

THE 'REAL' **AFGHAN WOMEN**

Representation, Privilege and Power of Narrative

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Abstract

Media and journalism have played a quintessential role in defining public perception. While this might seem unarmful on a superficial level but in certainty influences forms of cultural and structural violence. 9/11 was a defining cursor for 21st US foreign policy that witnessed the use of Oriental intellect and spectrum in defining Muslims and Islam as a homogenous, static and barbaric entity. While these tropes are still visible in various forms of media, what was significant was the manipulation of Muslim/ Brown/ Third-World women's struggle as a means of justifying what Leila Ahmed describes as *colonial feminism*. It was significantly witnessed before and during the Operation Enduring Freedom and is still evident in describing *their 'real' Afghan women* as exotic burqa gangs with no identity and agency, thus repressed and oppressed under the Taliban. While the Western media is obsessed with *'unveiling the veil'*, the Taliban have shoved their idea of the 'real' Afghan women as being covered and visible yet invisible from the mainstream. Thus, both have failed in recognising the rich socio-cultural fabric of Afghanistan.

While September 2021 has anxiously beheld the rise of the Taliban after the US withdrawal and simultaneously would mark the two decades after 9/11, the question of women under the Taliban persists within the media outlets. How would the Taliban be fair in this regard and, has the media made any changes in their narrative of saving the Afghan women after witnessing the failure of the US nation-building in Afghanistan? While these questions are scrutinised, the emphasis would be on the necessity of humanising the diverse and complex narrations of the Afghan women while acknowledging them as **mobile and independent thinkers and contributors to society**.

Keywords: US, Media and Journalism, 9/11, Taliban, Afghan Women, Burqa, Islam, Civil War.

Afghan Women in Post 9/11 Media

The depiction of America's diplomatic and military enemy in various Western media exceeded its predominance after the attack on the World Trade Centre to the extent that without any diplomatic talks, America felt the necessity of invading Afghanistan where according to reports, Osama Bin Laden had a haven. However, while subsequently killed in his home in Abbottabad, Pakistan, the US had priorly established its invading agenda against the backdrop of increasing media coverage in news shows, newspaper outlets, movies and magazines showcasing Afghan women in a burqa without any visible emotions, comprehended as an object, lifeless thus necessitating assistance. Against the Western women, the Afghan women were perceived as

passive and victimised under an inherently alien and barbaric Taliban influenced by 'Islamic fundamentalism'. Many of their narratives, decontextualised through the absence of translations and subtitles in documentaries showing arbitrary public executions and chaos in the markets, have been used to not only justify the US invasion but to glorify their militarial action to rescue and liberate the Muslim women from bearded Muslim men and establish liberal democracy. The Afghan women, thus, became a desirable commodity in their eyes, leading to her exoticisation and dehumanisation.

a) Exotic and Oppressive

The prevalence of terms such as exotic and barbaric under a specific spectrum is the consequence of the Orient intellect the US gained from the French and the British colonists. However, while Western media being aware of its influence imposes certain notions and biases through its word usage, narration and video documentation and interviews that immensely remains undeciphered by the passive viewers. It remained prevalent in justifying their invasion to vanish the Bad Muslims/ Taliban to save the Afghan women. These thus remain elite-oriented and biased due to their dependence on diplomatic progressions and native informers. The statement that *"either you are with us or you are with the terrorists"* that George W. Bush issued following 9/11 is the foundation of the binary and the elitess associated with US policy.

Images of black and blue burqa-clad women within the four walls sitting with their children lifeless like a stone against a subsequent recording of any public execution was the recurrent method of documenting atrocities under the Taliban. What existed was a strict implementation of dress code and forbidding women from receiving education, employment or even roam without male counterparts/ *mahrams*. While the violators were strictly punished by the Taliban, it was apparent that the Western media saw the burqa as the sole crisis *"symbolising submission... gender repression... the humanisation of women"*. It was accomplished by associating the lack of emotions to the absence of an agency to narrate. While emotions are necessary for humanising war bodies, the burqa blocks this power of the viewers and are thus left to see women cradling weeping children through gender stereotypes depicting women subordination. The same weeping children cradled by the US Army and its women soldiers would be lauded as a heroic act without any discussion around the context of the photo/ video.

