An Affective Reading of Fear in the Period of Peace Process with the Taliban:

Highlighting Afghan Women's Subjectivities During Uncertainties

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Dedicated to the three significant losses of my life, Nafisa and Sayed Mir Aqha,

my parents, Jamshid Zafar, my best friend

May you rest in power and pride.

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Abstract

The USA's sudden decision of complete military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2018 and its decision to force peace between the Taliban and Afghan government created questions, uncertainties, and fears. These fears have been particularly apparent among women, specifically among the women in Kabul and the bigger cities who have fought for and gained more space and platforms during the years since the Taliban's regime (1996-2001). This thesis discusses these uncertainties, fears, and emotions as they happen. I aim to highlight a particularly salient aspect of this period by focusing on Afghan women's subjectivities and leadership amid a situation of constant fear and uncertainties. To do that, I have been reflecting on my insider/outsider positionality and the possibilities and constraints it has created. As a feminist from Kabul, I have stayed in contact with organizations and individuals in Kabul, which kept me aware of women's actions, mobilizations, dynamics during the ongoing peace process period, although I was physically away. Moreover, as a researcher and an outsider, I have been equipped with the required knowledge to discuss emotions such as pain and fear and to highlight Afghan women's activism and subjectivity in a period of uncertainties. By applying a combination of in-depth oral history narrations, patchwork ethnography, and exploration of online resources such as WhatsApp, Skype, and Zoom applications, I explore how memories of a painful past with the Taliban have resulted in Afghan women's current fears and how these fears (both physical and psychological) have led to cooperation, mobilization, and activism. In this thesis, I explore discussions related to this complex situation such as the war on women's bodies, the rhetoric of salvation, patriarchy, and patriarchal bargainings, women's agency, and virtual activism and its (im)possibilities.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of Original research; it contains no material accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no material previously written and/or published by another person, except where an appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for the thesis is accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 25,046 words

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Signed :

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Two years ago, on May 11, 2018, I was sitting on a bench in front of the American University of Afghanistan prepared for what was called my graduation day. Due to security concerns, the main road, called Darulaman road, on which the university is located, was blocked. We were forced to walk a long distance to enter the university. This day was an important milestone for us as well as our university. We were the second cohort that graduated after the Taliban's complex attack on the American University of Afghanistan on August 24, 2016. For many of us, May 11 was about a celebration of survival as we continued the legacy of the loved ones we had lost on August 24 with the slogan we had learned as a community after the attack that said: "education prevails." My graduation day was a reminder of how lucky I had been for making it through, despite the complex attack, despite the uncertainties and constant fears after the attack, and despite the real possibility of additional terrorist attacks on the university. However, it did not take me long to leave those thoughts behind. In a matter of seconds, I had to clean a handful of dust from my face as well as my black gown is thrown into the air by the helicopter that had landed on my university campus. It carried the then-US Ambassador for Afghanistan, John Bass, and his wife, Holly Holzer *Bass*, from the US embassy to the campus. For a moment, I could not collect my thoughts; the scene was poignant and surreal.

What had happened before my eyes was a visual illustration of the inequality of Afghanistan's war, instability, invasion, occupation, dependency, helplessness, and surprisingly, 'hope,' amidst all of this. Many high-profile officials were invited to our graduation, which led to the closing of Darulaman road to ensure a safe parameter around the university compound – a parameter which we as students still had to traverse on foot to get into this safe zone. In addition

to the closing of the main road for VIPs, what seemed hyperreal about the surrealness of the helicopter scene, was the dust entering my throat and the visual exhibition of power exemplified in the lives that mattered more than ours - lives that needed protection and secured transport, while the students – who were supposedly celebrated that day – had to traverse the same area by foot. More importantly, it illustrated that the story had not started right at that moment, nor would it end there.

A year later, in the summer of 2019, I went to Kabul for one month to observe the situation and assess the possibility of carrying out my research, which initially was meant to be about the western salvation attitude towards Afghan women. I intended to work on that topic for personal and political reasons. Since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the women of Afghanistan have been portrayed in the west as the passive victims of Afghan patriarchy who, after being liberated by the US and its western allies, are fighting against the Taliban and patriarchy in Afghanistan. This kind of categorization not only overlooks the history of authentic fights and resistances of Afghan women but also essentializes 'resistance,' 'activism,' 'liberation', and 'agency' as solely western values imported to other countries. The continuing western fascination over the rhetoric of the salvation and liberation of Afghan women has been an ongoing phenomenon that overlooks the subjectivities and agency of Afghan women. Today, after 19 years of the US and its western allies' active presence in Afghanistan, the image of Afghan women in the western media is still dominated by the burqa. A relevant example could be the particular article[1] of Cheryl Benard, written in February 2019, which happened to

