IN THE SHADOWS OF ARMED CONFLICT:

EXPLORING EVERYDAY VIOLENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

In the Shadows of Armed Conflict: Exploring Everyday Violence in Afghanistan

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The length, scale, and intensity of the Afghan conflict distinguish it from other conflicts worldwide. This qualitative, interdisciplinary dissertation explored violence in everyday life and constitution of memory, as experienced and encountered in the life of Afghans during the conflict in Afghanistan (1978-2014). Through interviews conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan over five months in 2012, a phenomenological framework was used to capture lived experiences of the respondents. As the largest city and capital, Kabul had been coveted by conquerors and insurgents alike, and violence here was symbolic of the struggle to gain control of the country at large. This, along with security restrictions on other cities, especially in the south and west, was why it was chosen as the field site. The sample included Afghans across ethnicity, gender, age, and social class, and the analysis was based on the distinctive, subjective narratives of Afghans who have been recipients, instruments, and/or agents of violence during the conflict. Findings indicated that complexities surrounding ethnicity, tribal alliances, gender, and social

networks shape the experience of violence. Emergent themes were 1) endemic violence during conflict, 2) effects of violence and individual role: victim, perpetrator, or both, 3) institutionalization of violence as a tool to control and coerce, 4) resilience and victor attitude as a product of experiential numbing of violent actions and historical evolution of the Afghan nation, 5) institutional influence in shaping individual role in future development of Afghanistan; a second phase of analysis led to three more themes based on interpretations of the existing concepts. This corresponded with the past, present, and future understandings of subjective violence and changing sociopolitical context of Afghanistan. The three new dimensions were: 1) remembering violence: memory of the past; 2) identity as Afghans: exploring issues of nationalism and coexisting ethnic identities as conceptualized in the present; and 3) transitional justice and future goals: moving towards a situation of sociopolitical stability. The phenomenon of violence has transformed the sociopolitical and cultural milieu of Afghanistan and can be an important tool in understanding the upcoming sociopolitical transition in Afghanistan.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Afghanistan has faced continuous conflict, occupation, and civil war since 1979 (Rashid, 2008). Situated in an area of extreme strategic significance on the famous Silk Route, a historical meeting place of civilizations where trade flourished and cultures intermingled, this country has been coveted by many conquerors over time (Edwards, 2002). The resulting violence and aftermath of the conflict have deeply affected the sociopolitical dynamics of the country. The human cost of the conflict has been enormous. In addition, the conflict has resulted in weak governance structures, flourishing drug trade, warlord-ism, and growing insurgency (Barfield, 2010). Given the complexity of political events along with the highly diverse population in Afghanistan, the conflict has portrayed multiple realities (Barry, 2011); these multiple dimensions of the conflict reveal complex interactions between several ethnic, political, social, and cultural perspectives, as well as diverse regional interests which have played a significant role in the current sociopolitical situation of Afghanistan. In this dissertation, I focus on these multiple narratives and paradoxes through lived realities (Zahavi, 2003) of Afghans, by localizing conflict in the life of the individual and exploring aspects of individual agency, representation, and dimensions of social support. By placing conflict in the life of the individual and framing unique subjective experiences of violence in that context, effects of ethnic identity, gender, and religion on violence are analyzed. Through an examination of experiences of conflict (at home and on the frontline) in the daily life of Afghans and construction of memory, I use an interdisciplinary, qualitative approach to explore armed conflict and its impacts on people.

Research Aims and Questions

Through an interpretation of violence in daily life and its remembrance at the individual level, I explore everyday violence and memory in the context of armed conflict in Afghanistan. I pose an ontological question on the nature of violence in armed conflict that can be broken down in two parts: 1) how violence transforms into something routine in everyday life; and 2) how ethnic, social, and cultural positions impact what one remembers, recalls, and/or forgets in the context of violence.

An Example of Everyday Violence and Memory

The inaccessibility of Afghanistan due to sociopolitical instability over past decades has created a gap in the literature about unique effects of social-psychological impacts of violence and cultural nuances that shape these experiences. Individual recollections of violence are unique in subjective experiential processes. Before looking at the literature on violence and memory, this section provides an example of endemic violence in daily life and memory of the same in a physical site.

Violence in a physical site: remnants of Dar-ul-Aman. Nestled between the Hindu Kush Mountains and the Kabul River, the city of Kabul dates back 3,500 years. The city is mentioned in ancient texts like the Vedas and in travel accounts of scholars like Hiuen Tsang (602-664 AD), Al-Biruni (973-1048 AD), and Ibn Batuta (1304-1368/69 AD) and became an important trading center on the Silk Road in the fourteenth century. Since antiquity, Kabul has been familiar to the vagaries of power struggles, partly due to its location and its reputation as a historic city. Hence Kabul is no stranger to conflict, secret alliances, political assassinations, and betrayals (Fletcher, 1965).

Throughout its long and distinguished history, violent actions have become an integral part of the city's identity.

No physical structure embodies the meaning of everyday violence and its normalization in daily life of Afghans like the palace of Dar-ul-Aman, which means "the abode of Amanullah" or "abode of peace" (peace literally meaning *aman* in Farsi). It was built by the reformer king Amanullah Khan in the 1920s. The most visible structure in West Kabul, situated on top of a small hill at the end of the road that runs through Karte Se, the palace was supposed to be the center of a modern and liberal Afghanistan which the king aspired to. However, over the past years, the palace has been the most visible symbol of war in Kabul. Not only is it a daily reminder of the violence in the country, it embodies the broken aspirations of entire generations of Afghans (Edwards, 2002).

Today, as one travels further along from the city center towards Karte Se (District 3), the district that saw one of the worst factional fighting during the civil war in the 1990s, Dar-ul-Aman slowly becomes visible in the distance at the end of the road through the dense haze of dust that is integral to Kabuli summers. It is a colossal building with a distinct European, neoclassical style. It stands alone on a hill with a walled off US army base at a distance and the foundation of the new Afghan Parliament building rising in its shadow. At the first glance, what is striking about Dar-ul-Aman Palace is its eeriness; a huge, deserted, bombed palace standing on top of a hill at the edge of a city where the sense of war-weariness is extremely intense. After the initial foreboding ebbs, a sense of melancholy sets in. Today, armed guards prevent anyone from getting access to the building; but if one is successful at convincing them as I did, there is an unimaginable scene of destruction. As I walked through the rubble listening to the voices of my

companions echo in the deserted corridors lined with innumerable empty rooms, it was difficult to find a way in semi darkness; and then suddenly sunlight would greet the open space through a bomb crater on the outer wall. With staircases collapsing, walls barely standing and no semblance of anything but forgotten promise of greatness from a long lost era, it is definitely one of the places that incorporate the tragic history of this country like no other. What used to be a symbol of grandeur and royal opulence is marred by bullet marks, explosion craters and collapsing window panes. This is not like the scene of a massacre; it has no traces of blood or the dead. Yet somehow this ragged structure is a perfect metaphor of the current state of the Afghan nation, one that is still standing as a reminder to the people of the conflict.

Why Afghanistan? Past and Present

I chose Afghanistan for this study because it allows me to examine geo-political dynamics and regional dimensions that explains trajectory of the conflict; memory of everyday violence is analyzed within this broader historical context. When I went to Afghanistan in 2012 for fieldwork, the first thing that struck me was how the place upheld, through subtle and overt signs, four decades of conflict and continuing insurgency. Omnipresent security forces, barbed wire, blast walls, checkpoints, and an atmosphere of hyper vigilance prevailed in the city. In addition to these overt symbols, physical space and narratives denoting sites where violence unfolded during the war bore witness to the past. Dar-ul-Aman serves as a fitting reminder of Afghanistan's brutal history of conflict and is a logical point to start a discussion on the evolution of conflict in the country.

Numerous conflicts and ethnic rivalries that shaped modern day Afghanistan have deeply rooted historical causes (Barfield, 2010; Edwards, 2002). Afghanistan has been at the crossroads of armed conflict and violent ethnic tensions right from its inception as a sovereign nation (Barfield, 2010). Starting with the first Anglo-Afghan war in 1839, the territorial integrity and political leadership in Kabul has always been contested among warring factions (Dalrymple, 2014). After two Anglo-Afghan wars (1837–1879), the British were defeated and forced to retreat (Dalrymple, 2014). Though the country saw periods of reforms and political calm during King Amanullah Khan's regime in the 1920s, those were not sustainable (Fletcher, 1965). Afghan society's constant struggle with conflict, along with its attempts to simultaneously modernize and conserve its traditional cultural base to appease different sections of population, provides an insight into the evolution of the modern country's successive tensions through peace and war. Modern reformist governments in Kabul under Amanullah Khan and Zahir Shah were toppled by regional players like religious clerics and tribal leaders, who were opposed to the modernist vision of the monarchs and expressed their discontent through rebellion; hence regional powers always had a significant role in shaping the nation-state (Edwards, 2002; Fletcher, 1965). Religion has been one of the decisive sociopolitical forces that has impacted governance and politics (Roy, 1990). The way Islam has operated and functioned in Afghanistan illustrates not only the ideological skirmishes within Islam but also the regional tensions between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran (Barry, 2011). In fact, the resistance to communist rule in the country along with advocacy for the return to a more literal, fundamentalist interpretation of Islam by many mujahedeen groups was the starting point for growing Islamist ideology in Afghanistan, which culminated in the

Taliban takeover of Kabul in 1996 (Rashid, 2000). The brutal civil war and Taliban regime destroyed the country, but the world forgot about Afghanistan once the Cold War ended (Crews & Tarzi, 2009). The country's forgotten identity in the broader global consciousness ironically unfolded as the conflict worsened.

Since 2001, after the toppling of the Taliban regime, the country has undergone significant changes. In the thirteen years that has followed, the international coalition along with the Afghan Government has made some progress in post-war reconstruction, development of infrastructure, and stabilization of governance systems. But most of the development dividends are concentrated in urban areas; alongside selective progress in urban centers lies the reality of severe dysfunction. The insurgency has increased significantly since 2005 and governance is almost non-existent in most rural areas of the country (UNHCR, 2012). Overwhelming corruption, increasing insurgency, economic dependence on the West, and growing ethnic tensions fuelled by recent allegations of widespread electoral fraud have seriously undermined progress made across socioeconomic indicators (Barfield, 2010; Chayes, 2007). The international community's involvement in the conflict can be divided into three main phases: 1) 1978-1989, the US and Pakistan share a common goal of weakening and undermining the Kabul Government because of the Soviet influence and presence; 2) 1989-2001, the US abandoned post-Soviet Afghanistan to Pakistan's zone of influence, although Pakistani-supported Afghan Sunni fundamentalists and their alliance with Al-Qâʿida became a growing cause of concern or the US since 1998; 3) 2001 to the present, US military intervention provoked by the 9/11 attacks has sought to strengthen Afghan state, enhance nation building, and quell the growing insurgency, but it has been subverted in these efforts by Pakistan's

support for fundamentalist insurgents. Hence the US and Pakistan's strategic goals have diverged which is one of the main causes of the political instability the country faces today.

The current sociopolitical tension in Afghanistan is not just symptomatic of any post-conflict society; rather, it is strangely mirroring past sociopolitical concerns that led to the breakup of the post-Communist era Afghan Government and pushed the country into civil war. Unless rapid action is taken to address growing tensions instigated by rampant corruption, fraud, warlordism, and depleting faith in democratic institutions, the country is very close to the brink of another disaster.

Literature on Violence and War

The phenomenon of violence is not limited to war, but it is important in conceptualizing war in its entirety (Dodd, 2009). Violence has been a central concern for ethical thought, and the moral implications of violent actions have been a topic of enquiry (Chomsky, 1967; Bandura, 1978). Theorists differ on the conceptualization of violence. Weber talks about violence being the premise on which all governments are based and draw their legitimacy from. Arendt on the other hand points out the segregation of force from power in the study of violence. The main difference between these two approaches is viewing power as a non-violent strength (Arendt, 1970) versus power as violence-dependent (Weber, 1958) and the struggle for legitimacy between different agents, states, and individuals. Žižek distinguishes between different forms of violence as subjective violence, which can constitute acts of assault, murder, terror, and war. However, there are two other varieties of objective violence: "the 'symbolic' violence embodied in language

and its forms", and systemic violence, the "often catastrophic consequences of the functioning of our economic and political systems" (2008, p. 9-11).

The problem of violence has been taken up by anthropologists and historians who assess impacts of violence and ritualistic violent actions across diverse sites and cultures (Hambelt, 2004). However, violence as a philosophical issue has seldom been studied and it may be due to the nature of violence. Jacques Semelin (2007) talks about three impacts of extreme violence: psychological, moral and intellectual. Extremely violent actions make virtually no sense, and even if it can be justified as a means to a particular end, one cannot fathom the banality of daily violence that characterizes any continuous conflict (Arendt, 1963; Semelin, 2007; Hambelt, 2004). Endemic conflict strips violence of its ethical garb and the legitimacy of violent actions in such situations can be contested. The inclination and disposition to believe in the righteousness of force, or in this case, violent actions, are reinforced through identities, the way one sees and experiences the world, and their individualized cultural aspects (Hambelt, 2004).

A philosophical approach to deconstructing this phenomenon leads to questioning the use or inherent capacity of violence as an answer to political insecurity. A phenomenology of violence incorporates the interpersonal nature of violence, one where the act of violence transcends one individual or state of being (Dodd, 2009). Conflict can also be explained in a more anthropological context, where humans struggle for domination and control. Rene Girard takes this argument further to state that violence is essentially a phenomenon based on mimetic attributes (1979); mimetic desire forms the basis of Girard's work where he suggests that if individuals imitate other people's desires, there is a potential for conflict because they end up desiring the same thing. In

that case, individuality leads to interdividuality, which is a function of imitative patterns in the social domain (Siebers, 1995). Hence, alienation and the resulting marginalization becomes not a function of the individual but a political creation based on exclusion and the struggle for recognition (Honneth, 1995; Siebers, 1995).

Turning the focus to the relationship of violence and state, Hobbes's Leviathan suggests that faculties of morality, laws, and judgment can only thrive under a governing power (Hobbes, 2011). In Hobbesian political philosophy, war and violence are portrayed as the opposite of peace and stability where people ought to follow a path of war or peace based on what is best for their self-preservation (Hobbes, 2011). But this is challenged by many theorists, the most famous argument coming from Baruch Spinoza's concept of peace as constitutive. Spinoza notes that, far from consisting in only a negative form, peace is "a virtue which comes from strength of mind; for obedience is the steadfast will to carry out orders enjoined by the general decree of the commonwealth" (Campos, 2012, p. 86-87). The sovereign authority has perfect ownership over the state and its citizens, and violence arising from that structure is legitimized because it is disciplinarian by nature. Here, it is important to distinguish between generative power and ordinary power. Generative refers to the "primordial power or arche-power, categorized not by the presence, but by absence that comes before the conventional binary of presence/absence" (Polat 2010, p. 320). In Spinoza's concept of natural rights, peace is conceptualized as a function of this generative power.

Multiple dimensions of power have forced Afghans to reconstruct their narratives of conflict as the state and its machineries have increasingly become sites where violence is produced and experienced (Scheper-Hughes, 1987). During the conflict, the lives of

Afghans signified little more than what Giorgio Agamben classifies as "*homo sacer*," where human life is "included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)" (Agamben, 1998). This process is further exemplified by arbitrary killings, targeted assassinations, forced disappearances, sexual assaults and other forms of random violent actions during the conflict, all of which target the bare life component of *homo sacer*. Although severe violence is a part of human experience, keeping it somewhat distant and separated from oneself is something that is observed in the sociopolitical sphere. The German theologian Martin Niemoller immortalized humankind's inclination for passivism and overbearing silence in the face of totalitarian terror in his famous poem "First they came" Mike Taussig (1989) categorizes this process of distancing as "*terror as the other*" (p.3). The process of acquiring this characteristic of being routine, banal, or mundane can be traced in the evolution of violence in a specific historical context.

In Afghanistan, the construction of political factions along the lines of ethnicity and religious sects has paved the way for the coexistence of diverse narratives of conflict (Barry, 2011). Hence, memory becomes essential not only to frame a certain narrative and remember it, but also to forget and delegitimize other stories. Subjective experiences of conflict become collective due to the "virtue of its omnipresence" (Green, 1994). But in this case, the collective isn't a national collective, rather an amalgamation forced out of necessities created by the war and ascribed to ethnic, regional, and tribal identities. The idea of a nation as an imagined community (Anderson, 1991) has been historically fragile in the Afghan state; it has been corroded and replaced by impressions of fragmented nationhood based on ethnic and tribal affiliations during the war. The origin of ethnic

tensions can be traced back to the development of Pashtun supremacy and assumed entitlement as natural rulers of the country (Barfield, 2002; Fletcher, 1965). Ethnic factions within the communist party, as well as divisions among ranks of mujahedeen, were intensified by external support to these insurgent groups which was dictated by their ethnic and religious identity (Roy, 1990). So while Hizb-i-Islami, a primarily Pashtun Sunni political group, was supported and aided by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, among others nations, Hizb-i-Wahdat, the Hazara Shia faction, gained their support from neighboring Iran, home to fellow Shiites. Ethnic violence during the civil war and Taliban regime reconstituted these divisions. The connection between ethnic violence and social memory is therefore shaped by these differences and institutionalized insecurity.

The production and reproduction of conflict and memory often has a symbiotic relationship (Ricoeur, 2004). So it is essential to analyze the complexities of addressing memories of violence and trauma. In Afghanistan, remembering the conflict and related violent actions is influenced by sociocultural identifiers. Norms, symbols, codes of conduct, and etiquette are unique across Afghan tribes, and their realities and narratives of conflict are also diverse (Edwards, 2002). Each group has a distinct oppressor depending on their historical and ethnic identity (Fletcher, 1965). Regional ties are formed and performed on the basis of ethnic loyalties. Hence it is cultural consciousness borne out of ethnic ties that leads to an emergence of a sense of collective. The basic premise of such an identification is based on the exclusion and marginalization of all those who do not belong to the group. This means that remembering the conflict also comes with a double burden. It requires: (1) recalling the trauma of being victimized and

brutalized at an individual and communal level; and (2) acknowledging the responsibility for collective exclusion of other communities, often through violence and brutality.

Importance of the Study

Carrying out field work in Afghanistan over a period of five months provided an excellent opportunity to engage with the real stakeholders in the Afghan conflict and gain firsthand knowledge of a country that has long been inaccessible to researchers due to sociopolitical instability. This dissertation is very timely and provides an account of everyday violence and collective memory of the conflict in Afghanistan. Apart from devastating sociopolitical consequences for the country, the conflict has resulted in a massive humanitarian crisis. The conflict has resulted in over 150,000 deaths, 7.5 million refugees, and 2 million internally displaced over the course of the last three decades (UNHCR, 2012) However, these are conservative estimates; the real situation of the country can be assessed by the following figures: Human Development Index for Afghanistan is 0.374; it ranks 175th out of 187 countries in 2013. Life expectancy is: 58.6 years for males and 60.8 years for females (WHO, 2011). The country has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality, 1,400 in 2011 (WHO 2011). Worsening behavioral and health indicators and rising sociopolitical instability have severe impacts for Afghans. The Bilmes study (2013) on financial legacy of the wars in Afghanistan and its relationship to future national security budgets estimates that the War in Afghanistan cost $2 trillion only in direct outlays, not taking into account equipment, training and maintaining the war apparatus as well as reconstruction aid.

Implications to Social Work

This study has multiple implications for trauma and violence research; it also contributes to knowledge and literature on international social work. In the international scenario, there have been efforts to define social work as a global profession and to establish an internationally-agreed common code of ethics (Cox & Pawar, 2013, p. 3). Social work in the globalized world has to learn from different social contexts; isolationism is not a good solution as some borders become more fluid and social problems specific to a region or population may spread to the rest of world. In order to be culturally relevant in a globalized world, social work has to reflect upon its various interpretations and manifestations in different contexts. In the absence of a colonial past, centralized systems of social welfare and community development have been absent in Afghanistan. However, unique cultural ties and tribal structures, along with a necessity to create and maintain close social relations during conflict have contributed to the development of these values in the Afghan society. This study contributes to the existing social work literature on function of violence in society. Additionally, it looks into: (1) social values that lead people to create and protect social ties in the face of violent actions; (2) oppressive social structures in sociopolitical functioning; (3) operation of patriarchy in traditional conservative societies as a tool to control and coerce; and (4) cultural norms that dictate aspects of social life. The importance of utilizing a non-Western lens to identify the sources of conflict, analyze nuances of cultural expectations, and examination of cultural chasm between urban and rural Afghanistan are topics that enrich the literature on alternate ways of studying violence and cultural dimensions of conflicts.

Organization of the Study

This study analyzes everyday violence and collective memory during conflict, through respondent narratives, which are unique in their diversity yet commonplace in their frequency.

The chapters of this dissertation are organized around the themes from the respondents' narratives. Their stories and life histories form the basis of the dissertation to elaborate ordinary citizens' experiences of the war.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction of the issues, lays out research aims and questions, and examines the literature on violence and memory.

Chapter 2 lays out the methodology and theoretical framework. It engages in a discussion on the experience of conducting research in armed conflict zones, addressing personal biases, being cognizant and following local customs, positioning oneself as a female researcher in Afghanistan, and finally, dealing with respondent confidentiality and other research-related issues.

Chapter 3 presents the process of systematic dehumanization and gendered suffering during the conflict as part of everyday experience of violence. Gendered violence during the conflict is analyzed in the backdrop of the historical evolution of conflict in Afghanistan; the constant struggle between rural/urban and central/tribal centers of power resulting in the direction that Afghan nation took under diverse regimes is useful to understand the effects of violence. Gendered nature of violence is analyzed by placing the focus on deprivation of equal rights, opportunities, and privileges in the ideological framework of multiple regimes; structural challenges to equity, cultural practices, agency and voice of the respondent, and interpretations of religion sanctioning oppression and daily violence is examined.

Chapter 4 focuses on the experiences of everyday violence. It presents how conflict becomes mundane, how people normalize loss, witness killings, disappearances and other horrors of war, and conceptualize insecurity in daily lives. Following works of Hannah Arendt, Mike Taussig, and Elaine Scarry, this section looks into the process of terrorizing and subjugating an entire population during war; it examines how violence seeps into everyday interactions and represents the collective psyche.

Chapter 5 presents an argument on nationalism and identity and how it impacts the experience of everyday violence. This chapter explores national, ethnic, and tribal ties and alliances, politicized ethnic identity during civil war, and the complexity of tradition versus modernity, which is presented by the nuances of cultural practices. The historical evolution of the modern Afghan nation, the genesis of the conflict, and the meaning and importance of being Afghan is studied through these distinct identity lenses.

Chapter 6 wraps up the discussion on violence in everyday life by exploring collective memory of the conflict. It looks at what people remember, forget, and/or recall about the conflict. The chapter presents individual memories of loss, need for transitional justice, oral history traditions to preserve memories of war to transfer generational knowledge. It also focuses on exile and refuge, focusing on memories of loss and coping.