It is thus evident that these cases don't view Afghan women as a source of humanising war bodies but instead justifies the elite force's militarial invasion to destroy the country. The case of Sharbat Gular on the cover of the National Geographic 1985 is striking in this regard. Regarded as The Afghan Women, her face came to represent what a *"beautiful haunting face"* meant under the Taliban regime. While her identity remained unknown, her appearance became fetishized and utilised as a marketing symbol of justifying violent intervention and liberating these exotic Afghan women. What media for the most failed to acknowledge that at the ground level these

were institutionalised issues rather than just about the burqa. However, this is not in support of normalising various of the atrocities they are under. Instead, it's the blatant association between women sufferings with *sharia* that allows them to declare Islam as a barbaric religion. However, on the other hand, the media chooses to ignore that Afghan women's autonomy was abused by men in power in various forms. It included peacekeepers, humanitarian workers, armed groups, local police etc., thus, marginalising the constant humiliation the Afghan women underwent, both individually and being a part of the community by being victims of trafficking, rape, prostitution leading to severe health and reproductive health conditions. It also ignores the universality of this gender-based violence and narrows down the Afghan women's bodies being a contested claim by the opposing institutionalised forces.

b) Operation Saving Afghan Women

George W. Bush, the then President of the United States, highlighted the need for separating Muslims and Islam as opposed to ISIS and the Taliban. However, the implementation of the Patriot Act and persistent weight on the Taliban following 'Islamic fundamentalism' concerning the *sharia* showcases the historically deep-rooted notion of Islamic civilisation being *uncivilised and barbaric*. While the women fulfilled the exotic and mystical facet of this spectrum, Islam with its *sharia* came to be recognised as a threat to America and its Americanness defined by liberty, democracy thus, formulating the *us vs them* divide. Sympathy was generated among the Americans through the publicization of public executions and other forms of arbitrary torture by the Taliban. It succeeded as it created fear and panic among the Americans with questions of 'what if' Islam with its *sharia* ascends onto America, destroying their freedom and rights.

However, this fear against Islam was prevalent even before the 9/11 incident. Historically, Islam was described as being inherently dangerous, violent and backward against the rationale of enlightened Christians, thus creating the Clash of Civilisation. It came to be applied in formulating and defending their white-saviour trope to save the Muslim women, Afghan women in this case, from this archaic religion and rather push them towards the widely acknowledged homogenous culture. The Taliban, like the misogynistic barbarians with beards and turbans, had to be banished to grant Afghan women freedom and modernity. Laura Bush, the wife of President Bush, played a vital role in disseminating the worries of the Afghan women subsequently after the 9/11 attack. Her weekly radio Address on 17 Nov 2001, became quite revolutionary in openly justifying the US's violent intervention and as well glorifying it by professing how "*the brutal oppression of women is (was) a central goal of the terrorists*" as they were the only one "*forbidding education...threatening to pull out women's fingernails for wearing nail polish*". Moreover, she mentioned how Muslims universally publicly condemned their actions, showcasing how the ones not condemning publically could be deemed another Taliban. She drew attention to the growing responsibility the women had in speaking up while being grateful for their 'American life'.

The depiction of Laura Bush as the sole representative of the Afghan women brings forth various questions regarding privilege and power concerning the obligation of the First World Feminists in rescuing every woman from their Third World country without much understanding of their lifestyle and their status with the societal structure. Various organisations like the Feminist Majority Foundation thus came under the radar for disseminating such phallocentric discourses. Shahnaz Khan, in her research, *The Two Faces of Afghan Women: Oppressed and Exotic* focuses on the issue of TIME Magazine 2010 narrating the story of Bibi Aisha. While Khan extensively dwells on the structure of the story, what is necessary is that her case should be scrutinised from the perspective of her being a victim of abuse perpetrated by her own family. Her abusive husband sliced off her nose and ears for running away from his abuses, reportedly under the Taliban's command. Later the narrative moves around how the US forces and agencies ended in contributing to her surgeries. The story ends with no criticism of the complex history of Pakhtoonwali culture under which the 'running away' is linked to 'committed zina'. It was an issue prevalent even before the rise of the 1996 Taliban regime. The report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) clearly mentions that women like Bibi Aisah could be considered guilty of 'moral crimes' when asked for justice from their abusive husbands, in-laws for they would be "*perceived to have transgressed social norms*". Therefore, we observe that administrative and judicial forces are more inclined to operate based on their selective ideology rather than an impartial manner.

Therefore, we conclude that there is an obsession surrounding saving Afghan women not only by the heterogeneous white males but also white females as well. It is evident from their negligence towards not comprehending the prevalent tribal culture and its influence in their family structure and instead basing their argument around burqa, education and beauty parlour.

