

# AFGHAN WOMEN IN THE DIASPORA: SURVIVING IDENTITY AND ALIENATION

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## **Abstract**

This research will study the claims to and contestations of identity among the women of the Afghan diaspora, with particular focus on those in India and Germany. What does the concept of identity mean to these women? How do they reconcile their own sense of identity with the stereotyped, homogenised images of Afghan women and of Afghanistan held by their host communities? While analysing the constructions of identity and *afghaniyat* or afghanness, or the absence of the same, among the women of the Afghan diaspora, the emphasis is on how those women define their identities within the parameters of Afghanistan, India and Germany, and how they negotiate traditional constructs of identity given their experience of alienation and assimilation within their host cultures and communities. This study finds that these women in the diaspora, as a gender group, are at the margins of Afghan identity, with limited ability to play a role in defining themselves against categories that are critical to them.

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## **Biography**

Deepali Gaur Singh is a Delhi-based academic and media practitioner. She is the author of *Drugs Production and Trafficking in Afghanistan* (Pentagon Press, 2007) which focuses on the effects of the narcotics trade on the security and stability of Afghanistan and the region. She has an MPhil and a PhD from the Central Asian Studies Division, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, where the focus of her research was Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Deepali is also a filmmaker and photographer. She has been actively engaged with development organisations in rural Karnataka, Rajasthan, New Delhi and Orissa, documenting social change and developing an archive of alternative images in different media, on issues ranging from early childcare to primary education, health, the environment and the informal workforce. She was part of a film project – gender and migration – while on a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) scholarship at the University of Hanover (2000). She is an alumni of the Cluster for Excellence, Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany. She also received post-doctoral fellowships at the Cluster for Excellence, Asia and Europe in the Global Context, University of Heidelberg from the German Research Foundation (DFG) from November 2008 to January 2009 and from August 2009 to January 2010. She has just completed her research, which included a film on the Afghan diaspora.

Deepali has also researched and written extensively on Afghanistan and the new Central Asian republics as well as gender from a South Asian perspective. Her writings have been published in Indian national dailies, the United Nations Foundation's blog on sexual and reproductive health and the Afghanistan-based website, Kabul Press.

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İsmet Özel in his poem entitled 'Of not being a Jew' wrote:

'...When you reach the doorsteps of your friends  
Starts your Diaspora'

## I. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

For many Afghans, the first flight out of Afghanistan in the late 1970s and early 1980s (to escape compulsory conscription and the violence of the war) took them to Iran and Pakistan, the two neighbouring countries that opened their borders to them. These countries became home to one of the largest groups of refugee populations worldwide as nearly 7 million were displaced by the war following the Soviet invasion.<sup>2</sup> Several years later the region witnessed one of the largest return of refugees to their homeland as many Afghans made the journey back to the homes they had abandoned at the height of the war. More than 5 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan since 2002.<sup>3</sup> Yet today, 30 years after the start of the Soviet war, Afghans continue to be one of the biggest displaced populations globally.<sup>4</sup> Many went on to make the countries they fled to their homes, making them a widely dispersed group of people today.<sup>5</sup>

Repeated displacements create constant disruptions in the uniform meaning of home, which impact upon the manner in which these groups define and redefine home. Through this research paper I intend to understand what such relentless flight from home as a consequence of conflict has meant for the women of the Afghan diaspora, what happens when certain social groups no longer have access to spaces that are generally perceived as 'naturally given', and when they construct their social identities from a plethora of other factors, social constructions and hierarchies.<sup>6</sup> According to Richard Jenkins, the local, the communal, the national and the racial are to be understood as historically and contextually specific social constructions on the basic ethnic theme, allotropes of ethnic identification, and thus perceived as naturally given. Thus, this research will also explain how constructs of *national*, *ethnic* and *cultural* identities are imagined in the context of alienation and assimilation within host cultures and communities. For the purposes of this research, Germany and India are the 'host nation' contexts for the analyses of the experiences of

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<sup>1</sup> I am greatly indebted to the conversations I had with (the late) Dr Bernt Glatzer. His advice and assistance were invaluable to my research on the Afghan diaspora in Germany.

<sup>2</sup> Rüdiger Schöch, "Afghan Refugees in Pakistan during the 1980s: Cold War Politics and Registration Practice", PDES Working Papers, Research Paper No. 157, 28 June 2008, p.3.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "2010 UNHCR Country Operations Profile – Afghanistan", February 2010. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/txis/vtx/page?page=49e486eb6>

<sup>4</sup> Rüdiger Schöch, "Afghan Refugees in Pakistan", 2008, p.3. For related statistics, see also United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "2008 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced Persons and Stateless Persons", 16 June 2009.

<sup>5</sup> See Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), "Conference on Afghan Population Movements", Kabul, 14 February 2006.

[http://www.areu.org.af/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_download&gid=275&Itemid=99999999](http://www.areu.org.af/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=275&Itemid=99999999)

<sup>6</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity – Arguments and Explorations*, London, 1997, p.43.

Afghan diaspora communities in those countries.

Often traditional societies, like that in Afghanistan, define women in relation to male members of the household – father, husband or son.<sup>7</sup> What happens to the women's identities when there is no male figure to derive identity from or when women fail to fulfil their pre-assigned roles? Most of the women in the diaspora in Germany are educated, knowledgeable and empowered women who have managed to draw strength from obstacles and opportunities so as to forge their specific life stories. Those in India are a mixed group, some of whom are educated while others barely literate. How they chose to engage with their experiences in India is indicative of how they perceive the self and how they engage with the complex issue of identity despite the male-dominant agenda.

This paper thus centres on gender, agency and identity. It looks at the manner in which the women interviewed dealt with the variables they encountered (violence at home and remotely in Afghanistan, other diasporic groups and networks, the government or groups within the host nation) and, whenever possible, made the attempt to be agents of change for themselves, their families and the larger community. Even when their histories differed, they faced a common struggle against gender prejudices.

### **Structure and Methodology**

This study is based on qualitative participatory research principally involving three months of detailed observational study constituting interviews with individual women – leaders of organisations, students, media professionals, homemakers, artists and lawyers. It is an approach that incorporates oral history discourse, making it easier for these women to share their experiences. The in-depth and extensive interviews conducted specifically for this research paper in India and Germany between July and October 2009 in Afghan diasporic communities were based on a theoretically informed sample that encompassed a range of experiences among Afghan women and men in relation to their age, education, employment status, political, social and cultural activities, socioeconomic status, marital status, degree of religiosity, ethnicity, class and citizenship status. These respondents, however, should not be seen as representative of a large population though their life histories are representative of many others. Also, the use of the term 'Afghan women' in the paper in no way suggests that these women are a homogenous group. The term 'Afghan' in the paper refers to all people from Afghanistan and not specifically Pashtuns (as it is also sometimes used to denote).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell, "Exploited by Whom? An Alternative Perspective on Humanitarian Assistance to Afghan Women", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 5, 2002, p.918.

<sup>8</sup> The term Afghan has become a matter of debate in more recent discourses as many young Afghans (particularly in Afghanistan) believe it has been appropriated by the radical right amongst the Pashtuns. Hence its usage is problematic unless clarified.

The aim of the research is to produce qualitative data that will aid towards a consciousness of the issues facing Afghan women and men, facilitate processes of change in social and gender relations in these societies, and alter assumptions about women's passivity and how women's roles in such societies can be enhanced. It also aims to reject essentialisms about Afghan women both inside and outside Afghanistan. All names have been changed or only first names have been used in order to keep a uniformity of reference and to respect the anonymity of the respondents. While research for this paper was conducted specifically in the time period mentioned, many of the respondents were participants in another ongoing research project prior to and beyond that period. Thus, I have also relied on the data from the other project in some instances. In addition, some of the respondents were part of a subsequent film project on the Afghan diaspora in Germany and I have made use of audiovisual documentation from that project for this paper. The discussion on the issues of gender, agency and identity in this paper are firmly situated in the knowledge gained from my interviews with the women and men of the Afghan diaspora.

The first part of the paper deals with an introduction to the research. It looks at the various definitions of diaspora and where the Afghan diaspora lies in relation to those definitions. It also describes the segments of the Afghan diaspora that this research covers, namely, those in Germany and India. In the case of India, the focus is on the Afghan Hindus and Sikhs living there. The second part of the paper deals with violence and how it has impacted these groups and their migration. It looks at how violence entered the personal spaces of the home for these women, how it impacted their migration to different countries and also how it contributed to shaping their lives and their perceptions of self. The third part of the paper deals with other variables, such as language and attire (especially in relation to the politics of the *hijab*), and the culinary habits that have shaped the identity of many of these women. The fourth part deals with the stereotypes that these groups contend with in their host nations and how issues of racism play out in their daily tasks and lives. The final part concludes with the findings of the research.

### **Defining Diaspora**

The term 'diaspora', derived from Greek, means a scattering (of seeds), and refers to the scattering and resettlement of Jews outside Israel.<sup>9</sup> Over time, it has come to refer to the movement of any population sharing a common ethnic identity, and which was coerced into leaving their culture. The term is thus linked with the creation of a group of refugees.<sup>10</sup> It is used for a permanently displaced and relocated collective irrespective of whether the refugees do or do not ultimately settle in the new geographic location. Thus the term diaspora, both continual and contradictory in definition, conjures 'a remembrance of misfortune, genocide or expulsion as a requisite feature'<sup>11</sup> as the population so described

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<sup>9</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Taylor & Francis, 1998, p.425; see also Avtar Brah, "Thinking Through the Concept" from *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, Routledge, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Denise Helly, *Cultural Continuities and Contradictions*, Paper presented at *The Making of the Islamic*

finds itself separated from its national territory while harbouring hopes, or at least a desire – perceived or real – of returning to their homeland at some point (irrespective of whether the homeland exists in any meaningful sense at the time).<sup>12</sup> The English usage of the term widened in the mid-1950s to include long-term expatriates from various countries and regions. Most migratory movements since the 1980s have been the result of violent armed conflicts, economic dislocation and political repression, or contact and rivalries between countries; this is very true of the Afghan diaspora as well. Yet, the voluntary nature of some of the resettlement cannot be completely ignored. In fact, prior to the Soviet war, many Afghan professionals and intellectuals migrated to countries such as Germany following their education in western institutions.

Diasporas define themselves through relationships with the homeland, international entities, and host-country governments and societies, thereby influencing various dynamics.<sup>13</sup> Members of a diasporic group try to maintain their ethno-national identity, and their contacts with their homeland and other dispersed segments of the same nation through intricate organisations, in an attempt to protect the rights of their members and encourage participation in the cultural, political, social, and economic spheres which are the presumed bases for continued solidarity. Members of the Afghan diaspora have formed several such organisations for lawyers, academics and other professionals as well as portals that act as a bridge of communication and information between diasporic groups and host nations. In India, the Khalsa Diwan Welfare Society is one such group. It seeks the empowerment of the Afghan Hindus and Sikhs who have migrated to India, and runs courses such as tailoring and computer applications for women and children.<sup>14</sup>

Diasporas highlight the global trend of creating, constructing and reconstructing identity, not by identifying with some ancestral place, but through travelling itself. When the diasporic subject travels, so does his or her culture. A travelling culture means a culture that changes, develops and transforms itself according to various influences it encounters in different places. This change is also a two-way flow: host cultures, too, do not remain untouched by migrating groups or cultures, whether the migrants are permanent settlers or merely in transit while they await resettlement. Diasporas change their country of arrival, even as their own cultures are changed.<sup>15</sup>

A diasporic group, as in the case of the Afghans in different parts of the world, is often an amalgam of a few to several journeys occurring over differing timescales and to different (and sometimes the same) parts of the world. Young Afghans experienced their first forced

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*Diaspora Conference*, Geneva, Switzerland, May 2004.

<sup>12</sup> William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return”, *Diaspora*, Vol. 1, No.1, Spring 1991, p.83.

<sup>13</sup> Manuel Orozco, “Diasporas and Development: Issues and Impediments” in Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, *Diasporas and Development: Exploring the Potential*, Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., September 2008, p.208.

<sup>14</sup> “Delhi’s Khalsa Diwan Welfare Society Transforming Afghan Kids’ Lives”, *The Hindustan Times*, 21 August 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Ashcroft et al., *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, p.427.

displacement by virtue of the Soviet war. They moved to various countries and built their identities on the basis of their diverse experiences of dislocation. Some returned to Afghanistan expecting normalcy, only to have to flee from the ceaseless violence yet again. As a consequence, for many, a substantial part of their lives had been spent in repeated flight between Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iran or other countries, as a result of the different conflicts, starting with the Soviet war, then the civil war and the rule of the Taliban militia. Even under the post-9/11 democratic government, many professionals continued to leave to escape persecution from local warlords, powerful politicians and criminal gangs.

