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Songs of war and despair: two Afghan/Uzbek women's life history and lament

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ABSTRACT

This study explores two adult women's self-authored and self-composed songs and life history in a north-eastern province of Afghanistan. The women did not sing to entertain the researcher or their visitors. Instead, they sang in the form of lament to express their grief. The author argues that by singing, women create a space in which they lament, communicate with their lost loved ones and criticize political ongoings that resulted in despair. The study also explores how the women cope with their inner feelings and sufferings that are the outcome of more than four decades of civil unrest in the country.

KEYWORDS

political unrest; Afghan/Uzbek women; folk songs; oral poetry; imagining alternative; lament

Introduction

Afghan women's folk songs tell stories of joy, pain, resilience, hardship, oppression, war and despair, and they are passed on from generation to generation. Women sing in different languages and settings depending on the ethnicity and geographical locations to which they belong. In most north and north-eastern provinces, women sing predominantly in the Uzbek language. They also sing in the Dari or Tajiki language. In the south and western regions, however, women mainly sing in the Dari and Pashto languages. Folk songs in every ethnic group of Afghanistan have a rich history (Olszewska 2011). Oral folk songs or poetry are called *chaharbaiti* or quatrain and *dubaiti* or couplets (Doubleday 2011; Olszewska 2011). Those folk songs are called *qoshoq* in the Uzbek language and follow the same format as the *chaharbaiti* and *dubaiti*.

Afghan women traditionally perform folk songs in their own time, among friends and on happy occasions to entertain each other. In the case of the present study, quatrain and couplets among women are sung with a *daff* or *daira* (a kind of frame drum made of animal skin, such as cow or goat, stretched on a thin, circular piece of wood with hanging, jingling plates) (Balandina 2009; Doubleday 1999; Slobin 1976; Sultanova 2008), without the *daff*, and with a *chang* (essentially a 'harp', a musical instrument made of a metal frame with strings that is played with the index finger putting the instrument to the mouth). On happy occasions, women sing with the *daff* to entertain; however, individually, women sing without any musical instrument. Like the informants, older women do not usually sing with the *daira* to entertain, as it is considered immodest for their age.

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Some of those women compose and improvise songs. Others copy from male and female folk singers. Women's folk songs are best described as singing or reciting (Khavari 2003, 8). Sakata (1983) explains that reading folk songs is *uneasy*; they are best sung. It was a *challenge for me to transcribe* these songs since they are in a *regional* dialect or vernacular spoken language: *zaban ameyana* (Khavari 2003, 7; Sakata 1983). Also, folk songs are usually without specific authors, or the authors are unknown, as such songs are not written, *authored* or recorded by anyone.

Afghan people's artistic forms of expression, such as poetry, painting, calligraphy, etc., have been attractive areas of study for anthropologists and historians. Since the 1970s, cultural diversity, social structure, migration, Pashtun kinship dynamics, marriage and oral poetry have been some of the main areas of scholarly attention (Schuster and Shinwari 2020; Mills 2019; Olszewska 2007, 2011; Rahimi 2017). However, the ongoing political situation has been a hurdle in conducting comprehensive academic research on folk traditions in the north and north-east. Slobin (1971, 1976) stated that northern Afghanistan has a rich culture in folk music, but few ethnomusicologists have paid much attention to it, especially in recent decades. Ethnomusicologists such as John Baily and Veronica Doubleday (Doubleday 2006, 2011) have extensively studied folk and 'art' music and songs in Herat province; however, the folk music of northern Afghanistan has remained a lesser explored topic.

Although Slobin's *Music in Northern Afghanistan* (1976) and Sakata's *Music in the Mind* (1983) offer many in-depth encounters of folk tradition in northern Afghanistan, a contemporary exploration of north folk music, especially women's oral poetry and songs, is missing from the literature. With rapid regime changes and the involvement of international troops in the country, lived experiences and cultural performances have changed. In other words, women's folk songs and the message they convey through their songs have varied depending on their experiences. One may argue that the foreign involvement that stirred civil unrest created a climate of heightened oppression on women since countless women are left in poverty, suffered due to the loss of their loved ones, displacement and so on. There used to be less mass migration, carnage and poverty, all of which established women as victims. Life has changed for Afghan women, and so have the narratives around it. Lately, the Afghan media has been broadcasting north-eastern men's folk songs. Even though some scholars have studied women's folk songs in the southern and western provinces of Afghanistan (Doubleday 2011; Majrouh 2010; Mills 2019), Uzbek women's folk songs have been neglected in the literature.

Besides war and insecurity, the practice of modesty, and seclusion in the country made it challenging for researchers to explore women's singing culture in Afghanistan. Abu-Lughod (1986) discussed modesty or *hasham* through expressing sentiments indirectly, and Papanek (1973, 1971) explained seclusion through the concept of *Purdah* in India and Pakistan. Modesty for my informants and the village inhabitants not only means wearing a headcover but also implies seclusion from men outside of their kin and keeping their matters to trusted circles. Although Uzbeks of the north and north-east are not as conservative as Pashtuns of the south, some modesty and seclusion are still observed, especially among older women. As an insider, having a blood tie in the village and as a woman, the researcher of this study could enter women's private spheres and learn about the two women's life histories through songs, which articulate stories more sophisticatedly than plain words.

I argue that Afghan women's traditional practice of composing and singing songs enables women to express injustices in society, many of which are gender related (Majrouh 2010; Olszewska 2011; Sanauddin 2015). Afghan women's social critique is about grappling with injustice due to decades of war, violence and lawlessness (1970s–present). Unlike Caddick's (2020) study, my participants' life histories cannot be separated from a narrative of war. Four decades of war have shaped my informants' lives and caused considerable suffering. Their songs were more about pain than joy while also indicating the spirit of resilience.

This article examines how songs provide a window into women's emotional lives and predicaments. The songs analyses focus on the personal impact of war on two women in a north-eastern village of Afghanistan. I discuss how these two women *describe* their lives as struggling wives and suffering mothers through songs and poems. By addressing the words 'Afghan women', I do not mean to generalize and apply my findings to the entire population of women in Afghanistan. In my analysis, I focus on my informants' circumstances, blending literature about women's folk songs and folk tradition in the country and the Middle East. I argue that oral poetry or folk songs for my informants lays the groundwork to express their suffering caused by war, as well as imagining a reunion with their lost loved ones.