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[1] Cheryl Benard, "Afghan Women Are in Charge of Their Own Fate," Text, The National Interest, February 27, 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/afghan-women-are-charge-their-own-fate-45777.

be contentious among Afghan feminists and women's rights activists[2]. Benard is the wife of Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan American Special Envoy of the USA who carries the peace negotiations with the Taliban. Benard takes credit for being involved with issues related to the rights of Afghan women for more than twenty years. Yet, in her article, while she forcefully and much authoritatively calls on Afghan feminists to be proactive, she uses the picture of women in burqas as the cover picture for her article. This might not seem like a big issue for someone who has not been involved with Afghanistan. However, for anyone with some level of real engagement with the socio-cultural context of Afghanistan, it would be clear that those two would not go together. The mainly Kabul-based feminists/women's rights activists who have fought to gain some access to medium, platforms, and some privileges[3] that Benard is calling on, most likely are not and would not happen to be the women under burqas. By saying this, I do not intend to say that the women who wear burqa cannot be feminists; instead, I aim to highlight that because of socio-cultural limitations[4], they cannot afford to be the kind of 'feminists' that Benard is calling on "to be in charge of their own fate."[5]

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[2] A lot of activists in Afghanistan prefer to be called 'women's rights activists' rather than feminist(s). My understanding is that it comes from lack of feminist scholarship and academic learning in Afghanistan. It is also because like many other places the term 'feminist' is stigmatized, therefore those who actions are feminist, also prefer women's right activist.

[3] Privilege, whenever used throughout this thesis, shall identify some level of difference between individuals and their life/social circumstances. When I used privilege to highlight my research participants' and my own positionality, in no way I mean to categorize and/or homogenize the experiences. It also should not be read with the connotations and implications that it would have in the US and the west. It is used as a negotiable social condition/benefit.

[4] The question here is, what are the chances of the women under burqa in the socio-cultural context of Afghanistan to identify as feminists in the first place, and then use their voice to challenge patriarchy and misogyny in the political sphere of Afghanistan while they cannot mostly get an education or decide to leave their houses? And if one argues that the picture is used randomly without much thoughts given into it, then it must still be questioned that why this image of Afghan women under burqa still exists or is preferred in western media as the only image representing Afghan women.

[5] Cheryl Benard, "Afghan Women Are in Charge of Their Own Fate," Text, The National Interest, February 27, 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/afghan-women-are-charge-their-own-fate-45777

While there could be various motives for such negligence and lack of deeper engagement with Afghan women's lives and activities, one could not close her eyes to the power dynamics that define which stories could be told and what images should be presented when talking about Afghan women. I aimed to study that and the politics behind such fascinations. However, when I landed in Kabul in August 2019, the very first conversation I had with my friend made me realize the discussions I had missed due to my absence. While I found myself more engaged with the news related to Afghanistan while being abroad, I was heavily dependent on western media coverage. Similarly, the connection through social media is not the same as physical presence in a place. The hopes, dreams, concerns, and anxieties that inhabitants of a city or country embody cannot be felt quite the same through the screens of laptops and phones. Another salient aspect of this disconnect is that my feminist academic training in Budapest is also profoundly western and European oriented. There are some disconnects between what I am trained to read and engage within the western academic sphere and what I observe regarding gender and feminist discourses in my country. But while being in Kabul and as the days passed, I was increasingly amazed that so much of public discussions focused on the peace negotiations with the Taliban.

Almost every person I met and every conversation I took part in was either about or shaped around the topic of peace with the Taliban. A few days after my arrival, I met a friend in the Turkish restaurant in *Share Naw* (lit. New City), Kabul's downtown, where several cafes and restaurants are located in. Most restaurants in Afghanistan have a separate space for the family (read: women) in which women can sit, on their own, their children, or with a male family member. It is usually the dull and darker corner, with not much light and/or air, often separated

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by a thick curtain from the men's area, which always has more light, space, and a better view. In the Turkish restaurant, these spaces are segregated through wooden barriers with oriental designs, making them more fashionable, yet traditional. Like many times before, my friend and I resisted the waiter's suggestion and refused to sit in the 'family' spot. However, shortly after failing to discourage us from our decision, he said: "*Do whatever you want to do, soon the Taliban will return, and you'll see…once they cage you, you'll learn…* "[6] then he left us with a cunning smile.