Chapter 7 looks at the understanding that evolves from the previous chapters about the nature of everyday violence and daily life during conflict. This chapter provides a conclusion by examining the process by which violence is made familiar, mundane, and meaningless; how complexities surrounding ethnic identity, tribal alliances and gender impact memory of that violence; and how, even in its meaninglessness, the phenomenon

of violence has shaped the sociopolitical and cultural milieu of Afghanistan for four

decades.

Chapter 2: Research Methodology

Overview

I draw on an interdisciplinary, qualitative approach to the research of armed conflict in Afghanistan and its social impacts on people. By using a phenomenological framework, the analysis is framed according to the distinctive, subjective experience of ordinary Afghans who have been recipients, instruments, and/or agents of violence. As the largest city and capital of Afghanistan, Kabul and its violence have been symbolic of the struggle to gain control of the country at large (Barfield, 2010). This symbolism, along with security restrictions on other cities, especially those in the south and east of the country, is the reason for choosing Kabul as the field site. The repercussions of violence on Afghans and the resulting vulnerabilities and insecurities acts as backdrop for understanding complex institutional, personal, and discursive relations. This chapter discusses the methodology and conceptual framework used for this study; it describes the study sample, research design, data analysis process, and limitations. It concludes with an analysis of the complexities of conducting research in an area of armed conflict, ethical concerns, and trustworthiness.

This study employs a phenomenological framework to study violence in the context of sustained armed conflict, which had not been previously used to study armed conflict in Afghanistan. A phenomenological enquiry is based on the premise that all social problems are problems of meaning (Dodd, 2009). This framework is used for this study because it seeks to understand the essence of violence with all its anarchy, chaos, and seemingly meaningless actions in totality. This study is not only an analysis of violence while it is cordoned off in the political realm; rather, it accounts for the

obscurity, regularity, and interactions of violence with individual agents, and most importantly, how violence is manifested across social sites (Hambelt, 2004; Dodd, 2009). However, understanding violence from a phenomenological paradigm brings considerable challenges. The production of violence and collective memory cannot be analyzed in isolation; it must be analyzed while being cognizant of the multiple complex levels in which violence operates. For this study, this meant conceptualizing violence not only as a product of armed conflict, but analyzing it in conjunction with the sociopolitical and cultural perspectives prevalent in Afghanistan.

Rationale

Patton stated that the controlling force in research is the purpose of the study, from which all decisions about design, measurement, analysis, and reporting flow (Patton, 2002). The purpose of this study is to examine experiences of everyday violence and collective memory in Afghanistan. Little research in social or behavioral sciences has been conducted on armed conflict, especially on the everyday nature of violence and collective memory (Potts, Myer, & Roberts, 2011). One of the reasons for this has been the challenges of applying a rigorous methodological framework in a context engrossed in political instability. In addition, ethical concerns and ensuring the safety of the research participants and researchers impacts scholarly study of this problem.

Phenomenology is chosen as the research framework because it is useful to analyze the meaning, structure, and nature of lived experience of everyday violence of research participants. "Phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes some 'thing' what it is, and without which it could not be what it is," (Van Manen, 2007, p. 9). This study focuses on exploring the core meaning of the participants'

experiences in living in the midst of armed conflict as well as the collective memory of the conflict. This framework was best fit for the project because it involved methodologically capturing and describing how people experience this whole phenomenon of violence in their daily lives: "how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it and talk about it with others," (Patton, 2002). Husserl stated, "We can only know what we experience," (1913). The only way to know another person's experience is to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible (Patton, 2002). In the absence of direct experience of the phenomenon by the researcher, the assumption and study of the essence is the most defining characteristic of a phenomenological study (Van Manen, 2007). Likewise, this is a study of the meaning of sustained violence in the face of armed conflict. Using an inductive and exploratory analysis, the experience of endemic violence in daily lives of the participants and collective memory of conflict is explored.

Study design

    A: Sample. The issue of breadth versus depth is important in a qualitative study; it depends on available resources and level of interest of the researcher (Patton, 2002). However, for this study, the security situation and availability of research participants were two major concerns. The primary goal was to ensure safety of the participants and conduct the study ethically. Recruiting participants is one of the most difficult stages in conducting any research on armed conflict. In addition to the lack of security and safety concerns, trauma and fear force some people to keep silent about their wartime experiences (Potts, Myer, & Roberts, 2011). The fieldwork in this study was conducted keeping in mind the literature on difficulties in conducting research in armed conflict;

however, this study did not present any such challenges, which would be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

A variety of sampling techniques were used for this study. Convenience sampling was the primary sampling technique, the logic and power of which lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2002). One third of the sample was recruited through snowball sampling and two thirds through convenience sampling. The initial sampling criteria for selecting and recruiting participants were: 1) They must belong to one of the four main ethnic groups in Afghanistan: Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik or Uzbek; 2) They must speak either English or Dari; and 3) They must be between the ages of 25 and 55 years, ensuring they lived through the decades of conflict. In addition to this, precedence was given to people who fulfilled certain additional criteria mentioned below. This study focused on understanding the experience of violence, but since Afghanistan has witnessed three decades of continuous conflict, there were substantial people with similar experiences. After the first few interviews, a decision was made to include witnessing of certain types of violent actions as an additional inclusion criterion. This included participants who had experienced violent actions; for example: having a family member killed/disappeared or witnessing active gunfights; bomb blasts and rocket explosions; participated in the conflict; serving as local leaders in the community; and/ or assisted the resistance movement.

I started the sampling procedure by having a conversation with the director of my host institute, American Institute for Afghanistan Studies (AIAS), about the purpose of the research and sampling criterions. He put me in touch with few people he thought might help. I repeated the process of explaining research goals and sampling frame with

this group of potential respondents to get any possible leads. Most people approached by me agreed to be a part of the study. Finding such respondents was much easier than what I had imagined. This enabled me to identify information-rich cases to better develop an understanding of the meaning of violence. After each interview, I'd ask the participant for possible interviewees; this snowball sampling formed about one-thirds of my sample. As I developed my own network in Kabul through informal interactions and meetings, I identified people with unique stories of conflict; I'd approach these people with a request to participate in my study. This is how I got two-thirds of my sample.

This process resulted in a total sample which included 30 respondents: 17 men and 13 women. Most of the respondents were Pashtuns or Tajiks; few were of mixed heritage (Pashtun and Tajik). In addition to this, the sample included 5 Hazaras, 2 Uzbeks and 1 Baluch. The sample consisted of people from two generations between the ages of 20 and 55 years with extremely diverse sociopolitical and ideological backgrounds. It included people from as politically and ideologically diverse a group as a member of the ex-royal family, members of the mujahedeen (Hizb-e-Islami, Jamiat-i-Islami, and Hizb-e-Wahdat) who fought against the Soviets and the communist government, people whose families were high-ranking officials in the communist government, people who fought in the resistance under the Taliban, people whose family members were part of the Taliban, people whose families were either tribal leaders or community/religious leaders, people who served in the jirga, and people who had an active role in the conflict. 95% of respondents moved out of Afghanistan or Kabul for the countryside during the conflict. In 2012, almost everyone in the sample were a part of the international development effort, working in aid organizations, consulates, international non-governmental

organizations, or the Afghan Government. Most of them were prominent social activists: one was the head of a local daily newspaper; one was the founder of a local TV station; some were professionals like journalists, doctors, and professors; and a few were young activists organizing community activities on diverse sociopolitical issues. The sample is not equally distributed across gender or ethnicity. I tried recruiting uniformly across ethnicity/gender, but that became difficult; so I focused on recruiting anyone who fulfilled the inclusion criterions.

     B. Data collection. Semi-structured interviews and the life history approach were used for this study. The life history approach was used to gain insight into the broader human condition by "coming to know and understand the experiences of humans" (Trainer & Groue, ed., 2013, p. 152). More specifically, by using a life history approach, the interviewee was asked to provide a narrative of their lives and experiences. The strength of the approach laid in holistically capturing endemic violence in everyday life in Afghanistan. Qualitative interviewing allowed me to understand the interviewee's perspective on a range of research questions; training on conducting qualitative interviews also prevented the risk of leading the interviewee on or get a certain kind of response that the interviewee presumed I would like to hear while collecting data. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to elicit responses from the interviewees. (See Appendix A for the interview guide) The interview guide had questions on seven main dimensions: impact of violence on self, impact of violence on family, primary self-identity, violence within social networks, experiences of daily violence, experiences of exile and displacement, and hopes and dreams for future.

The original local organization that was selected as a resource to help with the study did not materialize once I reached Kabul. This organization had a different role for me in mind, while I wanted to conduct fieldwork and not spend my time being a full time employee for them. I approached another organization, AIAS, an Afghan research organization under Boston University. I arranged for my accommodation and logistical arrangements with their research team. Most participants were approached for the first time using contacts obtained from AIAS and through personal networking. All participants were approached by telephone; I explained the purpose of the study and requested interviews. In an initial visit, potential participants were briefed about the study: the motive of the study, the identity and objective of the researcher, and the time commitments expected from the participant were discussed at length. Once the participant agreed to be a part of the study, the interview was conducted. Most people requested that the interview be conducted at their offices. In four cases, however, the interviewee selected my office for their interview. All interviews were conducted in English by me. Before the interview began, I reassured every participant that no personal information or specific names shared would appear in the transcripts or in any written work. The audio tapes with the names would be destroyed three years after the study and none of the transcripts would have any reference to personal information/identifying information about anyone. Only two out of forty respondents refused to be audiotaped. Transcriptions were done on site in my office, and the tapes were destroyed immediately after that. Once transcribed, encrypted audio files were uploaded to a hard drive using secure network protocols as per Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements and could be accessed only by the members of the research team. In almost all cases, participants

were extremely open about sharing information. Most of the respondents were active in the public sphere and their stories had appeared in newspapers/books; no one was unsure about what they wanted to share. In fact, due to the trusting relationships developed with the interviewees, they often times revealed stories which they had not mentioned to anyone before. This will be discussed at length in the final section of the chapter.

      C. Data analysis. Qualitative analytic strategies were used to analyze the data and understand the experience of conflict. The following steps were taken before the analysis began: phenomenological reduction, description, and the search for essences (Giorgi, 1997). I am not native to Afghanistan, and the conflict is something I have not personally experienced. This reduced the chances of my being biased by my own experiences of this particular conflict, but my experiences in other areas of conflict coupled with my reading and knowledge about the country would have caused bias. For this reason, the phenomenological reduction included a bracketing of the patriarchal cultural context of Afghanistan, the popular images in media about the cultural traditions in the country, and the norms, stereotypes and gender roles in Afghan society. This was done by being cognizant of personal existing biases and taking time to address the issue during any interview and analysis.

      A two fold approach was adopted for data analysis: The first step involved a thematic analysis for common themes of subjective experiences of violence. However, this study wanted to go beyond a thematic analysis; in phase II, these themes were taken and interpreted through a narrative structure of impacts of violence. By integrating a thematic and narrative methods (Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010), a

multidimensional and holistic vision of the whole phenomenon is obtained, instead of a fragmented understanding of personal experiences.

In the first step of data analysis, I engaged in phenomenological reduction to identify any major themes across interviews. Transcripts were read in minute detail, a minimum of three times for every transcript, and sometimes more, depending on the quality and nature of the interview. The narratives were then coded, analyzed and compared to identify the themes (Patton, 2002). The third step was to transform these meanings through interpretation to frame the transcendent meanings of facts or events. This step was used in conjunction with a narrative analysis of the transcripts. In the fourth step, the meaning units were recorded to present a structured outline of the phenomenon for the text, including how the process was experienced by the participant and what the phenomenon actually entailed (Karlsson, 1993). The final step was "creative synthesis" (Patton, 2002) to incorporate the structural outlines from all the interviews to elucidate the common element.

The process of narrative enquiry is composed of engaging with participants in the field, creating field texts, and writing both interim and final research reports (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); each story is embedded in context (Mishler, 1979). Immersion in the field for five months and repeated conversations and discussions with research participants above and beyond the interviews that were taped aided the process of narrative analysis. Fieldwork was a very vital component of this study as the relationships established with the research respondents outside the interview setting further helped to make sense of the temporal and contextual aspects of the narrative analysis (Trainor & Groue, 2013). This was a key aspect of this study because it helped in the

phenomenological process of creative synthesis to interpret the experiences of living with endemic violence.

Narrative analysis demands that the researcher pay attention to the ways individual narratives of experience are embedded in social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives (Caine, 2007). In studying the Afghan sociopolitical context, I took care to ensure that each narrative reflected the ambiguities, complexities, difficulties, and uncertainties I encountered as I lived in the field (Trainor & Groue, 2013). Issues of voice, agency, and audience had to be balanced for narrative enquiry. Any conclusion arrived at from the data through interpretation was checked with respondents to ensure accuracy. I'd call the interviewees for this purpose and discuss my interpretations.

Conducting Fieldwork during Armed Insurgency

Addressing security and ethical concerns while ensuring trustworthiness and credibility posed initial difficulties. Since qualitative studies are inductive, value-bound and context-based, and extrapolations are broad, rigor is often talked about in terms of the credibility of the researcher and their trustworthiness. The researcher is an instrument in the qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2008, p. 13), which means that the training and competency of the researcher is vital to this study. Reflexivity is a key issue here; I had to pay utmost attention to the voice of respondents in the narratives. Conducting research in a foreign environment brings about issues related to the outsider/insider (emic/etic) perspectives. It is especially true for a country like Afghanistan with its history of fiercely defending its culture and social space against foreigners (Barfield, 2010). The conflict had rendered the country almost inaccessible for decades, and entering into a

sociopolitical space like that required a keen eye for detail and the capacity to observe and adapt to local customs. By immersing myself in the field, my goal was to observe and share as intimately as possible the lives and activities in that setting to develop a view of how violence is contextualized in the everyday life of a common Afghan. Immersion meant that I refrained from superficially engaging with my respondents through one interview; I personally connected with each one of them, explaining my presence and purpose of research, and making sure that they were comfortable with the research agenda before we started the interview process.

My entry to the field was comparatively easy. Through AIAS and my personal networks, I established contacts with the first group of people I could potentially interview within a week of my stay in Kabul. Being from India actually worked to my advantage due to the great reputation India enjoys in popular Afghan culture. Because the narrative analysis was focused on a relational enquiry, the interviews and encounters with respondents were never one sided. I needed to open up as a researcher; my presence had to be explained, along with my motives, objectives, and background. My respondents had to be reassured about my presence and a balanced relationship had to be established to gain their trust. Afghanistan is a place where enormous emphasis is placed on family relations (Edwards, 2002). For this reason, I was often questioned about who I was; my credentials as a researcher were often unimportant. To them, the most important information was about me, my family background and my country of birth. Stories of my family's exile from what is now Bangladesh before the partition of India in 1947 was something most of the respondents could relate to because of their own experiences of exile and refuge. After an initial rapport was established, it was much easier for me to

have a conversation about the current sociopolitical scenario and cultural nuances, because people were more likely to provide rich details once they knew who I was.

Conducting research in areas facing armed conflict is often controversial. Potential problematic issues include ensuring security for respondents as well as the researcher, gathering required data, and enhancing methodological rigor. I had to constantly reassure respondents of the confidentiality of the interviews. All of the respondents were warm and open with a desire to share their experiences of conflict. A few respondents openly expressed gratitude for being asked about their experiences, since often personal stories are lost in the collective picture of suffering as a nation. In fact, some spoke about how Afghans are now talking less about the conflict era, in a way signifying that they are ready to move beyond it.

Limitations

This study presents qualitative, subjective experience of violence and collective memory formation in the context of three decades of conflict in Afghanistan. Limitations of this study are as follows: Convenience sampling strategy enabled me to get a particular sample of Afghans who are well educated, articulate, and have some social standing. Even though many respondents in the sample came from modest backgrounds, yet the distinction between them and the vast majority of Afghans whose experience of violence is modified by their lower socioeconomic status are huge. Security issues were the reason why this study was not expanded to other settings. So although the findings elaborate the subjective experience of violence, it is specific to a small, selected section of Afghans, who did witness the war very closely, yet had a specific experience shaped by their socioeconomic and cultural standing.

Although all respondents were fluent in English (which was a selection criterion for sampling) yet it was not their mother tongue, and a few respondents did struggle to find the correct word to describe their experience. All interviews were conducted in English because I wanted the rich narrative and did not want to risk meanings getting lost in translation. So while this ensured that I get exactly what the respondents meant by a specific experience, sometimes due to a language constraint, I felt that a few respondents struggled to express the intensity of their experience. In that case, few would use Farsi words, while few would look up English words to describe the experience.

Another limitation could be social desirability bias, because the questions asked very specific and personal experiences of violence the respondent had during the conflict; it was not limited to their role as victims of violence but also as perpetrators. Although factors like grief, trauma, and an unwillingness to disclose very private information can modify responses and is perceived as a limitation, yet many respondents were in the public life with little to hide. Also, in a cultural context like Afghanistan with a long shared history of conflict, most experiences were already common knowledge, yet some respondents did mention that they have confided in me some of their experiences that few outside their immediate social circle would know. I felt that establishing a good rapport and explaining the purpose of the research in depth were pivotal in getting good responses. The findings of this study will be presented according to thematic areas in the following chapters.

Introduction to Findings

Findings of this study are presented in the following chapters. In the first step of analysis of all transcripts, five major themes were identified from the data. These were: 1)

endemic violence during conflict, 2) effects of violence and individual role: victim, perpetrator, or both, 3) public violence: institutionalization of violence as a tool to control and coerce, 4) resilience and victor attitude as a product of experiential numbing of violent actions, 5) institutional influence in shaping individual role in future development of Afghanistan; these themes are explored in chapters 3 and 4 on everyday violence and gendered violence. A second phase of analysis led to three more themes which were based on interpretations of the existing concepts. This corresponded with the past, present, and future understanding of subjective violence and changing sociopolitical context of Afghanistan. The three new dimensions were: 1) remembering violence: memory of the past, 2) identity as Afghans: exploring issues of nationalism and coexisting ethnic identities as conceptualized in the present, and 3) transitional justice and future goals: moving towards a situation of sociopolitical stability; these are explained in chapters on nationalism and collective memory, along with the historical evolution of the conflict. The following chapters on findings are organized around these themes, which will give the reader a holistic perspective of: 1) the historical evolution of the conflict and violence in Afghanistan, with special emphasis on the nature and causes of conflict, 2) subjective experiences of everyday violence, explored through the narratives of how Afghans perceive, feel, make sense of, and judge the violence around them, and 3) bringing together these diverse narratives as they remember/recall it, and making sense of what constitutes a holistic depiction of endemic violence across three decades in Afghanistan.

Chapter 3: Gendered Violence in Afghanistan

Overview

Gender roles, social relations, and the functional dimensions of masculinity directly impact how violence assumes a gendered nature during conflict; the extent of gender-based violence in a society is a predisposing condition for sexual violence in war (Leatherman, 2011, p. 4). Drawing from Judith Butler's (1988) conceptualization of gender over social temporality and not as a static category, through repetition of gendered acts (p. 520) and Simone de Beauvoir's (1974) seminal work *The Second Sex*, where she posits gender "as a historical situation rather than a natural fact" (p.38), this chapter presents everyday forms of violence and memory construction from a gendered perspective. Due to the unique history of Afghanistan trapped between modernity and tradition and the eventual struggle to ensure gender rights that played out during the conflict, it is imperative to focus on gender and its impacts on the experience of violence over time. Beauvoir's pronouncement "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman," (Butler, 1988, p. 519) is the starting point of this analysis; through a careful assessment of historical events, narratives of everyday violence, and the ongoing interventionist agenda, this chapter captures the sociocultural and historical causes that shaped gender relations in Afghanistan and elaborates the struggle between the personal and political (Hanisch, 1969) through the experience of everyday violence and collective memory of conflict. The best way to conceptualize violence in everyday life through a gendered lens is to examine the voices of women who lived through the conflict and bore witness to the atrocities. As elaborated in the sections below, gender roles in Afghan society were a result of the policies of the ruling political powers, which were in turn shaped by the

rulings powers' visions for Afghan society as well as traditional Afghan culture. The clash of modernity and tradition in Amanullah Khan's Afghanistan, the politics of ethnic identity and resulting brutality during the civil war, the complex tribal code of conduct still prevalent in many parts of the country, the impact of social class relations and propaganda during the rule of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), and the cultural chasm between two Afghanistan – an urban, progressive one and a rural, politically insecure one – are a few periods that defined gender relations and its impacts on everyday violence (Barfield, 2010; Dalrymple, 2014; Mausavi, 2007). Gender based violence is thus a reflection of interactions between Afghan politics, culture, and effects

It was fairly easy for me as a South Asian woman to navigate the complex nuances of culture, religion, and patriarchy in order to get narratives of violence, both in private and public spheres, from respondents. Afghan society is gender segregated to a certain extent, though it is less pronounced in cities like Kabul. However, as a female researcher I had the opportunity to reach out to both women and men. Female respondents expressed a solidarity they felt with me as a fellow woman from a neighboring country, as expressed below:

> "There is unity and solidarity in women's movement across the world. We are at the beginning of that movement, and we need, as women, solidarity of other women of the world. Forget about politics but just as a woman, if you believe in women's movement, we must have your solidarity and you must trust the women of Afghanistan. That's why I trust you; that is why I am sitting here talking to you, I feel that you feel me; you understand my pain and my struggles."

This quote is from Sanam[1], who is a women's rights activist currently based in Kabul. Her assertion in trusting me as a woman who'd understand her struggles has a further layer of sharing common cultural practices: as a woman growing up in South

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[1] All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

Asia, cultural nuances, stringent gender roles, and patriarchal social structure in Afghanistan are not unfamiliar to me. In this study, narratives from female respondents (a little less than half of the sample) presents a different lens in understanding daily violence during the war. Violence during war is never gender neutral and has multiple nuances. In a cultural context like Afghanistan, gender is one of the most significant categories which directly impacts the experience of violent actions in different ways. The complex interaction of private and public life for Afghan women has been the result of historical, cultural, and ethnic practices, the analysis of which becomes imperative to understand how violence operates for Afghan women at home and during war.

Gendered Relations in Afghan Society

In Afghanistan, external invasion, civil war, widespread displacement, and the brutal Taliban regime made a huge contribution to the way gendered violence was produced and shaped (Barfield, 2010). However, it would be simplistic to say that the conflict carried sole responsibility for gender segregation and the oppression of women and minorities. The existing gendered relations in Afghan society are a product of its historical evolution as well as a byproduct of the conflict (Povey, 2002). Misogyny and oppression of women are ingrained in traditional practices and cultural norms; where such discrimination is normalized, legitimized, practiced, and even celebrated in the name of religion and tradition. While these strong structural inequalities have shaped the notions of sociopolitical position of women in society, such structures have also been influenced and shaped by the current political institutions (Barakat, ed., 2004). Hence, the impact of gender relations on everyday violence has to be analyzed against the background of changing power structures in Afghanistan, through the prism of stringent

cultural norms and tribal codes of conduct, and alongside specific historical periods denoting the conflict that shaped the country. This delineates the sociopolitical trajectory through which gender-based violence has been established and institutionalized in Afghan society, thereby making it a part of everyday violence (Povey, 2002).