The 'Real' Afghan Women

The principle of defining an accepted lifestyle for women is misogynistic as it extorts women of their agency and their power of regarding themselves as a contributing aspect to their identity. Therefore, the issue is structural and institutional thus, basing its presence on its long-drawn roots within the administration and society at large.

The imposition of a homogenous character upon a diversified population of women would mean advancing colonial interests by othering them and as argued by Swati Parashar, it won't lead to the acknowledging that "*the war zone, therefore, is a world of its own which constructs its politics, economy, culture and society, sustains people and is an institution in itself*". It denotes that the war bodies, in general, are more than bodies experiencing war which academia and traditional journalism fail to capture. Thus, the inclusion of human experiences would empower us to expand upon the

multiple identities concerning their situatedness. Therefore, instead of committing the same grave mistake of defining the Real Afghan women, it is imperative to acquaint oneself with the intricate positions Afghan women had within their society long before the inception of civil wars.

Afghanistan geographically is surrounded by high terrains and the residing rural population consists of various cultures, distinct from the ones prevalent in the plains and the cities. What we generally witness concerning women's status is the prevalence of tribal customs and traditions such as *baad* (the exchange of girls to settle disputes), *baadal* (exchange marriages) and child marriage. Women are seen as possessions for settling crimes by the male members and for “preventing the escalation of blood feuds between families”. The predominance of these customs is because “girls are not as valuable as boys... a girl marries and becomes the property of someone else, where a son brings a bride to serve and work for the family”. Even the concept of consent as observed from the customs is not granted to the woman and instead, silence is appreciated for respecting the family's wish. Opposition could lead to abuse in the name of protecting her from committing zina or teaching her a lesson or could also be pressurised in giving her consent or are never asked for it in the first place itself.

While women's role in the mountains is controlled by tribal culture, the ones in the plain are elaborate, with the interpretation of Islam defined by one's situatedness.

The rise of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan in the late 1970s is of significance who tried to bring various reforms into the gender structure of the society but, what many failed to witness was the ‘fast pace’ in legislations of education, veil etc., becoming quite challenging for the countryside people to digest and follow. CIA, ISI backed Mujahideen resisted the Soviets till 1989. During this period of civil war, perhaps “two million Afghans were killed, and six million made refugees-75% of whom are women and children”. While the war trauma channelled to the normalisation of violence against women in the form of domestic violence and public rape and humiliation, it is the association of violence and frustration with masculinity that compels them to ‘protect their women’ in whichever way possible even if it meant killing them.

After their withdrawal, the Mujahideen became busy with their internal power struggles, with Taliban becoming victorious after their fall. They implemented their radical policies influenced by the Pukhtoonwali code in association with their narrowed interpretation of *sharia*. The tribal customs continued along with laws restricting women and their interaction with the outside world. The thesis, *Afghan Women's Experiences during the Taliban Regime* by Beheshta Jaehori dwells upon this extensively by basing itself on personal interviews given by Afghan women from different socio-economic backgrounds under the regime. Jaehori focuses on the differing ‘degree of suffering’ the women underwent in the Taliban regime. The cursory image of violence and oppression against women by restricting them to wearing burqa and education in actuality is extensive as it entails spatial and cultural attributes. Although it was more difficult for the urban

women to function under the Taliban, many have failed to focus upon the violence against marginalised women, especially Hazara women in various massacres in Mazara-i-Sharif, Yakowlang, Bamiyan. Moreover, the imposition of a strict dress code is on both women and men, with the latter having their shaved heads covered with turban and sporting beards and baggy pants.

While the media invested itself in broadcasting the negative aspect of being under the Taliban regime, many interviewees mention a decreasing number of crimes, even as small as stealing, as harsh punishments were at placemaking commoners fearful of even performing such acts. One interviewee also mentioned that there was relatively less fear of being sexually harassed due to this very growing fear. A Hazara woman stated that while the Taliban restricted their rights, the women under the regime did hold leading positions at the community level due to the absence of male supporters and became aware of their agency without being educated.

“In Afghanistan women met in secret to organize... developed maps of streets and neighbourhoods where underground homeschools for girls or medical help or jobs could be found and shared them at weddings and birthdays.”

Other ways were communicative discussions in prayer halls and shrines where stories and sympathies were shared. Therefore, while the women had psychological effects, various countering strategies were at their dismissal. The men on the other hand were culturally glorified for their strong, masculine persona and being oblivious to emotions which gave them no choice but to keep their grievances within themselves. Such a notion destroyed their mental peace against the rising burden of being the breadwinners in a country suffering from rising unemployment and famine.

