

## Sahar Muradi Intro

To better understand the Afghan American literary tradition, it is important to contextualize our arrival and root-taking in the United States. The Soviet-Afghan war resulted in the greatest influx of Afghan refugees into the United States. In the early 1980s, mostly affluent, educated Afghan families were able to emigrate here. Many used life savings to pay smugglers to get their families out. Doctors, engineers, lawyers, and businessmen in Afghanistan now took jobs in the United States as service workers, taxi drivers, and food vendors. After becoming openly involved in the war in 1986, the United States airlifted Afghans from villages and gave them refugee status. In the diaspora, we came together across class, ethnicity, and rural/urban lines to build communities and renarrate our lives.

The 1980s was a time of adjustment and transformation. Storefront mosques slowly appeared on the streets of New York City and California.

When occupying these two geographies, how is it possible to do so in the most possible way? How can we create deeper relationships, the firsthand stories of Afghans, the "Little Afghanistans" within Afghan American literature and history, of escaping, and remembering the United States, creating new ways of living in and out of two cultures. Writing came into writing as an act of discovery, a means of accessing mythic colors in contrast to the grays of the walls of ignorant questions from living the two streets that intersect, wondering how to be Afghan, how to create a third space where our

intersection was compounded by writing, these voices claimed a place where our mother tongue did not exist and yet brought to it a lineage of Pashtun, Hazaragi, or Hazaragi. The result is a home in its reception, in the inner periphery of our new Afghan American identity through the act of writing, a way between "here" and "there." Within the American literary tradition, it is a story of root-taking in the United States, in the greatest influx of Afghan Americans in the early 1980s, mostly affluent, educated, and professional. Doctors, engineers, lawyers, and professors in the United States as service members. After becoming openly involved in the lives of Afghan Americans from villages and towns, we came together across class, language, and communities and renarrate our

story of migration and transformation. Storefronts of New York City and California.

These mosques were not the architectural wonders of our parents' generation; mostly, they were humble rooms in four-story buildings, or the second floors of houses with illustrations of domes and minarets to make up for the lack of ornate design. These mosques were places where Afghans came together for comfort, for company, and to carry on our traditions. In Queens, New York, the housing projects were filled with new Afghan refugees. Their numbers were so large that this area became known affectionately as Deh Afghanan, village of Afghans. This concentration of Afghans helped create a self-sufficient community of Afghan specialty shops, restaurants, and translation offices all along Main Street. Similar neighborhoods bloomed in other parts of the country when adventure, or desperation, or the cultural claustrophobia of immigrant neighborhoods thrust families off to New Jersey, Virginia, California, Colorado, Nebraska, and Texas. We children were raised in communities where a strong work ethic became the cornerstone of our lives, especially if our families owned businesses. Because of this new work-centered consciousness, gender relations changed. Because children became translators for their parents, parent-child relationships, which were very strict in Afghanistan, also changed. Children, especially elder children, grew to feel responsible for their families and for their parents.

We began rebuilding our lives in this new country, but with both ears attuned to what was happening in Afghanistan. Our parents believed our stay in the United States was temporary and that we would return after the war ended. But following the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan in 1989, this generation of Afghans was disappointed by the subsequent civil war and became resigned to the reality of not being able to return. Not surprisingly, thousands of Afghans became American citizens during the 1990s. Meanwhile, Afghanistan slowly disappeared from the American nightly news.

In the mid-1990s, we as second-generation Afghan Americans began articulating our experiences. Although Afghanistan disappeared from the news, it was every bit as much a part of our lives. Our parents reconstructed Afghanistan in our homes. Families designated "Afghan rooms," replete with rug-covered sitting mats; they hung maps and displayed flags. Afghan newspapers like *Caravan* were circulated at the newly opened grocery stores. Many of our parents' generation were self-proclaimed political experts, and we, the children, breathed this air of politics and memories of homeland. We weaved these moments, these voices, these inherited memories, into our own experiences of America, rural or urban, inner city or suburban, and became a mix.

Another milestone was our entrance into college, where American multiculturalism allowed us a space to build community among our peers in the form of Afghan student clubs and publications. By the summer of 1997, three Afghan American youth magazines were being published: *Afghan Communicator*, *Afghan Mosaic*, and the online *Lemar-Aftaab*. The young college students who were involved in these magazines were pioneers in the Afghan American community. They went on to build other community organizations, like Society of Afghan American Professionals; more commercial publications, like *Zeba* magazine; and radio stations, television stations, cultural events, and conferences. These were also the first to return and partake in the reconstruction process in Afghanistan after 2002.

Although Afghan American writing existed long before 9/11, it was the media attention to Afghanistan that made our voices and the interactions urgent and necessary and opened up a space for this distinct American experience. It was important to be visible and vocal at a time when vilification of Muslims and of Afghanistan was common in mainstream media. Many of us felt responsible as Afghans and as Americans to show our faces, to speak out, to tell our stories and point to the connections and complexities between American and Afghan cultures. The flourishing of writing in response to and following 9/11 grew from this simultaneous political and personal urgency to give an account of ourselves.

In an email sent just after 9/11, Mir Tamim Ansary wrote: "I am from Afghanistan, and even though I've lived here for thirty-five years, I've never lost track of what was going on there. So I want to tell anyone who will listen how it all looks from where I'm standing." This email caught the world's attention and paved the way for an Afghan American perspective. Ansary's subsequent memoir, *West of Kabul, East of New York: An Afghan American Story* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002) was the first book that addressed both the Afghan and American experiences and the places where they converge. But it was through the fiction of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (Riverhead, 2002) that the world saw Afghanistan as we Afghan Americans remembered it. Not only did the international best-seller provide a welcoming entry into our culture for non-Afghan readers, but it also opened up doors for Afghan Americans to fictionalize and share their experiences. The phenomenal reception of this novel made us feel a sense of inclusion. Our stories were being heard and understood where once there was great invisibility.