In traditional cultures and societies such as Afghanistan, almost every woman faces displacement when marriage takes her to the matrimonial home. Marriage uproots her from her ties to family and kin, placing her in an environment that is not only alien but often also hostile. This new place is what she has to start calling home. Added to this already tenuous scenario is the presence of conflict and violence in the nation which necessitates flight from home and the constant destruction and setting up of the household. As a consequence of this recurring displacement brought on by unrelenting conflict, what is perceived as the uniform meaning of home – a place of safety and security – metamorphoses into something less stable and more fragile. These violent inconsistencies in the fixed understanding of home mean that the construction of identity thus becomes a series of inclusions and exclusions. Such repeated exile and movement may, for some, even result in a loss of nostalgia for a single home. According to Avtar Brah the concept of diaspora can offer a critique of ‘discourses of fixed origins, while taking account of a homing desire which is not the same as the desire for “homeland”’.<sup>16</sup> Jeannette, a Berlin-based artist, describes herself as located in three places – Kabul, Bombay and Berlin.<sup>17</sup> Her experiences and responses manifest how some individuals may have multiple homes throughout their diasporic experience, with different reasons for maintaining some form of attachment to each. She made her journey from Afghanistan to Germany at the age of 3. However, the Soviet invasion soon changed the circumstances of that journey. She reconstructs the early years of her life through vignettes of her home in Afghanistan, her family’s treacherous journey from the refugee camps of Pakistan to life in India as asylum-seekers, and the eventual move to Germany to join her and her aunt. Today, her lives in those three places are part of her identity, and those experiences are reflected in her own work as an artist.<sup>18</sup>

The Afghan diaspora in Germany is the largest community of Afghans in Europe, with a large sub-group of 22,000 living in Hamburg alone.<sup>19</sup> As a consequence, the experiences of particular sub-groups can vary so considerably that it might even seem futile to talk of shared identities and experiences (just as it might seem futile to do so for the Afghan

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<sup>16</sup> For more on diasporas, see Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 1996, p.180.

<sup>17</sup> For more on Jeannette’s views on displacement and identity, see her profile at <http://www.jeanno.de/>

<sup>18</sup> Based on personal interviews in Germany, November 2009, including audiovisual documentation for a film project.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfram Zunzer, “Diaspora Communities and Civil Conflict Transformation”, *Berghof Occasional Paper*, No.26, September 2004, p.36.



diaspora at the global level). For other sub-groups, the more recent migration is really the continuation of a process begun many centuries earlier, such as in the case of the Afghan Hindus and Sikhs who had made Afghanistan their home at different points in history, the most recent being after the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Afghanistan, due to its location at the crossroads of routes spanning the Indian subcontinent, Iran and Central Asia, became home to various religions, including early Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Islam. From the 6th to the end of the 10th century, Kabul and most of southeastern Afghanistan was ruled by a series of small Hindu dynasties. Their influence is reflected in names such as Bagram (Bagi Ram), Shakar Dara (Shankar Dara) and Kandahar which was Gandhara, a strategic site on the main Persian routes to Central Asia and India.<sup>20</sup> Thus, for the Hindus and Sikhs on the western frontiers of Pakistan, it was natural to cross into Afghanistan for safe haven during the brutal riots that accompanied the partition. This group, though a miniscule minority in the ethnically diverse country, made the region their home for several centuries – against a background of invasions, wars and trade. Their trading activities spanned Sindh, Punjab as well as Kandahar and Kabul and onwards to Bukhara, Merv and Europe.<sup>21</sup> They enjoyed considerable religious tolerance, especially under the constitution of 1964.<sup>22</sup> Their more recent relocation – during the internecine civil war and the rule of the Taliban militia – from their homes in Jalalabad, Khost or Kabul, to India or Europe, was yet another stage in their experience of displacement. The Taliban in Afghanistan had made it mandatory for the community to wear yellow armbands, so that they are clearly demarcated from the rest of the population.<sup>23</sup>

Multifaceted, intricate narratives like the above have forced many writers to recognise the complex history of diasporas and to review the totalising nature of rigid categories. As there are several factors working concurrently, a deeper cultural, historical, social and political understanding of the contexts and sub-contexts (class, caste, religion, ethnicity, age, language, tribal customs and beliefs, kinship ties, political affiliations) would be required, as would an understanding of the institutions (political, social, cultural or religious) reinforcing certain practices. Only with that depth of understanding would it be possible to form a comprehensive rather than a singular, homogenised view of identity for these groups.

Some of the factors that might influence both the perceptions and the reception of a diaspora, depending on the host nations they locate themselves in, include: the complexities stemming from the rise of authoritarian religious movements both in Afghanistan as well as within the host countries of the Afghan diaspora (which has had severe implications for women); the weakening of the once active feminist movement in Afghanistan and in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran; and the growing

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<sup>20</sup> Deepali Gaur Singh, *Drugs Production and Trafficking in Afghanistan*, Pentagon Press, 2007, pp.13–14.

<sup>21</sup> “Hindus and Sikhs in Kabul – A Fact Sheet”, *Foundation for Culture and Civil Society*, 23 September 2003. <http://www.afghanfcss.org/general-file/hindus-and-sikh.htm>

<sup>22</sup> Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell, “Exploited by Whom?”, 2002, p.911.

<sup>23</sup> Sayed Salahuddin, “Afghan Hindus Divided over Taliban Yellow Badge”, *Reuters*, 23 May 2001.

resurgence of the tribal, patriarchal culture against a backdrop of the ceaseless conflict. For instance, just a few weeks after the overthrow of the Taliban, the Northern Alliance, the ally of western governments, prevented women from marching to the United Nations (UN) compound to announce that 'women were free, but it is not freedom to throw off (our) veils'.<sup>24</sup> This was even though *freeing* Afghan women had been a primary agenda of the International Security Assistance Force-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (ISAF-NATO) led invasion. What makes gender an equally critical variable in identity formation is that many Afghans within the diaspora offer textured social histories that reflect the criticality of variegated categories; they respond to issues of alienation and assimilation with regard to identity formation on the basis of both their collective and individual histories.

## II. VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT

### Migration and Conflict

Conflict has been one of the primary causes of most diasporic movements and this is more true of the Afghan diaspora than any other group globally. For the ethnic Afghans who left their country over the last three decades in hopes of leaving behind the incessant violence, fleeing meant leaving behind everything that had defined their lives up to that point. For Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, the flight out of Afghanistan was due to conflict as well, to escape military conscription during the Soviet war, and later the atrocities of the civil war and the Taliban. However, wars and battlefields occupy the public space and hence tend to be associated with men, with women having diminished visibility in that sphere. Homes, which occupy the private space, are associated with women. According to Haleh Afshar, the mythology of war is known to relegate women to the roles of wives and mothers of heroes, confined to cradles and coffins. Through their grief and suffering, death and martyrdom become the hallmark of their achievements in a conflict rather than any direct role.<sup>25</sup> As men play the role of protectors of women from the brutality of war, women are reduced to dependent migrants; it is the male members who have power and control over the citizenship and identity of their dependants – their wives and children. Emily Hobhouse, the early 20th-century reformer in her controversial book *The Brunt of the War and Where It Fell* points out that women and children are 'where it fell' when talking about the direct consequences of war and conflict.<sup>26</sup> In destroying homes, wars, for women, take a toll not only on interpersonal relationships but also on associated ideas of self and identity. However, the analytical parameters for understanding citizenship and identity, or the dynamics of war and migration, are set by men.<sup>27</sup> This intersection of the private and

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<sup>24</sup> "Kabul Women's March Thwarted", *BBC News Online*, 27 November 2001.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1679337.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1679337.stm)

<sup>25</sup> Haleh Afshar, "Women, Wars, Citizenship, Migration, and Identity: Some Illustrations from the Middle East", *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2, University of York, February 2007, p.238.

<sup>26</sup> Emily Hobhouse, *The Brunt of the War and Where It Fell*, 1902. For statistics on Afghan women and children as migrants, see also Nancy Hatch Dupree's "Demographic Reporting on Afghan Refugees in Pakistan", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 1988, pp.845–65.

<sup>27</sup> Haleh Afshar, "Women, Wars, Citizenship", 2007, p.237.

public domains has implications for women as they find themselves displaced from their personal spaces (that is, their homes) by events in the public arena (that is, wars and conflict) which are considered to be beyond their comprehension. It is important to understand how this impacts their perception of the self in relation to the emotional meaning of home, or the absence of it.

### **The Afghan Diaspora<sup>28</sup>**

A complete generation of Afghans has witnessed only conflict by virtue of the three-decade-old situation, watching it as it metamorphosed into various forms of violence, from actual war to the violence of minefields and the destruction of livelihoods. The mathematics of death tolls, the sound of mourning, the weight of grief and the uncertainty of safety are what have come to become a near daily occurrence for many.

Many of those who left Afghanistan during the Soviet war returned in the early 1990s expecting that the conflict had ended. The internecine civil war only brutalised them further as the *mujahideen* turned against each other in their thirst for power. Women witnessed unprecedented violence. It is these years of the civil war that really saw a complete destruction of the lives of the Afghan women, especially in the urban centres. Many accounts of the condition of women in Afghanistan have been quick to use the Taliban era or the civil war prior to it as the reference point. And yet, eight years after the first American troops entered Afghanistan to 'smoke Osama out' and rescue Afghan women from the misogynistic policies of the Taliban militia, both tasks remain unachieved. For the conservative rural-based mujahideen opposition, Kabul and other cities were perceived to be centres of 'sin and vice' precisely because of the high visibility of educated, emancipated, urban women.<sup>29</sup> Those suffering under Taliban rule fled Afghanistan, returning only when the American troops took on the 'war against terror' after the events of 9/11.

However, even today, there are families leaving Afghanistan, though perhaps not in the earlier flow of before. Instead, a steady trickle can be seen leaving – to escape persecution at the hands of local politicians, warlords, criminal groups and militia.<sup>30</sup> The Ibrahimis, who have been living in Germany since early 2009 as asylum-seekers, left Afghanistan because a Taliban-style local militia group threatened to kidnap their daughter if Ibrahim, an engineer, refused to be their accomplice in their criminal activities.<sup>31</sup> Sadra and her husband fled to India in 2004 to escape the local militia threatening to kill them. Their neighbours had left in early 2009 to escape threats to their daughters, one of whom had actually been kidnapped by a local criminal gang. They fled soon after she managed to

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<sup>28</sup> The Afghan diaspora in Germany is close to 100,000 in size. For more on the dispersion and activities of the Afghan diaspora in Germany, see Wolfram Zunzer, "Diaspora Communities", 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell, "Exploited by Whom?", 2002, p.913.

<sup>30</sup> Interviewed families in Germany and India in July 2009 – January 2010 who had migrated to protect their teenage and pre-teen daughters from local militia, who they often referred to as the Taliban.

<sup>31</sup> Interviewed Ibrahim and his wife and two daughters in Germany in October 2009. They had arrived two months earlier.

escape.<sup>32</sup> Threats are often directed towards the young girls of the family, and are used to settle land disputes, debts or personal scores – sometimes in line with tribal customs, other times in accordance with interpretations of Islamic law, but never in congruence with women's rights.<sup>33</sup>

The Soviet war saw most of the country's intelligentsia leave to escape persecution from both sides in the conflict. This was at a time when Afghan women in the cities were already visible amongst the professionals.<sup>34</sup> As early as 1929, Queen Suraya and her daughters had appeared publicly without the veil, creating the space for urban Afghan women to follow suit.<sup>35</sup> What the war in effect did was rob the country of the resource of educated women and professionals. Most primary and secondary schools, which relied on the female workforce, then became acutely short of staff.

In the early 1990s, women held 70 per cent of the teaching positions, 50 per cent of government jobs and 40 per cent of medical posts in Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup> Khadidja, who has been living in India with her family for the past few years, had been a high school teacher for 20 years when her daughter was kidnapped. She left for India soon after.<sup>37</sup> For some, such as the early phase of Afghan migrants to countries such as Iran, migration was also an important means of accessing education and employment.

Among the women who had migrated later as a consequence of the brutal civil war or during the Taliban regime in the 1990s, not all were educated, professional women, and their move had been an act of desperation. Migration for them meant experiencing new and different forms of social stratification. Of those who were educated, they had not been exposed to an elite western (English, French or German) education unlike the earlier wave of migrants. For these women, migration completely de-skilled them as their education and language skills were in Dari or Pashto, the two official languages of Afghanistan. Their primary task on moving to the host nation became learning the local language, a necessity to engage in even basic daily tasks. Education for the children was almost always in a foreign language, which alienated the parents from any kind of active participation and engagement. These women thus found themselves in an environment that thrust a sense of inadequacy and helplessness upon them. Khadidja, for example, went from being an independent, professional woman to a helpless dependant confined 24 hours a day to her two rooms set in a crowded locality in New Delhi while she struggled to learn to communicate in Hindi. What was even more frustrating for her was that she could not help

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<sup>32</sup> Interviewed both families in India in July–September 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Amnesty International, "Afghanistan. Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Fate of the Afghan Returnees", London: Amnesty International, 2003, p.4.