This was not my first-time hearing something along those lines but hearing it at the time of peace negotiations from a young man (around 20 years old), was rather alarming. It sounded more threatening than worrying. During the time of my stay, I heard many of these comments in the form of jokes, humor, stories, and even warnings from various people. In her book, *Women and Wars,* [7] Carol Cohn argues that 'power imbalance' defines the different relationships of women and men with the war.[8] Similarly, from what I noticed, the different ways women and men related to and showed concerns in the conversations made me see more clearly that it is also the 'power imbalance' in Afghanistan's patriarchal society that shapes different understandings of the Taliban's return for women than it does for men. Every woman (friends, family, acquaintances) I talked to in Kabul, regardless of their age, ethnicity, or social and educational background, expressed an enormous amount of fear and concern for the Taliban's possible return and share of power in the country. However, in the case of my male friends and relatives, only a few shared their concerns about the Taliban's possible return, and

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[6] Conversation in Farsi, taken from my notes, August 2019.
[7] Carol Cohn, "Women and Wars: Towards a Conceptual Framework," in *Women and Wars* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013).
[8] Ibid. p.6

these were not of the same kind as women's. Some of the expressions and moments I have noted during my stay in this regard:

> *"We should travel, because once the Taliban enter, we cannot do this anymore,"* *"Women will go back to 1990s; there will be no way to stay here and no way to go out",* *"Once the Taliban come back, the men in our neighborhood and families will also show their true faces," "I love Kabul, but I am not sure if I can come back after the Taliban's return," "I fought all these years to live alone, now I have to beg a man to live with me."*[9]

These notes are from different conversations I have had with my circle of female friends and acquaintances. While the sentences are taken out of their original conversational contexts, they still account for various kinds of fears women in Kabul felt. For instance, fear of losing autonomy and independence, fear of forced domestication, fear of having to be a refugee, and more.

These observations can tell a lot about the situation, the urgency of this topic, the different understandings of the Taliban's return. They can also tell us about the predominant gender setting in Afghanistan. I found out that the effects of war and peace are perceived in a gendered and binary manner. To expand on the above arguments, I must shed light on gender politics in Afghanistan. Like in many other countries, in Afghanistan, gender is simply perceived as a binary, which means that the common perception is that there are two categories, namely women and men only. So, for the perceived men and women, the effects of war and peace are understood differently. In this binary view, other sexual and gender minorities are entirely neglected, and their concerns, voices, and stories, are ignored. There are many power

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[9] Taken from my notes, original in Farsi, August 2019.

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imbalances in this binary view, which results in leaving one group (women) extra concerned, fearful, and uncertain. In contrast, the other group (men) are positioned to be uncritically relaxed and hassle-free, amid the continued difficulties and uncertainties.

Thus, when I returned to Budapest in September 2019, I was sure I wanted to highlight a particularly salient aspect of this period focusing on Afghan women's subjectivities and leadership amid a situation of constant fear and uncertainties. I hope to speak through this contribution to and challenge the various ways Afghan women have been marked as passive, victims, non-agents in the dominant discourses in the west.

In this thesis, I am highlighting an ongoing critical period, considering the fact that I am carrying out this research while the situation remains highly uncertain. The ongoing war takes a heavy toll on the lives and wellbeing of Afghans at a time when peace is needed more than ever. In addition, COVID-19 have also impacted the delicate political processes, intersecting with the ongoing war, and high levels of poverty – inequalities that have profoundly affected people's lives in Afghanistan. Therefore, choosing this topic was a risk for me because of many uncertainties around it. I decided to work on this topic because the combination of my privileged access to academia, knowledge, and especially feminist knowledge production, while I am physically away from Afghanistan, enables me to work on these topics in temporary relative safety.

The so-called 'peace process,' whose different aspects I am studying in this thesis, started in 2018 when Trump's administration announced a sudden and complete withdrawal of all US American troops from Afghanistan. The proposal to initiate peace negotiations between the

government of Afghanistan and the Taliban has since then shaped new discussions around the discourses of peace, stability, and war. It also raised various debates over the protection of women's rights upon the Taliban's possible return because, after more than 18 years of continuous war, that was started in partial justification of 'saving Afghan women from the Taliban,' it has been proven that neither Afghan women have been saved nor were the Taliban diminished. The US decision to initiate reconciliatory talks by default removed the Taliban from the 'terrorist' group, which the US and its western allies were supposedly fighting against. The Taliban were granted the legitimation to negotiate and justify their atrocities and terrorist attacks in the name of being the Afghanistan government's political opposition. Since then, the idea of the Taliban coming back to power has led to various concerns, fears, and uncertainties with a core question for Afghan women (in the big cities mainly) of "*what will happen to us, then?*". I locate this question in its broader context in chapter two, where I highlight the 'Afghan woman question' in its continuity with the past in the wider historical context. This will further elucidate the reasons behind "*what will happen to us, then?*" through narrating the experiences of women (my interlocutors) in the Taliban's period.