The songs or poems I collected are original Uzbek *qoshoqs* (translated into English verbatim by the author), and the singing is my informants' composition. One of my informants, Khaldar, – names and the village are anonymized to protect their identity – followed *chaharbaiti* rules, meaning all her songs consist of four lines. The first two and last lines of the stanza ended in the same rhyme. However, my next informant's *qoshoq* was in a freer poetic verse format, sometimes following the *chaharbaiti* rules, other times not. Thus, Khaldar's songs were all structured, and Ulbash's poems were not always structured in format. Overall, I will use the words 'songs' and 'poems' interchangeably throughout the paper. This study's collections are mainly about separation and loneliness caused by political conflict, poverty, and lawlessness due to prolonged civil war and ongoing feuding among rival factions in different parts.

The significance of this study is multifaceted. First, it seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature regarding women and their expressive culture in Afghanistan. Second, it provides a unique perspective about two Uzbek women's life histories and how political circumstances have shaped their lives. Third, it analyzes the nature of social change for some women in a specific region of Afghanistan. Fourth, it draws together northern folk tradition scholarship, which concerns women, emotions, war and oppression.

In the following section, I briefly explain Takhar's social, political and kinship structure. Methods of data collection and analysis are then described. I then elaborate on my informants' short life history, songs in their original language with their English translation, followed by a brief analysis of the songs. The article ends with a thorough discussion of Khaldar's and Ulbash's life histories and songs.

Political and social structure of Takhar province

Takhar is one of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan, located in the north-east of the country bordering Tajikistan. It is surrounded by Badakhshan to the east, Panjshir to the south, and Baghlan and Kunduz to the West. The city of Taloqan serves as its capital. It is multi-ethnic

and mostly rural. In Afghanistan, individuals use the term 'ethnic' or *qoum* to characterize themselves based on their language and religious practices (Banuazizi and Weiner 1988, 2). There has not been an accurate census in Afghanistan, and population size estimates are controversial and vary widely (Graham-Harrison 2013). Takhar is divided into two main ethnic groups: Tajiks and Uzbeks. Some Pashtun ethnic groups also reside in some districts of Takhar, such as Yangi Qala, Bangi, Khan Abad and Khoja Ghar. Pashtuns of Takhar are called *Naqilin* or resettlers arriving from the country's southern provinces during the reign of Abdul Rahman Khan (1800–1901). Rahman Khan was a Pashtun king who settled thousands of Pashtun families to northern regions of the country in an attempt to build a 'nation-state' that could represent Afghanistan, meaning the land of Pashtuns (Shahrani 1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002b). Uzbeks are the largest Turkic-speaking group in Afghanistan (Banuazizi and Weiner 1988, 5). According to Uzbek historians Rahim (2010) and Yarqin (2007), there are 5–8 million Uzbeks currently living in the northern areas of Afghanistan, a majority compared with other ethnic groups: Tajiks, Hazara and others. According to local estimates, 85% of the population of Takhar is Uzbek, but politically Tajiks dominate.

Rasuly-Paleczek (2010) argues that decades of civil war have altered the country's socio-political structure, particularly the case with the Uzbeks of the north-eastern provinces in Afghanistan. Previously Uzbeks had been a leading group in north-eastern and some western provinces of Afghanistan, but have since diminished and become a minority ethnicity (Rasuly-Paleczek 2010). Similar incidents happened mainly after the political emergence of the Mujahiddin commanders (Rasuly-Paleczek 2010). The Mujahiddin, meaning 'holy warriors', consisted of different groups or *hezb*. Each *hezb* was led by leaders representing other ethnic groups. The Jamiat-e-Islami group was led by Ahmad Shah Masoud (a Tajik commander or *qomandan* from Panjshir province), the Hezb-e-Wahdat was led by Abdul Ali Mazari, a Hazara leader born in Balkh province, and Hezb-e-Islami was led by Hekmateyar, a Pashtun leader from southern Afghanistan. The western countries supplied these groups to fight against the Soviet Union of the time to 'liberate' Afghanistan from foreign occupation (Bhatia 2007; Shahrani 2018). The Jamiat-Islami group was primarily based in the northern provinces of Afghanistan. To date, this group is recognized as the 'northern warlords or allies' (Stanski 2009). The term *Mujahiddin* is commonly used in north-eastern provinces of Afghanistan to refer to the Jamiat-e-Islami group. For fluency, I will use Mujahiddin throughout the article.

Northern provinces of Afghanistan, mainly Takhar, were in the 1970s and 1980s affected by Russian uncertainties, in the 1990s by inter-Mujahiddin conflicts, and in the 2000s by the Taliban insurgencies. Since the 1980s, Takhar has become a land of warlords – for the Mujahedin groups coalesced along the lines of the two major ethnic groups inhabiting northern Afghanistan: Uzbeks and Tajiks. Struggles over power were aggravated. The rage between northern warlords began in the 1990s, and different Mujahiddin factions, Jamiat e Islami, Hezb e Islami and Jumbish Mili, fought against each other. Takhar was politically dominated by Jamiat e Islami, which was a faction ruled by Tajiks. The region has suffered from heightened inter-tribal and inter-ethnic struggles. Now and then there was tension over demands for equal power-sharing between the two major ethnic groups inhabiting the province. Local people suffered as a result.

In Takhar, the Mujaheddin had imposed harsh restrictions on women's public appearances and forbade them from getting a higher education. Women were allowed to obtain

an elementary level education only, up to fourth or sixth grade. They were forced to wear the burqa at a certain age and had fewer job opportunities. Being a schoolteacher was one of the few jobs open to them. Women were often subjected to marriage by force to *qomandans* or their soldiers. Their families were threatened with death if they refused to accept the proposal (Aziz 2011). However, oppression multiplied when the Taliban occupied the province. Women were the main causalities of the overly oppressive regime. Such oppressive measures included schools being closed for girls, banning women from appearing in public, women not being permitted outside of the house without a male family member or *mahram*, and limitations on women's access to healthcare facilities. As a result, few Takhari women received a higher education; few sought an education abroad, only a handful pursued a career, and few occupied critical governmental and non-governmental roles. Uzbek women, as a minority group, politically and economically, endured harsher consequences.