<sup>34</sup> Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion*, Zed Books, 2007, p.16.

<sup>35</sup> Saba Gul Khattak, "Afghan Women: Bombed to Be Liberated?", *Middle East Report*, No. 222, Middle East Research and Information Project, Spring, 2002, p.19. For other emancipatory measures for women under King Amanullah, also read Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell, "Exploited by Whom?", 2002, pp.909–30.

<sup>36</sup> Saba Gul Khattak, "Afghan Women", 2002, p.20.

<sup>37</sup> Based on interviews conducted in New Delhi, India in August 2009.

her younger children with their education as they were attending Urdu language schools, a tongue alien to her. Moreover, her older daughters became dropouts as they could not cope with education in Urdu or Hindi. These were traumatic life-changing situations for a woman who had herself been an educator; she had to watch her own daughters being deprived of an education. This acute sense of frustration led her to attempt suicide a couple of times. Such experiences are not uncommon amongst members of the diaspora when they arrive in a host nation, and very often shape their lives there.

The experiences of these women are often similar even in resettlement countries such as Germany. Where differences arise, they may be related to the position of the women in the class structure in Afghanistan at the time of migration and education. Those educated in Dari and/or Pashto had experiences similar to Khadidja's and they struggled to learn German. However, among the Afghans who had arrived in Germany during the Soviet war 30 years earlier, there were many who had been exposed to a German education in Afghanistan. Hence, Germany was the natural choice for resettlement. This was the case with Jeannette, who had gone to Germany before the war while her family followed later. This segment of young girls struggled not so much with education as with being accepted by their peers at school where they evidently stood out by virtue of their appearance. Among them were also women for whom the change was less arduous and traumatic, like Susanne who has an Afghan father and German mother.<sup>38</sup>

### **Afghan Hindus and Sikhs**

The significant feature of the situation in India is the composition of the Afghan diaspora there, which is quite different from the nature of dispersal of Afghans in other countries. Nearly 90 per cent of Afghan refugees in India are Hindus and Sikhs, with around 9,500 under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) care.<sup>39</sup> As the violence continues uninterrupted in Afghanistan, they see naturalised Indian citizenship as the best long-term solution, and many of them work towards being socially and culturally integrated into the Indian way of life. All the women when questioned about wanting to return to Afghanistan completely rejected the idea. The lack of freedom and educational opportunities, the attached insecurity and the presence of the Taliban or Taliban-like militia groups were cited as the reasons making it no longer possible for them to return. The fact that many Afghan Hindu and Sikh girls have married into local families in and around Delhi and Punjab makes the possibility of return even more remote.<sup>40</sup> This group is believed to have numbered between 50,000 and 200,000 or 1 to 2 per cent of the Afghan population

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<sup>38</sup> Based on interviews between September 2009 and January 2010 including audiovisual documentation for a film project.

<sup>39</sup> Kitty McKinsey, "Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie Applauds Courage of Refugees in India", United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 6 November 2006. <http://www.unhcr.org/454f05d62.html>

<sup>40</sup> In several cases the men – fathers and brothers – have returned to Afghanistan to rebuild their lives there. They were often accompanied by the mothers, leaving the daughters in their matrimonial homes in their host countries.

before civil war broke out in the 1980s.<sup>41</sup> Today, there are only a handful of Hindus and Sikhs who still live in Afghanistan (primarily in Kabul) as their homes have now become hostile territory. Under Afghanistan's 1964 Constitution, this group along with other minorities enjoyed the same rights as the rest of the Afghan population, a situation which changed when civil war broke out. Minor tensions never turned into pogroms, one of the exceptions being in 1992 when many temples were destroyed in Afghanistan following the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in northern India.<sup>42</sup> But by 1994, during Taliban rule, nearly the entire Hindu population left. Many of these refugees joined family members in Germany and India, some of whom had made the move earlier during the Soviet war. There were others who joined their Indian relatives in these countries.

### **Case Study – Amarjeet (Afghan Sikh in India)<sup>43</sup>**

Amarjeet went to visit her aunt in India in the early 1990s. What was supposed to be a short holiday became an extended stay as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated during the civil war. It has been 18 years and she has not returned since. Originally belonging to the community of Sikhs in Afghanistan, her marriage was eventually arranged to a local Sikh family in Delhi. She says, 'I did not have the option of turning down the proposal as I am the oldest of five siblings – with one brother – and am also polio-afflicted'. Life for her in her marital home was a series of adjustments, including learning to cook in what she calls the 'Indian Punjabi' way which to her was far different from their own simple Afghan Sikh fare. While communication was not that difficult, the language she spoke was different from the Punjabi spoken at her marital home. In many ways the adjustments she made were erosions of her own memories of Afghanistan and also her identity as an Afghan Sikh.

Widowed barely two years after her marriage and abandoned by her in-laws, she works hard to make a life for herself and her 4-year-old son. Amarjeet's is a life torn between two countries, a country she calls home even today but knows she cannot return to given the lack of security for the tiny Hindu and Sikh minority there. Her only connection to India (her family having lived in Afghanistan for generations) was through her husband, and his death severed that as well. And yet she prefers to live alone in India rather than return to Afghanistan as her parents want her to do. Due to her decision, the family lives a divided life. Her mother stays with her in India while her father carries on his small trading business between the two countries.

Though she is from Jalalabad in Afghanistan, Amarjeet, like the rest of the Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, is referred to as Kabuli by the local population, an identity that she appears to have embraced. As mentioned earlier, Afghans in India are originally from different parts of

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<sup>41</sup> Exact figures are unavailable since a census has not been conducted in Afghanistan. US Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report, Afghanistan", 2004. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35513.htm>

<sup>42</sup> Lavina Melwani, "Hindus Abandon Afghanistan", *Hinduism Today*, 3 June 2005. <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1994/4/1994-4-02.shtml>

<sup>43</sup> Based on interviews conducted in New Delhi in July–August 2009.

Afghanistan. Thus, Amarjeet's own nonchalance towards the use of the term reflects her reluctance to delve into the life she left behind in Afghanistan. It is also reflective of the prevalent ignorance with regard to the Afghan diaspora amongst the locals. Interestingly, the term *Kabuli* is used for Afghan Hindus and Sikhs only. There is no evidence to suggest that native Afghans are also referred to as *Kabulis*. This could thus also be a term used to distinguish Afghan Hindus and Sikhs from both native Afghans in India as well as from the local Hindu and Sikh population.

During the series of displacements that women encounter, 'home' could be a mud house, a dingy rented room or house, a camp or a tent. Their experiences as diaspora groups are shaped through shifting among multiple camps, homes and cities in search of safety and sources of livelihood in an inhospitable, if not completely hostile, environment. Although there are cases such as that of Amarjeet, who directly faced displacement just once, when a holiday turned into a change of home, or Makai, who was also displaced just once when she went to Germany from Herat in eastern Afghanistan 20 years earlier (when she was married over the telephone to a young Afghan man settled in Germany), there are other Afghan women who experienced displacement several times. Heelani and Zakia, amongst others, moved from Pakistan to India and eventually to Germany.<sup>44</sup>

Since both the abandonment and the making of the home are important, the home itself has several connotations for these women. Their understanding and representations of home involve multiple themes that relate to both the physical as well as imagined and intangible aspects. The abandonment of home is symbolic of leaving behind a sense of identity, a culture, and a personal and collective history through memories or tangible objects and materials contained in the shell of the house that make up a home. Aside from being a reflection of the self, and of social and economic status, home represents the space where women aspire towards happiness and security and where they enjoy familial support. In some instances, home becomes the social and psychological space. Homira recalls her sense of loss: '... when I left Afghanistan ... the one thing I lost was my childhood.'<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Jeannette and Susanne both have distinct memories of their homes in Afghanistan. Susanne could even find her home through the lanes and by-lanes of Kabul many years later. Thus, for some, home is a specific geographic location and structure. These variables of memory and loss with regard to their sense of home simultaneously merge and disengage with one another at multiple levels in the discourses of these women.

For some there are constant thoughts of returning home, which often prevents them from coming to terms with the present. And it is this denial – the reluctance to accept their move as final – that makes them feel that the present is temporary even though it affects their lives in a deep and permanent way. Khadidja in her frustration reflects this state of mind.

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<sup>44</sup> Based on interviews conducted in India and Germany in July 2009 – January 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Film and other audiovisual documentation based on interviews conducted in September 2009 – January 2010. She left Afghanistan at the age of 13 with her family.

Sadra, another Afghan woman, and Khadidja's neighbour, on the other hand, has learnt to negotiate a space even within that perceived temporary life. She speaks of how she no longer allows herself to be cheated by shopkeepers who charge her much more than the 'locals' for the same articles. While negotiating the public transport system, she would rile at the autorickshaw drivers who charge her extra with 'we are from here only' as opposed to being *baharwala* (outsiders) or foreigners. In contrast, Seema, interviewed much earlier in the spring of 2000, who was living in better conditions (compared to Sadra), continues to nurture hopes of returning.<sup>46</sup> Her anger and sense of humiliation is palpable when she says, 'They [the locals] look at us like we are animals', recognising that that attitude comes from her being different in the way she dresses and what she eats. In her narrative, Germany is a transit destination until she is able to return to Afghanistan. Evidently, she chooses to nurture only the happy memories despite the circumstances under which she left.

### **Wars on the Home Front**

Even as some women, such as Seema and Khadidja, react to the sense of alienation they feel as they try to settle into the host countries, there is enough evidence to suggest that the spiral of endless violence in Afghanistan has found its way into the lives of women on a daily basis in the form of violence and abuse by male relatives. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, regardless of a woman's marital status, her level of education or employment, over 87 per cent of women in Afghanistan have faced some form of abuse.<sup>47</sup> Thus, increasingly, wars for women are fought on the home fronts. Against this background, what are the different ideas that are contained within the concept of home for Afghan women in the diaspora? Is home a place where life is peaceful and familiar, where one lives with the immediate family – the husband and children – or just a series of permutations, combinations and redefinitions of all or some of these factors? Women counter these expectations by creating an 'embattled identity' according to Maria Holt.<sup>48</sup> In Afghanistan, when the towns were bombed, the women created their own embattled identities and saved their children, negotiating mountains and borders and living in abominable conditions in under-resourced camps. As a result, refugee women were often the decision-makers, a task that normally would have been undertaken either jointly with men, or by men alone.<sup>49</sup> But what happens when they escape the conflict, into environs where the conflict is of a different kind? How do you contextualise this embattled identity in the diaspora once the conflict ends? And what happens if the home itself is a site of conflict?

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<sup>46</sup> I met Seema in August 2000. Thus, conversations with her were devoid of the additional discourse on 11 September 2001 and the events that followed subsequently inside Afghanistan in particular.

<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch, "We Have the Promises of the World. Women's Rights in Afghanistan", 2009, p.11.

<sup>48</sup> Maria Holt, "The Wives and Mothers of Heroes: Evolving Identities of Palestinian Refugee Women in Lebanon", *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2, University of York, February 2007, pp.237–46.

<sup>49</sup> Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell, "Exploited by Whom?", p.921.



### **Case study – Morsal (Native Afghan in Germany)**

In May 2008, the screams of young Morsal Obeidi reverberated in a quiet locality of Hamburg, highlighting the conflict that many Afghan women in the diaspora contend with.<sup>50</sup> Even as paramedics battled to save the 16-year-old, the shocking tale of the brutal stabbing of the young girl at the hands of her 23-year-old brother unfolded. *Namus* or honour was at the centre of this death in Germany of a life that had begun in war-torn Afghanistan. Such cases of transnational ‘honour’ killings have only added another dimension to the vulnerability of migrant women within communities where identity, religion, culture and traditions become enmeshed to create a lethal cocktail, giving the concepts of family honour and reputation a resurgent lease of life when the displaced find themselves in alien and insecure environs.

Morsal was killed by her brother for leading what many called a ‘dishonourable’ life. The friction between the family and the rebellious teenager appeared to stem from her westernised lifestyle which, like other German girls her age, included makeup, short skirts, cigarettes and uncovered hair. In German society her rebellion might appear to be the rebellion of a pubescent teenager, but what would it appear as to an Afghan who had left behind only the war in Afghanistan and nothing else?

As public discourse became polarised, much of the local media chose to represent the case as a clash of cultures, with the teenager a martyr taking on the tribal culture of her parents in the feminist cause, even as her ‘evil’ brother thwarted it by rejecting the more evolved western culture and society. The problem with this oversimplified argument of assimilation versus alienation – Morsal versus Ahmad – is that Morsal returned repeatedly to her abusive family despite locating herself culturally and socially in Germany. That in itself is a statement on a teen life torn between the public and personal domains, a classic tussle between two worlds that the second generation diaspora, particularly the women, experience.