Gender relations in Afghanistan can be connected with geography, regional cultural differences, urban/rural divide, and the ethnic distribution of population; the more conservative Pashtun tribes in the South have always had a higher record of discriminatory and abusive practices to control their women than the rest of the country (Fletcher, 1965). In the central highlands of Hazarajat, most Hazara women have a higher degree of freedom and equality which is due to the higher social status of the Hazara women (Mousavi, 1997). Thus the impacts of oppressive gender based rules under multiple regimes, especially the Taliban, were felt in the most intense way in the urban centers of Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, and Balkh, where women historically enjoyed more freedom and rights than the conservative Pashtun-dominated cities like Kandahar (Rashid, 2000).

Interestingly, Afghan history is strewn with stories of strong and heroic women (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p. 16). Afghan folklores sing the praises of such historical female characters. Rabia, the poet from Mazar-i-Sharif whose passion for her lover led her to write her last poem in her own blood as she lay dying for him, and Malalai, the famed warrior who led troops in battle against the British in the Anglo-Afghan war, are well-known female Afghan figures who are revered and beloved to this day (Rostami-Povey, 2007). During the interviews, it was reiterated by respondents that there has hardly been any focus on the unique narratives of strength and courage of Afghan women. Very few

scholars address this aspect of strength in Afghan women during the conflict, and this can be a result of interpreting the conflict through a predominantly Western lens, focusing on interpreting the discrimination faced by Afghan women without any cultural or historical understanding (Barakat, 2004; Barfield, 2010; Blood, 1997; Das, 2007). Following Beauvoir's theory of how one has to "become a woman" (1974) by conforming to a historical idea of womanhood, it is interesting to move beyond a western interpretation to understand the effects of Afghan conflict on demands of propriety and tradition and the impacts of historical factors on Afghan women's position in society as well as their experience of everyday violence.

Early Steps towards Women's Liberation: The Role of the Monarchy

Amanullah Khan was the first ruler who introduced social reforms in an attempt to modernize the country, while forging new friendships and strengthening diplomatic relations abroad (Fletcher, 1965). Under his rule, Afghanistan was following the footsteps of other modernist Muslim nations like Turkey. He was the first champion of women's rights and gender equality in a deeply divided society (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). His sweeping reforms included provisions for women's education by opening schools, increasing the minimum age of marriage for girls, and limiting bride price, as well as establishing a constitutional monarchy, an elected assembly and a secular judiciary with full participation of women in all areas (Barakat, 2004). The extent and pace of the proposed reforms led to an uprising and overthrow of the King (Barakat, 2004, p. 111). Since then, it has been a constant struggle between the traditionalists and the modernizers who had diametrically opposite visions for the development of Afghanistan (Barakat, 2004; Edwards, 2002; Dupree, 1998). The reasons for failure was primarily because the

tribal power centers believed that women had no role in the public sphere and should be subjugated; they perceived the reforms as Westernization of their traditional values and a corrupting influence of modernity through education and women's rights. (Mousavi, 2004). This can be aptly described by the Pashto proverb *"A women's role is either in the home or in the grave."* However, this is the kind of cultural norm that Amanullah and the later reformers tried to address and failed.

The reform agenda was again taken up again by Zahir Shah (1933-1973), who had a low-key, facilitative approach to social reform (Barakat, 2004, p. 112). His reign saw a slow but steady increase in women's access to education, employment, and public service. The reforms concentrating on the urban elite went directly against the prevailing conservative cultural and religious norms of the society (Povey, 2002). Traditionally in Afghanistan the private and the public spheres hardly intermixed and due to later political developments, women's voices were systematically silenced in the public arena (Rashid, 2000). This was done on a purpose to constrain and limit women to their sphere that is the domain of the private. By keeping women, their sexuality, and their identity under control, the conservatives could uphold their power over the dominant political sphere (Dupree, 1998). The failure of the reforms was not just a result of the clash between modernization efforts and traditional practices; rather it signified the growing disparity between urban and rural centers, not only in mindset but also in wealth and development (Rostami-Povey, 2002 2007). The defeat of reforms in Afghanistan produced a unique form of reaction to modernity, almost a regression to an imagined ideal Islamic past (Mann, 2005, UNESCO working paper), where the honor of the family and by default of the tribe was based on the women, and it was their responsibility to abide by it.

Women's Rights as Social Engineering: The Communist Era

By the 1960s, the world saw a growing demand for social change, which was reflected in Afghanistan as well; however, in this case, the call for liberal reforms was met with a radically opposite demand from the religious and tribal leaders for a reversal of the existing reforms, especially those concerning women (Brodsky, 2011, pp. 123). Afghanistan's social landscape soon started portraying two very distinct realities: the urban, educated, prosperous Afghanistan and the rural, tribal, traditional Afghanistan, with the primary dividing line being the most contentious: the question of gender equity and role of women in society (Barfield, 2010). These two groups had drastically different cultural aspirations for Afghanistan and it led to Zahir Shah being ousted in 1973, which signaled the initiation of the conflict Afghanistan is embroiled in to this day.

The communist regime that came to power (1978–1992) embarked on a proactive program of social reforms, often forcefully and without any regard for local customs and cultural norms (Barakat, 2004). Reform measures included a literacy program, training for women to take up employment across all sectors, increased visibility of women in public life, and the banning of traditional practices, such as bride price and child marriage, that the regime considered regressive (Brodsky, 2011; Barakat, 2004). This aggressive campaign resulted in phenomenal successes as far as women's rights are concerned: approximately 75% of teachers, 40% of medical doctors, and 50% of civil servants were women, but almost all of them were based in urban areas (Human Rights Watch, 2001), hence refueling the struggle between rural traditionalists and urban modernists once again. Being the urban city center, Kabul was shielded from the war against the Soviet occupation and communist regime. However as resistance to the

communist regime strengthened in rural strongholds and gained support from external

sources, rural Afghanistan saw the devastating impact of the communist rule and Soviet

occupation. Indiscriminate bombings by the Soviets, guerilla warfare by the mujahedeen,

destruction of education and healthcare services in the rural areas because they were

considered anti-communist and pro-Islamic, as well as massive displacement due to the

conflict served a severe blow to the already disenfranchised rural women (Brodsky,

2011).

Anarchy during the Civil War

During the communist rule and mujahedeen resistance against the Soviet

occupation, the lives of urban women experienced no major changes. They progressed in

all areas and had a significant amount of social liberty on a scale unheard of under any

other regime in Afghanistan. This became the bane of cities like Kabul, because the

conservative, rural-based mujahedeen groups considered Kabul to be the center of sin,

due to not only the rule of the Godless and immoral communists, but also due to the high

visibility of educated, emancipated, and urban women (Barakat, 2004, p. 113). Right after

the Soviets retreated and the mujahedeen came to power in Kabul, the first casualty of

their newfound victory was women's rights and everything women had gained in all the

past years through social reforms (Moghadam, 2002). During the civil war, the

mujahedeen forces were accused of committing numerous human rights abuses, including

assassinations, torture, disappearances, and crimes against women (Barakat, 2004). For

those who enjoyed a normal life before the mujahedeen government came into power, the

whole situation changed overnight with war suddenly appearing on their doorstep. This

sudden change, with all its claustrophobic consequences and highly heightened sense of fear and suppression was recounted by all the women interviewed for this study.

In the following quote, a female respondent recalled the shock that transpired in Kabuli society during the civil war. Violent, drastic suppression of their lives and mobility became a rule under the new regime, and there was no end in sight of that situation. Urban women were the group who bore the maximum brunt of the civil war; not only were they relegated to the private sphere of the household, but under constant threat of sexual violence their lives became constrained overnight.

> *"*I don't remember the day mujahedeen came to Kabul. What I do remember is the kind of fear that people felt, they felt that everything will now change. Like they have to dress differently, they couldn't just go out, but it wasn't as intense as during the Taliban time. But since Kabuli people were so protected and always very modernized in their lifestyle, the fear was that they would affect the way you lived... Women used to wear skirts, my mom and aunts used to have miniskirts and dresses that they used to wear. The school uniform was this short skirt with socks and a shirt. People used to go to parties, picnics, it was very calm and normal. Men and women interacted very freely without any issues. But they had an idea, when the mujahedeen come it's going to change and it did... In the beginning it was a shock, people didn't know what to do…"

After the Soviets withdrew in 1989, no one could imagine that a vibrant city like Kabul would very soon be engulfed by a brutal civil war that would not only damage its infrastructure and displace millions of people, but also destroy the essence of what it means to be a liberal Afghan (Rashid, 2000). The mujahedeen's claim included not only power over the country, but also over any land, riches or woman who they fancied (Brodsky, 2011). The city was divided into parts under the control of different mujahedeen groups and was marked by significant internal displacement within the city as the ethnic nature of some neighborhoods became more pronounced (Barakat, 2004, p. 113). With constant fighting, daily rocket attacks, and occasional ceasefires, the frontline

became more and more fluid as the fighting shifted within the city, often as close as house to house (Barakat & Strand, 2002).

Sexual violence and increasing gender segregation. The resistance movement against the Soviets, which was organized in part from these refugee camps with international support, was predominantly male. Unlike other liberation movements (Palestine, Algeria, Iran, Arab Spring, etc.), there was no female participation or female spokesperson for the mujahedeen, and women who became too vocal or visible were threatened or killed (Barakat, 2004; Barakat & Strand, 2000; Dupree, 1998). In fact, the diktats issued by the mujahedeen government in exile in Pakistan on women's conduct and socially acceptable behaviors as well as their enthusiasm in curtailing all forms of female participation in the public sphere were not different in essence from those of the Taliban who succeeded them (Barakat, 2004; Moghadam, 2002). However, at the cusp of the end of Cold war, such decrees and oppression of women drew no international attention; in fact, the mujahedeen government was actively supported by the West in their mission of overthrowing the Soviets and the communist regime (Brodsky, 2011).

Most of the respondents described this period of civil war as the worst with regards to everyday forms of violent actions, including sexual violence, where violence aimed towards women and boys became routine. Even young boys, on whom their families relied to bring supplies of groceries and other essentials during ceasefire, were not safe from sexual violence. The following narrative focuses on a traumatic account of sexual violence and killing; the respondent was in severe distress recollecting this event. But he was certain that he wanted to share this, because in some way the memory needed commemoration through the way of narration.

"My best friend was this guy called Farid. He was Tajik. One day a soldier, well in fact they were not soldiers, but militias with a gun, the armed man, they asked him to come with them. And he was a nice boy, he went, and they took him and raped him for days. Afterwards they asked me to take his dead body, and I saw my, my best friend, Farid, they actually took the skin off him, they raped him and took all the skin out and killed him and [cries] it was so difficult to me, I said I can't look at this. I want to go, please leave me, please let me go…and they said no, and I had to dig a hole with a shovel and bury him. He was my best friend, you know…these armed men were like animals …Actually they were Uzbek militias belonging to Dostam."

Sexual violence was rampant during this time, and with no central command to answer to, the armed militias from almost every mujahedeen group started acting with impunity (Brodsky, 2011; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). To protect themselves against this, urban women, who until few months before the civil war started had jobs and lead relatively free lives, started to veil and hardly left the house (Rashid, 2000). But there was no security even within the household. Often times, armed militants would forcibly enter a house and demand a girl of their choice to be given away immediately in marriage (Barakat, 2004). Fearing atrocities, along with growing instability in sociopolitical life, women's space in the public sphere suddenly became limited, and a lot of families decided to leave the country. In the quote below, the respondent was an adolescent during the war, and spoke about the insecurities her parents had regarding her safety in the midst of constant threat of violence.

"Fighting and looting became pretty common. So you'd have to say, the safest way was to stay at home. But a time came when staying at home was also not an option. And it happened one night that we heard screaming from one of the neighbors' houses, and we didn't know what was happening. The next day we heard that a girl was taken by force from her family by the mujahedeen. That incident really triggered my mom and dad to leave. I was 14 at that time and they were really scared for me."

Life in exile: gendered violence in refugee camps. As the toll of civil war increased, many Kabulis who were postponing leaving the country in the hope of the

conflict dying down decided to leave (Barfield, 2010). Over 5 million Afghans lived as refugees as a direct impact of the Soviet occupation (UNHCR, 2001).

In most settlements in Pakistan and Iran, the conditions were insufficient to meet the needs of a growing refugee population (Brodsky, 2011). There was no safety for women and children, and the camps slowly turned into breeding ground for a conservative, patriarchal, and predominantly Pashtun way of life; 85% of Afghan refugees in Pakistan were Pashtuns (Barakat, 2004 p. 120). The way that tribal Pashtuns treated their women were drastically different than the Kabulis. Women in the camps were supposed to exist in the periphery, doing housework and caring for children, and their existence in public spaces was curtailed by the huge societal pressure to observe the *hijab* (Barakast & Strand, 2000). It was extremely difficult for urban people, especially women, to adapt to that. Living in refugee camps was fraught with abuse, danger, and a heightened sense of insecurity; this stemmed from the limitations to their mobility, the lack of opportunities, and a real fear of being assaulted if they dared to step into the public domain, one that was forbidden to them.

This is stated in the following narrative, where the respondents talks about a lot of the above mentioned issues; lack of security, feeling of being helpless faced with violence, risk of sexual abuse in refugee camps, and a sudden drastic change in lifestyle that many women had difficulty adjusting to, and which shaped their experience of multiple forms of violence that they faced on a daily basis.

> *"*I was in shock. Things changed so dramatically that I couldn't process it. We were on the run, from one house to another, from one family to another family. People in Kabul were very modern and liberal, and then Peshawar was a city where you see women covered in a black burqa, you see all these men with a big beard and a turban. Covering wasn't an issue for me…it was the people, the environment – that was an absolutely terrifying to me. Because I had to protect

> myself, on a daily basis, had to be aware of who is walking behind me, because that's what people did, they walked behind you, then they touched you, they harassed you, they did all sort of things I wouldn't imagine in my life.*"*

War was considered to be an exclusively male sphere; in the tribal culture of

Afghanistan only men had the privilege and right to fight for their country (Barfield,

2010; Brodsky, 2011). It reproduced the already existing divide between urban/rural and

public/private by reframing gender identities (Edwards, 2002). Since sexual violence was

rampant during the civil war, this led to a further thrust which forced women into the

faceless realm of the domestic, reinforced by strictly containing women within the

household and by necessitating the observation of *hijab* in public, and slowly the public

sphere became almost impossible for women to access (Povey, 2002). In a way it was a

reiteration of the segregation of space; by making public space unavailable to women,

they were forcefully confined to the private domain. This was the beginning of forcing

Afghan women into the private sphere, termed "reprivatization of domesticity" by Juan

Cole (2011, p. 2008).

The Taliban Regime: Backlash of Conservatism

The Taliban's totalitarian regime reconstructed the public space and demarcated

the private sphere as the only physical and social space for women. Trained in literalist

interpretation of Islam ideology, the Taliban foot soldiers, mostly orphans brought up in

fundamentalist Pakistani *madrasas*, had grown up with a visceral hatred for not only

women, but also minorities like Shias, and the urban way of life (Rashid, 2000). Their

policies incorporated the strictest and often misguided interpretations of Sharia, as well as

tribal customs which guided and dictated social norms and practices for centuries

(Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). To elaborate on the nature of gendered violence under the

Taliban, one has to begin with their policies. As soon as they came to power, they

established and modified the Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice

(*Amar Bil Maroof Wa Nahi An al-Munkar*). In 1996, by the order of the chief commander

Mullah Omar, a decree was issued banning many activities (Huwaidi, 2001, p. 66) that

demonstrated the institutionalization of social sanctions for women, re-creation of the

public space, and the use of religion to control the appearance of men's bodies.

In this new social order, women were viewed as the chief agents who needed to

be dominated and restrained in order to create the version of convoluted piety and

religious purity in the traditions of Islam and Afghan culture away from the moral

bankruptcy of the warlords and civil war-era anarchy (Rashid, 2000). All respondents in

this study recalled in detail the rules of that regime: women were barred from attending

schools/universities and holding a job; women had to cover up completely in public;

women could not leave the household without a close male relative; women could not go

on the balconies of their house; women could not wear colorful or white clothes, since

white was the color of the Taliban flag; women could not attract attention by wearing

shoes that made noise while walking; laughing and raised voices were not allowed since

it might excite men; access to healthcare was nearly banned, since women could only be

treated by female doctors, and employment for women was banned. This heightened shift

to the private sphere promoted gender apartheid through the systematized oppression

incorporated into the social structure where women were not only denied their basic civil

rights, but also forced out of the public space completely under the threat of execution,

imprisonment, or public flogging (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Brodsky, 2011; Rashid, 2000).

There were ample instances of violence whenever a Talib soldier thought that

women were not strictly ascribing to the set norms. Arbitrary punishments were rampant

and that created a milieu of terror that no individual could escape. A young woman who

lived under the Taliban regime had a compelling account of the severity of violence and

impunity with which the regime operated. It not only made violence (or the threat of

violence) mundane and an accepted fact of life, it made violent actions and punishments a

stronghold of maintaining control over the people.

> *"*It was the way they would look at you, especially for women, despite the fact
> that you were fully covered; you'd just want to leave and be out of there. Because
> you felt unprotected; out there with a monster who could attack you anytime. I
> remember once we were passing the street, there were two girls passing the street
> as well, the only thing was that they were wearing sandals and not wearing socks.
> And you could see their feet; that's it. And this Talib guy, he put the lash behind
> his back and walked slowly so that these girls wouldn't realize what is he up to
> and they didn't realize he was coming towards them. They were in the middle of
> the street and this guy started beating them. And they fell down. I remember I
> could feel my heart coming out of my chest. It was so hard for me because I could
> see myself there, it could have been me. It was so hard. I went quiet; I was totally
> shocked."

The Taliban's vision was not just against modernity or contemporary societies; it

was to counter modernity, a political move to create an Islamic republic that would

adhere to the strictest puritanical versions of early Islam (Crews & Tarzi, 2008). They

made it an obligation, both political as well as religious, to impinge upon the mobility

and freedom of women through a systematized form of extreme privatization (Cole,

2011). The Taliban were not medieval cave dwellers as many portrayed them in mass

media (Chayes, 2007); rather, with the absolute control over all aspects of the public

sphere and invasion into private lives of citizens, they portrayed a perfect example of

Orwell's totalitarian state (Orwell, 1949). By making almost every form of social

interaction among the genders *haram,* outlawing any form of work or education for

women, as well as significantly restricting mobility in the public space, the Taliban

recreated a social space just for men (Povey, 2002), whose bodies became the arena to

demonstrate the control of the state through symbols of religious piety (Crews & Tarzi, 2008). Respondents stated that men and young boys were under constant policing and surveillance.

Resistance against oppression. The inherent violence and oppressive nature of the Taliban regime was felt most in Kabul and other Dari speaking urban centers, which historically enjoyed more freedom than the Pashtun-dominated urban centers like Kandahar (Barakat, 2007). Most respondents agreed that women who suffered most were adults who had an identity outside the domestic sphere, which the Taliban sought to destroy. They looked back on the Taliban period as one where every form of resistance and aspiration extinguished slowly. Among the foremost victims of this misogynist Taliban regime were young girls who were keen on having an education and young women who had to sit idle in their house. To break out of this frustration, a few women started small businesses like tailoring and beauty salons. Secrecy was absolutely required, since under the new regime it was outlawed for women to engage in any of those activities. Najma, who was a child during the regime, shared her experience.

> "We could walk to this secret school; we just needed to have scarves and have to be careful of the way. We needed to change our routes so that no one would suspect us. If anybody would ask, we were told to tell them that we were going to mosque to learn the Qur'an. So we would put all the books in pockets. We have a special cloth to cover the Qur'an, and we would put books in that so it looked like the Qur'an. And we would take that, not a bag, and we would go to school, and if any Talib would ask us on the way, "Where are you going?" We told them that we are going to the mullah, because at that time it was allowed to go to the mullah, especially if you were a kid."

Najma clarified that not everyone in the Taliban ranks believed in the total subjugation of women. The whole endeavor of secret schools for girls and entrepreneurial women would not have been successful without some people in power knowing about it.

These small things acted as a tether for women forced out of the public sphere; their whole existence was placed within the boundary of the domestic by the ruling patriarchal forces. However the number of sympathizers was not small; the control of the regime was such that no one would dare to publicly question the authoritarianism and arbitrary excesses committed in the name of upholding Islamic principles (Cole, 2011).

The Veil and Violence

The above discussion on the history of gender relations in Afghanistan and how it shaped, and was simultaneously shaped by the ongoing conflict would be incomplete without a discussion on the veil, its importance in Afghan culture, and its use as a symbolic tool to suppress women's mobility. Gendered violence has been used by all regimes and is a function of the tensions between traditionalists and modernists that played out against the backdrop of changing political realities (Barakat, 2004). As a deeply conservative and religious country, veiling had been observed in various forms throughout time in Afghanistan. Most of the Western interpretations view the act of veiling as barbaric which promotes violence and oppression of women (Chayes, 2007). However, questioning the mere act of veiling without a critical engagement can only be termed Islamophobia, which treats anything Islamic with suspicion.

Amanullah Khan actively campaigned against the veiling of women; it became a norm among government functionaries in the 1920s to do away with veiling (Fletcher, 1965). During the Communist regime, veiling fell out of preference once again due to their leftist-leaning value system. During the civil war, women realized that the best way of staying safe was to observe *purdah*, thereby obscuring herself as an individual and secluding herself from the public space (Brodsky, 2011). By segregating and constraining

women in the household and requiring them by law to wear a full face veil, the Taliban did their best to obliterate any individual essence of womanhood (Crews & Tarzi, 2008). However, outside the diktats of these numerous regimes, gender segregation was always practiced in most rural areas, and tradition dictated that all women above a certain age veil (Mousavi, 1997). Interestingly, each ruling regime decided to arbitrarily place their regulations on people based on their ideological bent instead of addressing the tribal social norms that not only requires women to veil but denies them equal status in society (Edwards, 2002).

After the Taliban were forced to withdraw from Kabul, the Western forces espousing liberation for Afghan women has lacked understanding for the cultural nuances of Afghan society, has failed to grasp how tribal power structures function and what women's roles have been in such a collective society, and in turn has seen Afghan women only as victims of uncivilized customs (Moghadam, 2002). There has been very little engagement or critical discourse on the rich heritage of Afghanistan, its legacy of women's rights, though for a minority of educated, elite women, and the cultural nuances that requires some form of gender separation in the country. Leila Ahmed (1992) questions the notion that equates unveiling with women's liberation because without political and social consciousness, individual agency, education, and opportunities, equal rights would be devoid of their real meaning and purpose. Research participants were often of the opinion that veiling is a part of the cultural context; it does not symbolize violence on women. What is truly important for Afghan women is not a campaign to abolish veiling, but to create equal opportunities, address regressive social attitudes, and establish a sociopolitical structure that is based in gender equity.