Women's oppression in the north-eastern provinces of Afghanistan, especially Takhar, was not confined to the Mujahiddin and Taliban regimes. It dates to the 1970s when different Russian and government factions shed blood and women lost their loved ones, land, and education and were left in poverty (Aziz 2011). Decades of war left generations of women with 'emotional scars and psychological trauma' without medical assistance, except for grieving to their village members (Aziz 2011, 229). Ongoing conflicts have affected people's lives, especially women's participation in society in Afghanistan. Yet oppression was prevalent before the post-1978 political conflict, and women were banned from entering school even in urban areas while enduring political tragedies.

Consequently, the majority of women prior to the political upheaval and after the Taliban era remain illiterate. Endemic poverty, a patriarchal society and the inability of previous governments to provide access to education in the country's rural regions led to high illiteracy rates among women. In addition, the current war between the Afghan government and the Taliban is inflicting excessive human cruelty. The mainly Uzbek population of rural Takhar has lost land due to expanding families, political uprisings, displacement and droughts. To feed their families, young men had no choice but either to join the government to fight against the Taliban or the Taliban to fight against the government. The long-lasting war has severely impacted Afghan society; however, the rural population and women's sufferings have been more extreme than their urban-dwelling counterparts (Aziz 2011).

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led forces provided security in the capital Kabul and different provinces based on the Bonn Conference agreement. German-led coalition forces from other European countries were deployed to Afghanistan's north and north-eastern provinces until their mission was completed in 2014. Takhar was relatively peaceful between 2001 and 2012, where there were fewer insurgent attacks than in southern Afghanistan. However, since 2012, the Taliban's insurgency attacks moved in from the northern provinces aided by their Pashtun allies in the region (Shahrani 2002a). According to Shahrani (2002a), former Presidents of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai and Ghani Ahmadzai supported the Pushtun resettlers in Afghanistan's north and north-eastern provinces; those locations became safe havens for Taliban fighters.

Kinship and social structure

In Taloqan, villages are categorized by ethnicity, which is determined by the language spoken (in this instance, Uzbek, Tajik or Pashtu). Uzbeks in northern Afghanistan, especially Takhar, are mainly land-inherited farmers, characterized as *maldar* or livestock owners and *dihqan* or farmers (Barfield 1978; Bleuer 2012; Shahrani 1988; Tapper 1991). The majority of Uzbek families work on land inherited from their ancestors, cultivating the crop and selling the surplus. Besides farming, as not many families have enough land to meet their living needs, Uzbek families pasture domestic animals, such as cows, sheep, goats, donkeys, etc. The products, including milk, hides and manure, are used for their living needs. Any extras are sold, even though due to impoverished circumstances many families sell their animal products to make money rather than consume them. For instance, 20 years ago, towns or villages were rich in dairy, fresh fruit and vegetables. However, this tapestry was changed by war, unemployment and loss of lives. In other words, fewer families in the Uzbek villages consume dairy, fresh fruit or vegetables because they need to sell the produce for cash.

There are neighbourhoods or village subsections organized by lineage, territory/land and language within Uzbek inhabited villages. For example, Khujamukhtar (a pseudonym for the village I studied) is located approximately 5 miles to the north-east of Taloqan, the capital of Takhar. Khujamukhtar is a village spread out across several hamlets, known as *pas qishlaq* (lower town), *teba qishlaq* (upper town), *doong qishlaq* (high hill village) and *jar qishlaq* (cave village). Village residence tends to be kin-based, that is, related by blood, land and language. For example, the *teba qishlaq* residents tend to have common ancestors; the same is valid with other hamlets. In each hamlet, there are 25 or more families. Houses are marked by lower walls, which often have smaller doors or *darcha* between compounds, and people do not shy away from dropping in at any time of the day. When passing into a neighbour's house for a chat, women do not bother to walk via the streets. Instead, they pass through the neighbour's house yard.

Some residents may claim that they are not necessarily connected by blood, but preferably by land. Working on adjoining land other is a social activity. They interact to the extent to which that connects them to kin members. Also, families usually live near by their land and become protectors of each other's land and families. In most cases, they initiate marriage relationships. Biological relationships exist, but social bonds seem to be more critical in connecting people (Carsten 2000). A few families live wall-to-wall every few miles together in such villages, defining themselves as having common ancestors or merging due to inter-marriages and land – and food-sharing in the same area for a long time. In the meantime, families who share land boundaries are related. They share losses or gains in agriculture, as well as similar labour and social structures. Therefore, their relationship is approved by social connection, blood and language because there are mutual behaviour and labour patterns (Bodenhorn 2000). Kinship in north-east Afghanistan villages is 'optative' and 'non-optative' – to borrow Bodenhorn's (2000) terms. In such towns, social 'acting' is as important as biological 'being' (Bodenhorn 2000, 139; Schweitzer 2000, 44).

As in Needham's explanation of the Nuers' kinship's system, kinship in some north-eastern Afghanistan villages depends upon everyday acts of sharing food, labour, community, customs and traditions (Needham 1971, 65). Similarly, in the towns around

Taloqan, through exchanging food, people build networks of relationships. Thus, in this specific village of northern Afghanistan, relationships mainly construct social behaviours or performances (cf. Bodenhorn 2000; Carsten 2000; McKinnon 2005; Needham 1971).

Methodology

Design

Grounded in an interpretive paradigm, this qualitative study took a phenomenological approach. One-on-one interviews underpin the interpretive paradigm to elicit the meaning of the data collected (Moustakas 1994). This paradigm is based on an understanding of the realities through the subjective viewpoints of individuals. Similarly, the interpretive paradigm's ontology and epistemology are concerned with an individual's worldview, assuming that anyone will have a different view based on their personal experiences (Hays and Singh 2012). Given these perspectives, this study looks at the participants' lived experiences or truth and aims to co-construct knowledge while taking the role of environment and physical setting into account.

Participants

My key informants were two elderly women, Ulbash and Khaldar. The number of participants is enough for a phenomenological study because the researcher's purpose is to make meaning out of the participants' lived experiences. A large sample is not necessary to obtain more in-depth knowledge about lived experiences as there is no intention here to quantify or generalize findings (Vagle 2018). As previous residents of the village, my parents recommended that I talk to Khaldar first if she agreed, for she was known for her talents in weaving her stories into oral poetry and songs. When I visited the village and initiated contact with Khaldar, the village inhabitants urged me to meet Ulbash. Not all women in the town were singers of their life histories, nor did they have the talent. These two women were recognized for entertaining their friends when they were younger and expressing their sorrows in the form of lament as they became older. They were between the ages of 70 and 80 years.

