiba, the country she grew up in was already under Soviet occupation so all she knows is war and destruction, and a glimpse of peace will once again make it desirable place to return to.

The hybridized culture that emerges especially among Afghan children born and brought up in the U.S. is still alien, not safe, nor comfortable to Afghan mothers. Thus, the trauma of war, remigrations constant displacements challenge her own identity and place in society and family and community. The constant renegotiation of her role to be herself accepted by her family, her peers and non-Afghans is shouldered by mothers and is reflected in their mothering patterns where her final mission is to make sure her children remain hers (her culture, religion and “sense” of home) while they are also recognized and accepted by the larger society as contributing members to the U.S.

¹These case studies, while individually discussed, are representative of the larger project and interviews I have conducted in Southern California since 2009.

²Mujahideen means freedom fighters. They are Afghans who fought the Russians and were financially and through arms supported by the U.S..

³Taliban means students of religion. They were also U.S. supported but were mainly Afghans who grew up in Pakistani refugee camps and came into power in Afghanistan to quell the civil war during the Mujahideen regime.

⁴Out-migration from Afghanistan was more limited mainly due to denial of visas to young men to western countries post 9/11.

⁵Shahida is a pseudonym.

⁶Habiba is a pseudonym.

⁷Most middle- and upper-class families in Asia retain servants (male and female) to help with household chores such as cooking, cleaning and maid service for children.

⁸Nadira is a pseudonym.

⁹In all likelihood, Soviet occupation did contribute to the family's outmigration from Afghanistan.

¹⁰Nadira's mother was disappointed that they could not afford a house in a "better" neighborhood because she was prejudiced against Blacks and was embarrassed to be in a working class neighborhood.

¹¹The Indian film industry is referred to as Bollywood (borrowing from Hollywood since it is located in the city of Bombay). Bollywood films have been and are extremely popular in Asia and the Middle-East for decades.

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