"An Entire Jihad is going on against Women/If not for the War, My Life would be like Yours Today": **Current Context**

Literature explains the conditions for Afghan women varies based on their socioeconomic position, educational background, ethnicity, whether they lived in an urban or rural environment, and the political affiliation of their family. (Dupree, 1998a; Edwards, 2002; Brodsky, 2011; Moghadam, 2002). Today, women in Afghanistan have better access to education, employment, livelihoods and a life of dignity and respect. However, just like the past decades where such privileges were only concentrated in the liberal urban areas, the rural parts of the country are still enmeshed in a traditional value system and increasing insurgency that hinders any social reform based on gender equity (Crews & Tarzi, 2008). The tribal code of conduct, along with the growing suspicion of the central Government and international forces in these rural hinterlands, especially in the South, has led to a situation that is hardly different from the previous years (Brodsky, 2011). Restrictions on women are multiple, and as a few respondents pointed out, it often comes from concern for her safety, as insurgents keep targeting girls' schools and working women. This is further elaborated in the following quote, where the respondent recalled something told to him by a villager from one of the most conservative provinces:

> "A conservative Pashtun farmer from Kandahar, who has never ventured outside his village, told me once 'I have nothing against sending my daughter to school, as these Westerners tell us to. But when the Taliban comes and kills my whole family for educating my girl, will the Government protect us?"

Fear for life hindering social development was reiterated by multiple respondents and elaborated the current situation; even when the population is somewhat agreeable to embrace greater freedom for women, insurgents, warlords, and local militias act strongly against it and impose social sanctions. In the south, with deteriorating security conditions,

people are fiercely protective of their women, and social control comes from the belief

that they have power over lives of the women, and any supposed transgression can result

in killings to protect the honor of the family and community. In addition to that

misogynist belief, the motive of the insurgents is to recreate the same environment of

terror and everyday violence, and to do that, restricting equal rights to women and

pushing them back to the private sphere is a useful ploy. Fundamentalism and tradition

do not sufficiently explain this phenomenon. Rather, it has to be seen as a political tactic

to destabilize the region by promoting the same tyrannical policies that had devastated

the country for decades. A young female respondent wondered the reason why

oppression of women is so common and accepted in society:

> "Right now the situation is different for us in Kabul. It's not different for a lot of
> people in the provinces, killing school girls, poisoning the wells, threatening
> working women. It seems that an entire jihad is going on against women. I don't
> know why, I seriously for the love of God can't find out why."

It is baffling to find an answer to this situation, where traditionalists and

modernists seem to be in a perpetual battle over the direction of the country. Due to

enormous amounts of international aid money, the discourse surrounding women's rights

in Afghanistan currently has a heavy focus on Western ways of understanding rights

(Brodsky, 2011). While equity, freedom, and individual liberty are values to be upheld,

Afghan society also places a strong emphasis on collective identity, family responsibility,

and honor (Edwards, 2002). Women are often seen as bearers of these traditional values.

Being a poor country, economic concerns have led to a preference of boys over girls;

other than the money available during their marriage through bride price, daughters do

not contribute to the family's economic situation at all (Povey, 2002). While 27% of

legislators in the Parliament (more than the 25% quota) and numerous civil servants and

social advocates are women, the situation is deplorable in most parts of the country outside of a few urban centers. As Freshta, a young accomplished lawyer whose illiterate parents moved from their ancestral village to Kabul because they wanted to educate their six daughters, stated during an interview: *"If the war was not there in Afghanistan, I would be like you. My life would be like yours today."* Putting aside historical oppressions and cultural performances (Butler, 1988) based on propriety and traditional roles, becoming a women in Afghanistan today symbolizes the desire for a better life and a more equitable future. And in order to understand that desire, one must understand how everyday occurrences of violence and political instability created barriers for Afghan women, fuelled by conflicting visions of Afghan nation that the ruling class had.

Chapter 4: Exploring Everyday Violence in Afghanistan

The question of violence has intrigued philosophers for centuries. The social, psychological, and moral connotations of violence as an integral part of civilization have been a continuing subject of scholarship. The twentieth century presented a conundrum to theorists: growing liberal and democratic traditions marred by unprecedented violence around the globe. The essence of violent actions, especially in the context of civil war, is both complex and daunting. Literature shows that individuals internalize everyday violence when routinely faced with such fear and anxiety (Arendt, 1973; Robben & Nordstorm, 1994). As Robben and Nordstorm (1994) note in their anthology on ethnographies of violence from around the world:

> "...the place may be different, the suffering unique, but everyday life under war at any place and any time is confusing and full of anguish. This realization is so obvious that it is almost banal, yet why is this perennial chaos of warfare and the incomprehensibility of violence for its victims so seldom addressed in scholarly writings? Why do we find so many intricate studies about war and so few about human suffering?" (p. 1).

In this chapter, I present everyday experiences of endemic violence; by addressing missing pieces of human experience in armed conflict, I hope to further enhance the understanding of violence in Afghanistan. The violence in this chapter is personal. It is experienced by people with names, aspirations, interests and life stories. These experiences expose the vicious yet banal character of violence in Afghanistan and elaborates how violence become commonplace. Violence in Afghanistan can be categorized into two main forms since 1978-1979: indigenous social pressures and outside military intervention. While gendered violence since 1978 has proceeded mainly from profoundly internal social causes (male resistance to female emancipation) - but

military violence has proceeded mainly from foreign intervention reinforcing civil war in the 1990s.

When I went for fieldwork, the complex interplay of individual and social factors posited potential focal points of interest; the definition of violence was often arbitrary and the boundaries of violent actions porous. Through my interviews and discussions with Afghans in Kabul, it was fairly easy to get people talking about the conflict; everyone had a story they were eager to share. They would start off easily but, through the course of the interview, veer dangerously close to be overwhelmed by the terrifying prospect of remembrance, as elaborated in chapter 6. Some people had to stop while recalling traumatic events they witnessed during war. Some were stoic, yet their steely composure showed a frightening aspect of forced detachment, and they were often the ones to narrate events of devastating proportions. The surreal quality of everyday violence was palpable in these conversations. Every person made reference to the shock of the first attacks, the devastating experience of death or disappearance in the family, destroyed homes, mass exodus of refugees, and disruption of regular activities, all of which were symbolic of the continuing instability that characterized their lives.

"Living with Daily Violence is like Growing Immune to a Drug": An Overview of Everyday Violence

One way of conceptualizing the evolution and growth of the Afghan conflict is to study violence through violent actions—killings, sexual assaults, disappearances and such. In the context of conflict, such violence is taken for granted, as something known and inevitable, from which there is no release. But such a focus prevents one from developing a holistic view of endemic nature of conflict saturated in the sociopolitical

dynamics. The banality of it all, as Arendt notes in her seminal work on the Eichmann trials (Arendt, 1973), lies in the ease with which people resort to violence; it is not due to a pathological streak in them but a product of their ordinariness. Being a product of the dominant culture, violence is "given shape and content to specific people within the context of particular histories" (Robeen & Nordstorm 1994, p. 3). In Afghanistan, this ordinary nature of violence has been traditionally present in interpersonal relationships where a man has power to put to death female members of his family for a supposed wrongdoing (M. Barry, personal communication, 10th November, 2013). This reality exemplified the very commonplace yet devastating nature of routine violence, which became more pronounced during the conflict.

During an interview with an Afghan researcher working for an international aid organization, the process of violence becoming mundane through repeated violent actions was captured in his narrative:

> "I saw people getting blown to pieces before my own eyes. Not once, but many times. But you know, what can we do? If there is no fighting for a day or two now, it feels abnormal. We have grown used to the smell of gunpowder here."

Accounts like this portray the intimate yet destructive role of violence in the life of a common Afghan. As one of the several Afghan children who grew up during the war, this respondent's narrative echoes the unheard voices of thousands of young Afghans who accepted the conflict's aftermath as life. When the intensity of sustained violence is such that the indigenous population accepts smell of gunpowder as normal, there can be no walking away from such an event. The violence spoken about here assumes a sudden, deliberate, and ominous character. It destroys all that is valued and treasured, as will be explored later in this chapter.

The theoretical construct of banality (Arendt, 1973) translates quite easily into experiential contingency. As all Afghans reported, instances of life threatening violence dispossessed people of everything that is valuable and meaningful to them, be it family, community, identity or nation. Though violent acts left an indelible mark of trauma and suffering on people, it was the cyclic nature of insecurity, deprivation, and suffering that posed the most challenging aspect for anyone who had witnessed violence. This immediacy was crucial, because this transformed violence from a distant phenomenon to a pressing everyday life issue, where broader anxiety over life and livelihood was replaced by constant fear of the "next meal, next move and next assault" (Robeen & Nordstorm, 1994, p. 3) For most Afghans, living under conflict had no components of choice, but resembled a stark truth from which generations have had no escape. Violence in this case was absolute and needed no qualifications; it was the defining aspect of their lives. Afghans were very forthcoming in talking about the tremendous insecurity and trepidation that conflict brought to them when it was no longer possible to keep it "at arm's length" (Taussig, 1970).

One of the respondents, belonging to the minority Hazara group, embittered by decades of war, summarized the situation:

> "After the Communist coup, gradually we witnessed the concept that you are talking about, violence, very closely. Every day there was fresh news of someone being arrested, someone being tortured, someone being jailed, and it was not someone strange; it could be one of our friends, neighbors, relatives or anyone-- when we would hear someone from that family is now lost because he is regarded as anti-revolution, anti-regime. Later when the war started, such incidents never stopped; there was never any justification; people would just disappear. No one knew why."

The absence of reason or logic in the face of certain death became the moment that separates two realities: pre-war calm and wartime anarchy. Violence assumed a disconcerting dimension not only because it endangered people and increased vulnerabilities but because it brought a palpable aura of foreboding and uncertainty; a situation where the victim could be anyone.

Writing about extreme violence presents a complex challenge, especially when the author is not native to the country and the conflict (Das, 2007; Potts, Myer & Roberts, 2011). In the absence of a self-reflexive process, the language of pain and suffering unique to war is often elusive to outsiders. Das's book, Life and Words: Descent of Violence into Ordinary (Das, 2007), presents a historical perspective of communal and religious violence during partition of the Indian subcontinent where she explores the ideas of suffering, trauma, and remembrance. While exploring the descent of violence into the realm of the ordinary, she elaborates on the domain of violence, or what she calls the "language of pain" (Das, 2007, p.6-7) and how interactions of language, memory, and words form the essence of transforming violence into ordinary. For most Afghans, the memory of pain is a very personal experience. It is defined in part by who they are as individuals and in part by their sense of identity, which has been transformed by their traumatic past.

Individual Experiences of Violence

The distinction between victims and perpetrators, and sometimes the complex intertwining of these roles formed the core of subjective experiences of violence during conflict. Since this study spanned three decades of conflict and employed a life history approach, most respondents provided a nuanced understanding of different stages of their

life, changing sociopolitical realities impacting reactions to violence, and their unique role in the conflict. The diverse sample led to a variety of experiences: being victims of the conflict; having an active role in the resistance and being the perpetrator of violent actions; being a reluctant participant in violence. In the interplay of these various roles, what stood out was the vulnerability of humans in such a context. This was especially true for those who grew up witnessing the violence.

Children living in war zones are at huge risk of developing any type of psychopathology, especially post-traumatic stress disorder (Thabet, Abed & Vostanic, 2004, p. 533). An entire generation of people has grown up amidst armed conflict in Afghanistan (Brodsky, 2003; Lim, Metzlar, & Bar-Yam, 2007). Literature suggests that children are preferred by military commanders because they are "readily available, cheap, useful and can be manipulated, terrorized and often willing to accept the most dangerous assignments because they lack a full understanding of their own mortality" (Wessells 2005, p. 363-364). Children have been used in the Afghan conflict for multiple purposes; they have acted as informers, foot soldiers, active combatants, and in some cases, suicide bombers. Narratives from this research confirm these claims. In fact, there has been a recent spate in using adolescent boys for the purpose of suicide attacks, as seen in the suicide bombing near the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in September 2012, where the alleged bomber was about fifteen years old. Six other children died as a result of that attack. Additionally, sexual abuse during civil war, use of children as combatants and other culturally accepted practices like bacchabazi, a form of sexual slavery of young boys, child marriages, and honor killings have been quite common in Afghanistan (Povey, 2002).

Among the first things that I heard when I went to Kabul were recollections of stories from childhood suggesting complete vulnerability, inability to grasp a rapidly changing social scenario and failure to understanding the gravity of the situation. Most of these stories comprised of seemingly straightforward yet painful memories of being hungry, going without resources, staying out of school, and feeling unsafe. The anxiety of getting separated from family, remembering the impact of particularly difficult military assaults, and taking unnecessary life threatening risks by playing outside during attacks were constantly repeated by many respondents.

One of the respondents from a fairly affluent family, who grew up during the civil war remembered a different Kabul, but spoke of how things changed with changing regimes. The insecurity of knowing that his father was at risk due to his army job would eventually force the family to leave Kabul; an example of the threat of omnipresent violence that forced millions of Afghans to flee their country.

> "Kabul used to be different those days. My brother remembers the Russian soldiers who used to smile at us driving the streets of Kabul, I don't remember that. In the 1980s my father was transferred to Kunduz when the fight was raging against the mujahedeen. That was the time I grew up, we were based close to the airport when my dad was working in the army. It was pretty safe; not much violence. But in the area where we were living, we would go around, play with all the military wreckage, tanks, aircrafts and all that, I remember that, collecting bullets and casings. Later when the regime was falling, this shift of situation, as a kid, was shocking for me. We were all terrified because of my dad. He was in the army, and everyone branded him a communist. The mujahedeen would come to our house daily, interrogating us, terrified me as a kid… and one day they looted everything. They actually wanted to take my father away. That is when we left for Badakhshan"

Most conversations like this one started with depictions of a fairly easy life, before one particular day or event which everything changed. However, these would come in conversations as anecdotes, making me realize that growing up without an idea

of sustained peace has affected a whole generation. The memory of war is the only connection to their childhood. In some cases, everything had been lost: their family, their friends, their home—everything they held precious, and as one respondent stated poignantly "I left Afghanistan broken hearted". This human tragedy was compounded by the fact that the ongoing armed conflict that has taken away so much from them, and yet it was the same violence that keeps them bound to their sense of lost innocence.

Conversations with people who were child combatants or who witnessed extreme violence provided a glimpse of a unique worldview. Exposed to violence from a very early age, that social process of broken communal ties and sectarian tensions became their new normal, where they integrated the totalitarian nature and destructive capacity of war in their daily routine. They spoke about how "you learn to live with it" in the absence of any other option; how the sole purpose of life becomes survival. Most people recognized of the dangers they were in, like this respondent who summarized the risk his generation faced as adolescents growing up during the war.

> "Young people were always at risk. Most probably they would take you away and kill you, and if you were a woman they would take you, rape you and then kill you anyway"

This nonchalant attitude to facing the near certain prospect of death, mutilation, imprisonment, and torture provides a glimpse of violence becoming normalized; a process of experiential numbing presenting a reality that defines life under conflict, as expressed in the following quote.

> "We Afghan people didn't have anything like life. Life here during the conflict, you know, was just being alive."

This distinction between enjoying life and surviving another day in fear was amplified by the power wielded by mujahedeen during the civil war and the Taliban

forced. Akin to the homo sacer's (Agamben, 1998) bare life, which the sovereign has power to obliterate, life for Afghans during the conflict meant being alive because one was not dead yet. Death was always present and more often than not, one was alive just because of luck. This aspect of luck keeping people alive is clear from the following quote, narrated by a Pashtun professional now working on providing legal aid to minority groups.

"During the time of civil war, we were twelve friends always together, and in the back of this apartment we played volleyball. One day I went to the store so they started playing without me, and a missile came and exploded right there and all of them were killed, and that's where I was supposed to be. My mother thought I was there too because I was always hanging out with them, so she left the house without shoes, running and screaming, looking for me. And I went to see my friends, all of them were just in small pieces, and I collected the pieces and buried them. There was no volleyball anymore."

This account exemplifies the ubiquitous yet ordinary nature of violence (Das, 2007). It portrays a tremendous feeling of loss, where in one instant a young boy was bereft of his entire peer group, and it was only by chance that his own life was not lost. But the narration ends with how there were no more volleyball games after that incident. Through this account, one can comprehend how violence intermingled in everyday life; and how a tale of tremendous grief and loss turned into one of disruption of routine. Even with such a tragedy, violence was just another part of life.

Initiations and symbolism: a guide to combat role. Afghans are known to value bravery and valor (Dalrymple, 2013; Dupree, 2002); multiple conflicts have made it absolutely necessary for every average Afghan male to learn the rules of warfare in order to survive as well as protect his land and people. Being a conservative society, the mujahedeen resistance against the Soviets and the Taliban was almost exclusively male, with recruits often starting as early as adolescence (Rashid, 2000). Hence spending time

on the frontlines in various capacities as well as engaging in active combat has been quite

common for Afghan male children.

For some people I interviewed, initiation to the violence was abrupt and

immediate. The civil war drew out the worst among the mujahedeen leaders in Kabul;

violence was institutionalized and the mujahedeen fighters, who until then had fought the

Soviet army and local Communist forces in the mountains and rural hinterlands, brought

that fight to Kabul's streets (Barfield, 2012); neighborhoods were segregated into by

ethnic group under the patronage of local commanders. Protecting communities from

possible attackers and looters fell on neighborhood committees, where patrolling and

surveillance were done in groups often constituted of adolescent boys.

Ahmed's story. Following this narrative of children growing up during war, I met

Ahmed, whom I had known through common friends and attended several social

functions together. A big built man, the owner of a leading newspaper in Kabul, he was

quiet, charming, cheerful, and had an easy and confident air. He started the paper from

scratch and was justifiably proud of its success; he is known for his relentless efforts in

advocacy and lobbying for civil society issues through his paper. He is one of the young

entrepreneurial Afghans with a strong sense of civic responsibility. Speaking about the

violence, he was mindful of the struggles of the past, yet dared to hope for a better

Afghanistan.

 "I am the change you see now in the country, and I will always work to do as
 much as I can."

On the civil war, however, his recollections were unambiguous and stark. Being

drawn into the responsibility of guarding his neighborhood when he was thirteen years

old, he witnessed numerous atrocities. His closest friend lost his entire family and

neighbor in a rocket attack. His uncle, a Parliamentarian during the Soviet period, was

arrested and tortured by the Afghan Communist forces. He remembered living under

constant surveillance, the harrowing investigations by the secret police KHAD

(Khadamat-e Aetla'at-e Dawlati or the State Intelligence Agency), and fleeing Kabul

while conflict was raging in the city. However, the endemic nature of violence became

obvious when he spoke about his guard duties; when he was thirteen years old, he

became an active combatant and assumed responsibility for the whole neighborhood's

safety. The following quote states his understanding of responsibility during conflict and

implications of the same.

> "In the beginning it was very scary for all of us, but as I told you, we slowly
> adapted and became part of the situation. When people were killed by rockets, we
> were there collecting body parts, putting it together and going to the grave. I was
> very young, 13 or 14 years old at that time. The neighborhood made a committee
> and we had a rule that every house should have one person for guarding the street.
> So I was responsible to guard the street every night for two hours. I was very
> young. But because of the violence, because of the constant gunshots and things
> like that, I was not scared. We would regularly come under attack. Every night
> when I was going for my duty, my mom was kissing me and saying farewell. We
> were ready to die at any time then. But I was kind of proud that I was defending
> my house, my family, my friends, my neighbors. And it was a very great initiative
> by the people. Now when I think of it, when institutions are destroyed and such
> violence is perpetrated, people become more responsible for their own defense."

This distinctive role of young people as neighborhood guards during the civil war

as well as fighters during the Taliban resistance blurred the boundaries between safe

spaces and potential threats, innocence and forced maturity, reckless play with dangers

symbolic of adolescence and real possibility of death or injury. Conversations with

people who were responsible for this duty during the war epitomized the quintessential

Afghan spirit. In the face of debilitating fear, there were many tales of courage and pride

in defending the honor of the family and the nation.

Experiential numbing during a state of emergency. Commenting on the brutality that children face in conflict, Machel points out how relentless exposure to suffering and extreme violence makes children "desensitized to the horror around them" (2000, p. 9), which is exemplified in the following narrative:

> "For me it was hard to understand to what extent was it violent, I couldn't even process it. If you are getting into the violence for the first time, you don't have a clue, how to measure it, how to feel it, the dangers of it. Me and my cousins would go secretly to the 2nd and 3rd floor of our house to see what's going on at night, and when they would fire bullets you could see as if they were stars, they would pass above our heads like here (points to an inch from her head) shew shew (makes noise) and we would be fascinated, we would think what is this, like bullets being fired and making noise, we have never seen anything like it. But we didn't know how dangerous it was. Never thought that it could kill us"

This account corroborates Machel's views on desensitivity to violence. This phenomenon can be conceptualized as a form of attached indifference (Machel, 1996) and experiential numbing of the violence. Being physically present in the conflict led to trauma of intense proportions; trying to keep oneself mentally separate from horrors of the war was one way of coping with the escalating violence (Taussig, 1970). For young people who were barred from their daily activities like school, play, and fun, hiding in a bunker didn't seem exciting enough, so many would venture out on adventures, often at great personal risk. Many developed an inquisitive edge to probe the changing social scene but kept themselves emotionally impassive from its potentially dangerous outcome. In the following quote, the respondent states how he would venture with his friends to seek out wreckage as part of childhood games.

> "After school, I remember walking around the wreckage—tanks, aircrafts and such left by the Soviets. We collected bullet shells, empty casings, would try and improvise with the ammunition. Once I got badly burnt trying to play with a bomb. And during the civil war there were lots of atrocities—houses burnt, looted, rapes, killings, bombings, and we would just roam around amidst this fighting in the frontline, in a very volatile situation, collecting souvenirs. Many

times we got shot at, bullets flying right above our heads; so many times we just escaped death"

The escalating conflict was the zone where terrible abuses of power was produced. Vulnerability, in particular, was a crucial aspect in the realm of terror. It was what people felt when hiding in a basement for days while getting shelled. The basement became the safe space that sheltered them from death temporarily, yet vulnerability lingered in the air. That shelter wasn't sustainable as people had to leave to get food and supplies, or in some cases children left for a sense of adventure. The violence in the immediate environment outside the basement was no longer possible to hide from but absorbed in life (Taussig, 1970; 1978), as people had to continue their daily lives.

In Benjamin's writings on Fascism during World War II, he stresses the possibility and existence of terror as a universal rule: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight" (Benjamin, 2009, p. 8-10). I argue that this "state of emergency" is what Afghanistan has experienced during the last few decades of conflict, and it has impacted everyday experiences of violence and construction of collective memory of the conflict. The recent geo-political strategies and domestic power plays provided a seamless understanding of this tension between vulnerability and violence and its recognition (Honneth, 1996), in the absence of which the balance of power is skewed, resulting in more political instability and the perpetuation of this emergency.