Setting and selecting participants

I travelled to the north-eastern province of Takhar in Afghanistan where I was born but did not grow up to collect data. I stayed with my relatives and located my informants through them. My mother accompanied me throughout the trip. As an anthropologist working in Malinowski's tradition,[1] I had aimed to immerse myself in singing occasions and theorize and report my findings. However, my circumstances were different from Malinowski's school, and I found my circumstances different from what Malinowski encountered. As an unmarried young woman, it was considered unusual for me to live on my own. Unlike Shahrani's (1994) experiences among the Kirgiz of Afghanistan, I was not of mature age or married, and had been absent from the country for many years. Therefore, I could not travel to villages without attracting suspicion.

Similar to some of Arab female ethnographers studying their communities, I, too, faced moral disapproval (Altorki and El-Solh 1988). For example, Suad Joseph, researching in Lebanon, stated that her marital status gave her freedom during her research and that 'an unmarried female researcher instead of her would have been expected to be too shy to talk about her topic' (Joseph 1988, 104). Joseph enjoyed certain advantages due to her status as a married woman. In another example, despite her half-Palestinian identity, Abu-Lughod stated that her half-Western identity limited her when she studied the Awlad Ali Bedouin in Egypt. Abu-Lughod needed to be extra careful about her interaction in a secret society, adopting the role of a 'dutiful daughter' to her host family (Abu-Lughod 1988, 142).

My circumstances were not altogether different from Abu-Lughod's (1988) and Shami's (1988) study concerning gender and class among the Circassian community in Jordan. Besides, my part-Western identity, derived from my time in the West for education, further limited what I could do. Like Abu-Lughod, I was aware of Western women's negative image, a notion fed by rumour (Abu-Lughod 1988, 142). As a Western-educated woman, I had to be extra careful about my comportment. Like Abu-Lughod, I was restricted as to where I could go, whom I could be seen with, whom I could speak to and how I could dress. It was hard to define my role as a researcher; instead, I had to follow a culturally defined role. As an insider and outsider in the village, I needed someone to connect me to the community.

My situation echoed Shami's (1988) when her mother introduced her to the Circassian community in Jordan, and Abu-Lughod when introduced by her father to the Awlad Ali. Similarly, my mother facilitated my access and decreased the social distance between the community and myself. She placed me within a context and established my respectability. Most of my interviews were conducted with my mother present. Her presence was a source of support in creating respectful relationships with my informants. She was also helpful in communicating, in opening up conversations and in encouraging women to sing. She spoke better than I did since she was more adept in the tones and expressions of the local Uzbek language. I could not communicate in the village dialect. I spoke in a *shahri* (urban/elite) linguistic register, even though I tried to talk as clearly as possible (cf. Akbar 2012, 73). Without my mother's presence during my fieldwork, my informants would have distanced themselves from me. I was a *shahri* and *kharijdida* (one who has seen foreign countries), even though I did my best not appear different.

Despite all these strategies, most respondents treated me as a guest, not a researcher. This circumstance is similar to what Shahrani (1994) experienced among the Kirgiz of Afghanistan during his fieldwork. Unlike Doubleday (2006), I had to care about what people thought of me. Doubleday (2006) pressed on with gathering data for her research, despite being warned by her host families about interacting with professional singers. Collecting data was her purpose in visiting Herat, as was mine, but I could not similarly approach my informants. She was working along with her ethnomusicologist husband, John Bally – she took on working with female musicians while he worked with the men. He was her *mahram* throughout. People they knew warned or criticized them both for her performing with the girl band, not just for interviews, etc. Perhaps Doubleday would not have been able to ignore concerns about reputation had she been in my situation.

As Shahrani (1994) puts it, native anthropologists became marginal persons while in the field at home, and they are seen as outsiders. In my case, similar to what Breen (2007) experienced, I was neither an outsider nor an insider. With my mother's help, I could place myself in 'the middle' within my research setting (Breen 2007, 1) as she tried to introduce me as one of the villagers. Nevertheless, not having lived in the village, my long absence in the Western countries, and writing for Western audiences positioned me in the middle, as it seemed impossible to be one of the village members and a researcher at the same time (Bonner and Tolhurst 2002). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) use the term 'the space in-between' not to be either insider or outsider but to be both simultaneously.

Data collection

Data collection was based on in-depth one-on-one interviews with the participants upon their verbal consent for publication. I assured them that their identity would be masked, and I would not broadcast their songs in the audio format which would identify the women based on their voices. Collecting interviews opened up the dialogue and generated information and knowledge (Kvale 2008). I spent three months in the north-east and visited with my participants regularly. During the three months, I collected four in-depth interviews from each participant to collect their songs, biography and life history. Each of the interviews took hours. I spent the entire day in their hamlet on each visit to the village. Also, I collected ethnographic data from village residents, my relatives and my parents. This method was best in understanding the participants' inner feelings and their relation to the verses they sang. I audio recorded the songs, as writing down the lyrics was not easy. I would miss some verses and would not be able to get a song's complete meaning. Nevertheless, some women did not permit recording. I could not write down much, so I had to stop them repeatedly to repeat words or ask them to recite their songs distinctly without the natural flow of singing. In some cases, I tried to get the gist of their songs rather than write them down word for word. I got a general sense of the songs they would usually sing or were eager to sing from these women.

Khaldar's and Ulbash's laments

I will proceed with Khaldar's life history and then move on to her songs. Khaldar was sophisticated, decisive and to the point. Khaldar was called the *Arbāb* of women by my relatives. *Arbāb* is a Farsi/Uzbek word meaning 'village headman' or leader (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013). It is a common form of traditional local leadership, usually with males in charge of the community's internal and external relations, especially vis-à-vis the state officials (Shahrani 2007, 15). Khaldar was called the *Arbāb* of women because the villagers believed that she had positive leadership qualities. She was confident and could influence other women in her village.