While this case raises issues related to the failed experiment of multiculturalism in Germany, marginalising these women further gives male members in that cultural context legitimacy to reinforce their control over them. It is discomfiting that the more recent discourses within western secular thought call for allowing a cultural space for minority practices and beliefs in the context of a secular agenda, when those are the practices that impinge on the rights and liberties of women in minority groups. Often, conventional gender divisions as they have been understood in the West, according to Elaheh Rostami-Povey, fail to explain the fluidity of Afghan women’s identities. Afghan women’s agency and identity, she says, suggest a different view of gender, a greater fluidity in defining men and women so that they are not labelled merely by gender and faith. Afghan women discuss gender in the context of social relations, Islamic religion, culture, domination, subordination and

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<sup>50</sup> Deepali Gaur Singh, “16-year old Afghan Girl Victim of ‘Honor Killing’ in Germany”, *Kabul Press*, 14 May 2009. <http://kabulpress.org/my/spip.php?article3495>

masculinity. They see gender as a process embedded in all social relations and institutions.<sup>51</sup>

Equally worrying about cases like Morsal's is the message it sends back to Afghanistan where members of the Afghan diaspora in European nations are perceived as the educated political elite who could afford to make their way to these nations as opposed to the ones who simply crossed borders to escape violence and starvation. And yet, even for this group, there is embedded in the tribal code the belief that a woman once married has to be protected by the man (husband) at all costs, which also underpins the criticality of honour.<sup>52</sup> *Zar, Zan, Zamin* (gold, women, land) is what a man has to fight for and protect.<sup>53</sup> It is possession of these 'assets' that underpins violence against women in traditional structures even if they might not be physically located within those structures. With her position within these patriarchal contexts defined through male relatives – as mother, daughter, wife or sister – and her fertility as her biggest asset (especially the bearing of male children) what happens to her identities when there is no male figure to derive an identity from or if she fails to fulfil her pre-assigned role of wife and mother? How are these women perceived within their own communities if they are abandoned, divorced or widowed? What happens when these women are unable to bear children, particularly a male child, given that child-bearing is believed to be one of the most important duties of a woman in Afghan society?<sup>54</sup>

### ***Case study – Jahan (ethnic Afghan in India)***<sup>55</sup>

Jahan, who is in her nineties, has lived in India for the past 20 years, having fled the war in Afghanistan with her husband in the 1980s. Today a widow, she lives alone in the middle-class neighbourhood of Lajpat Nagar, New Delhi, waiting for the day she can be with her only son in Germany. However, her diminishing hearing seems to be diminishing her hopes. Her last request for resettlement with relatives in Canada was denied because she could not answer most of the questions. Her age-related hearing impairment meant she could not hear, understand or respond to the interviewer's questions. Besides, very few countries seem willing to take on the responsibility of a nonagenarian woman. A two-room accommodation with her life's belongings in an always-packed bag is what she calls home. She converses in Dari and her understanding of the local language is quite limited which makes communication with her neighbours or migration officials an arduous task.

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<sup>51</sup> Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*, 2007, pp.3–4.

<sup>52</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Between Hope and Fear, Intimidation and Attacks against Women in Public Life in Afghanistan", Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, 2004.

<sup>53</sup> An old Afghan proverb which is believed to provide the motivation for the violence that underpins local life.

<sup>54</sup> Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*, 2007, p.18.

<sup>55</sup> Based on interviews in India in September 2009.

Jahan, like many other Afghan women, once belonged to the more privileged sections of society. While in Afghanistan, as the political, social and economic elite, they enjoyed a more sequestered and luxurious lifestyle, quite different from the lifestyles they have to contend with as asylum-seekers and refugees. Often, these women have had to give up modern homes and apartments in Afghan cities for poorer crowded neighbourhoods in countries such as Iran, Pakistan or India.<sup>56</sup> This move translates into a loss of status for them. These women, though educated, have limited survival skills when they are thrown in the midst of chaotic middle-class life in countries like India. Their only means of livelihood becomes the vast informal sector where the jobs are mostly menial, something that they are unable to cope with. Often they struggle to negotiate even daily tasks such as shopping and cooking, and have difficulty adjusting to the new environment, its culture and its challenges.

Jahan was already in her sixties when she arrived in India, and had to make a new start in that country. She says she cannot join her son as his German wife is unwilling to support her. She sees her son once a year when he comes to India to visit her. In India, she has a distant male relative who lives with her and provides immediate support in terms of dealing with the travails of daily life as well as her migrant status and its accompanying complications (involving bureaucratic hurdles and status renewals among other things). Jahan bears the financial burden of her stay through remittances from relatives settled abroad.

The remittances which sustain many women like Jahan are a reminder of the dominant role of community and group identity in Afghan society, to the extent that it might render individual identity (especially in the rural areas of Afghanistan) redundant. It is on this question of their individual identity that women come up against hurdles as they attempt to negotiate another dimension of their understanding of the self amidst the various demands of the community and family. That the communal identity has an enormous impact on gender relations, even in urban areas and among the educated and middle classes – as well as in diaspora communities in the west – is evident in the reactions to the women-led protests in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the introduction of the Shiite personal status law.<sup>57</sup>

Afghan women see themselves as an integral part of the family unit shaped by Afghan tradition and culture. And yet, femininity crosses paths with war and violence. Against this background of violence, traditional gender relations in the context of Afghan culture take on an added complexity. Thus, for some women even as the move from a traditional conflict-riddled home might provide a path towards equality, it can also cause a further

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<sup>56</sup> Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell, “Exploited by Whom?”, 2002, p.921; see also Nancy Hatch Dupree, “Demographic Reporting”, 1988, pp.845–65.

<sup>57</sup> Deepali Gaur Singh, “Afghans May Vote but Women’s Rights Remain Elusive”, *RH Reality Check*, 25 August 2009.

<http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/blog/2009/08/24/afghans-may-vote-but-democracy-has-not-yet-restored-women-rights>

decline in status. Shaima, a mother of three grown-up children who made Germany her home 30 years ago, is an example. Within a few years of her arrival in the country, she separated from her husband and raised her children on her own. Many women who have had to migrate without their husbands or male family members find themselves in similar situations, as do Afghan Hindu and Sikh women whose family members return to Afghanistan. As mentioned earlier, Afghan Hindu and Sikh women often marry into local Indian families, while male members of their family – fathers and brothers – return to Afghanistan. Nikhat's entire family has gone back to Afghanistan while she lives with her husband's family in Delhi.<sup>58</sup> She has intermittent contact with her family in Afghanistan and her worries are reflected in her repeated references to the *haalaat* (circumstances) in Afghanistan. She has no immediate family in India and finds companionship among fellow Afghan Hindu and Sikh women in the tailoring class she attends. There is little space for her to share memories of her life in Afghanistan with anyone at her marital home. The two hours at the tailoring class every day offers her the liberty to talk about a life and identity she has left behind. Needless to say, in the absence of any immediate kin, the circumstances under which these women made the journey to India heightens their vulnerability within their marital homes. So, for many, forgetting their Afghan history is the best coping mechanism, and they even speak of their parents in Afghanistan in hushed whispers. In one interview, Nikhat shows discomfort with talking about Afghanistan when her sister-in-law is present in the same room.<sup>59</sup>

Leaving home has its own deep-seated psychological repercussions. When the home – the most sacred and safest of places – can no longer guard against the outside, it becomes symbolic of a larger insecurity, and the actual abandonment of home becomes emblematic of that insecurity. When diasporic groups, such as the Afghans in Germany, India or elsewhere, leave behind families and relationships, the leaving is also symbolic of the abandoning of a larger family, their nation, their culture and their history, all of which anchor the identity. Insecurity and uncertainty are embedded in the fact that the patriarch, here a metaphor interchangeable between the father and the state, is absent and unable to offer protection. Displacement thus no longer remains in the realm of changing just their country of residence. This metaphorical reference comes up quite poignantly in a meeting with Kunti, an Afghan Hindu who had been living in Germany for the past decade. She points out that the only reason she still lives in Germany is because her immediate family – her brothers and her children – is settled there. However, 'it is not home. And yet we [Afghan Hindus] have no place that we can call home as we are neither accepted by Afghanistan nor India'.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> An Afghan Sikh woman who migrated to India by marriage, interviewed in July–September 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Many Afghan Hindu and Sikh women marry into local Indian families with no Afghan ancestry or linkages of their own. Against this background, and due to the circumstances of their own journey and especially their experiences of vulnerability and exploitation as women, Afghanistan is not a context women such as Nikhat are comfortable referring to especially in the presence of non-Afghans who do not share and understand their experiences.

<sup>60</sup> Kunti lives with her children in Germany close to both her brothers who are also settled in Germany. Interviewed between September 2009 and January 2010.

Identity re-articulation becomes particularly traumatic when people come from a completely different cultural context such as those who move to the West from traditional backgrounds. The gender focus tends to become located in marriage and the family, two intertwining aspects of the traditional home. With fertility and marriage at the core of this personal domain, the position of women in that private space goes on to define their visibility or otherwise in the public space. Fertility continues to remain the crux of a woman's role and importance in the community, and it is hardly surprising then that the marital status of a woman also plays a significant role in her life. Arranged marriages are inherent to the social fabric of traditional societies like Afghanistan as is the institution of marriage itself. And often this choice, if made independently, is representative of crossing the sacred threshold between rebellion and dishonour.

Aarzo's narrative raises questions related to both fertility and choice in marriage that Afghan women have to negotiate.<sup>61</sup> She emotionally pointed out that 'it was out of respect for my father that I postponed my own wedding to the man of my choice till the time that he was ready to give his blessings. He did not give me the same respect when he chose to remarry simply because he wanted a son'. The oldest among five siblings – all sisters – her relationship with a German man though known to the extended family and fellow Afghans met a roadblock when her parents objected to it. Although her father was perceived as the more educated and less orthodox of her two parents, Aarzo expressed her displeasure when he married a girl half his age due to his wish for a male heir, going to the extent of breaking ties with him. That response was also an articulation of her desire to stand by her mother. Eventually, it was her mother who was present at her wedding.

This particular case also reflects the relatively higher tolerance for Afghan men marrying local (German) or non-Afghan women compared to the reverse situation. Thus, it is not very common to find Afghan women in the diaspora crossing the lines. Afghan Hindus and Sikhs would be an exception as they marry local men, but their religion becomes the common thread for the alliance. Also, in their case, marriage allows the women to stay on in India as legitimate citizens even when their families return to Afghanistan.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, during this research, there is evidence of some of the women respondents in Germany being in long-term relationships with non-Afghan men. In some cases the relationships are known to the immediate family (parents) but not to the extended family. Often the pressure to marry even for the women in these 'unconventional' relationships (when compared to the more traditional relationships defined by Afghan culture) is from the extended family. One of the respondents talks about how her mother has been gently pressuring her to change the status of her current relationship to marriage 'since everyone' – meaning her extended family – 'knew about it anyway'.

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<sup>61</sup> She went to Germany with her parents during the Soviet war and has been living there since. Interviewed between September 2009 and January 2010.

<sup>62</sup> For similar arguments on Afghan diasporas in neighbouring countries, see Elaheh Rostami-Povey, "Afghan Refugees in Iran, Pakistan, the U.K., and the U.S. and Life after Return: A Comparative Gender Analysis", *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, April 2007, pp.241–61.

Often community norms become an important reference point for women to negotiate their identity. Religion, as already discussed, is deeply embedded in Afghan society, community and family, and exists concurrently with other indicators of identity. The dominance or subordination of religion might change with the cultural sub-contexts but it remains integral to social life. How do women fit in given the omnipresence of religion? Religion, especially in more recent times, has been one of the most potent tools used to constrain women's lives irrespective of their actual religious, social or cultural affiliations or realities.<sup>63</sup> More often than not, religion has been used to wrest from women the ability to make any decision that is independent of their position in the community. For women, religion is a cultural practice, and with the task of preserving it thrust upon them, it often also sets the tone for conflict.

Religious radicalism is predicated on the control and restriction of women's sexuality by men using the tools of religion. Women considered as someone's property are restricted in their ability to make life-changing decisions; the curbs on their sexual partners or the right to choose whom to marry manifest themselves in a multitude of ways.<sup>64</sup> Arranged marriages are the most compelling means of preserving socioeconomic hierarchies, and ethnic, religious or racial purity, thereby reinforcing traditional concepts of identity. Yet, there are women who have constantly made their own choices, rejecting prospective grooms for a variety of reasons, and even their parents have come to accept their decisions. In Heelani's case, the rejections included an alliance with her cousin.<sup>65</sup> On the issue of marriage and relationships, Heelani relates how her brothers had been forbidden by her parents from bringing their girlfriends home since it was not a freedom made available to her. This was demanded by her parents out of 'respect for their sister'. Today, at 26 years of age, she has negotiated, albeit with considerable struggle, arguments and fights, her choice of where to live (she lives independent of her parents in another city). And yet she recognises that while her parents give her this space, it is not necessarily something that her extended family members might understand. Hence, it is a fact that continues to be concealed from the extended family.