In conclusion to this section, it can be stated that behavioral effects of being exposed to endemic violence are multiple; yet in contemporary Afghan society, they are not overtly visible due to a dissociative process where the respondents try to numb their

traumatic experiences over time. Also, in a country where almost everyone has some memory of severe grief related to war, and in the absence of a rigorous transitional justice procedure to address wartime excesses, such experiential numbing becomes the foundation on which respondents try to frame their experiences of living with endemic violence and processing traumatic memory. In the light of violence being institutionalized in the social sphere, discussed in the next section, such a process of desensitizing violent experiences becomes pivotal in order to survive.

Reimagining Violence: Institutionalizing Violence in the Social Sphere

Foucault's doctrine on punishment and discipline is particularly relevant when discussing the Afghan conflict, because the framework is useful to engage inherent power relationships and narratives in Afghanistan's sociopolitical context (Crews & Tarzi, 2008). The approach requires developing a discursive analysis and emphasizes the interaction of language and power (Das, 2007). His seminal work, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975), provides a historical analysis of the evolution of punishment as a means of state control. Hence Foucault's framework can be a useful tool to explore violence, especially during the Taliban regime.

Disciplining citizens for any transgressions in through state decree and public shaming was a cornerstone of Taliban rule (Cole, 2013; Crews & Tarzi, 2008). The Taliban used the modern infrastructure of the state to suppress sociopolitical progress and reimagine space, both private and public, through absolute supremacy and stringent disciplining, a cocktail of power and religion that justified authoritarian rule and an ultra-patriarchal socioeconomic structure (Crews & Tarzi, 2008). Their power spectacle and inherent violent rule was meant to completely reorganize the society ideologically

(Rashid, 2008). Talib militias and foot soldiers were always eager to publicly deliver quick justice to those perceived as an outlier. The purpose of this very visible punishment regimen was not just a display of strength, shaming the alleged perpetrator, or dissuading future wrongdoers, but to socially establish the victim's guilt. By creating an alternative public narrative based on the victim's supposed crime according to their misinterpretation of divine law of Sharia, violent disciplining was justified.

Juan Cole uses the term countermodernity to describe the Taliban phenomenon because they used "modern tools like the State, radio, mass spectacle" very differently than liberal democracies especially in transforming the private sphere (Cole, 2010, p. 119). One of the current leaders of the Hazara community recalled the Taliban era of terror vividly. He agreed that though the regime was able to fill the power vacuum created by the civil war in the 1990s, it was far from an ideal situation:

"The time of Taliban was not a time of peace; it was a time of silence."

Cole (2010) suggests that the Taliban's distinct form of governance, by transforming the state into an instrument of violent action, driven by the philosophy of complete subjugation, and motivated by medieval values is a distinct form of "political modernity" not comprehensible with existing theorists like Habermas and Hegel. In Habermas's discourse, power is exercised either through public discourse or elections either through "liberal channels or through use of power as spectacle" (Cole 2010, p. 124). The Taliban used "medieval motifs for modern recreation of power as representation" (Cole 2010, p. 124). Any form of adverse public opinion was perceived as dissent and hence suppressed during Taliban rule. As a result, there was no opposition to the regime throughout most of the country. The Taliban was the only channel through

which one could acquire scarce resources (food, fuel, and security to name a few), hence

many people joined their ranks. The following narrative from a female respondent gives

the reasons for which people would join the Taliban movement.

> "Nobody had freedom to have different with Taliban, no political movement or anything like that. Everybody was Talib at that time, because the only place where people could find food; only if they work with them, be one of them, and then the Taliban would give you something. There was no work, no transport, or anything. One of the only ways that people could survive that time was to join them, so all my relatives were Taliban. I don't know what they were doing, but they were sitting in Taliban stations and would take care of everyday work. For example there is a car accident or something, they would run and beat up the people, to make them being afraid of Taliban leadership, so this is what it was being Taliban, the soldiers I mean."

Those who refrained couldn't escape the ideological infiltration, as recalled by someone

who was an adolescent during the Taliban regime, and spoke of his internal struggle to

break free of the hateful Taliban ideology:

> "Their reign was peaceful compared to the war. But the ideological influence and the indoctrination that we went through, personally for me it was devastating. Because during that period I came to keenly foster religious Islamist ideals propagated by the Taliban. Now I realize that it was full of so much hate. Later it took me quite a lot of pain, a lot of trouble to get along with myself and the world."

Public executions as spectacle. Public displays of punishment were used as a

spectacle to terrorize the population, instill fear, and also for entertainment. Talib gangs

would go around in their white Toyotas with loudspeakers across neighborhoods asking

people to come for stoning or beheading of an accused. During interviews, almost

everyone who had witnessed an execution mentioned traumatic memories associated with

it. Most recalled severe reactions symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

after witnessing staged executions; nausea, inability to eat or sleep, nightmares,

helplessness, extreme fear, being jittery and easily startled were reported after effects.

The following narrative provides a chilling account narrated by a respondent who took his younger brother for what he thought would be a football match, only to witness an execution:

"There was nothing much to do so we would go to see football in the stadium; sometimes there would be beheadings and other punishments. I only saw it once. One day news came that today there is a match and I took my little brother with me. But there was no match. These pickup trucks came and took out a young man; his face was hooded, and he actually squatted first and another person came, and now I have to guess, say there were five thousand people, the stadium was absolutely packed. Then an elderly man with a big shining knife came, and the victim was laid down on the ground, I could clearly see this guy beheading him. I still remember the legs of the victim, it was shaking. The first guy, who was beheaded, they call it qisas in Sharia, he was accused of killing someone. Then, I also saw chopping hands of thieves. The hands of two men were chopped off and the Talib went around the stadium showing the severed hands to everybody. And my brother, this small kid who was sitting beside me started crying because he understood something bad is happening there; he was cringing and whimpering. I didn't feel good. I felt guilty. Why I brought this kid with me, I thought, but then I didn't know, they said there was a match going on. I felt horrible. I couldn't eat at night. I can never forget it. It is etched in my memory, I very well remember, the person's legs shaking and this other guy cutting his head, and blood everywhere."

The Ghazi stadium in Kabul served as the primary theater for public executions and amputations carried out by the Taliban. Today it is used by the Afghan national football and boxing teams, both men and women[2], as their practice and training ground. Given the symbolism of this space in Kabul, it seemed essential for me to visit. Right across the road is the majestic Id Gah Mosque, the second largest mosque in Afghanistan, noted for its enormous open space, white and beige minarets, and wonderful archways. The mosque's spectacular presence stuns a visitor. The stadium, an unassuming building, pales in comparison. Walking into the stadium, I couldn't help myself but notice its ordinariness. The front façade leads to the stadium inside. In order to reach the field, I

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[2] Women's Boxing Team in Afghanistan was set up in 2007. Despite oppositions from conservative forces, participation of women in sports has steadily increased. Afghanistan's skateboarding association for street children has 40% girl students.

had to pass through narrow corridors with numerous rooms on the side, originally designed for training future Afghan sportspersons. The corridors run into an iron collapsible gate that can be fastened by iron chains. After this last barrier I reached the field, which looked spotless and well maintained. Renovation work was going on when I visited; some workers were putting up a huge portrait of President Hamid Karzai. The opposite side of the goalpost had another massive portrait of Afghanistan's favorite leader, Ahmed Shah Massod. Nothing suggested that the space was used as a ground for public executions not too long ago. But as I spent more time taking in the silence, the field, the empty stands, the goalpost which has been made famous from the execution videos circulating on the internet, the enormous significance of the space started to sink in. Regardless of the manicured lawns, freshly painted stadium stands, and newly installed portraits of Afghan heroes, the eeriness filling the stadium was palpable, like a physical entity of its own. Because even today, amidst cheering crowds during a football game, people refer to the stadium by what its function was during the Taliban regime: a site for killings and amputations. This same stadium became a killing field every jumma[3] where the Talib version of divine justice was served to perpetrators. Violence was not just sponsored by them, but enabled and implemented. And nobody who has witnessed it once could ever forget the brutality associated with it.

The Changing Face of Violence: Current Ambiguity

The conflict has ebbed to some extent today, yet memories of the conflict are physically etched in the body of ordinary Afghan citizens. Individuals with missing limbs, prosthetic replacements, scarred faces, and hollow, gaunt, war weary dispositions are visible signs of the vestiges of prolonged exposure to conflict. But in addition to these

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[3] Friday in Arabic, the day of prayers

obvious symbols of impact of the war on citizens, the compounded effects of severe

psychological stress and trauma have to be grasped to realize the devastation of war

(Dobbins, 2008).

Insurgency remains a significant concern of the Afghan state, where government

control is all but absent in most provinces (Cole, 2013). Although the capital, Kabul, and

a few other provincial cities enjoy relative calm, for most people in the countryside,

conflict is the only reality. For them the nightmarish violence has no end, no moderation,

and no boundaries. The face of the aggressor changes, but the nature and intensity of

violence remains the same. Targeted killings of people working with western coalition

forces, aid organizations, or the national government are quite common. In July 2011,

President Karzai's half-brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, a very influential administrator who

was hailed as the most powerful man in southern Afghanistan, was assassinated. With the

transition in 2014 unfolding currently, there has been a spate in suicide attacks targeting

high security government installations and coalition forces; more often than not, the

people affected by such attacks are local civilians who just happened to be present there

at the time of the attack. Hence no one is safe for long, and one lives with the constant

reality that it could be their turn at any moment. In this part of the world, brutalization

and dehumanization is routine, and death remains a very immediate possibility. Here, as

suggested in the narratives, fear has become a "way of life" (Green, 2009, p 1)

Victor attitude: how resilience functions. While describing the effects of war,

one Afghan said "it is like growing immune to a drug." Violence became their drug that

they "learned to live with because the only other option was death." While talking about

the ordinariness of violence, one respondent stated that "a human being is softer than a

flower yet harder than a stone." Conflict demanded that they become immune to terrible atrocities, often shrouded by experiential numbing that made them able to keep going on with violence in their everyday life.

Some respondents often told me that understanding war in totality is impossible without being in it. One can't conceptualize fear or fathom the intensity of insecurity, grinding poverty in refugee camps, the pain of being uprooted from your homeland, literally losing everything of value. The enormity of that loss can be stated but never truly felt unless it is experienced. The following statement shows this tension in retelling stories of violence. However, the respondent's hesitation to trust my ability to truly understand the nature of war not only came from his desire for people to understand the level of horror Afghanistan went through. Rather it was a much more complex phenomenon, one that he failed to explain in totality.

> "As much as I explain, it will not tell the story. What has to be felt can't be explained. How people were hiding underneath this block because it was not safe to live in the apartment so they had to live underground, how rockets which were pounding the city…"

It is significant to question if language has the capability to fully describe what transpires in conflict. Sometimes the experience, as horrible as it is, has to be felt, experienced, and lived. It is the nature of personal exposure to violence that gives it the meaning it has. No one can simulate the context of insecurity and fear. As a researcher working on armed conflict, it is a challenge to take personal narratives of such violence and transpire it devoid of personal meaning to one of critical understanding and compassion.

From the narratives on everyday violence, it could be inferred that Afghans have a victor attitude when it comes to war. Oral histories and folklore across Afghanistan are

full of examples of their victory over the British in the Anglo Afghan wars, the famed resistance they put up against the Soviets and the Communist regime, and now the uneasy collaboration they have with the international forces. In order to maintain sovereignty, any Afghan leader has to prove his independence from foreign powers (Dalrymple, 2014) and in case of Afghanistan that is achieved by propagating this victor attitude; Afghans truly believe that regardless of any instability or challenges, they will always resist, defy any regime, and finally emerge victorious because God is on their side. This belief in divine justice and the ability to win, as emphasized in the narratives, have helped them overcome three decades of conflict. This is aptly summed up by one respondent who worked as a war reporter during the conflict; his unique position presented an opportunity and responsibility to observe, be neutral, and report his findings. It was a position of privilege but also a position that brings great suffering. However, while summing up the impact of conflict, he mentioned:

"War makes people warriors; maybe it is for the best"

This statement explains resilience and defiance that Afghans have showed in the face of conflict over time. War has not made them weaker or less powerful, even when their society has been destroyed. Rather, it has turned them into warriors, capable of fighting and never giving up. Many respondents spoke about the lessons conflict has taught them; how they face situations differently and have developed a different attitude towards life. This can be connected to the literature on resistance to foreign rule in Afghanistan and the desire for independence and self-reliance (Dalrymple, 2014; Edwards, 2002). This victor attitude while facing violence is what defines the experiences of everyday violence and memory of conflict in Afghanistan.

Chapter 5: Nationalism and Identity

Overview

In this chapter, I present transforming ideas of 'nation' and 'nationalism' in Afghanistan in terms of the temporality of cultural and social consciousness (Bhabha, 1990) and elaborate on the interactions of national identity and ethnicity with its effects on the experience of everyday violence. The narratives on nationalism in this chapter are primarily derived from Anderson's seminal idea of a nation as 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2006). For Afghans, this translates into multiple imagined communities based on their tribal and ethnic affiliations (Anderson, 2006). This chapter uses Anderson (2006) and Bhabha's (1990) theories of nationalism to look at the ideas of Afghan nation in the backdrop of conflict; by a careful examination of identity and "the other" (Bhabha, 1990) as part of broader Afghan sociocultural consciousness, an overarching concept of national identity is reproduced and its effects on everyday violence explored.

The development of an imagined community, as derived from Benedict Anderson's seminal work on nationalism (2006), can be used to examine identity, nationalism, and violence in sociopolitical sphere. Though the imagined nations presented in Anderson's colonial frameworks are helpful, they fail to identify the modern challenges faced by nations, communities, and emerging fluid identities in Afghanistan today (Barfield, 2010). While Anderson speaks at length about the cultural components and fluid identity structures that framed nation as imagined community, the realities of a globalized, post-conflict society with complex interactions of multiple levels of identity can be difficult to address. In a post-conflict Afghanistan, cultural identities, social ambiguities, and traditional norms have posited that the ideas of nation, or 'a sense of

nation-ness' (Bhaba, 1990), direct the development of Afghaniyat, or 'Afghanness'. What makes an Afghan and who can claim the right to be a citizen of the modern Afghan nation is a complex endeavor; it is not only a product of the conflict, one of the defining historical moments in Afghan history, but is also shaped by the cultural representation of the Afghan nation, its transitional history, and its complex convergence of diverse ethnic and tribal identities.

The conflict in Afghanistan has engulfed generations of Afghans in endemic violence and trauma. As different power groups fought for supremacy over the national political scene, the conflict became the defining aspect of Afghanistan over the last four decades (Gorronsoro, 2005). However, the idea of the Afghan nation is not a homogenous one and it did not develop overnight; it is fragmented, and often defined by multiple variables, such as ethnic identity, gender, and social relationships, instead of its limited, sovereign outlook (Anderson, 2006; Edwards, 2002). A fierce sense of patriotism, duty, and responsibility defined by the Pashto concepts of nang and namoos – which signify honor and pride across social settings, especially in one's heritage and identity – have been main guiding principles for Afghans (Khan, ed., 2001; Fletcher, 1982). The idea of a unifying, central authority came about as a result of the monarchy's standardized taxation, laws, currency, and administrative structures that put Afghans under the command of a single system (Barfield, 2010; Fletcher, 1982). Afghanistan was never colonized, so the gradual development of a nationalist ideology through resistance against a colonial power did not take place in the country (Barfield, 2010). For most regions and tribal centers, ethnic identities were more of a dominant identifying factor for people than the notion of a national character of unity (Mousavi, 1997). Once a

centralized system was developed by the Emir Abdur Rahman Khan in the late 19th

century, it functioned well although it was predominantly autocratic in nature; the tribal

power centers, clergy, and various factions around lineages that dominated the Afghan

sociopolitical scene sometimes remained outside the central control (Khan, ed., 2001;

Feiffer, 2009; Fletcher, 1982). Abdur Rahman's reign can be identified as the first

unifying force in creating the modern Afghan nation. The centralization of power was

complete, and regional power centers were brought under his control so that they

recognized the central leadership under the common banner of an Afghan nation (Khan,

ed. 2001). However, tribal structures, especially in the Pashtun South, and the religious

clerics remained active in politics; their role would become more prominent when faced

with the unique challenge of the modern twentieth century (Barfield, 2010). This paradox

of defying central leadership while upholding independence of regional centers exists in

modern day Afghanistan as well; hence it is so important (and complex) in identifying

factors that hinders the formation of an uniform Afghan national identity. In the backdrop

of political upheaval, the tension between national and ethnic identity and its impacts on

violence in daily life is a matter of investigation. Moving beyond "essentialist" (Bhabha,

1990, p. 300) readings of nationhood, where homogenous and holistic interpretations of

nation are considered false, the interactions of Afghan nationalism, identity, and impacts

on everyday violence can be captured by a reexamination of nationalism.

Literature on Nationalism

The process of reading narratives and oral histories on nation and national culture

has been a topic of debate among theorists (Bhabha, 1990; Chatterjee, 1993; Said, 1990).

Language, rhetoric, and cultural representation are issues that form a holistic idea of the

nation. Interpreting the nation as a sole product of state power and apparatus is restrictive

because it fails to acknowledge multiple, competing patterns of representation that can

acquire a central position in framing a national narrative (Bhabha, 1990; Said, 1990). For

Afghanistan, in addition to upholding the importance of a unique cultural dimension,

sociopolitical manifestations of the conflict act as the central piece shaping this narrative.

Nationalism as an idea presents itself as a natural instinct to protect the nation from

outside influence. Historically, national chauvinism can be traced back to periods of

political instability that forced Afghans to unify against external aggressors (Edwards,

2002). The British during the Anglo-Afghan wars and the Soviets (1979–1989) are good

examples included in Afghanistan's rich oral tradition. The 'locality' of national culture

is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor should it be seen simply as 'other' in

relation to what is outside or beyond it (Bhabha, 1990). The complexity of conflict and

the struggle for political supremacy during the civil war and Taliban regime makes it

difficult to frame the narrative without taking multiple competing factors into account,

such as ideology, religion, cultural practices, and ethnic politics.

Anderson interprets "the anomaly of nationalism" as "nation, nationality,

nationalism – all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone analyze" (2006, p.

3-4). He offers a new way of looking at nations and nationalism: as "an imagined

political community, and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign", and he

convincingly illustrates the role of colonial states in "making" nations (Anderson, 2006,

p. 6). Anderson's framework can be utilized to explore its relevance in the context of the

modern Afghan nation state to analyze how "imagined communities" formed one of the

bases of political struggle and social upheaval during the civil war and the Taliban

regime. Moving beyond this concept of imagined communities, Bhabha's work on the cultural representation of the ambivalence of modern nations is useful to develop an idea of Afghan nation.

Ideas of Afghan Nationhood

Spatial and temporal manifestations of the conflict can explore the ideas of the modern Afghan nation and the basis of Afghan identity. It is interesting to see how narratives are shaped by the public portrayal of a nation's past and its path to the future; one of the first things I noticed in Kabul was a gigantic poster of Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud positioned right outside the airport, quick to catch the eye of anyone flying into or out of the country. The poster displays his contributions to his nation and reiterates his belief in a unified nation for all. Interestingly, this is the message that the modern Afghan nation chooses to display; a vision of unity and pluralism, spoken by someone who's not of the dominant Pashtun heritage. This choice is telling because it shows that the political climate is ready for change, and furthermore that the restrictive readings of Afghanistan as a nation based on ethnicity alone are no longer relevant in the current sociopolitical scenario. Before delving into an analysis of ethnic politics and how it frames multiple aspects of Afghan life, including identity and nationalism, this dissertation presents a background of how national fervor and cultural pride were created and used during the conflict.

Evolution of the Afghan Nation. For centuries, ideas of Afghan nationhood have been shaped by dominant ideologies of the ruling class. Lack of strong central control meant that the rulers would always strive for legitimacy for their vision for the nation; however, along with the vision for a unified nation, what has been significant for the

Afghan ruler is his capacity to deal with foreign powers that would strengthen national integrity and unity and establish a feeling of nationhood.

Emir Abdur Rahman Khan, considered the father of modern Afghanistan, forged his image as a leader defending his country from external infidel forces, most notably the British in the late 19th century (Khan, ed., 2001). The monarchy in Afghanistan and the subsequent decade of democracy in the 1960s which saw several attempts towards constitutional reforms, tried to institutionalize liberal values in the Afghan system (Edwards, 2002). Under the monarchy and royal family, the dominant narratives of Afghan culture and national pride were derived from the legitimacy that kings enjoyed in the eyes of the masses; the monarchy would set the parameters and etiquette that shaped social norms, and the people, especially the elite serving the monarchy, would be the dominant group to follow the trend (Feiffer, 2009). When Amanullah Khan's wife Queen Soraya publicly removed her veil at a ceremony (Fletcher, 1965), elite women were increasingly seen in the public sphere without the veil; it became a matter of national pride to adopt liberal values emphasized by growing participation of women in the public sphere. During the communist rule and Soviet invasion, for those who supported and collaborated with the regime, practices defining social change were derived from the communist ideology that was the framework of the Afghan nation (Feiffer, 2009). The dichotomy between traditional Afghan values and the communist ideology were convincingly addressed through narratives of equal opportunities, equity, and liberty for all (Rashid, 2000). Those who opposed the communist regime and were part of the resistance movement rejected the dominant ideology, which was often based in violence and purged all forms of opposition; the legitimacy of the resistance movement was drawn

from their fierce opposition to foreign invasion, the fighting of a holy war, the protection of traditional Afghan values, and the upholding of religious principles.

After a long and brutal opposition, the mujahedeen finally came to power, and their vision for the nation included doing away with everything that represented the communist regime; the first casualty was the liberal social policies, including women's participation in public life, and an overall environment of forced piety in social life (Brodsky, 2003). This was taken up and institutionalized by the Taliban regime, whose totalitarian control over the people was unprecedented in history. Actively promoting a culture of violence and intolerance against women and minorities, the Taliban vision for a nation-state was an exclusive bastion for predominantly Pashtun males, where the leadership was from the Ghilzai clan (Dalrymple, 2014; Rashid, 2000). The Taliban version of 'imagined community' included only the Ghilzais, and sometimes other Pashtun clans by extension. Anyone else was construed as 'other', and the cultural representation of the dominant political class in the administration, with an entrenched bias against minorities, was made absolutely clear (Rashid, 2000). Driven by a misguided tribal interpretation of Islam under the Taliban regime, a backlash of conservatism against the perceived immoral and corrupt regime of the mujahedeen formed the basis of policy decisions (Crews & Tarzi, 2009). Redefining of national identity and nationhood during the war by ruling regimes paved the way for further conflict and violence.

Identity Politics and Ethnicity

The conflict always had ethnic undertones in Afghanistan, despite the efforts of few successful rulers to thwart that opposition and establish a strong central leadership (Fletcher, 1982). This shows the importance of ethnic identity in the broader sociocultural

space, where kinship and family ties are vital components of the social structure

(Edwards, 2002). This section explores the ethnic history of the Afghan people, situates it

within the violence that erupted during the conflict, and investigates how ethnic identity

is shaping notions of nationalism today.