Therefore, we can discern that the rise of the Taliban and their growing regime went far beyond burqas and guns as propagated by the Western media. They functioned like a *“full-fledged political order”* due to their strong position at the local ground that governments had failed to establish. Moreover, the image of the Afghan women contributing to her community and the Afghan men mentally and physically destroyed by the war never surfaced in the western media.

Even the liberated women were only depicted under the US invaded Afghanistan. Media outlets dominated the image of celebrating women without their burqas, going to school and listening to music but the reality was far more different. The expectation of adorning Western dress never crystalised as many of the women didn't remove their burqas. It could be because of fear and also was a part of the Afghan culture. What was noteworthy was that *“despite complete body coverage, women after the fall of the Taliban regime are portrayed as more involved, interactive, more socially intimate and symbolically equal to the viewer”*. It was apparent that the promised liberation was neither complete nor immediate as thought by everyone.

The increasing presence of women in different sectors of education, politics and entertainment can't be used to argue the improved status of women. The development, in reality, was restricted to cities like Kabul and Herat while Afghanistan still suffered from 80% illiteracy and many of the women were forced into child marriages and were victims of exploitation, sexual and psychological abuse in general even after its prohibition under the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW law). Its main agenda was the prohibition of *"customs, traditions and practices that cause violence against women contrary to the religion of Islam"*. Thus, making many acts of exploitation prohibited and giving the right to education, work and access to healthcare under the Hamid Karzai government.

Based on the findings it is indisputable that the fundamental teachings of Islam/ *sharia* had greatly influenced the Afghanistan Constitution but its failure in execution according to *"UNAMA HR's findings, as well as studies by other organizations, reveal that harmful traditional practices are often reinforced by religious misconception, community and family perceptions of the role of women, judicial and police officials who fail to enforce the law and informal justice mechanisms that compromise women's rights to a collective solution."*

Therefore, defining the real Afghan women should be left to the Afghan women themselves. With no sense of power to claim their bodies, their atrocities are abused by the opposing forces to justify their extreme ideologies. Moreover, while both encircle their ideologies around women, no women are found in major decision-making events as a representative showcasing the fictitious progression they are undergoing.

Has Anything Changed?

The world was at its edge when the Taliban ascended to power in Afghanistan thus, establishing themselves again after two decades. While it came as a surprise to many, political analysts asserted how the 2019 Doha Talks between the US and the Taliban were significant in foretelling their rise and withdrawal of the US forces as well. There is a growing fear for the forthcoming days as the Afghans could relive the 1996 days, forcing many to leave the country. While rich bureaucrats, officials and politicians, including their ex-President Ashraf Ghani have fled the country, the commoners had no choice but to either flog the airports hoping to flee or stay back in uncertainty.

This time, the media focused on the US's failure of establishing democracy and abandoning Afghan women under the Taliban while they also focused on the ever-presence of the Taliban

and their rise in Afghanistan after two decades. News articles regularly published by CNN and Fox News would be chosen due to their large viewership to assert how the similarity exists in their narration.

a) A Western Media Representation

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan personified their failure in establishing democracy and modernity through military forces. The Western media began to question the whereabouts of the investment for two decades, arguing that it led to nothing but further destruction and chaos. The US came under scrutinization of how its emphasis on military for saving women was nothing but a catastrophe as it never acknowledged the massive military and economic assistance, they historically provided to the most extreme Afghan religious group against various moderates, including Islamist and secularist that became a predicament for the women. However, that didn't hinder the idea of justifying the US's obligated presence to modernise and democratise Afghanistan.

Through the medium of nostalgia, social media users shared comparative photos of women holding books while wearing skirts against the women wearing burqas holding their children. These photos of women wearing miniskirts were restricted to major cities like Kabul and were prevalent among the upper class while the commoners wore the traditional clothes. As discussed earlier, even the burqa remained prevalent in the post-2001 era.

While social media played this narrative by comparing the barbaric black burqa with a short skirt of modernity, news media like Fox News and CNN focused on reviving the cultural phenomena of demonising the Taliban by exploiting Afghan women experiences. In the article, *Taliban rule will be a 'long slow death' for women, Lara Logan says*, Logan introduced as the veteran foreign and war correspondent describes the life of women under the Taliban as an “a long slow death” by emphasising upon how “you’ll just be slaughtered quickly” even for the minutest thing like “belt buckles being too shiny”. The article focuses on Afghan women in a destitute position as a prostitute, submissive and non-responsive objects who are only waiting for the US for their “established schools for girls and vastly expanded women's rights”.