Zakia, on the other hand, faced opposition to her marriage to a fellow Pashtun simply because he was a musician. In her early years in Germany she recalls being spotted having an innocent conversation with an Arab boy by one of her brothers. That resulted in a severe backlash at home. While her brothers brought their girlfriends home, she was chastised just for speaking with a boy. She said, 'I could not deal with these double standards and [the] complete lack of trust in me,' and completely stopped interacting with people for many years. This shows that the pressure of social and cultural transformations and the changing gender dynamics in the country of resettlement can result in shifting relationships among family members.

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<sup>63</sup> For more arguments on religion and writing in the post 9/11 America context with reference to Muslim immigrants, see Samaa Abdurraqib, "Hijab Scenes: Muslim Women, Migration, and Hijab in Immigrant Muslim Literature", *MELUS*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Arab American Literature, Winter, 2006, pp.55–70.

<sup>64</sup> Also see Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castaneda, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller, *Uprootings/Regroundings. Questions of Home and Migration*, Berg, 2003.

<sup>65</sup> Heelani came to Germany at the age of 9. Interviewed between September 2009 and January 2010.

Some of these narratives thus bring us to the question of whether diaspora experiences reinforce or loosen gender subordination. Zakia makes an interesting comparison between her two brothers, one of whom is married to a highly educated and professionally accomplished German woman and the other to an Afghan woman. She says that the ease with which the one with an Afghan wife makes decisions without even consulting his wife – even on family matters – is in stark contrast to the other brother who has to consult his (German) wife about everything. For herself she says that whenever her own family needs her help as a daughter, they call her at the shortest of notice. Yet, when it comes to critical family matters such as property, she is never consulted. She says, ‘This hurt me so much that now when they call me I go at my convenience, otherwise I don’t.’ Often the home becomes the locus for the deepest conflicted values where personal agency and resistance clash with accommodation to previously relevant norms. Zakia expresses this resistance when she sees the difference in treatment when it comes to critical decisions.<sup>66</sup> The extended family sometimes imposes restrictions on the women, which some go along with, while others resist. However, what all their narratives suggest is that even if the families are supportive within the diasporic context, they are not free from the conflict that comes from a clash between the demands of tradition and culture, and modernity. Often the conflict comes down to the power of choice and decision-making.

While a woman who migrates and becomes part of the diaspora may gain autonomy due to the distance from her husband’s relatives, it also comes at the cost of emotional support. From a household in familiar surroundings, she is thrust into an environment where she is alone. Makai, whose marriage, as mentioned earlier, was solemnised over the telephone in Afghanistan, arrived in Germany alone at the tender age of 16 as a young bride, where she met her husband for the first time. Today, 22 years later, she still has none of her kin in Germany. All her sisters are in the United Kingdom. Her husband’s parents, brothers, uncles, cousins, though, are all within a three-kilometre radius. In Germany, the position of Afghan Hindu and Sikh women is even more precarious as they feel they lack acceptance in all the various national contexts – Afghanistan, India and Germany. Makai, who left her entire family thousands of miles away when she got married, relates the acute vulnerability of a Hindu girl from India that she knows, one who had married into an Afghan Hindu family in Germany. This Indian Hindu woman is, by virtue of marriage, not just located in an alien country (Germany), but also an alien cultural sub-context (Afghan Hindu), thereby increasing the pressures of adjustment on her. In talking about her, Makai unwittingly references her own fragile situation as a young bride in a foreign country several years earlier. The experience of vulnerability is one shared by many of the women in the diaspora. Very often, women in the diaspora, because of the absence of the support of their immediate kin, have no support systems to turn to.

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<sup>66</sup> For cultural and familial pressures on Afghan women in the diaspora in the UK and US, read Elaheh Rostami-Povey, “Exile and Identity” in *Afghan Women*, 2007.

While adultery might be accepted grounds for divorce in one cultural context, it might not be so in another. Aarzo's mother in Germany was abandoned by her father for another girl in Afghanistan. Yet, they are separated, not divorced. Due to the fact that women migrate as dependants of their husbands, they believe that their status in the host nation is tied to their marital status, even though that might not be the case. Some of the respondents relate how their parents divorced after making the difficult journey out of Afghanistan. They explain it simply as 'an inability to adjust with each other soon afterwards'. Separations – like Aarzo's mother's – draw attention to the centrality of marriage for a woman's identity as well to the complex negotiations women must undertake to overcome the continuing stigma associated with living outside the realm of marital life. As a result, many women in the diaspora tend to tolerate adultery and abandonment as long as it allows them to maintain the symbolic identity of a married woman.<sup>67</sup>

When a woman's status is derived from male members of the household, the death of a husband often presents the ultimate test of the widow's bargaining power within the household. During Amarjeet's short marriage, she was the primary care-provider for her ailing husband. However, after his death, she was asked to leave the marital home with her infant son. Her position as an Afghan migrant in India, whose nationality was determined by her marriage, increased her vulnerability on his death. She put up no resistance as she did not have any kin she could turn to for legal advice or help. Thus, the loss of the husband for many women translates into a loss of self, irrespective of whether the experiences of marriage were joyful or harsh. For Jahan, her experience as a widowed migrant woman is compounded by the dispersal of her kin, as they are located across North America and in Europe (her son lives in Germany) while she alone lives in India. So for women like Jahan home lies, quite ironically, in the various national contexts inhabited by her various kin as she struggles to be accepted by any one of them (and their countries of residence). Her current location is viewed less as a home and more as a transitory location.

However, many younger Afghan women do recognise that their lives are different from that of their mothers. They are educated and work outside the home from an early age. Some, especially in Germany, live by themselves like many single native German girls their age, and they often do not live with their husband's families if married. In India, while their lives might not be that different from their mothers', the sense of freedom that they experience in terms of mobility is very different from their own early memories and experience of life. As for the younger girls, their lives are influenced by that of teenage Indian girls, and to that extent, they are different from young girls of their generation in Afghanistan. Thus, for all these women, there is a strengthened personal agency in the diaspora but there is also a renegotiation of gender relationships.

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<sup>67</sup> For more on migrant women and marriage see Rajni Palriwala and Patricia Uberoi, *Marriage, Migration and Gender, Women and Migration in Asia*, Vol.5, SAGE, 2008.



### III. DIASPORIC DIETS, DIALECTS AND DRESS CODES

The experiences of wars and calamities and the emergence of various shades of radical Islam as well as Islamophobia have situated women both at the centre, as the public face of Islam, and at the periphery, by demanding that they cover and hide from the public gaze and by barring their way into the public sphere.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, gender ideologies involving modest dressing, veiling and the positioning of women inside the home versus at work, become newly contested in recreated and re-energised ways. Afghan women, like other women belonging to traditional societies, are seen as the urn-bearers of the family and clan's honour. Often, issues of attire and modesty become the rallying point for the fragile and contentious issues of honour and culture. So while within the country itself – especially during the years of conflict and after – they used the *burqa* quite literally as a security blanket to protect themselves, they are quick to abandon the *burqa* or *chador* for the very same reasons, that is, to assume an identity that allows them to dissolve in the population more easily in host societies such as India and Germany. And it is the embracing of these characteristics from the host culture that changes layers of their identity even as they attempt to reclaim parts of their original identity from Afghanistan.

#### **Modesty, Hijab and Identity<sup>69</sup>**

Most of the women respondents, both in India and Germany, reflected a natural disposition towards the prevalent dress codes in the host nation alongside a discourse on modesty and appropriateness congruent with Afghan tradition and culture. Heelani in Germany sees herself as the perfect daughter who is not only educated, a working professional, economically independent but also able to slip into her Afghani dress to socialise in the community during weddings and other family functions. These are all aspects of her identity that she fervently guards and is proud of.

What changes is that the spaces of freedom get reversed quite often in the diasporic context as witnessed in the Morsal Obeidi case and also with other women. In Afghanistan, the home is the space where women have more freedom compared to the public sphere. As a diasporic group, however, it is inside the home that women are constrained by cultural moorings and traditional rituals and practices.<sup>70</sup> The way Morsal dressed was believed to be one of the many contentious issues between her and her family. Thus, often, the freedom many of these women enjoy as working professionals is interrupted the moment they cross the threshold of the home. The home is where they are required to fulfil their traditional gender role within their particular cultural context and sub-context. Yet, though their mobility and financial freedom are restrained by the demands of modesty and

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<sup>68</sup> Haleh Afshar, "Women, Wars, Citizenship", 2007, p.237; see also Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell, "Exploited by Whom?", 2002, p.918.

<sup>69</sup> The terms *burqa*, *hijab* and *chador* have been used interchangeably for the discourse on veiling that has gained ground in recent years with regard to Muslim women in general and Afghan women in particular.

<sup>70</sup> Inside their homes women enjoy a fair amount of autonomy in decision-making even under the ethnic charters like Pashtunwali.

appropriateness, many of these women do not necessarily see the hijab as a constraint, instead regarding it as a personal choice, even though they might not themselves use it.<sup>71</sup> In fact some even refer to the controversial discourse surrounding the hijab as part of a growing trend in the West to disempower individuals in the name of secularisation. According to Anouar Majid, although the widely held perception that women have been historically persecuted by all patriarchal cultures is, to a large extent, incontestably true, the discourses of western feminism, largely shaped by gender relations in Christian capitalist cultures, and by the exhausted paradigms of Western social thought, have hindered a more subtle appreciation of women's issues under Islam.<sup>72</sup> Women in the diaspora and women's activists from a cultural context similar to Afghanistan base their concept of feminism on their understanding of their historical identities, which also includes Islamic culture. During Taliban rule, Afghan women had succeeded in subverting the dictates of hijab as the very anonymity and protection offered by hijab allowed them mobility; the spatial constraints placed on them led them to create an informal labour market where men are hired to act as their relatives to escort them.<sup>73</sup> Having recognised these possibilities, even as men in the diaspora try to recreate the traditional spaces of the homeland inside their homes, women renegotiate a trade-off; their freedom outside the home is offset by cultural constraints at home, a reversal of the situation in Afghanistan.

### **Culinary Culture and Food Habits**

For many like Seema, their way of dressing and what and how they eat are critical indicators of 'self' and any change in that is a coercive wearing down of that self, which is where anger such as that felt by Seema comes from. Closely connected with the idea of migration is the tendency to sentimentalise the home that has been left behind, as reflected in her reaction to this alienation. The inability to identify one single enemy makes the experience of displacement harder. So while the circumstances of leaving Afghanistan would have been just as traumatic, she vents her frustration over her life in Germany as she reacts to what she experiences as alienation or 'othering'.

The romanticising of the home they left behind is manifested through the imagery of close family ties, through the sentimentalising of rituals and folk culture, and through food and simple household objects. Religious and national holidays across cultures become the sites to deify the concepts of home and family. Replication of the way of life as remembered becomes the only connection these groups are able to maintain with their homeland; culinary culture has an important part to play in these diasporic identifications. Food is located both within cultural boundaries and beyond, thereby ensuring that diasporic diets, like all aspects of diasporic identity and culture, are constantly remade,

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<sup>71</sup> For more on hijab/burqa see Maryam Qudrat Aseel, *Torn Between Two Cultures*, and Elaheh Rostami-Povey, "Women in Afghanistan: Passive Victims of the *borga* or Active Social Participants?", *Development in Practice*, Vol. 13, No. 2/3, May 2003, pp.266–77.

<sup>72</sup> Anouar Majid, *Unveiling Traditions: Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World*, Duke University Press, 2000, p.99.

<sup>73</sup> Haleh Afshar, "Women, Wars, Citizenship", 2007, p.237.

even while some key elements endure over time. Cooking and eating become some of the enduring habits, rituals and everyday practices which are collectively used to sustain a shared sense of cultural identity. Food is closely linked to ideas of prestige, social place and identity. Hence among the everyday cultural practices routinely used to maintain, enhance or even reinvent diasporic identities, food and the rituals associated with eating assume central importance. This is a connection which is particularly important for women as many of them in their roles as mothers and wives derive their identities from the food that comes out of their kitchens, a space that is completely theirs.

Added to this is the comparative portability of food traditions and habits. They tend to endure despite multiple migrations and displacements. Migrating families carry with them elements of the diet and eating habits, if not physically, then at least conceptually. Elements and flavours of various destinations may be incorporated along the way. Every nation's diet thus bears the imprint of countless past migrations. And yet, the banality of food, its connections to the body and its gendered linkage to women's work in the domestic realm have probably each contributed to the lack of attention these topics have received from philosophers.<sup>74</sup> Ingredients, foodstuffs or methods of preparation used in new habitats, changed or unchanged, help map not just the movement but also the adjustment and adaptation patterns of groups in their new environments, how they are influenced and in turn influence cultures. Food thus becomes a method to document adaptation, substitution and indigenisation.