      Ethnic diversity in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has several major and minor

ethnic groups. There is no data on their numbers, and estimating them for the different

ethnic groups has always been fraught with difficulty (Barfield, 2010). The Pashtun-

dominated governments have tried to portray their ethnic group as the majority, but no

relevant official data exists; they are most likely the largest demographic in Afghanistan.

Pashtuns are followers of Sunni Islam, and most are rural farmers. They can be sub-

divided into lineages which unite to form clans. Several prominent clans among the

Pashtuns are the Durrani,[4] which comprises two main components, Zirak and Panjpao

and several sub-components, the Ghilzais (mostly forming the Taliban base), the

Gurghusht, and the Karlanri (Barfield, 2010; Fletcher, 1982; Poullada, 1973). Being

Pashtun has sometimes been synonymous with being Afghan; however the ethnic identity

has recently been of less significance as the country acquires a more national identity by

encompassing numerous ethnic and linguistic groups. Pashtuns also adhere to a unique

code of conduct called Pashtunwali, which determines all forms of social and cultural

norms in a social Pashtun setup (Barfield, 2010; Poullada, 1973). The ability to speak the

common language, Pashto, is essential because urban Pashtuns who grew up in a Persian-

speaking environment are not bound by the tribal code of conduct (Barfield, 2010). The

second largest ethnic group (around 30% of the population) is the Tajiks, who are a non-

tribal, Persian-speaking population; their identity is derived mostly from their region

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[4] Most of the ruling elite in Afghanistan are from this clan.

rather than their ethnic affiliation. Due to their educational background, Tajiks have always formed a significant part of the administration (Barfield, 2010). The Hazaras comprise about 15% of the population. They are the single largest group of Shia Muslims in Afghanistan and are descendants of Mongol forces (Mousavi, 1997). Despite being one of the major ethnic groups in the country, Hazaras have been one of the most underdeveloped groups in Afghanistan due to the segregationist and discriminatory practices of the previous Afghan governments. Uzbeks and Turkmens make up about 10% of the population, mostly descendants of tribes in neighboring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; they are mostly concentrated in the northern parts of the country and do not enjoy any special political leverage. Afghanistan is also home to other ethnic groups, like the Nuristani, Pashai, Baluch, Aimaqs, and Arabs, along with some non-Muslim groups like Sikhs and Hindus, though their small numbers mean that they do not have any significant sociopolitical role in administration, governance, or policy.

The study of Afghan nationalism and its sociopolitical context is intertwined with the nature and dynamics of tribal politics (Poullada, 1973). Abdur Rahman consolidated the national borders, quelled all forms of tribal opposition, and established a strongly centrist autocratic regime. However, multiple tribal interests and alliances continued to thrive and in his lifetime, he faced at least ten internal uprisings (Fletcher, 1982; Poullada, 1973). Abdur Rahman and his grandson Amanullah, who tried to create national unity by introducing an extensive program of social, political, and economic reforms, were the two rulers of modern Afghanistan whose nation-building efforts were significant and noted for the establishment of a central structure by institutionalizing the army, civil administration and state structures, and, most importantly, by diminishing the

influence of the tribal leaders (Barfield, 2010). However, despite these measures in quelling tribal influences, it has remained one of the most important social structures in Afghanistan, so much so that being Pashtun would be considered synonymous with being Afghan (Barfield, 2010; Rashid, 2000). Claiming a particular ethnic heritage, however, is not a predictor of authority. Rather, it is complicated by a social system that places high values on the reputation, prowess, wealth, and moral standing within the clan. A lack of inclusion of other ethno-linguistic and religious groups, especially in the ruling aristocracy, has always been a bane for Afghans, which manifested itself grotesquely in the violence of civil war of the 1990s. The dominance of Pashtun supremacy has remained one of the barriers to the successful formation of a unified, national identity for Afghans.

Ethnic vs. national identity: a constant struggle. The way national pride and nationalism has functioned during the conflict is a good indicator of the fluid role that violent action has taken in the broader social scheme. For example, the violence by the communist regime and the Soviets resulted in an overwhelming feeling of nationalism that cemented ties and brought different ethnic groups together (Feiffer, 1973). When the same mujahedeen groups who fought against a common infidel enemy came to power, no mutual interest was strong enough to mend the ethnic factionism, which soon erupted into a full blown civil war. Interestingly, amongst brutal tales of torture and ethnic violence, narratives of tolerance and support emerged, especially among the urban educated class. For them, the causes of the civil war were political, and ethnicity's role in conflict was a direct result of the ruling leadership's tribal affiliations, which the educated urban class tried to bypass in the initial days of the conflict.

The following narrative from a respondent puts forth a few vital issues that characterize the challenges in developing a broad sense of Afghan nationalism. Until now, historical and contemporary evidence suggested that ethnic identity is one of the most crucial aspects colliding with the ideas of a uniform national identity. But through this narrative, and from other respondents reiterating similar themes, it can be concluded that the geographic divide mentioned here by the respondent is a result of creating a mental category for the oppressive other; people who were brutalizing men from different ethnicities were deemed as uneducated/uncivilized and not aware of the diverse urban life:

> "The city was mixed before 1991, but then the city got divided on ethnic lines. My experience from the civil war was that people took more responsibility to defend themselves. They organized themselves. Our street had people from different ethnicities, different political backgrounds and different family backgrounds, but everyone was working together and defending each other, but at the same time, in other parts of the city there was an ethnic war. Hazaras were killing Tajiks, Tajiks were killing Hazaras, Uzbeks were killing Pashtuns, Pashtuns were killing someone else…. But at the same time there were Uzbeks and Tajiks and Hazaras and Pashtuns living together and defending each other in the same city. Groups in the north, they were more civilized in terms of culture, society and economy. We were on the Silk Route, so we had experience in encountering outsiders from multiple ethnicities. Also, the economy in the north was stable and the people were more educated; we had land, water, resources… and life was more stable than life in the South. People who stayed in the Kabul together for long time had experience living with other ethnicities before. But for those who came from the countryside, for example the Hazaras who came to the city, they had no experience of such a life in the Central Highlands of Hazarajat. Or the Pashtuns, they came from the south, they had no experience with this type of communal, ethnically diverse life."

This distinction based on social stature and lifestyle becomes the central piece in this problem. Ethnic identity, which shaped how the civil war unfolded, is pushed to the background by bringing forth a more pressing category: identities defined through the rural versus urban and further strengthened by ethnic ties if one grew up in a rural region

among family, extended relatives, and clan for social support. In the urban areas, a sense of multiculturalism prevailed, which developed from the coexistence and through the creation of a new, urban community; it was not characterized by one's ethnic identity or familial ties, unlike rural areas, but through mutual interests, social courtesy, and multi-ethnic social ties.

Urban versus rural: who is the quintessential Afghan? Many dilemmas and dichotomies come forth while embarking on an analysis of the factors contributing to Afghan nationalism and its influence on shaping experience of everyday violence. The differences in ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds are framed by the geographical diversity of the country, which also dictates cultural backgrounds. The southern provinces, dominated by the more conservative Pashtuns, have always been regarded as enmeshed in tribal cultural values, which contributes to their low human development indicators, like widespread illiteracy, minimal access to healthcare, and stringent restrictions on mobility and rights for women (Edwards, 2002; Fletcher, 1982). Most of these southern tribes are nomadic with little more than farming to depend on, which also prevented a service class from emerging from their ranks. The terrain they occupied compounded their problems; lack of resources was acutely felt by these groups. Hence, frequent tribal clashes in attempts to seize power were rampant (Barfield, 2010). The north of the country, situated at the cusp of ancient trading routes, were immune from these issues, mostly because they were open to outside influences, lived in a more tolerant and forgiving setting, and had no dearth of resources like the south (Barfield, 2010; Mousavi, 1997). This gave them ample time and opportunity to pursue other activities, and a significant percentage of Tajiks from the north dominated the

administrative services. The increasing cultural split between the elites in Kabul and the population living in rural and provincial centers during the transitional phase undergoing reforms to the monarchy and constitution, as discussed earlier in this chapter, contributed to this chasm, which would eventually take a monstrous form in the shape of the Taliban and their policies, almost all of which were pursuant to eradicating what they saw as a corrupt moral influence of the urban life, characterized by mobility of women, abundance of material goods, and rampant westernization. Hence, to gain power and absolute social control, their policies had to be aimed at the moral evil in society that their rural, gender-segregated madrasa education warned them about (Rashid, 2000). Though ordinary people realized their ulterior motives, they found themselves helpless in the face of a tyrannical force backed by regional powers.

In the following quote, a respondent who lived under the Taliban regime spoke about the ethnic component of Taliban forces and real purpose behind the deceptive claims of upholding Islam. He elaborated on their insular tribal upbringing that was propagated by hatred for minorities which resulted in severe violence:

> "The Taliban was very religious, but it was not Islam; it was their tribal version of religion. There was no other ethnicity in the government… the Taliban was only in the hand of Kandaharis (southern Pashtuns from Kandahar province, mostly from the Ghilzai clan). They also bombed, killed, made a mass killing of people, especially Hazaras, in the north... They hated our (urban, educated) way of life. They never saw a city before, and all of their policies were derived from their tribal, conservative way of doing things."

This was reiterated by numerous respondents in many interviews. Casual conversations with Afghans also brought out similar themes of totalitarian control during the Taliban regime, fuelled by their ideas of literalistic interpretation of religious texts and rural insular upbringing that viewed anything modern with suspicion.

Linguistic Politics in Afghanistan

This cultural chasm and resulting sociopolitical divide over which such vicious

violence erupted can also be traced to linguistics. Afghanistan has two main languages,

Farsi and Pashto as well as numerous dialects (Barfield, 2010). All ruling powers and

elite in Afghanistan have historically spoken Farsi (or Dari, an Afghan dialect). It was the

language of the court and later for the government, and was therefore the language of the

educated elite and middle classes in addition to being the common language for the

diverse ethnic groups in the country. Anyone who is not conversant in Farsi is considered

to be culturally illiterate, as conveyed during the interviews; all of the urban, educated

Afghans in the sample, regardless of their ethnic background, spoke Farsi. The

knowledge of Pashto, the language of the Pashtuns, however, is much more than just

knowing a language. Being Pashtun with the ability to speak the language also binds one

to the honor code of Pashtunwali (Barfield, 2010). Linguistic differences and challenges

are pronounced even today, for example when someone purposely speaks one or the other

in order to show pride in their ethnic identity. Speaking solely Pashto with non-Pashto

speakers (especially in the urban regions) is an emphatic statement of one's Pashtun

identity, while Dari speakers are more fluid and can belong to any ethnic group.

However, the tensions in how language and ethnicity operates can be understood

from the following quote which came during my interview with a young female

professional:

> "I had to contact someone for work, and he was a Pashtun who spoke in Pashto,
> and he knew I speak Farsi, but he asked me if I could speak in Pashto. I said I
> can't, and it's the truth, not because I don't want to, but because I never got an
> opportunity to learn. And he reacted in a very negative way, he avoided speaking
> to me in Farsi… it seemed really strange. I can't speak Pashto but that doesn't

mean I don't like Pashto. And he was not speaking the language he knew, Farsi, just because he wanted to make me feel bad."

This account shows that linguistic politics and an assertion of ethnic identity are still very much prevalent in Afghanistan. In this case, a professional interaction was loaded with tension due to the inability of one person to speak what the other considered the dominant language of Afghanistan. The Pashtun man wanted to assert his identity through his language; and the inability of the Tajik woman to understand his language impacted the discussion.

Religion and Afghan Identity

Religion has been an intrinsic part of Afghan life, so much so that it is impossible to separate it from public and private spheres (Edwards, 2001; Mousavi, 1997). The complexity of Afghan life and culture is very much rooted in religious practices, interpretations, and the influence of the mullahs in public life. This religious identity has always been at the forefront in defining an Afghan identity. Since it was never a colony, contemporary literature on political Islam as an ideological reaction to colonialism was never an issue for Afghanistan; rather, it treats religion as an all-encompassing reality in everyday life (Barfield, 2010). No transaction or relationship in the sociopolitical and cultural sphere in Afghanistan is formalized without invoking religion. Religious symbols, values, and practices are evident in every aspect of society and political affairs. Islamic identity in Afghanistan is more of a cultural identity and, as Barfield (2010) notes, few societies have maintained "such a strong sense of themselves, their culture, and their superiority as Afghans" (p. 42). Convinced of their religious purity, Afghans have been dismissive of even their Muslim neighbors when it comes to the practice of religion; even under the strict puritanical regime of the Taliban, they maintained their

unique practices like visiting Sufi shrines (the Nakhsbandi and Chisti Sufi orders are particularly well-known) and believing in amulets and magical charms (Barfield, 2010).

This cultural notion of being Muslim and having a sense of superiority in their belief and practices does not seem to coalesce with the decade-long communist regime. The dichotomy of being a communist Muslim in Afghanistan is especially interesting because it has already been established that religious identity is of predominant importance to Afghans. Exploring how the communist Afghans practiced and participated in their public and religious lives, which take seemingly opposite ideological positions, is of some value to this study to understand how religion, politics, and ideology intermingled during that time.

In an interview with an editor of a leading Afghan daily, the interaction of religion, politics, and Afghan social norms were spoken about in detail, as noted in the following quote:

> "I never believe that in Afghanistan we have a strong and concrete communist ideology. The main reason was that the PDPA was the only party at that time. They had the power, they had the money, they had international support so many people joined them. And I still remember party workers coming to our house during Ramadan in the 1980s, and they were fasting [laughs]. But they were communists working in very top positions. They were praying all the time. It was a kind of contradiction for me, because they were strong ideological people. They were not very religious, like they were not very fundamental, but they were faithful ordinary Muslims; they would drink alcohol but at the same time they were fasting for Ramadan, too."

Here the respondent talks about the dichotomy in ideological position and religious belief; according to him, this was navigated easily, and even the Communist party workers ascribed to the religious doctrine and followed traditions. The assimilation of faith and political ideology was an intrinsic part of Afghan politics. This shows the utmost importance of religion in all aspects of private and public life.

Religion was always invoked to protect the ideas of nation and national pride in Afghanistan. The mujahedeen based their offensive on the basis that they were liberating the Afghan nation from invaders (Rashid, 2000), and that Islam and God was on their side in this holy war. It was a matter of national pride where being a martyr for the nation was one of the reason why people would join the resistance movement (Edwards, 2002). This concept was totally reworked by the Taliban, who claimed to be the true protectors of Afghanistan and upholders of original Islamic values according to the scriptures and the Qur'an (Povey, 2002). Any dispute would be addressed in their favor by giving it a religious spin through the scripture. Though the regime imposed a tribal version of religious practice dominated by severe oppressive norms, when people rejected these ideas, they still upheld their closely held religious identity.

In one of the interviews, while discussing the difference between personal faith and popular demands to perform religion in the public, a female respondent clarified her decision of not veiling:

"I am a good Muslim, but if my chador (veil) is not happy with me, if it comes off, that is not my problem."

In this context, she suggests that when her veil comes off, she doesn't feel necessary to cover up; yet she simultaneously stated that not veiling does not mean that she is not a "good Muslim", which is of fundamental significance in Afghanistan and the basis of conceptualization of Afghan identity. Rather, her value system does not incorporate a practice that she deems has little to do with faith. She posits that outward observations of religion, as characterized by wearing the veil, should not be a criterion for judging her faith. This is extremely powerful in the context of current post-conflict Afghanistan, since it restores the autonomy to women to decide on preferences in veiling

and religion. The woman, as the respondent observes, can choose what she prefers and how she wants to live her life, but it does not come at the cost of her Muslim identity. Rather, her Muslim identity is not dependent on outward observances of veiling.

"No one ever Benefits from Such a War": Current Context

The past thirteen years have brought significant changes in the country. Along with sociopolitical restructuring and preparing the country for a political transition, it also hugely impacted how Afghans view themselves and their future. International aid money has resulted in measurable progress across social sectors, especially in urban Afghanistan, and Afghan youth are enthused and invested in creating a better future for themselves. Every respondent of this study's sample was involved in some sort of social activism. They reiterated the opportunities that lie ahead for Afghanistan. They recognized the monumental challenges, but kept up the hope that sociopolitical transition is possible. For this group of young Afghans, most of whom grew up in refugee camps, life has given them another chance at peace which their previous generation failed to achieve. And among this urban group, interestingly, ethnicity is not a primary marker of identity.

In the following quote from a young Afghan female professional who has spent some time abroad for education and has returned back to the country, she poignantly states the significance of diverse ethnic identities that forms Afghanistan.

> "I think for me, you know, these different ethnic groups are just like these flowers: different colors, but it makes us more beautiful. That's how diversity is and a lot of times we fail to see that in that way. Our differences can make us powerful, can make us beautiful. And it is just unfortunate that it has been used as a political tool against us."

Changing attitudes towards strong social/ethnic ties, however, are largely an urban phenomenon. Rural Afghanistan is still quite homogenous within its ethnic pockets and has been lagging behind in development. Its distance from the central administration, not only geographically, but also in terms of development aid, creates dependence on local networks; warlords and local militias flourish and ethnic ties and kinship are most significant protecting factors. However, amidst centuries-old prejudices, ethnic supremacy, and the realities of civil war, small but significant changes can be noted nationwide.

In the following narrative, a respondent eloquently frames the political dimensions of the continuing ethnic divide in many parts of rural countryside:

> "Outside influence has a very determining role in this ethnic insurgency. In the case of the current insurgency, it is the Pakistanis. They just keep drumming out these false narratives of Pashtun supremacy and deteriorating conditions. And when you spread it among the illiterate mass, who don't have anything, it becomes very appealing. You sort of mix mundane worldy benefits with some afterlife and prestige and paradise – that becomes very appealing for this youth. And they see the benefits their friends are having from joining the Taliban while they are unemployed with no government support, and with all these narratives around prestige and martyrdom, it becomes like an attractive career option. And then the ethnic hatred begins."

This quote succinctly portrays the current problems in Afghan nation and identity construction; a war ravaged country facing massive insurgency, illiteracy, and complex sociopolitical issues which is used by the insurgent movement. When hatred for other communities is sold to uneducated, rural youth in the name of prestige and pride, it hampers national integrity and fuels the insurgency, leading to more violence in the social sphere.

Transforming national identity. Despite continuing insurgency and constant debate around changing nature of Afghan identity, the current situation shows some hope.

Though the success of the first round of recently concluded elections in April 2014 suggested that people are ready for change, allegations of industrial level fraud in the second round has significantly damaged the vibrant mood of the country. However, there have been minor improvements; this election saw a record percentage of women contesting for public office. The participation of all Afghans, especially those from the rural provincial centers, shows how the dominant narrative of rural Afghanistan being conservative and backward is shifting.

While interviewing an Afghan researcher who grew up during the war, the discussion included a conversation on the future of the country with regards to its tormented past and incorporation of multiple ideas around nationhood and identity. The respondent's reply, paraphrased in the following quote, shows the changing thought process of Afghans across the geographic urban rural divide.

> "There is a bit of humanity that remains in everyone's heart. This issue is particularly important to my generation, who grew up during the war, because before the communists came we did have this glorious era of peace. I am a researcher, I move around Afghanistan, I come across an illiterate farmer who has not seen Kabul, lived their entire life in villages, and when they start talking, you'd be stunned… For example, I met this elderly man in 2009 in Uruzgan, I asked him who he voted for. He said "I voted for the woman candidate." He emphasized, "These men, they betray us over and over again, so what is the harm in giving the chance to a woman?" Imagine, a man from Uruzgan, that's one of the strongholds of the Taliban; it has almost no Government presence, voting for a woman."

It can be concluded that the Afghan national identity, like its sociopolitical scene, is in a state of flux. Afghans no longer want to be solely identified by their ethnicity and religion. While religious identity remains important in contemporary Afghan society, urban educated Afghans have started to identify themselves as Afghans first. This process of change is impacted by the significant sociopolitical transitional

processes that the country is witnessing. Even though there is a lingering fear that the old,

violent days of the civil war might return due to constant regional interferences of

neighboring countries in Afghan politics, in current Afghanistan communities are not as

segregated as they used be under the Taliban. Rather, it is much more diverse and

inclusive, and people are aware of the damages of ethnic violence and tired of the

constant conflict which led to such widespread trauma and suffering. Even though

challenges remain in Afghan society, as evident from the electoral process, there is a very

clear desire to move beyond that era of violence. Though the current situation of

increasing tensions between the two leading Presidential candidates and their campaign

team characterized by opposing ethnic factions doesn't augment a situation of sustained

stability, yet there is a chance that this time around the transition will lead to a hopeful

future, as stated by this respondent who wrapped up his interview by these final words:

> "Large-scale ethnic violence is intolerable because it threatens the very existence of this country. But the scars of civil war remain. I mentioned the civil war, I don't forget it and I don't forgive it. I still have problems with it. Those guys who bombed us, killed people are still around. As of now I am involved in some small-scale politics. I think if one of these days one of those guys comes and wants to talk how am I going to talk to him? I still have personal feelings about that so I don't think I can talk to him, I will just kick him out. I will tell that I am not going to talk to you because you are half-human. You killed people, you razed a city. Between 20,000 – 50,000 Kabulis died alone, and forget the people who died in the provinces. But when it comes to ethnic issues and inclusion, I think we should do our best to do to avoid violence. And this is one of the lessons I have learned from my past. No one ever benefits from such a war."

This statement signifies the impacts of a devastating conflict and the younger

generation's perception of the same. The lack of justification among continued

destruction and resulting meaninglessness would be looked at in the next chapters.

Chapter 6: Remembering and Forgetting: Memories of the Afghan Conflict

Theories of Memory and War

Memories of conflict and war have been constructed, repressed, appropriated, and debated in multiple ways across cultural consciousness. Theorists working on memory studies and cultural dimensions of historical events focus on the social, cultural, cognitive, and political shifts affecting how, what, and why individuals, groups, and societies remember and forget (Journal of Memory Studies, 2014). Memory is of particular relevance to the post-conflict field of research due to its pivotal role in the (re)constitution and negotiation of the present by addressing past conflict or critical events (University of Cambridge, Post Conflict and Post Crisis Research Group, 2011). The representation, transference, and circulation of memory, from oral recollection to documented transcriptions, are expressions and impressions of the past, and constitute a profoundly political act in the context of conflict. The attempt to suppress, resist, rewrite and frame alternative narratives to impact collective memory occurs frequently, especially during political upheavals of any kind. Recollections of a specific historical event are not uniform and pose a challenge in terms of how memories are formed and impacted by individual or group affiliations; it revolves around themes of ownership, appropriation, destruction, and restitution. Archiving and documenting events, even post-conflict, reflects the above-mentioned complex dynamics. The production and reproduction of conflict and memory often has a symbiotic relationship (Ricoeur, 2004) and it is imperative to analyze the complexities of addressing memories of violence and trauma, as well as the history of the conflict. This chapter elaborates on the complex

relationship between experiencing violent actions during conflict and construction of collective memory.