Sheena Mckenzie follows the same rhetoric in the article *The Taliban have seized control of Afghanistan. What does that mean for women and girls?* by focusing on how “freedoms of the last 20 years are coming to an end”. Another article by Fox News titled *Tomi Lahren: Afghan women and girls are 'truly oppressed,' unlike US Olympic athletes*, demonstrates the long-drawn polarity produced by neo-imperialists and liberal feminists. We find Tomi Lahren describing Afghan women's dreadful situation under the Taliban against “the greatest country on the face of the Earth”, i.e. the US. Even the Middle East is arbitrarily mentioned, while the Afghan women's oppression is held against the US female Olympic Athletes receiving Nike and Subway Endorsement deals. It seems that

Mckenzie isn't aware that an Afghanistan Contingent consisting of five players went for the Tokyo Olympics, out of which one of the flag bearers was a woman, Kimia Yousofi. Instead, she praises the US's achievements by comparing it to Afghanistan without any pre-acquaintance of how both of these countries are world-apart.

Based on the above examples, it is definite that a rigid structure with certain characteristics is in place to make it persuasive for the American audience. Firstly, there is a constant remembrance of the Taliban's atrocities unleashed in 1996-2001 to the 2021 Taliban to create fear among the viewers while putting aside the US's contribution to this mess. There is continuing stress on strictness around clothes, schools, music, job against the Taliban's public announcement of respecting women's rights but only under the *sharia* as a means of associating women's sufferings with Islam. Moreover, the constant connection of Taliban's with aggression, violence and terror concerning women and not Afghans "*externalized the threat of misogyny such that domestic threats to women's rights in the United States were rendered irrelevant*".

However, two articles caught my attention for their interesting narrative construction. *Opinion: America has abandoned the women of Afghanistan* is an article by Jill Filipovic where to a certain extent she talks about the US role in today's crisis. She exposed how the George Bush government known for its anti-feminist stance, draped itself under the "*language of feminism as an adjunct to the justification of the post-911 invasion of Afghanistan*" while their home dealt with issues around "*reproductive freedom essential to women's health, privacy and equality*".

However, it became evident that this exposition was adopted as a means of persuading the US to save the women, specially Afghan women's rights advocates, to not put "*another stain on America's reputation after our disastrous War on Terror*" putting everything to dismay as the issue of America's image is more important than the struggle of the locals under war-torn area.

For example, the heroic women of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) played a pivotal role in exposing the brutality. The CNN Documentary, *Beneath the Veil* captures the journey of Saira Shah, an Afghan-American journalist in Afghanistan revealing the Taliban's. Rather than stressing upon RAWA's long history as a symbol of the Afghan resistance, the documentary focuses on the Taliban's brutalities. Its title, '*Beneath the Veil*' also showcases the obsession Orientalists have in unveiling the Muslim women which Shah executes by veiling herself to be one with the Afghan women. Schools and women gatherings have been looked at from the perspective of being in fear of the Taliban rather than performing something revolutionary and heroic. It's as if the documentary uses women's resistance to showcase the brutalities rather than applaud their fearlessness in priding themselves as being Afghans. In her recent article on CNN, "*20 years ago, I Smuggled Myself into the Taliban's Country to Tell the Story of Women*", she recounts her experience of wearing a burqa while documenting Afghan women. Not a slight change in her narrative when she doesn't acknowledge that the RAWA were known to

adopt similar tactics to film public executions and atrocities. Instead, they are shown gratitude for providing her with safe houses in Kabul.

Therefore, while Afghan women might have been shown, silent or speaking in documentaries and news outlets, there is always a miscommunication or manipulation of narrations. McLeod, in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism* while talking about the subaltern women asserts that it's not the silence surrounding these women or the silence restricting them from speaking but the inability of interpreting their concerns that leads to binary division rather than understanding the complex society they have grown up with.