Khaldar was also representative of all suffering women in her village, province and Afghanistan. She was married to one of the men in Khojamukhtar from a nearby village. She lost her husband soon after her marriage. He died from an unknown disease, but she believed that he got an infection while serving at war. He was a soldier when he was engaged to Khaldar and was deployed to one of the southern

provinces to fight Russians in the late 1970s. He died three years after their marriage, and she was left with two young daughters and pregnant with a son. Because she had children from her late husband and a son, she was eligible to inherit her son's portion from his in-law's family. According to Sharia Law, sons inherit twice the amount of property as girls.

In most cases, practically, sons get the entire inherited property. Khaldar had one son. In other words, if she had more sons, she would inherit more land.

Nonetheless, she received her husband's share based on her children. She did not remarry, nor did she returned to her kin's village to raise her children alone, having inherited her husband's property. According to my relatives, Khaldar was talented at entertaining people, singing and playing the *daff* frame drum used by women and men in the villages. She sang on occasions such as weddings until her late 40s. Khalder was in her 70s and no longer sang at weddings, but she was happy to sing for and recount her singing of the past. She claimed that she never copied other's songs but always composed her own. I observed a greater degree of individuality and independence in her song themes. All her verses reflect her unique life story – separation from her husband, death and a broken heart. Given this, her songs followed a *chaharbaiti*, *qoshoq* or couplet structure, which consists of four lines, and the first two and fourth lines end in similar syllable words. Khaldar was uncomfortable singing, as singing was not considered an act of piety (Mahmood 2005). However, she agreed to sing behind the cornfield away from people's sights, where no one could hear her singing.

Songs behind the cornfield

My relative's house was full of guests as they came to visit my mother and me. Khaldar did not agree to sing in front of people. She would not sing at all to protect herself from being perceived as immodest. The hosts of the household knew the purpose of my visit and my interest in meeting with Khaldar. One of the family members facilitated our meeting in the field so she could sing. She was sitting behind the cornfield hiding from the rest when I joined. She started singing without further hesitation and without playing the daff or *daira*.

Interestingly, her songs were about a woman who has suffered from war. Her songs seemed to flow well in this secluded place. Below are her poems:

Daffti ursam qokhshaydi / zanjir bo'i boshaydi /
Men o'ynamdi o'ylasam, / boinlarim boshaydi
If I play *daff*, it will wail / Its jingling plates will be shaken off /
If I remember my loved ones / My limbs will fall apart. (1)

Osmon ayaz bolipa, / darya sayaz bolipa /
O'ynam kilgan kichasi / qurban namaz bolipa
The sky is clear and chilly / The river's flow has lessened /
The night my beloved comes / Will be like the Eid al-Adha [Feast of Sacrifice] (2)

Menni o'ynam boy bo'lsin / haydagani qo'y bo'lsin /
Qo'ydi haydab chiqqanda / khawaja khizr yar bo'lsin
May my beloved become rich / His herd be flocks of sheep /
When herding his sheep out to pasture / May Khwaja Khizr[2] be his companion. (3)

Pat brida kemayman / pati kitib qoladi/

Sipahiga temayman / karwan kitib qoladi
I don't wear a velvet dress / Its threads will fade quickly /
I won't marry a soldier / He will leave me for duty. (4)

Motar kiladi khostdan / payra qiladi postani /
O'ying koyger bu German / ayerdi yardi doustedan
A car comes from Khost / The watchman guards the military post /
These God-damned Germans[3] / Separate lovers from their beloveds. (5)

Oriq jaghalam jalbiz / qoynimga ola tarboz /
Sin onda-o – main bunda / qaytib jatamiz jalghuz
Mint has grown along the stream / On my bosom attached watermelons /
You are there, and I am here / Again, we go to sleep alone? (6)

Song analysis

Verse 1 reflects more on Khaldar's current situation. She suffered from her husband's long absence at war, never knowing if he would return alive or not. She complains about the difficulties she has had to endure. *Inqilāb* (revolution with a negative connotation), as Khaldar puts it, has made everyone suffer, and, as a result, everyone is full of pain. Since Khaldar's husband was a soldier, her poems are mainly centered around the same theme, admiring soldiers for their bravery, the happiness when they visited home would grant, and letting them go trusting in God they will be okay. However, due to her experience, she knows that this admiration is deceptive and will not last. A soldier is admired for his courage but the destiny that may befall him is a concern.

In Afghanistan more so than in other parts of the world, a soldier's ill-fate is deemed inevitable. They go to duty, which is usually face-to-face war where the possibility of running out of food, shelter, clothes, getting injured, captured and killed is high. Soldiers' families remain to wait without an income or any news for months. Whether soldiers who are missing in the war are dead or alive is unclear to their survivors. That is the reason, in verse 4, Khaldar resents marrying a soldier or *sipahi* in her language.

In verses 5 and 6, Khaldar brings up geography and 'German'. Khost is a predominantly southern Pashtun province on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. Interestingly, a geographical point is brought up in women's poems since sending Uzbek youth to southern regions for services is not a new phenomenon. In the pre-war period, most Uzbek and Tajik draftee youth were sent to serve in the Pashtun area, which was considered very distant, and many died for various reasons. Khost and other Pashtun-dominated provinces were considered the end of the world and a place of no return for their sons. Women feared even the names of such sites. In her poem, Khaldar plays on the concepts of cars coming from a far-off Pashtun province, her husband's case Khost, her loved one guarding, and the foreign invader 'Germans' separating the lovers from their beloveds.

Afghanistan has been invaded repeatedly. In the nineteenth century, British troops entered Afghanistan twice (Ewans 2002; Shahrani 1988). References to Germans are notable because, after the Taliban, German troops as part of the ISAF have been stationed in northern and north-eastern provinces. Therefore, the impression is that foreign forces would be German rather than American or British. Village people, especially women, do not differentiate foreign troops' nationalities. If soldiers are not from their country and religion, they are called *O'ros* – Russians or Germans. To older women such as Khaldar, *O'ros*

and German may also be linked to their memories of Afghanistan's Russian occupation. Khaldar's husband fought against the Russians and suffered from that occupation.