Mobility and adaptability work in tandem to ensure that food habits, even if they undergo transformation, are usually maintained among diasporic groups. Over time, this reshaping of ingredients and cooking methods often leads to a reshaping of diasporic culinary cultures such that the dishes sometimes bear little resemblance to the original. At other times entire culinary cultures may be preserved. The diasporic transformation of diet is, therefore, a two-way process. An invitation to dinner at the Alekozai household – a family of five which moved to Germany 25 years ago – to an Indian (like myself) would involve a table spread with German bread, an Indian-style chicken preparation, an Afghani aubergine dish and broccoli.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Zakia ensured she had a *dal* – an Indian lentil preparation – among an array of Afghan dishes during one visit. And it should hardly be surprising to find *mantu*, an Uzbeki meat preparation, at the dinner served by Kunti, an Afghan Hindu living in Germany, among a selection of Indian dishes served with German bread.<sup>76</sup> In India, Afghani bread is a staple in the lunch served daily to Afghan Hindus and Sikhs working at the Khalsa Diwan Welfare Society.

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<sup>74</sup> Uma Narayan, "Eating Cultures: Incorporation, Identity, and Indian Food", *Social Identities*, 1995, pp.161–2.

<sup>75</sup> The Alekozais have lived in Germany for almost three decades. They have three adult children with the youngest born in Germany after their migration. Interviews were conducted in September–November 2009 and earlier meetings in November 2008.

<sup>76</sup> *Mantu* is a dish of steamed dumplings stuffed with minced meat. Afghan food is believed to be a fusion of the regions that neighbour Afghanistan; and modern Afghan cuisine is the blending of the cooking methods of the three major ethnic groups in the country – the Pashtuns, Tajiks and Uzbeks. In addition, there is Indian influence in the use of spices such as saffron, coriander, cardamom and black pepper.

Even though the Afghan diasporic fare might present a range of cuisine marking their journeys, the one item that Afghan households – irrespective of whether they are native Afghans, Hindus or Sikhs – never run out of at any time of the day is Afghani tea; and this even if the omnipresent platter of dry fruits may be replaced by other local snacks and sweets. For almost all the respondents, and especially those in Germany, ‘Afghan hospitality’ is a critical part of their identity and what separates them from the native residents of their host countries. Interviews, if conducted at their homes, would almost always be backed by a formal invitation to lunch or dinner. In India, when the interviews were conducted during Ramazan, the month of fasting for Muslims, the result was profound apologies on the part of many of the ethnic Afghan respondents for their inability to serve a proper Afghan meal.

In a country like India where vegetarianism is integral to the food habits of large sections of the population, very often the diasporic groups either live in areas with culinary habits which bear some resemblance to their own eating habits, or they may alter their own eating patterns to fit in with the local habits. So, in Delhi, native Afghans, though fewer in number, tend to live in areas dominated by the local Muslim populations, while Afghan Hindus and Sikhs live in parts of Delhi which are populated by refugees who settled in India during the partition.

Makai’s children, all of whom were born in Germany, are more comfortable with German cuisine as opposed to Afghan food and that is what determines what is placed on the dinner table for the better part of the week. ‘They do not like eating lamb, which is a popular meat among Afghans,’ she says, ‘and prefer German food.’ So over the years as a homemaker she has had to adapt her cooking style to the culinary demands of her children. Susanne, who came to Germany from Afghanistan almost four decades ago, says, ‘My preference for rice is clearly the part of me that is not German but Afghan.’<sup>77</sup> Jeannette has a collection of jars with a variety of spices from her visits to Afghanistan even though she cannot cook herself. She says just opening these jars for a whiff of the aromatic spices and feeling their texture remind her of the sights and smells of Afghanistan.

While speaking about the assimilation of parts of migrant cuisine into the host country’s culinary culture, it would be erroneous to equate the popularity of a migrant dish within a host nation, or vice versa, with the assumption of a complete assimilation, acceptance or accommodation of that diasporic group. The lighter coloured chickpeas or garbanzo beans popularly referred to as *Kabuli chana* in some parts of India are so named because they were thought to have come from Afghanistan when first seen in the Indian subcontinent around the 18th century; it is also referred to as Indian chickpeas in Afghan cookbooks, another indicator of the migrations in the region and their impact on food.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Susanne has a German mother and believes many of her personal habits have been determined by her life in Germany.

<sup>78</sup> See Helen Saberi, *Afghan Food & Cookery: Noshe Djan*, Hippocrene Books, 2000.

In Delhi, from roadside eateries to plush restaurants, the frontier cuisine Afghani Chicken is part of the menu, yet people's perceptions of Afghans would often betray total ignorance. Alternatively, they invoke some stereotypical image of a Pashtun or a Talibanised imagery of the Afghan woman.<sup>79</sup> Some posit that this is a way of incorporating the 'other' into the self but on the self's terms.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the adoption of diasporic cuisines by host cultures often does little to encourage other forms of productive encounters between different ethnic groups. According to Ghassan Hage, the availability of diasporic foodstuffs permits a lazy 'cosmo-multiculturalism' in which eating foreign dishes almost substitutes for other forms of engagement.<sup>81</sup> The consumption of food from other cultures might for some also be just an articulation of the 'exotica' value attached to it (it may have little to do with actually enjoying the cuisine).<sup>82</sup> While eating ethnic foods in restaurants might result only in shallow, commodified and consumerist interaction with an 'other' culinary culture, it seems preferable at least to the complete lack of acquaintance that permits the different food of 'others' to appear simply as marks of their strangeness and 'otherness'.<sup>83</sup>

### Language as a Common Factor

Just as the cuisine of the Afghan diaspora reflects the journeys of these groups, so too do the languages they have picked up along the way. The languages the Afghans speak, according to Bernt Glatzer, reflect their journey during the course of their displacement from Afghanistan.<sup>84</sup> The Afghans who came to Germany prior to the Soviet invasion in pursuit of greater economic opportunities and a better future were those who had already been exposed to a German education through German schools set up in Afghanistan in the 1960s.<sup>85</sup> Many of those who left at the height of the Soviet war were part of the educated professional elite with the resources to make their way to resettlement countries such as Germany. They were fluent in English, German or French.

Those who fled to neighbouring countries, on the other hand, had either been educated in the Afghan languages or not at all. An estimated 97 per cent of the women fleeing to Pakistan came from a rural background and, of that figure, around 85 per cent were Pashtuns.<sup>86</sup> Some of this group are fluent in Hindi and/or Urdu, which is indicative of the time they spent in Pakistan before going to Germany.

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<sup>79</sup> For arguments on food colonialism and culinary imperialism, see Uma Narayan, "Eating Cultures", 1995.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.165.

<sup>81</sup> Ghassan Hage, "At Home in the Entrails of the West: Multiculturalism, Ethnic Food, and Migrant Home-Building" in Helen Grace, Ghassan Hage, Lesley Johnson, Julie Langsworth and Michael Symonds, eds, *Home/World: Space, Community, and Marginality in Sydney's West*, Annandale: Pluto, 1997.

<sup>82</sup> Insiya Amir. "New Taste of Conflict Cuisine", *Times of India*, 17 October 2010.

<sup>83</sup> Uma Narayan, "Eating Cultures", 1995, p.180.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Dr Bernt Glatzer, November 2009.

<sup>85</sup> Mir Hekmatullah Sadat, "Modern Education in Afghanistan", *afghanmagazine.com*, Aftaabzad Publications, March 2004. [http://www.afghanmagazine.com/2004\\_03/articles/education.shtml](http://www.afghanmagazine.com/2004_03/articles/education.shtml) ; see also "Education in Afghanistan", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Volume VIII, Fascicle 3, Mazda Publishers, 1998, pp. 237-41.

<sup>86</sup> Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell, "Exploited by Whom?", 2002, p.920.

In Germany, often the common language among many Afghan women is German. This is because some are conversant only in Dari and others only in Pashto, but not both. It was mostly the educated elite who used both languages. In India, Afghan women speak Hindi, with Afghan Sikhs also using Punjabi which they have 'refined' according to the local dialect. These Afghan Sikhs do revert to Dari or Pashto if they come across an ethnic Afghan in Delhi, more out of nostalgia for the language than anything else. Amarjeet, for example, fondly remembers an Afghan family she has befriended. She speaks Pashto with them whenever she has the opportunity. Many younger Afghan Hindus and Sikhs do also use Pashto in their conversations with each other as witnessed in India. The Indira Gandhi International Airport which receives several flights from Kabul daily is one place Pashto can be commonly heard spoken as much by tourists from Afghanistan as by Afghan Sikhs.

Makai, on the other hand, who comes from Herat in Afghanistan, speaks Persian and German and very little Hindi, unlike her husband who is fluent in Hindi. While she can hold a conversation with her sisters who have been living in the UK for the past two decades and are part of the Afghan diaspora there, her children cannot. With German as their primary language and given that not all in the second generation on her side of the extended family are fluent in Persian, her children find it difficult communicating with their kin. Such a complex linguistic heritage extends across geographical locations. Shaima's son who speaks Dari and German is marrying an Afghan expatriate from the Netherlands who speaks Pashto, Dari and knows Hindi/Urdu. Homira, a young Afghan lawyer, articulates her creativity through poems which she writes in German. In her words, 'My emotions are Afghan while my language is German.'

Heelani's own experience with language is not very pleasant, as she sees a clear divide reflected among ethnic Pashtuns over which language – Dari or Pashto – they speak. She feels her genuine inability to speak Dari is trussed up in her Pashtun identity and she reflects an unwillingness to speak a language which is representative of the political identity and divide that exists between some groups of the Afghan diaspora. She uses the argument that Pashto is the language of the majority in Afghanistan and hence every politician and bureaucrat should speak it. Often in the Afghan diaspora, language politics does seem to play itself out over the issue of Dari and Pashto. While it did not surface in the interactions between the women themselves, it was discussed by some of the respondents as an important issue. Thus, for many of these women, language is an important connection to their country of origin even if there are few symbolic similarities with Afghanistan in their daily lives after having lived in a host nation for many years.

For Afghan women their experiences across different cultures during the course of their journey, or journeys, make a multiplicity of demands on them as a new group in the host nation, as members of the nation they fled from and as women (mothers, daughters, sisters). They play out an uncompromising juggling act in all of these categories. Often they show evidence of rejecting the homogenisation thrust upon them either by their own communities and families or by members of the host society, attempting instead to work out

what has been referred to as a transcultural identity. In his description of transculturalism Wolfgang Welsch 'aims for cultures with the ability to link and undergo transition whilst avoiding the threat of homogenization or uniformization'.<sup>87</sup> Afghan women as a group have shown evidence of rejecting homogenisation even within diasporic groups – whether it comes from the private spaces of community and family or the public spaces of the host societies – and tend to derive their identities from various categories, through variation, selection and specification.

#### **IV. PROTOTYPES, STEREOTYPES AND RACISM**

In rejecting homogenisation, these women also attempt to disprove stereotypes of themselves, and their community, religion and country. As already mentioned, the perceptions of social identities and the reactions to them depend on a variety of factors including the social position of the individual within the established hierarchy. Often diasporic groups find themselves in marginalised positions in the host nation despite having occupied important rungs of the socioeconomic ladder in their home nations. Those native to the host nation and hence in positions of power tend to reinforce ascriptions that protect their prerogatives as natives.<sup>88</sup> In reaction, those marginalised by this hierarchy embrace attributes – sometimes stereotypical – as a defence against the hegemonic discourses. The construction of social identities are therefore interdependent and continual.<sup>89</sup>

It is often the second generation of the diaspora that, in particular, struggles to find their place in the various categories of identity, sometimes successfully and at other times not so successfully, against the background of their ethnic identity and belongingness constantly being questioned (in the host nations). This is a fact that Makai as a mother of three children – two of whom are daughters – recognises right away. She quite candidly tells of her husband Khalid having sleepless nights regarding his daughters' futures because he is still unwilling to accept that they are as German as they are Afghan, and in fact at times probably more the former than the latter, a fact that she understands and accepts. Makai's acceptance and strength are drawn from her own situation where she has made a home in a country which is thousands of kilometres away from the place she once called home, a place she left, alone, at a very young age. For the first generation, the confrontation is with contesting value systems and lifestyles on the one hand, and the desire to formulate a sense of self that integrates those differences on the other.

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<sup>87</sup> Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality – The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today", *California Sociologist*, Vols 17 and 18, 1994/1995.

<sup>88</sup> See also "Is the Boat Full? Xenophobia, Racism and Violence" in Deniz Göktürk, David Gramling and Anton Kaes, eds, *Germany in Transit: Nation and Migration, 1955–2005*, University of California Press, 2007.