It leads to the publicization of "one side of the story, victimized women, they never portrayed the positive aspect of that and how those women resist against patriarchy and try to make their own identity. This outlook changes the reputation of eastern women as active and revolutionary members of society".

a) The Uncertain Taliban

While uncertainty surrounds the steps the Taliban would take in the future, what many ignored was its ever-presence and influence after the post-2001 period. While many after the regime fled to other territories living secretly, various insurgent factions continued resilience from Pakistan's ISI and village level Afghanistan, escalating especially under the Barack Obama presidency and post-Obama presidency. While they received their training in Pakistan, especially Peshawar, basing their investment largely on opium with increased taxes on "*large telecommunications and construction companies to farmers taking their harvest to market*". They successfully justified their 'Islamic' saviour image by painting the US Air Force and the puppet Afghan government in Anti-Islamic light based on the destruction caused due to their airstrikes, drones and night raids.

Aside from their military, they had built their own set of governance including various departments for dispensing basic needs including, judicial courts at the rural level- known for their relatively cheap, accessible and less corruption and bribery cases against the ones functioning under the government. While these courts might not be just the poor and locals have no option but to go to these courts. However, its description in no way justifies the crimes institutionally executed as many of these people had no choice but to follow these rulings.

Now that the Taliban has 're-emerged' after decades by taking over Kabul, they would heavily contribute in either creating a new dawn for the Afghan women or recreating the same 1996 situation.

Therefore, it becomes poignant for the Taliban to publically acknowledge their crimes against humanity and appreciate Afghan women's contribution by granting them the rights that Islam

gives them without any modification. However, there is a growing ambiguity in terms of the image they want to showcase. The Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid claimed themselves to be 'Moderate Taliban' under whom women would be allowed to receive education and go back to their work- school and hospitals specifically. However, the fear and confusion persist in the country, giving them no choice but to *wait and watch*.

The Taliban has also failed to recognise that being in opposition is easy and their unacquaintance with any modern governance or even the ones prescribed under the *sharia* proves that they are still trying to comprehend the situation. It is necessary for them to acquire people with conventional academic and theological credentials and use various aspects of Islamic jurisprudence in implementing social justice, harmony and remove any kind of discrimination or exploitation prevalent both privately and publically. They should promote gender mainstreaming through the inclusion of Muslim men and women clerics and knowing their society's needs would allow them to execute legislations with the intention of gender equality, mutual sympathy and responsibility. The growing stance of using sharia as a supposed means of justifying an anti-western stance would do more harm rather than any social good.

It is only the Taliban who is responsible for incepting these reforms and are living up to their idea of the changed Taliban for the public good.

Conclusion

While the new government took the oath on 9th Sept 2021, there is a certain level of inconsistency when they claimed to be "*not trained in dealing with women*" thus, arguing the women to sit inside the home leading to further suspicion for their laws. Moreover, cases of them being violent to refugees at the airport, killing a policewoman and civilians, injuring protesters and journalists covering protests in Herat and Kabul and, the recent military rise in the Panjshir Valley has already hit the news channel, concluding that their changed image won't be working for long in justifying their governance. Moreover, as Afghanistan is witnessing a brain drain, their new government has faltered as the Hazaras, women, people from other religious minorities haven't been included and instead only restricted to influential Pashtun men.

However, it appears that while they need to define their political stance, many have failed to focus on the dwindling economy of Afghanistan against the US evacuation as the foreign aid by the US and its allies NATO were restricted, leading to central banks being closed, rising food prices by 50% against food shortages and no job opportunities. Even international communities like The World Bank froze their aid against the "*uncertain fate of the women under the Taliban*" further shambling the already destitute situation for the commoners.

Who has the Authority?

The inevitability of defining the Afghan women as only being subdued is disrespectful to their long history of contribution to society, not only through public protests like the recent women protests in Herat and Kabul but also the women in a burqa who watches after her kid. Every one of them is struggling to survive but these humanistic narrations are left far behind in traditional journalism only to be shackled by growing internet accessibility and the rise in independent media. It has led to the prominence of citizen journalists documenting these crises from ground level. An example is Muna al-Kurd, a Palestinian activist who architected the recent #Sheikh Jarrah movement worldwide. She and her brother, Mohammad al-Kurd relied on social media as a means of exposing Israel's militarial occupation over the Palestinian territory by documenting their illegal encroachment over Sheikh Jarrah. It has led to a growing acceptance of Israel's continuing atrocities, colonisation and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians to the point that it was criticised and condemned globally.

Similarly, several Afghans, both men and women as students, artists, educationists and activists and freelancer journalists, are using social media, especially Twitter and Instagram, to humanise and empower these varied voices rather than simply playing over the dichotomy. While they would continue to work, it also becomes crucial for the receivers and users to take pains in comprehending, interpreting and re-interpreting narratives to learn and relearn as active receivers.

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