Several themes of Khaldar's songs behind the cornfield were related to her personal life, although she did not confess this. Her life eventually came up in her songs: waiting for her absent husband while he was at war, and then tolerating his lifelong absence when he died. Through songs, Khaldar created a 'contextualized performance' (McMahon 2013, 236) representing herself, criticizing society and long-lasting war. It is not only Khaldar who has suffered. Many other families who had family members involved in war went through the same pain. Lamenting through songs was not a practice exclusive to Khaldar. It was a subculture within women's expressive behaviour to grieve their losses, which made it worth listening to their songs because they resonated in the community. While Khaldar mourns for her husband's loss, others lament the loss of their sons, brothers, and other immediate family members. This situation was, of course, compounded by other sufferings. To that end, Ulbash's songs will be examined next. She had a slightly different story but shared Khaldar's experiences.

Ulbash's lament for her lost children

Ulbash used to be happy, talented at singing and entertaining people such as Khaldar. Although she did not earn money through singing, she often sang on happy occasions and in small informal gatherings. Like my relative, Gulistan, said: 'She used to be full of jokes. Young women were eager to spend time around her. Women would often go to her house with their embroidery.' Ulbash was in her 70s, with visual and hearing impairments, and continuously lamented her loss.

Ulbash's life was also significantly altered by war in the past decades and other tragedies. She had seven children – two sons and five daughters – but only one survived. All five daughters and a son died in different stages of life. Her youngest daughter died at age 14 when a bomb landed next to her when fetching water from the well. Ulbash painfully described how she ran to her daughter and saw her covered in blood. She did not know how she got there but remembers when Ulbash herself fell over and broke her front tooth, which she kept showing me. The remaining four daughters died from diseases, mostly tuberculosis, which was widespread in the village. All four of them passed away after getting married and left orphans for Ulbash to bring up. Her sons-in-law could not look after the children because the second wives are never kind to the ex- or late wives' children. Often, the grandmother raises orphan children to save them from the abuse of the sons-in-law's co- or new wives. One of her sons-in-law, a Mujahiddin commander, died soon after her daughter's death and left children for Ulbash to raise without any financial support. Her younger son died while playing with a kerosene lamp at home. The surviving son, with whom she lived, was not kind to her.

When she had almost recovered from her children's deaths, her grandson, died in his late 20s. Unemployed, he had joined the Afghan National Army. Unemployment and poverty have driven many youth in Takhar and Badakhshan to join the army – post-US/NATO involvement fighting the Taliban – for 15,000 AFN, equivalent to US$200 per month (Rahim and Mashal 2017). Uzbek youth recruited in the north-eastern district army are deployed to southern provinces, such as Khost and Kandahar, as the Taliban insurgencies in the country's southern regions were active.

Ulbash's grandson died in a battle between the Taliban and Afghan forces in Kandahar. His friends brought his corpse home in the most inhumane way. The army gave the news a few days after his death and the government refused to send the body or help the family financially to get him home. Everyone was shocked and grieved for Ulbash's loss, feeling she had suffered enough and could never recover from so many tragedies. For her, it became impossible to forget everything and start over.

Ulbash loved visitors as she felt she was left alone. Nevertheless, because she lamented whenever she had a visitor, people distanced themselves from her. Also, since she became visually impaired and had a hard time hearing, it was harder for her and her visitors to communicate. This situation contradicts what Grima (1992) found among Pashtun women in Pakistan. She argues that *gham* or grief 'is thought as honourable and redemptive' (Grima 1992, 142). *Gham* over a loss of a family member is honourable. According to local belief, every *gham* has a double reward in this world or in the eternal world. It relates to the local saying, '30 days of the Moon are half dark, half-bright.' However, *gham* is not honoured when it is extended. Ulbash's circumstances demonstrate that people find it depressing and inappropriate if they grieve for too long because death is accepted as God's will. Wailing can be seen as an act of protest against God. Instead, people are advised to accept will of God and offer prayers. This is what is lacking in Grima's interpretation of women's complaint narratives in Islam. Islamic texts, such as the Qur'an Sharif and *hadith* or the words of Prophet Muhammad (pbh), encourage individuals to be patient, especially when they experience *gham* or sorrow.

Ulbash's loss of children left her emotionally alone, and her disability left her physically alone. She was a burden for her son's family due to her disability (Mackmakin 2011). As a consequence of loneliness, she lamented out loud to herself and cried most of the time. Ulbash did not sing; she lamented her sorrows, pain and grief. In her article on women's laments in a Greek village, Auerbach draws a line between song and lament: 'Songs are thought to arise from a "carefree heart"'; they are a recreational celebration of joyful occasions. On the other hand, laments are believed to originate in pain or complaint (Auerbach 1989, 27). Auerbach explains how women were transformed from singing to lamenting in Greece due to accumulating personal misfortunes and community loss (Auerbach 1987, 26). Her analysis can apply to Ulbash's case since she was a transformed woman: from entertaining with songs to saddening people with laments.

My visit to Ulbash's summer tent, located under a tree, was brief but a surprise – a visitor from the West who was interested in listening to her griefs. She eagerly started telling me her sad life story, reciting poems rather than singing. She paused after each *chahārbeiti* or quatrain and told a story or expressed her feelings, ending in sobs. Her energy sadly moved everyone around her at the moment. I joined the women around me in shedding tears. She asked if I would show her photograph to Westerners and say that she was a madwoman. I said I would and that her power and energy would inspire Westerners. I noticed a smile on her face, and then she recited poems for me as a 'far-away daughter' of her fellow villager. She improvised in the Uzbek language as follows:

Kandahar joly ko'l gulga / bobili qonsn gulga /
Kampor momang qlochi / Kandahar kitgan o'lig
The way to Kandahar is full of flowers / Nightingales fly around the flowers /
The arms of your old grandmother remain open / For her dead son gone to Kandahar. (1)

Kandar Youli yaproq / boshimga qo'nsin yaproq /
Khayrullajanim kilsin / shah Taliqan qo'l cherogh
The way to Kandahar is full of moths / the moths should descend on my head /
My dear Khayrullah should return / Make ShahTaloqan[4] bright with light. (2)

Men aytayin bayeti / erta qurban haiyiti /
Onang o'lsin Hajira Toki / Amer kilguncha, chighib kitti mayeting
I sing a song / For tomorrow is Eid,
O Hajira, may your mother perish / By the time Amer arrived, Your corpse left us. (3)