Theorists distinguish recollective memory (also called episodic or autobiographical memory) from habit memory (or procedural memory, a label for embodied skills) (Bergson, 1911; Russell, 2010). Another type of memory is traumatic recall (highly relevant to this chapter), which denotes painful resurfacing and recollection of traumatic events. In Paul Ricoeur's seminal work on the phenomenology of memory, titled Memory, History, Forgetting (2004), he examines the relationship between remembering and forgetting, and how this relationship influences the perception of historical experience as well as the production of a cultural narrative. Memory is primarily reflexive, and Ricoeur gives the example of the Platonic theory of *eikon*, which places the emphasis on "the phenomenon of an absent thing" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 6). Hence, recollection of the past is an important component of memory, which is complicated by the temporality and moment of recognition of the phenomenon. This creates a difference between "simple evocation" and "effort to recall" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 19). Memory, in essence, tries to be "faithful to the past" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 21), but to bridge the gap between history and memory, testimony becomes the fundamental transition structure. Ricoeur posits that even when there is insufficient faith in the documentation process, this is the only way to ensure that something did happen in the past. This theoretical position has been used to analyze memory, recollection, and witnessing in the context of conflict in Afghanistan. Following Ricoeur's analogy drawn from the Platonic position of memory being a thing of the past, and through testimony

and recollection, this chapter explores a historical narrative of collective memory of Afghan conflict, transcending space and time.

Memory, History and Transitional Justice

Transitional justice, history, and memory are intrinsically linked in post-conflict Afghanistan; efforts to documents recollections and testimonies of traumatic memories of the war have created a national consciousness surrounding the grievances, suffering, and war crimes that occurred during the conflict. Memories of the war in Afghanistan are derived from suffering, trauma, and the constant threat to life and property. Though some attempts have been made since the 2001 Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, also known as the Bonn Agreement, which led to the country's creation of institutional measures to move towards transitional justice, Afghans have still not witnessed any real effort in addressing war crimes. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission was tasked by the Afghan Government in 2002 to "undertake national consultations and propose a national strategy for transitional justice" (Nadery, 2007), which produced its report in 2005 documenting past crimes and testimonies of the abuses during war. However, in 2007 the Parliament passed a law that provided blanket amnesty for all members of the insurgency while failing to incorporate mechanisms for victims of their atrocities to seek justice. Any post-conflict society faces challenges of reconciliation and justice, but for Afghanistan, ensuring security has triumphed in the face of justice where amnesty has already been granted to war criminals, mujahedeen leaders, as well as members of the Taliban who wish to refrain from violence and recognize the current government (Rashid, 2008).

In this political context, few relevant questions are: how does the political process effects the reproduction and representation of the historical memory of the Afghan conflict? What are the impacts of this political scenario on collective memory, recollection, and witnessing of violence? The ways in which conflict and memory have been reproduced, represented, and documented in Afghan sociopolitical life is essential to understand the difference between "simple evocation" and "effort to recall" (Ricoeur, 2004). Historical reproduction of the conflict has always been fraught with multiple coexisting narratives due to the ethnic divide. What is to come of a post-conflict society where amnesty is granted to war criminals with seemingly no possible recourse available to the victims of the conflict? In the absence of transitional justice, how do the victims of war move beyond the memory of the trauma and suffering? What impact will this have on Afghanistan's future sociopolitical stability? In the following sections, I analyze individual narratives of the conflict, memory, and recollection of the war; all the narratives for this study were in a way an effort to recreate the past. By asking the respondents to talk about their life stories during the war, the study tried to explore "the phenomenon of an absent thing" (Ricoeur, 2004), in this case, life during conflict. This is achieved by recalling individual experiences of the war, their memory of self, family, and society during the violence, their experiences of being back in Afghanistan after 2001, and their impressions of a collective, national memory of the conflict.

Remembering the Conflict in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is known for its oral history tradition; the written word is not all-encompassing and is of much less significance in this society than in other contexts. The oral transmission of knowledge has been thriving in this culture for centuries and focuses

on traditional folk literature through legends, tales, and stories that immortalize events of importance. How Afghans witness, preserve, recall, and forget events, in addition to how it is recreated over time, presents the challenge that Ricouer (2004) posits with regard to the recollection of memories. Rzehak (2008) argues that the reworking of individual experiences of an event into a collective one is adapted for the construction of cultural memory. His ethnographic work in Nimroz province in Afghanistan on the Taliban focuses on the process of memory creation and knowledge transmission. In Afghan culture, a short prose story recounting of historical events (or myths) is called *riwayat*, which is a metaphorical short story or narration (Rzehak, 2008, p. 189). Transmission of a metaphorical idea or historical event with a particular meaning attached to it is done through the process of narration. This is important in this context because it brings forth the intricacies of narratives based on rhetorical, argumentative, or chronological patterns. However, irrespective of the *nature* of the narrative, it is imperative to note the tradition of the oral transmission of knowledge and its importance in forming collective memory and historical consciousness in Afghanistan (Crews & Tarzi, 2008). The following sections would explore the intersection of this oral tradition in Afghanistan and the finality of information through official recognition.

Death lists and the finality of closure. On September 2013, the Dutch Prosecutor's office released a list publishing the names of people who were killed during the communist regime. The list provided the first evidence on the fate of some of those who were forcibly disappeared between 1978 and 1979, the year the communist regime took over. Republished by the Afghan daily newspaper Hasht-e Sobh and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, the significance and impact of this

list in the Afghan sociocultural context and in the production of collective memory is the starting point of this analysis.

Lists were released under both the Taraki and Amin Governments during the communist rule with names and information on collaborators and anti-regime individuals who were imprisoned. How is this list different and how does it impact Afghan society? This list contained, for the first time the names, professions, and crimes of people who were disappeared by the regime in post-war Afghanistan. The list provided 1) information and on the fates of relatives and closure for many Afghan families; and 2) acceptance on the part of the current regime of the need to acknowledge and provide information on the fate of some of the millions of disappeared people. The list, which contained only 4,785 names, is just a fraction of a percentage of those who disappeared during the war. Importantly, forcible disappearance, which is a crime under international conventions, was used by all regimes (communist, mujahedeen, and the Taliban) to suppress opposition, create terror in the social sphere, and quell any resistance.

Memory of the dead and disappeared. The death lists allowed the families of the disappeared to hold a *fateha* (traditional mourning ceremony) for their disappeared family members. A traditional mourning ceremony with burying and grieving rituals is of paramount significance in any Muslim culture, and this right was taken away from them millions of families. Three fourths of the respondents reported having a family member disappear during the war. The sense of powerlessness, trauma and constant oscillation between hope and dejection were paramount in the respondents when they spoke about the disappearances. Families had no idea what happened to their loved ones, if they were alive or dead, and had no proof of their death (unless their names appear on a death list).

The seemingly endless wait to hear any news about the disappeared family members form the basis of narratives on memory of the war and loss. In addition to providing closure to families waiting for three decades to hear news about their loved ones, how does the release of this list impact the construction of historical narrative and memory in Afghanistan? This has to be analyzed in conjunction with the current political establishment, where it has been reemphasized that reconciliation is more important than prosecutions. In a society where war criminals occupy public office and enjoy social sympathy from select sections of the population, how can post-conflict justice and peace be achieved? How would memory and the historical consciousness of the Afghan conflict be drawn from such a dysfunctional process of transitional justice? This becomes apparent by what happened next. The release of the death list was followed by two days of national mourning; for the first time in the history of the country, disappeared people were acknowledged and commemorated, bridging the gap between history and national memory.

There is a difference between remembering the disappeared and remembering the dead. With death, there is a certainty; the finality of the event allows one to mourn, grieve, and continue with their lives. Disappearing, however, lacks closure; the agony of not knowing the fate adds to the trauma of the virtually certain fate of death. The following two narratives portray the continuing trauma faced by people to this day and how their recollections of events are not influenced by the perpetrator (as the examples portray atrocities committed by both the communist regime and the mujahedeen forces).

A respondent summarized his personal grief in the midst of the challenging work he performs in his official capacity as an officer for one of the transitional justice teams:

"I lost four members of my family during this tragedy. My three brothers, when the regime changed during the Saur Revolution, were captured by mujahedeen groups, and they said, 'you are members of the communist party'. They took them from our house, and until now we don't know what happened to them. We still don't know where they were killed, where they went. After three months my father went to Pakistan and asked the mujahedeen leaders for his sons, and they took a letter from my father to the commander of our area, and when the local commanders felt that they might face questions for this action, they killed my father as well. He was in the mosque and they came there and took him, and we don't know where they took him, and he also disappeared. This is our own tragedy in this country. My mother, she is more than 80 years old, and even now, after 30 years, she is still looking for her sons [breaks down crying]."

Accounts like this were very common during all the interviews; it personalizes grief and loss in the broader context of violence in the sociopolitical sphere. The repeated efforts of this person's family members to find out a single source of information, which led to the killing of the patriarch of the family, portrays how violent actions became integrated in the social fabric; however this family's story is hardly unique. It reflects the broader social narrative of the trauma of disappearances and loss, the memory of which remain alive in the form of misguided hope, in this case the mother still not being able to accept the fate of her sons.

The death list shows how people were imprisoned based on very little or no accusation; opposition to the regime was the primary reason, but other minor factors were common, like being a sympathizer of Khomeini, or Sufi saints, or being university-educated and hence a threat to the regime. This trend continued well into the mujahedeen and Taliban periods, where the act of killing, the power over a person's life that the regime had, and the impunity with which they acted became paramount. The following narrative elaborates on the absolutist power of the Communist government in Afghanistan. The similarity between the above mentioned narrative and the following one is the impunity that multiple regimes enjoyed during the conflict and the painful

integration of that memory in present times with little or no information. The following

narrative states that as well:

> "The communist regime arrested my father and uncle. Their message was you are
> either with us or against us… if there was any opposition, they considered them to
> be the enemy. So all democratic people have to be in jail or killed. My uncle was
> in his office and someone from KHAD[5] came and asked him to go with them; he
> put his office keys on the table and left. And my father was in his car with his
> driver and they stopped the car and took him and also his driver. They never came
> back. And till now I don't have any information about them; where are they, how
> were they killed. Nothing."

The memory of the dead and disappeared in contemporary Afghan national

discourse brings forth the recognition and remembrance of a historical event that the

Afghan State has tried to forget, if not repress, in public discourse in order to barter

security for justice. There can be a discussion on the utility and dangers in adapting such

an approach, but this chapter focuses on the process of recollection and recognition.

Memory of the conflict presents a reciprocal relationship between remembering and

forgetting (Ricoeur, 2004), and the next section explores the individual experience, social

sites, and production of violence to assess, as different theorists point out (Bergson, 1911;

Ricoeur, 2004; Russell, 2010), how history overtly remembers some events at the

expense of others.

Being a witness. How people bear witness to a traumatic event, recall it for

testimony, and process the experience is essential to explore how memory is shaped,

recreated, and reproduced across the cultural consciousness. The intention of memory to

be a truthful representation of events across the distance of time and space (Ricoeur,

2004) clashes with the exercise of individual remembrance. Aside from the recall bias

that occurs when looking at events that happened over three decades back, some

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[5] Khadamat-e Aetla'at-e Dawlati: State intelligence agency during the PDPA (communist) regime;
the most feared state agency during the Soviet invasion.

individuals were also faced with overwhelming distress in recalling these memories. Some people would often break down in the middle of an interview. Recollecting and sharing events from the conflict often created a starting point for these individuals to truly process their grief, because living in a society where everyone has suffered to some extent, personal stories of suffering are often put off to the side. What takes precedence in the collective consciousness and national memory is a story of trauma that is made up of these individual experiences. However, in the domain of the public sphere, it is nearly impossible to take account of every single story. Hence, recognition in any form, like in the form of the death list, is an active act of validating every individual person's trauma that is often subdued in the broader collective realm.

The witnessing of events during the war takes multiple forms: some sought out "adventure" because they were bored as children growing up during the war; some were unfortunate enough to be at the wrong place, like those coming under fire while they tried to flee the country; for some it was random, like the teenager who was beaten without reason by the Taliban; and for some it was a matter of living at the edge of violence, where it could erupt at any point in time, like the constant fighting, shelling, and occasional ceasefire occurring during the civil war. These multiple ways of witnessing events, as discussed in detail in the previous chapters, demonstrate the reality of constant conflict.

In the following quote, the memory bears testimony to a time of upheaval. What is significant to note is that even when one considers different accounts based on the respondent's political affiliations and ethnic background, the nature of the narrative and memory does not change. Forgetting the memories or even suppressing them is neither an

option nor a desire. Rather, as this narrative suggests, it is imperative to remember and

not forget the horrors of the past, because that would pave the way towards a decisive

future.

> "The war was very difficult; I have never tried to forget it and I can't. The misery, the suffering, the deaths and destruction, the poverty and humiliation that we went through, I can't forget. I don't know how the past affects me but one thing is I have become certain of in life is I want to find peaceful ways of doing business and politics. However, sometimes I feel we may have to do some fighting, I will be honest with you, I don't rule it out. Sometimes I think we should fight the Taliban till the end. Someone would come out the winner. But as far as the war is considered, I can see the incidents in front of my eyes, like it happened last night, even though it was 30 years ago."

Afghans know that their memories of the conflict are a strength that can guide

them to a better future; the narratives show the lessons learned and bring forth the

strength and resilience that Afghans showed during the war. A refusal (and inability) to

forget creates a historical consciousness of the conflict, which is reiterated across social

sites through images and symbols. The mental image forming the memory of something

that is lost forever is one that is the most difficult to recall, because the usual numbing

process that occurs when violent events are witnessed is not important in this case.

Rather, it is reliving the experience of loss, over and over again, until it becomes a part of

their being.

Processing the memory of loss. Any research on conflict has to acknowledge the

primary position that loss assumes for an individual who has witnessed war or

sociopolitical upheaval. The lack of transitional justice and the creation of historical

consciousness with regard to the collective memory of the war, as discussed in the

previous sections in this chapter, would be incomplete without turning our attention to the

private sphere of loss, bereavement, and grief. In a culture like Afghanistan, with very

strong religious convictions, segregated social norms, and a strict division of gender roles, it is interesting to conceptualize the sense of loss that is all-pervading in Afghan society. There is hardly anyone in Afghanistan who has not witnessed a personal tragedy. Loss is conceptualized in Afghan society through a constant reminder of what was lost; in the form of collective grief and lack of closure resulting from the war, the image of loss is recreated, which has an everlasting presence in its absence.

Loss does not always relate to losing a person. It is tempting to divide the experience of loss into material and human, but that doesn't do justice to the experience of losing. As suggested in the following narrative, losing things of immense emotional (rather than material) value can be equally traumatic as losing a family member. In fact, in a situation where the value of life has depreciated to the extent that people are "used to" watching friends and family die, it is loss of these seemingly meaningless objects that takes enormous proportions and has significant psychological impacts.

In the following quote, the respondent recalls losing his most valuable possessions during the civil war. Though he currently runs one of the leading newspapers in Afghanistan, his memory of this particular event, and what transpired while he was talking about it elaborates the complicated nature of loss during conflict. It signifies that the emotional value attached to an object or person makes the process of loss so painful:

> *"*I had a small library of my own that I built with my own pocket money over years. I had 400 or 500 books, and when I returned from Baghlan during the war, I directly went to my home to get my books. And the books were not there. The family who rented the house after us said, 'I thought these books had anti-Islamic content. I was scared so I burnt them all to save my life.' I just cried and cried. My father told me that we can go to the city and buy new books. And I said, 'no, I don't want new books,' because those books had my memories; those were my favorites, you know? And so it was a big shock for me, still, when I think about it [tears up, but laughs]. I get emotional."

Loss during conflict cannot just be measured by loss of life. Although it is absolutely devastating for families, it does not present the complete picture of helplessness and trauma. Loss must also be attributed to broken promises, growing dejections, fading hope, and rising violence. For Afghans, in addition to witnessing atrocities and severe violence, loss was experienced at multiple levels: individual, familial and social. Additionally, social discrimination due to supposed political affiliations took enormous proportions during the war. This was experienced by a respondent whose family was forced to move to the countryside during the war.

> "When the war started in Kabul, we became refugees in our own land, moving from place to place. Just because my father served in the Army, people would call us children of communists. We were treated as outsiders and it was very difficult to settle in the provinces and adapt ourselves. We had land there and were not allowed to take the harvest because they taunted us as communists. It was difficult to live there. And my mother had a difficult time protecting us. She was scared that maybe someone would throw us into the river for revenge. I don't know how my mother adapted herself to that lifestyle. There were issues of social incompatibility, different norms, and attitudes... though there was no violence, we had already lost everything."

For this respondent, a child at the time of conflict, being constantly on the run from the real threat of war had its own terrifying reality, but losing out on the daily life of stability they were used to before the war started was crucial in shaping his memory of loss.

Exile and Displacement

The conflict forced millions of Afghans to flee their homeland. There was an exodus of Afghan refugees, especially during the Soviet invasion, civil war, and the Taliban regime. Afghans formed the largest refugee population in the world for about 32 years since the conflict started with the Saur Revolution in 1978. Over 5.7 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan since 2002. However, the rate of voluntary return

has fallen since 2011, and estimates suggest that there are 1.8 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and 447,547 internally displaced people in Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2012).

Examining the process by which people leave their homeland and embark on a journey for the unknown can be complex. Putting aside the dominant cause of the conflict and political instability that led to that final decision, it was found that for most Afghans, leaving Afghanistan was a severely traumatic and painful decision that they tried to delay as long as it was possible. Most did not leave until a particularly significant or personal event of violence.

A respondent recalled a particularly traumatic event that forced his family to leave:

> *"After our neighbor's house was blown to pieces and they all died, my uncle decided that we had to leave. He told everyone in the community, 'we have lived together here for very long time, and we have very close relationship with everyone but it's impossible for me to live in this city anymore. Because I can't watch you die and have to collect your body parts and bury you... It's impossible for me to tolerate.' We collected our things, we got a car and finally left Kabul and went to the north."*

This account shows that despite the brutal nature of the conflict going on for years, people were unwilling to leave their homeland until a particular incident hit close to home. In this case, it was the death of a close neighbor, and also the fatigue that came to be associated with prolonged conflict. Yet this was a characteristic seen in most interviews where unless the violence assumed a personal quality, people went on with their daily life and showed little interest in leaving for a more secure place. This corroborates with Mike Taussig's (1989) work on "terror at arm's length" (p.3). Taussig claims that people tend to hold terror "far away in a clinical reality" (p.3) so that they don't get embroiled in it; for Afghans, they tried to keep violent actions away, putting it

"elsewhere" (Taussig, 1989), until it hit home. And when the terror became personal, most Afghans decided that it was time to leave.

Leaving the country was not easy. Armed militias controlled the roads, and during the Soviet invasion, the bombing of people trying to flee the country was common, as narrated by multiple respondents who witnessed Soviet air attacks while trying to leave the country. One had to bribe the armed militias and traverse across very dangerous roads and the mountainside to finally reach the border. In addition, incidents of abuse, discrimination, and marginalization against Afghan refugees at the Pakistani border at Torkham were very common. If one survived the journey, life in the refugee camps presented a new challenge, both in Iran and Pakistan, two countries that had the highest number of Afghan refugees. Difficulties in adapting to the local culture in Pakistan, the lack of basic amenities, and the constant struggle to make ends meet form the basis of recollection of anyone who lived in a refugee camp.

One respondent spoke at length about the difficulties the family faced when they were forced to move to a refugee camp in Pakistan. The problems faced by Afghan refugees were manifold; along with the trauma of being a refugee, Afghans faced poverty, discrimination, conservative cultures of host countries, and increased militancy and radicalization in the camps which became the center of anti-Soviet resistance:

> *"The first years we spent in the camps were very hard, very difficult for us; even my younger brothers were working on the streets in Peshawar to bring money and food. It was impossible to find any stable job, and most people in the camps were struggling to survive. Peshawar in Pakistan was very different culturally than Kabul. It was way more conservative, and very soon the mujahedeen started exerting control in the camps as well. It became especially difficult for women who had a different lifestyle in Afghanistan."*

Lack of assimilation in host societies, marginalization, and a feeling of being a misfit were common in the recollections of life in refugee camps. The following account focusses on the trauma of being a refugee. The feeling of not belonging and being marginalized in host countries is clear in this narrative. What stands out is the helplessness in not being able to return.

> "When you are a refugee, you always feel, 'this is not my country'. When you are in your country, when you are putting in some plants or flowers, you think that this is your future, you think of your children, of generations to come. When you are a refugee, that feeling is lost. I lost the best years of my life due to this conflict. When I left Afghanistan, I was only 24 years old. I could not return for the next 20 years…"

The historical evidence and memory of life in refuge can actually be conceptualized as a part of the overall collective memory of conflict. Refugee life for Afghans, like for any other refugee group, was exceptionally hard, and life in exile was recalled by most as one of the hardest that they faced. The respondents did not point to discrimination and abuse as the causes for this; rather, they spoke of the pain they felt while leaving the country.

Most respondents would try to emphasize how important the moment of their return was. It instilled in most people renewed hope, and a feeling that finally they have managed to put the conflict behind them. One of the respondents mentioned how he decided to leave everything behind in Pakistan because all he wanted for years was to be able to return to his country.

> *"After the Bonn conference started in 2001, I sold my shop in Pakistan and came back to Kabul. When I crossed the border, I kissed the land and I looked to the other side of the border at Pakistan and said to the border guards, I am not going back, ever."*
> Most of the educated class returned at the first chance after 2001. Many in

neighboring countries started returning as well. The end of exile was remembered as a

bittersweet moments of their lives. While they were ecstatic to return, the trauma of not

being able to return for decades, the unknown fate of family and friends left behind, and

the physical reality of a war-ravaged nation were crucial in how they processed their

experience.

> *"The first time after 20 years when I came to Afghanistan after the fall of Taliban, in the airport, when the plane came through Dubai to Afghanistan, near Afghanistan, when I saw the mountains I longed to see for 20 years, I started crying. And then I saw this destroyed country, no streets, no buildings, nothing. I couldn't imagine it would be like this."

This narrative focusses on a particular section of the respondents belonging to a

generation who were adults when they left during the war. Their memory didn't include a

war ravaged country; rather, they were active professionals who were working in

different capacities for a better Afghanistan. For this group of people, returning to a

homeland devastated by war brought a shock more severe than the generation who grew

up during the war and saw the destruction up close.

Collective Memory of Conflict

Although the communist regime, civil war, and the Taliban regime are memories

of the past, they are still a part of the individual experience of Afghans (Crews & Tarzi,

2008). In order to achieve political stability and transitional justice, all sections of the

society have a stake in how the memory is recalled and preserved, and how Afghanistan

envisions its common discourse of conflict and moves beyond it.

The main intention behind all the stories and narratives of the respondents is a

desire to remember the events, personalize them, and place them in the broader social

realm of war stories. Most respondents were eager to share their life histories, because

more often than not they never had an audience to share it with. Personal communication

among close family members does not disseminate knowledge, as only through recreating

the events in front of another group do stories get imbibed in the broader collective

narrative.