<sup>89</sup> For similar discourses among the Afghan diaspora in the US, see Fariba Nawa, *Out of Bounds: Afghan Couples in the United States. A Study of Shifting Gender and Identity*, San Francisco: Aftaabzad Publications, 2001.

With multiple belongingness, hyphenation and hybridity – a bicultural or multicultural identity – perceived as abnormal and suspicious, the second generation diasporic groups of Germans have very often been referred to as *auslanders* (foreigners) or to use Mecheril's term, *Andere Deutsche* (Other Germans).<sup>90</sup> Urmila Goel, who borrows Mecheril's term for her study on Indians in Germany, goes on to explain the dichotomy. Mecheril defines Germans independently of citizenship or ancestry, as those who were socialised in Germany, have lived, and will live there. By these standards, the Afghans of the second generation should be referred to as Germans. However, that does not always turn out to be the case. This conflict arises from the fact that their sense of belonging to more than one national entity does not sit comfortably with mainstream views of pure, incontestable belongingness to only one entity.<sup>91</sup> They sit uncomfortably between the majority society and their parents, both of which position themselves as belonging to one country unambiguously, and they believe they are perceived (and often are) as people of unclear identification. Thus, they feel the need to declare a unique affiliation. It is in situations like these that one sees the seeds of separatist tendencies or singular, homogenised, resurgent identities. In the new contexts, both migrants and hosts construct boundaries between those who belong and those who do not. This rejection influences the ethnic self-definition of the second generation in several ways, depending on the particular circumstances.

Heelani's connection with her Afghan identity is very strong as she engages with Afghanistan through her work, through her professional network, and in her spare time, through social networking sites. It is an identity which is determined by her categorisation as an Afghan Pashtun woman who has grown up in Germany. She recognises that many aspects of her personality are drawn from Germany, where she grew up and was educated, and does not reject them. However, it is her Afghan lineage, and her family's academic and political standing in Afghan society (reflecting the importance of class), that is very precious to her. Yet, in her association with her family, you can see attempts to resolve the contradictory aims of parental approval and personal choice. This is an issue that Morsal appeared to have been unable to resolve, as reflected in her conflicting and troubling escape from and return to the violence within the family, and her struggle both at home and beyond it. The reluctance of law enforcers on several occasions to intervene in what was perceived as a culture-specific case points to how various institutions and groups within politics advertently or inadvertently play their role in strengthening certain stereotypes as opposed to others.

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<sup>90</sup> Urmila Goel, "Imagining India Online: Second-Generation Indians in Germany", pp.210–32.

<http://www.urmila.de/UDG/Forschung/texte/GoelImagining.pdf>

<sup>91</sup> For similar arguments on "Americanness", see Samaa Abdurraqib, "Hijab Scenes: Muslim Women, Migration, and Hijab in Immigrant Muslim Literature", *MELUS*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Arab American Literature, 2006, pp.55–70.



As a consequence, in some interactions, the perception of Afghan culture as not only essentialist but also superior to German culture has developed. The reference to divorces in inter-racial marriages between Afghan men and German women was a recurrent theme whether it was the Ahmadi family or the Alekozais. However, these arguments were more emotive – and used to discourage inter-racial marriages – than based on real facts. During the course of this research, there were several instances of divorce among Afghan couples who had come to Germany several decades ago just as there were instances of divorce among inter-racial (Afghan and German) couples. These arguments also reflect the centrality of marriage and the rejection of divorce within traditional Afghan society.

Parents when looking for spouses for their children in other Afghan diasporic groups – in the US, Australia or Europe – end up looking for a matching symbolic belongingness to Afghanistan and shared experiences of alienation rather than a more practical alliance of cultural competence. So the match might be made based on their lives as foreigners in Germany and any other country perceived as having offered similar experiences. Shaima's son is engaged to an Afghan girl from the Netherlands. They belong to different ethnic groups and hence the only common factor between them is Dari. The Alekozais travelled to Australia to look for suitable matches for their children from among the Afghan diaspora there. They see the possibility of finding a partner in Afghanistan remote as a mismatch would occur at the level of education itself. Their children would expect spouses with similar education while literacy levels continue to be low in Afghanistan. Hence, the similarities are frequently based on negative experiences rather than a positive connection with the country of origin, Afghanistan.

In contrast, for Afghan Hindu and Sikh women, religious dissonance means that religion becomes the site for de-linking from their past. Due to the often one-dimensional stereotyped media representations which equate the problems in Afghanistan with the Taliban, many of the women in the diaspora in India connect their present circumstances with the radicalisation of Islam in Afghanistan. Hence, they find the need to distance themselves from the radicalised Muslim Afghanistan, even though they talk fondly of their friendships and close ties with ethnic Afghans in India and Afghanistan. Thus, for the Afghan Hindus and Sikhs in India as well as in Germany, it is the connection with *Muslim* Afghanistan that has been severed.

The preference among the diaspora is for marriages within groups and sub-groups which are primarily Afghan, with ethnicity a secondary consideration. Religion is taken for granted and men are seen as the natural decision-makers. Women are able to negotiate decision-making rights only within the realms of the private space. In fact, with the Alekozais, the wife quickly redirected the question of her son's marriage to her husband even though the question was posed to her, clearly relinquishing to her husband the place of decision-maker.

While none of the women recounted personal cases of overt racism, many of them show an inclination towards maintaining a balance between their perceptions of German and Afghan culture. For instance, one of them talks about eating with her fingers as a part of her Afghan

culture even if it might have been initially perceived as uncultured by her German friends.<sup>92</sup> Some of them appear to have a circle of Afghan friends rather than German friends, which is explained by the need to be able to share facets of their common ancestry. The older Afghan women look for group and community solidarity while the members of the younger generation are more experimental. Their experiences at school often shape their friendships and companionships. Many of those who had migrated to Germany well into their teenage years do not make many references to their school-going years. The common thread is that that was roughly the time that their parents (and this was evident more with the first generation) would have faced rejection or alienation by neighbours, and that had an impact on the relationships they built during those years. However, over time, their interactions with Germans as adults reflect their independent choices.<sup>93</sup>

In contrast, the ones who were either born in Germany or arrived there as infants find it easier to assimilate. Yet the fact that their physical attributes still contribute to some degree of alienation is not lost on them. Their angst is related to factors such as peers not even knowing where Afghanistan is, or instances like when Makai's young daughter asked her, 'Where are children born in Afghanistan?' Despite the diverse problems in Afghanistan, they do not want its every association to be of a war-ravaged, poverty-ridden country. There are others who clearly recognise discrimination when looking for part-time jobs, as the possibility of them being picked is 5 per cent compared to a native German. The strategy that many seem to employ in dealing with racist experiences seems to be to negate them and to locate cultural differences as the cause, that is, to adopt a defensive approach to position themselves as active, rather than passive, participants in this hegemonic relationship.

The case of second generation Afghan Hindus and Sikhs in Germany is particularly interesting since they feel alienated by German society and rejected by Afghans as well, as not many see them as 'real' Afghans by virtue of their religion. Under these circumstances they are forced to align with an Indian identity, a country that they have very little physical connection with. Kunti very clearly points to this sense of alienation when she refers to their peculiar position as Afghan Hindus in Germany. The lack of belongingness to India or Germany (or even Afghanistan) is felt sometimes more overtly than covertly – in everyday interactions.<sup>94</sup> It is felt by Sadra, an ethnic Afghan in India, who is constantly charged more than the locals for everything. The Alekozais, Muslim Afghans in Germany, see it in the manner in which their neighbours respond to them today, even after living in the country for 30 years.

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<sup>92</sup> Film and other audiovisual material on the Afghan diaspora in Germany, September 2009 – January 2010.

<sup>93</sup> Jeannette makes this point when she makes the distinction between the two phases of her life. During her school-going years she, by virtue of being the only dark-skinned, dark-haired girl in her class, and due to the behaviour of her classmates towards her, felt like she was "an alien to them [her classmates]..." This changed as she grew up and interacted with people from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds both at work and outside of it. From film and other audiovisual material on the Afghan diaspora in Germany, September 2009 – January 2010.

<sup>94</sup> Synnøve Bendixsen and Urmila Goel, "Representing the Other – Spaces of Belongingness in an Othering Society", Paper presented at the *14th Nordic Migration Researchers' Conference*, University of Mountains, 14 November 2007, p.5.

More importantly, Afghanistan is the context to which members of the Afghan diaspora find themselves ascribed in their daily interactions. Jeannette says that she does not like being called an 'Afghan' artist or an 'Afghan woman' artist and wants to be treated as an artist, not as an exotic, rare species referred to more by her ethnicity and gender and less by her work. Many from the second generation lack contact and actual experiences with the real Afghanistan, and thus, for them, Afghanistan plays a role mostly as an imagined place. However, they do not consciously reject the sense of belonging despite the physical distance (and despite the fact that they may lack effectiveness in Afghanistan, especially due to the circumstances under which they left, circumstances which also limit their chances of return). Thus, in trying to negotiate their identities within host communities – especially in societies such as Germany which are less culturally and socially diverse – they try to conform to the traditional norms of univocal belongingness which they have been socialised with, which also allows them to take refuge from the experiences of exclusion and alienation.<sup>95</sup> As already discussed, this is located in the belief that any one person univocally belongs to *one* nation, ethnicity and culture. Thus, most people can rarely think of anyone belonging to more than one national-ethno-cultural context. Jeannette explains this from her own experiences of growing up. She talks about a particular time in teenage life when all they try to do is 'to be German'. This is a fact that Homira supports when she says that she tried reading difficult German texts such as Faust just to be able to fit in, to show she too is 'cultured'.<sup>96</sup> However, significantly, despite their similar experiences as the 'other' they do not feel compelled to come together as a homogenous Afghan group.

Sometimes, the women find themselves caught in the dominant discourse where they are compelled to adopt identities ascribed to them by the prevailing culture. With the exception of Susanne in Germany (one of her parents is native German) almost all the women attach themselves to the Afghan identity even though not in totality. Amarjeet in India has accepted the term Kabuli in her identity even though very little remains of her life from Afghanistan. She searches for differences between Indian ways and Afghan (and her own) ways. The particularities of their stories speak of the larger forces that drive their lives in certain directions.

The influence of constant references to Afghan *kultur* (culture) on the dynamics within the family are evident to Heelani as she recollects a conversation when her mother was discussing the marriage of her younger brother. He promptly responded that the mother should be worrying more about Heelani's marriage, pointing out the presence of an unmarried sister. Heelani is also quite clear on the point that she wants to marry an Afghan Pashtun man but it has to be one who understands her sense of freedom.

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<sup>95</sup> Urmila Goel. "'Half Indians', Adopted 'Germans' and 'Afghan Indians', On Claims of Indianness", *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, Vol.3, No.1, February 2008. <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC>

<sup>96</sup> Film on Afghan diaspora in Germany and other audiovisual material collected between September 2009 and January 2010.

Freedom is brought up by Afghan women very frequently, both among the respondents in India and in Germany. Amarjeet refers to freedom in her refusal to return to Afghanistan. So too do other Afghan Hindu and Sikh women in India and Germany. While the women in India refer to the physical constraints women face in Afghanistan, those in Germany refer to the sense of professional freedom they enjoy as young Afghan women in a western society. Mojib, a young Afghan student who has been living in Germany for the past 17 years rejects the idea of returning to Afghanistan with his fiancée once they are married. He immediately recognises the difficulties she might face in terms of restricted movement after the life she has been used to in Europe even though he himself wants to work for and in Afghanistan. In the case of other young Afghan couples, coaxing by the family to translate their relationships into marriage is met with the reply that they will marry when they feel the need for it.

Heelani lives alone, but visits her parents frequently. So does Homira. Some live with their partners. Only when they marry will some of them be faced with the situation of having to live with a mother-in-law who traditionally imposes authority in personal spaces, such as having a say in how many children to have and how soon. For these women, freedom in relation to their fertility is critical, considering that the average number of children borne by women in Afghanistan is much higher. Those women respondents who are also mothers have three or fewer children, not more, reflecting a major shift in fertility choices of diasporic women, with or without careers. While each may define freedom through different variables (such as profession, education, decision-making power, sharing of household responsibilities, decisions in relation to marriage and fertility), freedom is important to each of their lives, especially if that freedom is considered relative to the situation of women in Afghanistan today. Even if they do not enjoy much freedom in their personal spaces, and have a life that may seem not so very different from some women in Afghanistan, their perception that they do have some degree of freedom comes from the perception that they have choices. In Amarjeet's case she has chosen a life in India despite pressure from her family to return to Afghanistan, and in spite of the difficulties she faces daily as a single woman. Thus, the changes they experience do not necessarily reflect loss but show positive creativity and a presentation of a new independent self.