Qeyomatni yelini / bolam qeib turmading /
erta kilgan ajaldan / girti qachib turmading
The road to Qeyomat [end of the world], my son, you didn't delay even a little bit /
From the death coming tomorrow / You didn't try to run away even for a moment. (4)

Badakhshandi bozori / bugun Taloqan guzari /
Quyiga borib qarasam / kurinadi mazori
On Badakhshan's market day,[5] in Taloqan's neighbourhoods today /
When going down a little to take a look, become visible my children's graves. (5)

Khoja Mukhtor bir mazor / tappa lari Lolazar /
Bir suru bolam jatibti / birbiriga entizor
Kāja Mukhtār[6] is a graveyard / Its hills are full of red tulips /
Many of my children are lying there / Waiting for the others to join them.[7] (6)

Mingan oti jatti / tosha earib botti /
Katta ieyldi ichiga / olardan tali qaitti
His riding horse knelt down / Their chests crushed /
Within the vast world / My children's fortune vanished. (7)

Bihishtdi darwozasi / gullardan andazasi /
Gharib onang zinda dil / taki olguncha chiqmasin
The doorway of heaven / the field of flowers /
Your poor mother with a living heart / Until death, she will not leave home. (8)

Su kiladi laba-lab / ola chiqsin kurpalab /
Sini onang jilasin / khudaijandan obkalab
Water fills the stream / Mint grows thick along the stream /
Your mother cries in grief / Mourning, beseeching her God. (9)

Jawin jawib kul bo'lsin / gardi latang ho'l bo'lsin /
Oeydan kiladigan shakh lar / bu onanga cho'r bo'ldi
May it rain until a lake is formed / Until the cotton headscarf is wet /
Streams of water from the rain / Became deep wounds for your mother. (10)

Azroeldan ot kildi, Jabraeldan khat kildi / Jabraeldan kilgan khat, ikki tan jo'q bo'ldi / Azrael dan kilgan khat ozinga nukhs bo'ldi / Azraeldan kilgan ot, otama?
A horse came from Azrael,[8] a letter came from Gabriel[9] / Upon the arrival of Gabriel's letter, two people perished / Arrival of Azrail's letter, caused your death / Does Azrael's arriving horse kill people? (11)

Oq tikandi bo'shlari / oqti ko'zim joshlari /
Oqma kozim jashlari / bu khudani ishlari
The white thorn's point / Rolled my tears on my cheeks /
Stop rolling o my tears / This is Allah's will. (12)

Bu Taloqandi talini / zanbor sorsing balini /
Hamma sini jonatdim / kim soraydi halimdi

These willows of Taloqan / The bees should be rubbing their wings on them /
I have sent them [all my children] on their way / Who is there to ask after me! (13)

Busaghanga majnoon tal / majnoon taldi bo'yi tal /
Men o'ltirib jilayn / sin o'ltirib qologh sal
At the entrance to your compound is the weeping willow / The weeping willow (majnun)[10] is weeping aloud /
I sit there and cry / You sit there and listen to me. (14)

Su otadi rish-bilan / shamol turdi dash bilan /
Bolam maindan sorasang / ikki kozim jashbilan
Water flows in the streams / Wind blows in the deserts /
My child, if you ask about me / My eyes are drenched with tears. (15)

Poem analysis

Although Ulbash's poems make general emotional sense, I needed elaboration based on her words to connect the dots between her life and laments. In her laments, Ulbash describes her world, a world she may not illustrate in ordinary language. Given the mystery and elliptical nature of the poetry, I offer my interpretation from her poems and life history, whereas readers may see it differently. However, her poems' obscurity makes them more critical (Minks 2013). In other words, Ulbash's poems had more impact on me and her surroundings than telling her life history verbally. She expresses sincere emotion and sentiment that is not found in ordinary spoken prose (Abu-Lughod 1986). Not being able to see, hear or walk, she imagines the road to Kandahar, her long wait for her grandson, Eid festivals without her children and visiting their graveyards. She names her dead children and depicts her sorrowful circumstances as if she wants to convey her feelings to her dead children. Like Minks (2013) and Gold's (1991) argument, Ulbash crosses some boundaries easily through her poems and melts the hearts of comparable women in her village. They crossed boundaries by allowing themselves to grieve as long as they could. As mentioned above, extended mourning after the family members' death is not encouraged due to local beliefs. Poems allowed her to lament, however, and to whomever she wanted. Ulbash creates a space where gender-based struggles are discussed in an informal context of songs.

In verse 3, she mentions her eldest daughter, Hajira. Amer was Hajira's son. Ulbash described how her grandson could not even see his mother before her death. Amer's mother, Hajira, was suffering from tuberculosis, and her death had happened unexpectedly. In other verses, Ulbash expresses her grief to her God or Allah (SWT), sometimes blaming fortune and luck. Other times she comforts herself, believing what she and her children experience is God's will. In her poems, she communicates with her dead children, letting them know what she is doing. Ulbash mentions market day in Badakhshan and Taloqan. Since women are freer on bazaar days, Ulbash indicates that she would have been able to go down to the village more quickly than on other days and visit her children's graveyards if her sight was not impaired.

Ulbash socially positions herself as a grieving mother through her laments. She expresses her various complaints through original words and a unique style of poems that become laments (Auerbach 1987, 26). Since she cannot hear and cannot see, perhaps she might avail herself of 'another expressive option to reflect her state of mind' (Auerbach 1987,

33). Maybe, only in the poetic space can she speak out about her family's misfortunes; she grieves for herself and her children's fates. My companions, extended family and fellow villagers already knew Ulbash's life history and the tragic incidents she had to endure. Since I did not belong to that community anymore, she explained what happened to Hajira, Khayrullah and others between reciting her poems. Her real world's ruptures were so extreme that her poems became a means of survival (Minks 2013). She had no other option for expressing her inner feelings and outward circumstances. Poetry had become a medium of choice between two Uzbek women in the north-eastern provinces. Culturally, through this medium, women express their emotions in general. Women like Ulbash and Khaldar have perfected it in some significant ways.