When I asked how the conflict affected their individual lives, instead of only

hearing stories of trauma and suffering, I got very interesting perspectives of Afghan life

during and beyond war. The following respondent who is a young professional working

in a research organization on social issues, speaks about how conflict has added value to

her life by helping her realize the intrinsic importance of every moment.

> *"The conflict made life more worthy. Because I wouldn't take my life or anyone's life for granted; I wouldn't take the peace that we are having right now, the fact that I can sit here and talk to you, for granted. For me it is a blessing that we are sitting here in peace. It helps me be appreciative of every single thing that we have and also look on the other side of violence, and to imagine it going, it's hard. But I think it makes life more precious, opportunities more precious, and the time that you have more valuable."*

Together with multiple narratives, these stories of strength cannot be relegated

only as the resilience of Afghans in face of conflict. While framing the collective

memory of conflict, these anecdotes are essential to develop a historical perspective of

the meaning of conflict. Though there are diverse narratives competing to gain

prominence in the public sphere of national discourse, the nature of this diversity

provides these narratives with such richness and depth. Hence, collective memory of the

Afghan conflict is an exercise in recalling and transforming stories of the past into

meaningful history for the present. And given the nature of the contemporary Afghan

ruling class, as demonstrated by the complex pathway of transitional justice and the lack

of political willpower to venture in that direction, it is crucial for Afghanistan's future to

produce these kinds of stories, validated by their tradition of oral history and the

transmission of historical knowledge, and to transform the realities of war into a collective meaning-making exercise.

The following respondent, an officer with the Afghan transitional justice team, explains the necessity of integrating memory of conflict into national consciousness. This statement is very pertinent in conclusion to this chapter on collective memory. It moves the discussion forward by identifying the need to reconcile memories of war in the current sociopolitical context by way of ensuring recognition and justice.

> *"*As a transitional justice activist, I can say that if we do not pay attention to the causes of conflict then we will not be able to remove the scars of conflict permanently and have stability here. It is the reality of our society. We need to face it and provide justice for the memories of the dead and the living. How else will we ever move forward?"

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Future Research

On April 5, 2014, Afghans went to vote in a historic election that saw the first

democratic transition of power in the history of Afghanistan. While violent attacks

increased in the country in the weeks leading up to the voting day, including the

deliberate targeting of civilian spaces like restaurants and hotels in Kabul, the elections

saw unprecedented turnouts in most parts of the country, along with increased enthusiasm

and hope among the voters for Afghanistan's future. The first phase increased hopes for a

better future and established the firm mandate of the Afghan people for a democratic

transition. The initial results suggested a split verdict, requiring a second round to

determine the winner among the top two candidates, Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, both of

whom ran on a progressive, liberal mandate. However, allegations of industrial level

fraud in the second round by Presidential Candidate Dr. Abdullah has tainted the process

and seriously undermined everything achieved in the past decade. Abdullah is half-Tajik

and draws his support from Tajiks and other minorities in the country; Ashraf Ghani, a

Pashtun, and his supporters claim they have the right to rule based on their ethnicity; this

situation can spill over into violence very easily unless immediate action is taken to quell

ethnic tensions, as noted by UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan: "the rhetoric brings

back memories of tragic, fratricidal, factional conflicts in the 1990s that cost the lives of

tens of thousands of civilians". (UNAMA, 2014) Given the current political situation, it is

clear that Afghanistan is on a crucial juncture in history. The latest announcement of

forming a unified Government by both factions comes as a welcome relief after weeks of

heightened tensions. However, with foreign forces withdrawing and political structure of

the country threatened by lack of legitimacy, any new Government has to incorporate

complex narratives of violence, displacement, and justice to move beyond the trauma of war. After exploring nuances of violent actions in Afghanistan, construction of memory during conflict, and current transition process, in this final chapter I present the conclusions drawn from this study and its importance in regional geo-strategic politics. Keeping in mind the ongoing political tensions for Afghanistan, its cultural and sociopolitical past serves as a guide to understand the impacts of saturated violence in social sphere.

The Quandaries of Studying Afghanistan through a Western Perspective

One of the main concerns in understanding complexities of the Afghan conflict is the dominance of a western lens to comprehend functioning of a traditional society engrossed in cultural nuances and tribal norms unfamiliar to the West. Afghanistan, being largely forgotten in the western world after the withdrawal of the Soviets, experienced massive levels of violence during the civil war and Taliban regime. Following the events of 9/11, Afghanistan's revival as a country of strategic importance paved the way for multiple nations to claim a stake in Afghanistan's future through initiating development projects and addressing broader security goals. Often times these policies and their implementation did not sync with local sensibilities and created lasting sociopolitical tension. Insider attacks on foreign forces and Afghan security establishment, rising concerns of insurgency, rampant corruption, and ongoing political instability are effects the policy failures of past twelve years but signal a bigger problem; trying to incorporate western models of development and progress in Afghanistan while negating the importance of traditional social structures, cultural context, and the ability of the country to develop on its own terms and at a pace set by itself.

One of the obvious struggles in understanding the Afghan conflict has been employing the benchmark of self-determination that is of pivotal importance in western societies; the freedom to make decision for oneself, principles of equal rights, opportunities, and autonomy constitute key principles that all modern nation states aspires to uphold for its citizens. In understanding the past twelve years of reconstruction in Afghanistan, it is essential to look at how the principle of self-determination has been used, albeit at cross purposes, in this context. Gendered violence and its broader impacts on societal relations has been the foundation of this debate on self-determination. Afghan cultural norms, gendered relations, tribal customs, historical tensions in ensuring gender rights, and severe divisions in opportunities and aspirations for rural/urban women pose a challenge for anyone trying to understand the country from a self-deterministic point of view. Individual rights are always secondary in a traditional society like Afghanistan, where collective community ties, tribal alliances, and social networks are the most cherished connections that are valued over individual independence. However, in a post 9/11 world, Afghans found themselves grappling with the concept of self-determination due to the insistence of western powers for whom this was the best model for development. This shows a severe lack of understanding and recognition for Afghan history and evolution of the Afghan nation-state. Tensions between a monarchy with modern outlook and tribal power centers who wanted to preserve traditional way of life has been constant in Afghanistan, and the major factor of contention was centered on self-determination and its impacts on women's rights. Narratives from the interviews portray this tension very clearly, where urban women (and men) speak at length about the most severe impact of the conflict- that of loss of educational opportunities, mobility, and

freedom. This is limited to a particular class of urban, educated, enlightened population; however, most of Afghans live in the rural countryside, and principles of self-determination mean little to them. Tribal power centers form the law, and cultural norms are absolutely vital in any kind of social transaction. So when Western powers came to the country in 2001 and framed the post-conflict reconstruction in the framework of individual rights and self-determination, it led to severe concerns among the rural sections of the population, to whom modern ideas of sovereignty, governance, and individual rights are alien concepts. It is therefore imperative not to get enmeshed in the historical struggle between modernity and tradition, frame post-conflict reconstruction narrative in a framework that is culturally appropriate and acceptable to the Afghans, and create a bottom up approach of development, where Afghans can emerge as the primary stakeholders of the reconciliation and development efforts in their country.

Integrating Theory with Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore subjective experiences of violence and collective memory of the conflict in Afghanistan. The fieldwork was conducted in 2012, just two years before the transition process began in Afghanistan. Along with being a timely work on the psychosocial impacts of the Afghan conflict, the study presented a concise description of the dimensions of Afghan private and public life, cultural relations in framing the broader social narratives, and interactions of ethnic and national identity with the broader sociopolitical sphere.

Understanding political violence was essential for this study, as actions on the ground can have a local or personal agenda other than portraying a war's larger image (Kalyvas, 2003). Noted theorist Karl von Clausewitz described war as "politics by other

means" (Howard & Paret, 1984). The fissure between public and private violence in the context of the Afghan war was even more intriguing because loyalties and identities became enmeshed in that context. Individual, communal, and collective history had to be considered to gain an understanding of the narrative of political violence which manifested itself as violence in daily lives in the social sphere. The distinction of morality is embedded in the problem of violence, and this study provided an essence of the moral and ethical nature of violence in the Afghan context. Any violent action calls for a "moralizing rejection of certain behaviors" (Hamblet, 2004, p. XI). An ethical call for political violence in Afghanistan required a clear understanding of its ethnic divisions, the thin line of distinction between perpetrators and victims, and the current process of nation-building to move beyond violence across sociopolitical realities. According to Kalyvas, the brutality of violence during civil wars and sectarian strife defies the previous communal relationships; it is hence directly co-relational with previous feuds between ethnic divisions, tribal identities, or other groups (Kalyvas, 2003; 2008; Gorronsorro, 2005). Even before the currently ongoing conflict, central control of the Afghan Government was weak, and there were multiple tribal power centers and religious clerics who wielded significant social control over the population; regional feuds between these tribal powers assumed massive proportions and fuelled ethnic tensions, especially during the civil war. In this case, the lack of social cohesion among various ethnicities, noted predominantly in the rural areas, led to fragile social ties, and it can be inferred that this further impacted manifestations of violence.

Theories on cultural violence can be defined as any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form (Galtung, 1990). Cultural

violence legitimizes structural violence by weaving in narratives of the other and attributing an inferior status to minorities. It divides the society along fissures of inequity by reinforcing and justifying categories of direct violence. With active sanctions achieved through cultural violence, agents engage in acts of violence, which can range from killing to deprivation of resources to discrimination (Galtung, 1990; Lim, Metzlar, & Bar-Yam, 2007). As narratives from the respondents stated, in the case of the Afghan conflict, cultural violence assumed multiple forms, and was often determined by ethnic practices and tribal norms. This created an environment of absolutism in terms of culturally appropriate behavior, as enforced during multiple periods in the history of the conflict, but was applied most stringently during the Taliban regime, which had devastating consequences. These multiple dimensions of violence and its manifestations need to be recognized while presenting the concluding remarks on this study.

Before moving on to the implications and final remarks, it is imperative to engage with the findings and place it in a framework. By using a phenomenological analysis, this study elaborated on the subjective experience of daily violence in the context of conflict. It was not focused just on exploring experiences of violent actions but developing a holistic perspective of saturated violence in society and its effects on people. Immersion in the field led me to experience daily life in Kabul and through interviews and life histories, rich narratives regarding violence in daily life was obtained. In this study, the narratives were not studied in isolation to identify themes around violent events; rather it synthesized the historical, sociocultural, and political dimensions of violence in Afghanistan by probing for experiences of daily violence, exposure to violent events, complex dynamics between being a victim, perpetrator, or both, psychological impacts of

exile, and finally connecting back endemic violence in social sphere to the collective memory of the conflict and dimensions of identity (national, ethnic, religious, and/or gendered) in Afghan society.

Future Research

Research on the Afghan conflict has been scarce due to multiple reasons like security issues and political instability of the country. However, in the past few years, the situation has improved; thus paving the way for a more intense engagement with Afghans and their daily life. This study is a small addition to the literature on Afghanistan. The Afghan conflict has been multifaceted and complex, and provides an opportunity to engage in the study of complex sociopolitical processes. A few areas for potential future research that were identified are listed below.

1) Examination of the impacts of political transition on returning Afghan refugees and post-conflict reconstruction efforts amidst insurgency. According to a UNHCR report (2012), 5.7 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan since 2002. However, threats resulting from the ongoing insurgency, a lack of centralized government control, and economic insecurity continue to effect internal displacement, increase the victimization of refugees, and hinder the process of repatriation from neighboring countries like Pakistan and Iran. A few important issues to explore would be dimensions of democratic institution-building, governance over the past twelve years in Afghanistan, and their effects on migration, displacement patterns, and rehabilitation of returning Afghan refugees and internally displaced population. Analyzing the changing sociopolitical scenario during the transition period would enhance knowledge of

the reconstruction process, assistance efforts, and challenges for the reintegration of refugees in society.

2) Exploring increasing role of women in the political process and policymaking through an analysis of private and public spaces and functioning of democratic institutions (like National Assembly, Provincial Councils, and Community Development Councils) at national and provincial levels in Afghanistan. Future research can examine the transformations of gender roles through democratic activities and analyze how the increased participation of women in political and civic life is breaking barriers of the patriarchy and challenging age-old traditions. Additionally, future studies can (a) evaluate the sociocultural impacts of the increased number of women in leadership positions in these political institutions and civil society on the social position and cultural constructs of masculinity and honor; (b) delineate the interactions between different actors like warlords, tribal combatants, Taliban and other insurgent groups, civil society activists, and the government machinery; and (c) analyze how these processes impact women's role in Afghan society.

3) Transitional justice is said to be crucial for the success of Afghanistan's transition and its reconciliation process. Future research can examine the meaning and process of justice in the Afghan context. Its parallel legal systems like *shura* and *Jirga,* tribal ways of delivering justice, and social control should be probed in future studies. Important for the reconciliation process is the fact that war criminals are in positions of power; how that impacts the process of transitional justice is a pertinent question. This would be a very important component of

future research because, based on the success of the process of justice, the country

will either succeed in its peace process or disintegrate into further conflict.

Reflections

This study presents few very important findings when it comes to understanding

everyday violence in Afghanistan and collective memory of the war. It breaks the popular

notion of Afghanistan as a land of lawless, medieval people who do not know anything

outside warfare. It demonstrates the rich historical tradition and social reforms in the

country, along with the political processes that led the country to a three-decade long

conflict, marked by brutal regimes, widespread suffering, and a severe refugee problem.

The narratives are full of defiance; in the face of severe hardship during conflict, people

still sought a way out for their education, employment, and personal freedom. They were

not always successful, but even in the refugee camps or in the frontlines as part of the

resistance, they never gave up on their hopes and dreams for the future. The narratives

show Afghans as proud, resilient people, who truly believe in their invincibility against

any external invaders and value their sovereignty and autonomy over anything else.

Today, Afghanistan is full of enthusiastic Afghans back in the country after decades, who

are invested in the country's future; however this enthusiasm is seriously undermined by

age old political traditions of factionism, warlordism, and fraud. Though people are

aware that no one really wins in a conflict, yet somehow Afghanistan finds itself again

standing on the cusp of a promising future and further conflict. The establishment of a

legitimate government is the only key out of this political tension; a stable Government

would also tackle the insurgency and move the country towards sustainable development.

What remains to be seen is if the country manages to pull itself out of a decade of

mismanagement, corruption, and minimal governance to emerge strong enough to hold the country together and usher much needed changes in society. Failure to do this would be devastating for Afghanistan. The country has been resilient in the face of violence until now, but if current conditions of growing ethnic tensions fuelled by political ambitions are not handled properly, then chances are that the country would disintegrate faced with another round of conflict.

In addition to these important recommendations from findings, conducting this study has impacted me as a researcher. Afghanistan always fascinated me as a country, and this study gave me the opportunity to witness impacts of conflict on a country. It taught me to conduct fieldwork in a conflict zone and develop a nuanced understanding of the nature of violence in that setting. Most Afghans who shared their life stories with me spoke in depth about the myriad connections between theoretical constructs that interested me: banal nature of violence during conflict, remembering of particularly difficult events, importance of meaning-making of these violent events, physical sites acting as a reminder of the daily violence, and their personal moment of loss. Findings from this study show that the struggle for survival in trying circumstances make people resilient, but there is something more to it; the historical belief in victory under any circumstance shapes the worldview of Afghans. Experiencing violence with a certain regularity makes it mundane, stripping it of its goriness to some degree, but finally, what people desire is a good life. It could be true that no one values life for all its beauty, brutality and shortcomings more than the Afghans. In listening to multiple narratives around conflict and destruction, what stuck out was the simultaneous dominance of hope and belief in a better future. And it can be concluded, with serious apprehension that

stems from the political relationships in Afghanistan today, that Afghans have the desire, willpower, and strength to lead their country to a post-conflict transition marked by a somewhat stable government and sustained development, only if the political class recognizes the dire need for it. This might be the final chance for the country. After all, it is only fitting, considering Emperor Babur's vision for his beloved summer retreat of Afghanistan, inscribed on one of the Mughal forts, as reminder of what the place was, and what it can be: "If there is paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this."

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Tell me about your experience of the ongoing conflict:

What are your views of life in Afghanistan? Tell me about these experiences. What are your experiences dealing with the civil war, Taliban rule, and the war with the US and allies? (Prompt with: feelings of hopelessness, fear, lack of mobility, witnessing violent actions) Do you have any new familial/social role due to the consequences of the war? Do you consider your life being changed and defined by the conflict? What has changed? What do you feel about your past (Prompt: sad, angry, fearful, guilty) Are you hopeful for a better future?

What are the impacts of the conflict on our family?

Who in your family got killed/disabled/wounded during the war? What was the experience of the family in dealing with that? In what ways has the family dealt with the loss of a family member? What did the family do to meet everyday needs met in the midst of the war? In what ways did the family manage their resources? Why did the family stayed in Afghanistan throughout the duration of the conflict?

What is your primary self identity?

Is your ethnic identity important to you? Does being Afghan mean something to you? What do you think of when you think of identity? Has that thought changed during/after war? How do you feel about gender roles in Afghan society? Are your understandings and experiences influenced by religious, social and cultural aspects of your upbringing? Tell me about your childhood and adolescence and how that shaped your understanding. Tell me how different ethnicities and gender categories viewed in Afghan society. Do you think you would have had a different life if your ethnic/gender identity is taken from you? How so?

What are your experiences with the social networks you have?

Which social group are you close to? (Prompt: friends, family, extended family, colleagues, community members, acquaintances)? What are the reasons for which you feel comfortable with this group? Has the composition of the group changed post conflict? What is your most salient social support system? What sort of relationships do you have with other members of that group? Have they provided you with any support during the war? Please elaborate. Have you stopped being part of any network/has any network disintegrated after the war? Why so?

Tell me your experience of violence within the networks?

Have you ever witnessed/participated in any sort of violent actions as part of your social networks? Do you know of anyone who has? Please tell me more about it. How do you define violent actions within the networks? (Prompt: disturbing, sad, normal, out of peer pressure, aspects of every day, accepted socially) How did you react to such violence? (Prompt: out of habit, normalized, reflexive action)

What role has violence played in your life till date?

What does living in Afghanistan mean to you? Do you think your life would have been different if there was no conflict going on? In what ways would it be different? What would you have accomplished more if you did not witness the war? In what ways have violence affected you personally? (Prompt: feel sad, depressed, unhappy, angry, indifferent, happy because it will get better) Would you consider violent actions a part of Afghanistan's tradition/culture? How has violence been legalized and implemented in your life through government sanctions?

How do you experience violence every day?

What do you and your family feels about the conflict? Do you think over time the conflict has become regular or mundane? Have you become accustomed to living in the midst of conflict? Tell me about your experience (Prompt: insecurity, instability, fear of dying, hopelessness) Has violence become habitual in your life, or do you still react to any sort of violent action?

Tell me about your experiences of migration/ internal displacement.

Did you move to another country/ within Afghanistan during the conflict? Why did you leave? Who helped them to make the move (probe: with resources, logistics, place to stay, making arrangements, getting visa or travel documents if another country)? Who in the family took the final decision to move? What were the feelings when you left? What were the feelings when you returned (when did they return and why)? What was life experience like when you were away? Alternatively- why did you choose to stay back? Who helped you in your daily life during the conflict? What did you feel watching loved ones leave?

What are your hopes and dreams for future?

Do you think living within the context of conflict have affected your attitude towards life and living? What do you feel about the future of Afghanistan? Where do you see yourself in ten/twenty years? Do you feel you can dream about your future? Are you hesitant to do so? Can you imagine a time when the conflict would cease to exist?

In what ways did your life plans take shape in the middle of armed conflict?

Did any of your life plans get altered due to the conflict? In what ways did you pursue their life goals during conflict? How difficult was it? Do you feel constrained by anything today? If yes, what are those issues?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Anasuya Ray, who is a Doctoral candidate in the Social Work Department at Rutgers University. The purpose of this research is to determine subjective experiences of everyday violence in Afghanistan.

Approximately 25-30 subjects between the ages of 30 and 55 years old will participate in the study, and each individual's participation will last approximately 2 hours.

The study procedures include ONE face to face interview with the researcher, and a follow up interview- if required. Participation in this study will involve the following: a face to face interview with the researcher. Subjects will be interviewed to get their opinion on whether their social networks: like family, community, friends provided them with any protection during the conflict, how their ethnic identity, gender and community ties shape social relations and their everyday experience of living in Afghanistan. If required, a follow up interview can be requested.

This research is confidential. The research records will include some information about you and this information will be stored in such a manner that some linkage between your identity and the response in the research exists. Some of the information collected about you includes your ethnic identity, age, gender and marital status. Please note that we will keep this information confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it a secure location. All the audio tapes will be kept secure in my Kabul office, and they will be transcribed immediately and then the tapes will be permanently destroyed. The encrypted audio tapes will be uploaded to a secure server which can be accessed only by the PI, and members of the research team. In US, all data will be kept secured under lock and key, and it will be permanently destroyed after three years.

The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated. All study data will be kept for *three years.*

The questions asked about your life experiences of living in Afghanistan in the midst of the armed conflict in this study may make your feel sad or anxious. . If you feel you are uncomfortable by any question or don't want to answer it, feel free to skip the question. If you want you can also leave the study anytime you decide. If you feel that you need to speak with someone, you may contact the Cooperation for Peace and Unity, House Number 997, Second street, Kolola Poshta Road, Charrahi Ansary, Kabul, Afghanistan. Phone: +93(0)700 278 891

The benefits for you are that the information that we will collect from you and other people in similar circumstances will help to better understand how everyday violence functions and how ethnic identities influence social relations and shape policy in conflict areas significantly.

Participant's initials:_____

There is no foreseeable cost to you for participation in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact myself at: Anasuya Ray, School of Social Work, 536 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, Ph: +1-732-932-7520X 143, email: aray@ssw.rutgers.edu or you may contact my advisor Dr. Jeffrey Longhofer at School of Social Work, 536 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, Ph:+1-732-932-8758X15, email: jlonghofer@ssw.rutgers.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

3 Rutgers Plaza

New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559

Tel: 848-932-0150

Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

Subject (Print) _____

Subject Signature _____ Date _____

Principal Investigator Signature _____ Date _____

AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM

Audiotape Addendum

You have already agreed to participate in a research study entitled: **In the Shadows of Armed Conflict: Exploring Everyday Violence in Afghanistan** conducted by **Anasuya Ray**. We are asking for your permission to allow us to **audiotape (voice)** as part of that research study.   You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for *analysis by the research team.* The recording(s) will include the narrative of the interview; no identifying information will be recorded.

The recording(s) will be stored in a locked file cabinet with no link to subjects' identity; all recordings will be transcribed in my office in Kabul and the encrypted audio files will be uploaded to a secure server. All audio files will be permanently destroyed after that. In the US, the recordings and the transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet, and the transcripts will be stored in a password protected hard drive accessible only to the research team. The recordings and the transcripts will be retained for three years after which the transcripts will be shredded and the recordings will be permanently deleted.

 Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

If you agree to participate, please sign your name here:

Subject's signature_____ Date _____

Investigator's signature_____ Date _____