These women, whether in India or Germany, reveal a complicated interweaving of disparate elements of identity. Sometimes identity is expressed through the ethnic. At other times, other elements of identity come to the fore – the Afghan woman, the Afghan Sikh woman (as opposed to the Afghan Muslim woman), the middle-class identity carried over from Afghanistan, or the identity from the political elite of the 1980s which can rarely find expression in Germany. As these identities jostle with one another, there is an important renegotiation of gender relations and ideology in the immigrant context and especially in relation to the immediate family.

The repetitive processes of migration provide both the context for identities becoming fluid and the demand that they do so since the very process of moving 'otherises' and consequently disempowers the migrants. So while some find themselves completely

alienated from one part of their ancestral identity, others find a reinforcement of national understandings of the 'self' and the 'other'. Susanne's initial response at being a part of this research was 'I am not a typical diasporic Afghan', referring to the stereotypical concepts of the Afghan diaspora. Her references to her Afghan parentage were more nuanced and were developed through her work and interests. For transnational migrants, the political, economic and cultural underpinnings of citizenship have been shattered, so it has become necessary to reconsider and create a gendered, time- and place-specific construction of national identity and entitlements.<sup>97</sup> In the case of women the process is more complex. They are seen, and often see themselves, as the guardians of culture, home and hearth, while at the same time the new exigencies of time and place demand greater engagement, economically or politically. Thus it is important to understand the gendered specificities of time, place and processes that shape the lives of women.

Identity in the case of diasporic women is best understood as a process rather than an outcome as identities are constructed and altered. So even as they construct new identities, the influence of their natal and host communities is also evident. Makai, for instance, corrects me when she says she is a Herati unlike her husband who is a Kabuli. She also realises that her children might carry neither Herati nor Kabuli characteristics in their respective identities. In that sense, it places her on an equal footing with her husband. In addition, the centrality of 'situatedness' – or where the women are physically located – is reflected in how different groups come to be relationally positioned in a given context, as Afghan women who moved to Germany reconstruct their identities in ways very different from those who went to Iran or Pakistan or India. Some of the women who made their journey through India feel that culturally, India comes closest to Afghanistan. Hence, they would like to take their children there (as they cannot visit Afghanistan) so that they can get a taste of what Afghan culture is like.

Thus, homeland, as Avtar Brah reminds us, might be imaginary rather than real, and its existence need not be tied to any desire to actually *return* home.<sup>98</sup> For many (not all) of the women from Afghanistan, whether in India or in Germany, the return to their homeland, though the subject of romanticised musings, is not something they see as a real possibility either for themselves or their children. Amarjeet does not see herself returning to Jalalabad despite the hardships of her current life, simply because of the sense of freedom she has experienced. She says there is nothing there for her to return to which she does not already have. If anything it would constrain her. Makai also cannot imagine returning because her daughters, who have grown up in Germany with other diasporic groups as well as the local German population, have no understanding of what life in Afghanistan entails for a woman today, and she cannot thrust them into that life. Seema, on the contrary, constantly speaks of her *watan* (country) and *mitti* (soil) and the wish to return to it at some point.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> D. Tambini, "Post-national Citizenship", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2001, pp.195–217.

<sup>98</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 1996.

<sup>99</sup> It needs to be noted that Seema's interview was conducted in a pre-9/11 context. It was a time that many from Afghanistan believed the civil war would end.

However, many of the women interviewed have in recent years either gone to Afghanistan for work purposes or have visited the country that was once their home. While they do not see themselves returning to their native country, they do want to integrate it into their work in some capacity. Jeannette's sense of nostalgia and loss is manifested through her art. For Heelani it is the single-minded determination to have Afghanistan reflected in her journalistic work. Susanne has contributed to infrastructure development in a school in Afghanistan and even volunteered there. Meiri's anguish and longing are reflected in her poems. Amarjeet reminisces about her friendships and the physical difference in the lifestyles in the two places while Nikhat's silence is a story in itself. Thus, one frequently encounters young Afghan women in Germany using initiatives to build civil society in Afghanistan through Western organisations where reconstruction activities become the points for extending kinship ties and connecting, through projects, to their areas of origin. They interface with women's organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or projects that engage with issues related to Afghanistan and women there, to be able to maintain their connection with Afghanistan.

For younger women, the expression of identity today also finds outlets on listservs, email groups, internet chat rooms, social networking sites and discussion forums such as Facebook where young Afghans pose questions, particularly to other Afghans in situations similar to themselves. This is where they look for answers to their own sense of uprootedness and bond through a common sense of both alienation and assimilation. There are comparatively well-organised associations which foster such exchanges online, through platforms such as *Afghanic (Afghan Informatic Centre)* and *Afghan German Online*.<sup>100</sup> During the course of the interviews with Heelani, she even offered to post a list of questions on one of the social networking sites for fellow Afghans from among the diaspora.

University campuses are popular with many young Afghans as places to network and answer questions of belonging and to regenerate their identities. According to James Clifford, maintaining connections with homelands and kinship networks, and with religious and cultural traditions, may renew patriarchal structures. At the same time, diaspora interactions may open up the demand for new roles and new spaces which many women are able to access and appropriate.<sup>101</sup>

Engagements with various organisations have given many of these women the space to expand the discourse around women's rights through activities focused on women's education, health and well-being. Some of the respondents even raised funds locally (in Germany) to fund projects related to education of girls in Afghanistan. Often these women are able to build upon a common sense of power and solidarity through their shared

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<sup>100</sup> The *Afghanic* was set up to both educate the younger generation of Afghans in the diaspora about their culture as well as act as a bridge between the diaspora and the host nation according to its founder Dr Yahya Wardak. Interviewed for a film project in January 2010. <http://www.afghanic.de/>. For *Afghan German Online*, see <http://www.afghan-german.de/>

<sup>101</sup> James Clifford, "Diasporas", *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol.9, No.3, August 1994, pp.313–4.

experiences of isolation, alienation, hostility, suffering or even daily tussles, however diverse and complex they might be. Zakia and Heelani have little in common in terms of age, marital status or a common Afghan language, and yet, during the interviews, they betrayed a sense of bonding as they shared their experiences in Germany through the years with family, peers and colleagues. Some of the Afghan Hindu and Sikh women in India too showed a similar sense of camaraderie during their tailoring classes (or other courses) at the Khalsa Diwan Welfare Society.<sup>102</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

*Change brings amnesias ... out of which springs narrative –*

Benedict Anderson<sup>103</sup>

Men and women experience forced migration differently and respond to it differently, and hence have different needs and expectations. Women have their own stories to tell – both as victims of a particular group and as women. Women in Afghanistan in the past two decades have been the victims of one of the most retrograde interpretations of the *sharia* laws. Such interpretations have pushed them out of hospitals, clinics and universities into the back rooms of their own homes. So clinical and brutal was the coercion, begun even before Taliban rule, that even today they struggle to recover. The controversial Afghan Shiite personal status law passed just before the elections in 2009 is just one example of this pervasive mindset and of the manner in which invasive laws impact women and their position in society.<sup>104</sup> And yet Zakia's own experiences in Germany show how the space in a marriage can be moulded into a balanced workable environment for both partners. She reveals that while she was studying, it was her husband who looked after the children, giving her the space and time to pursue her education, a situation which would be rare in a traditional society.

For Afghans, the timing of their migration, the circumstances under which they migrated, the countries through which they made their journeys, where they belonged in the social hierarchy in Afghanistan and the rung they occupied in the host nation determine the composition of identities and their heterogeneity as a diasporic group. Thus, women's identities in the diaspora too have to be understood as a multi-layered construct, wherein the relationships and positioning of each layer in its specific historical context affect and even construct one's identity in collectivities in the different layers.

Memory is a very critical component of identity in a diaspora. Historical memory is seen as a collection of narratives of a shared past as they build and rebuild, block and unblock, forget and remember as they strategically move towards a conscious identity formation

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<sup>102</sup> See Elaheh Rostami-Povey, "Afghan Refugees", pp. 241–61.

<sup>103</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1991, p.204.

<sup>104</sup> Deepali Gaur Singh, "New Afghan Law an Abrogation of Women's Rights", *RH Reality Check*, 17 April 2009. <http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/blog/2009/04/16/new-afghan-law-a-dramatic-abrogation-womens-rights>

through various issues connected to belonging and, in the case of Afghanistan, through issues of violence. For many women, memory is also a critical coping mechanism. Thus, through expression and at other times suppression of memory, they re-root in a series of often meaningful displacements. Not only does that serve to preserve their social and class identities but also their national identities and their association of their country with something beautiful and worth returning to.

However, simultaneously, the memory of violence prevents them from bringing their individual experience into collective history or collective consciousness. This was often evident while speaking with Afghan Hindu and Sikh women in India. Most of them initially denied any memory of Afghanistan, the country they left barely a decade ago as young girls. Amarjeet explained this reluctance to talk about Afghanistan as their attempt to dissociate themselves from that part of their life and identity. Consequently, most of them do not see their homeland as a romantic place to return to but rather as an explanation for their uprootedness and changing identities.

Homira remembers her return to Afghanistan in 2005, her first visit since her family fled in the early 1990s, as traumatic. She says, 'It is no longer the Afghanistan I had left behind'. Zakia remembers that she was part of the volleyball team in Afghanistan, something she could never return to. For Jeannette, the flight from Afghanistan is something that she remembers as a childlike adventure, with her and her aunt looking for her brother in the refugee camps of Pakistan. The initial years of settling into Germany (despite already knowing the language) proved to be distressing. It is her sporadic visits to India with her family and later as an adult that she cherishes. For most of these women, the return to Afghanistan was a reminder of what they had lost when they left – a part of their life, memories of that life and people who were part of it, their homes where they grew up, neighbours, friends and family. For most of them, 'Kabul is no longer the city they lived in or left behind' and in saying this they do not merely refer to the physical destruction of the city. What they saw had no semblance to what they remembered of it – the 'smell, the sound and the way it looked – the capital of Afghanistan in the seventies ... a modern city'. Again, what they remember are the happier times and not the circumstances under which they left. What they refer to is the hope they had at the time of leaving – of returning soon to their homes. Hence, what they saw on their return after decades was a complete loss of that time and those years of their lives.

Since most left with nothing, they have very few objects and photographs to even substantiate their stories, and are wholly reliant on their individual and collective memories. According to Zohra Saed, many Afghan exiles write from a child's voice and preserve their last memories of Afghanistan because it is usually their most valued concrete link to the country.<sup>105</sup> Leaving home is thus not a simple act of changing one's place of residence. It epitomises a parting of ways with a life that they had been familiar and comfortable with.

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<sup>105</sup> "Restoring Afghan Memory: An Interview with Zohra Saed", *Asia Society*, 14 August 2002.



This is so because identity is derived from a sense of home. Therefore, when women are forced to leave home, they feel suddenly bereft of identity. And through these struggles with memory and loss, these women developed a sense of commitment to resistance and to regaining agency.

Gender is grounded in the daily life, activities and social relationships of the individual, and transnational processes transform gender relations and gender ideology. So even if men are seen as the primary actors in identity formation through violence, women's identities are equally and differently impacted by it. Displacement, whether within a person's country or outside of it, has implications not only on physical security but also on anxieties about the non-material aspects that form the basis of identities. The transcultural experiences of these various women point to the fact that culture, even within the diaspora, cannot be seen as timeless, coherent and homogenous. It transforms as these individuals confront new pressures and negotiate and renegotiate relationships and spaces through their lived experiences.

Traditions are invented and reinvented to reinforce religious identity or other cultural identities as a group, and it is women who find themselves at the centre of maintaining and practising these customs. Marriages and cultural functions are an amalgamation of what is remembered and what is constructed from the remnants of memory. The changes in celebrations over time are an indicator of contextual and situational adjustment and re-adjustment. And as gender, class, religion and other categories interact, that interplay becomes the crossroads for the re-articulation of identity.

The narratives of these various women are reflective of an intricate pattern of confrontation and adaptation, resistance and adjustment to variegated pressures and forces in disparate and even impossible circumstances. And it is in gendered ways that women wish to understand and exercise their rights. This often poses difficult issues for feminists, especially within the discourses on equality. Women may be activists, workers and parents at the same time – as in the cases of Zakia, Amarjeet and Makai. And yet, in these differing roles they would make very distinct demands and construct their identities accordingly. Testimonies of these Afghan women are a revelation of how they, like women in other patriarchal and war-torn countries, build upon a sense of agency in grappling with problems on a daily basis. It is in a space somewhere between the orthodoxy of their own families (though not always the case) and the antagonism of their host societies that these Afghan women attempt to negotiate their identities. However, what also has to be recognised, particularly in the context of Afghan women, is the collective history of their multiple traumas and the individuality of their personal narratives. And it is somewhere in the spaces within these multiple layers that simple solutions to complex discourses evolve, as seen in the ways these women have managed to negotiate a voice for themselves in the course of their daily tasks in their varied contexts.