Discussion

Both Khaldar and Ulbash had suffered long from ongoing conflicts. They depicted their lives through their poetry and songs, rather than communicating in their everyday prose. Majrouh's (2010) women's songs are collected from Pashtun ethnicity or tribe, *and* concerned mostly with honour and shame. Unlike Majrouh (2010), I would argue that songs were means of communication for my informants with their long-gone family members and Allah (SWT). There was a sense of devotion and submission to Allah (SWT) in their songs and stories. They were honest with themselves, village kin, friends and to their God.

They sang about war, lamented those they had lost in decades of war and about being left alone in the later years of their life. Old age has added to their grief and sorrow, as Ulbash continuedly complained about not being heard and that her friends had lessened their visits. Löckenhoff and Pasupathi (2004) argue that ageism is a general societal problem; however, it is more entrenched in some societies than others. Although the village I studied pays enormous respect and admiration to their elders, women like Ulbash suffer from loneliness in rare cases. Khaldar had some support sources – she had been taken care of by her in-laws in her early widowhood and now by her son – Ulbash felt left alone. Part of her pain and frustration was her visual and hearing impairments because she could not communicate well. Even though she had a son who took care of her, her wailing heart, life tragedies and loss of her children left Ulbash in lifelong grieving. Her difficulties in communicating, vision and hearing impairment also isolated her emotionally, if not physically.

Thus, they create space for themselves to lament and make their voices heard. Through this platform, they grieve and seek relief. Women in the north-east have been the victims of political repression (Blackwood 2017). Singing is a mechanism through which women and men can condemn the consequences of political uprisings (Majrouh 2010). Both women's criticism of political instability is powerfully directed at those in charge of causing these issues. They cry out for justice even though the chance of being heard is slim; however, their songs create an audience and keep building on it (Caton 1993). Although the concept of 'emotion' has not been studied widely by anthropologists (Lindholm 2005), this brief yet in-depth study indicated that emotion is a significant part of women's lives in Afghanistan. Particularly of those who suffered due to war and poverty.

Lament played a central role in creating a space that strived to forge solidarity among women in the village and expressed women's form of resilience (Abu-Lughod 1990;

Appadurai, Korom, and Mills 1994; Kandiyoti 2007; Olszewska 2011; Scott 1985). Ulbash's performed poems, for instance, made everyone in her tent wonder, think deeply and reflect on the lives of people around them. In this study, both participants performed gender roles in their society, women as vulnerable, as the primary victims of decades of war, yet resilient. Their poetry expressed their 'alternative view' in an expressive form (Appadurai, Korom, and Mills 1994, 9) through which they find personal voices in a politically oppressed society that happens to impact women more than anyone else (Appadurai, Korom, and Mills 1994; Kodish 1987). Women's songs are their voice that echoes their sentiment, grief and alternative way to reunite with their lost loved ones. This is how they resist and express their gendered experiences (Abu-Lughod 1986; Appadurai, Korom, and Mills 1994).

Conclusions

I have argued that women's expressive culture allows women to tell their stories in an artistic way that often criticizes their oppressors and creates a space to grieve and project their feelings. In Ulbash's case, the only way to protest against her sorrow and grief was reciting her poems and shedding tears. Khaldar, for instance, remembered the loss of her husband and let her sufferings speak through those songs. In the meantime, the songs were a point of sociality and companionship for her with others. By focusing on these two women's experiences and sufferings, I do not mean to romanticize their lives and songs. I am not arguing that merely being women produced these conditions. Still, I wish to draw attention to the impact of the decades of war and violence on some rural Uzbek women in north-eastern Afghanistan and their creative use of available poetic means to witness and protest that impact through their poetic means.

Notes

1. Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) is considered the founding father of social or cultural anthropology. His contributions are phenomenal in the ethnographic data-collection method, which is observation. His tradition encourages anthropologists to immerse themselves in the 'other' culture first, then synthesize, describe and theorize their findings. Malinowski established this tradition during his work on the Trobriand Islands (now Papua New Guinea) between 1914 and 1918.
2. Khidr or Khizr is a revered figure in Islamic cosmology, believed to be described in the Qur'an as a righteous servant of Allah, possessing great wisdom or mystic knowledge. In local conceptions, Khizr is variously described as a saint, protector of travellers and a rescuer (*Encyclopedia of Islam* 2020).
3. Similar songs related to foreigner occupation, civil war and separation are composed in Pashtun women's oral poetry or *Landays*, 'May God destroy the White House and kill the men / who sent the U.S. cruise missiles to burn my homeland. Separation, you set fire / in the heart and home of every love' (Griswold 2013, 272–278).
4. Shah Taloqan is another hill in Khujamukhtar village, where Ulbash lived, and it is becoming a shrine because the village's common ancestors are buried there.
5. Specific days of the week are designated as *bazaar* or market days in Badakhshan and Taliqan, when farmers bring their produce to town. Market day is still a custom in the country, although people can find goods without bazaars. But customers get fresh and cheap goods on bazaar days when farmers bring their produce to sell. On these days villages are empty of men; they are rarely seen. Thus, market days are the freest days for village

women. They walk freely without thinking of being disrupted by men around the house or walking on the streets, since women have to cover their hair and bodies from all men as well as their faces from strange men.

6. Khwāja Mukhtār is a shrine on a hill in the village. Khwaja Mukhtar was the village's *peer* or saint buried there. Hence, the hill is named after him, and the villagers prefer to bury their deceased bodies on the same hill.
7. Classic poets have touched on the same theme as well. Shakila Azizzada, an Afghan poet, has written very close to what Ulbash says: 'If my heart beats for Kabul, it is for the slopes of *Bala Hesar*, holding my dead in its foothills' (Azizzada 2010, para 1).
8. In Islamic cosmology Azrael is the angel of death responsible for parting the soul from the body.
9. Gabriel delivers the message of God (Allah) to the Prophets of Islam.
10. The willow is frequently depicted in Persian and Uzbek poems as a symbol of grief and longing for loved ones. The story of the weeping willow goes back to the epic romance *Leila and Majnun*. Qays and Leila fell in love when they were young, but when they grew up Leila's father did not approve of their relationship. Qays became crazy (*majnun*) out of longing for her, which is why he is given the name Majnun, meaning madman. Leila and Majnun's story does not have a happy ending. According to oral traditions, Leila and Majnun were buried in different places; two willow trees grew on their graveyards, and their branches joined together. Therefore, the weeping willow is often called the '*Majnun beyd*' willow tree, and it often figures in love and sad poems.

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