Following that, in chapter three, I locate scholarly debates about 'fear' as an affective emotion, and the way(s) politics of fear can be read and translated in the context of this period and this research. I underline with examples and stories the various ways that the Taliban created fear(s) in the minds and hearts of Afghan women and how these fears are still present, as well, how those fears motivated women of Afghanistan to act and mobilize in 2018-20. This will also shed light on some of the ground 'realities' and 'stories' that I, as a feminist from Afghanistan, get to be aware of through my insider/outsider positionality that can speak to and inform both

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my western and Afghan audience. In the final chapter (four), I highlight the fears, questions, concerns, hopes, and various emotions that have led to several forms of activism (virtual and non-virtual) and forms of political mobilization from 2018 to the present. In the same chapter, I am shedding light on online activism as a form of mobilization for wider outreach. To illustrate this kind of engagement, I introduce, discuss, and analyze a WhatsApp group chat called 'our voice for our future,' which was created by Afghan women, particularly during the period of peace negotiations.

Positionality and Methodology

- **Positionality**

A year ago, the idea of doing this research did not exist. A year later, not only had I made a huge shift from what I initially wanted to research, but I found myself in a process that I would have never anticipated before. This research highlights uncertainties, complexities, nuances, emotions, and actions as they are happening. While carrying out this research and writing, this thesis has been taking a considerable amount of energy from me. It has been heavy as I consistently found myself connected to and affected by the topic, the stories, the process, and the events. Also, because the events have been happening during my research time, and they are still ongoing as they are confusing. Afghanistan and all that happens with it, confuse me thoroughly; it leaves me helpless while desiring to do more. More than anything, I feel sorry for Afghanistan, for all the way that it has been wronged by the superpowers and all the ways in which this has led to continuous suffering for its people. In the past three months, where the world seems to be paralyzed because of COVID-19, as Afghans, we woke up every day to watch a loved one

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dying in an explosion, to the images of Taliban[10] killing new-born children and mothers in a maternity ward in Kabul, to a Taliban attack on a funeral or a wedding, in the streets or inside the places of worship. Therefore, when I decided on the topic for my thesis, I knew it was not going to be easy for the practical reasons described above. I say for practical reasons also because researching a topic that is concurrent to the time of research, can be prone to inaccuracy as the situation and narratives can change as our interpretation and reading of the issues can change. I have been aware of this challenge, especially in the context of the peace talks in Afghanistan, where a hierarchy of power privileges certain voices to be heard more than others in an invaded country, and certain deaths are valued more than others. For instance, the entire peace process was in jeopardy to be terminated by a tweet of the US president on September 2019, after the Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack that took place near the US Embassy in Kabul. Twelve Afghan civilians, a Romanian soldier, and an American servicemember were killed in this attack. President Trump's outrage about the killing of an American servicemember caused a suspension of the peace process.[11]

Even this minor example shows a process that was not chosen and initiated by Afghans nor led by them; therefore, akin to some of the participants in this research, I see the so-called peace process as a US imposition on Afghanistan and Afghanistan's government. For me, as a feminist from Afghanistan, committing to do this research is a way of thinking out loud with my research participants who happen to be concerned and affected by the decisions made for

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[10] The Taliban didn't officially take responsibility for this attack, but the Afghan government and people blamed them for this attack as it was no different than so many other attacks they had launched before. I also believe that the Taliban are responsible for the attack, but they kept it quite because they would be blamed for it by the US in the peace process.

[11] "Afghan Peace Talks Are Dead, Trump Says," *BBC News*, September 9, 2019, sec. US & Canada,

them, and the actions they must take. I have been genuinely intrigued by the idea of doing 'timely' research, as I was aware of the unique opportunity, I have to take part in this process. I have been struggling with the question of how I can take part and makes sense of the situation, the privileges I have compared to many others, the information, and the community that I have access to. Having explained it briefly in the previous section, in this part, I explore my positionality both a researcher personally concerned with and affected by the issue, and as a former feminist activist from Kabul who has been part of activism in my home country. And finally, as an academic navigating my way in academia and knowledge making sphere. After conducting the interviews and gathering material, I found myself feeling challenged while talking about the people I wanted to talk about.

The participants and their stories are in several senses 'me, myself, and I' and in many other ways, I differ from them, as I see myself as an outsider because of the generational gap with some, the power dynamic (because of their higher positions in the government), our different political views, and even our education disciplines. Thus, at times when I wrote 'them,' what I meant was 'we,' and at other times I felt that the term just designated 'them' as a group of women leaders, that I happen to know (some more closely than others) and have worked with at times. On the same issue of being both an insider and an outsider in one's research, Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer L. Buckle in their article, "The Space Between On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research,"[12] argue for the 'space between' and its importance for the kind of analysis the researcher can offer.

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[12] Sonya Corbin Dwyer, and Jennifer L. Buckle. "The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, (March 2009), 54–63.

My position continuously oscillated between an insider/outsider role throughout this research. As an insider researcher, it is impossible for me to see myself apart from my topic. The struggles that I mention in this thesis are the issues I grew up with; these are the issues that have affected my life, my self-image, the relationship I have to my homeland, the traumas I have faced, and the losses I have encountered. My identity as an Afghan woman is inseparable from the inequalities I have faced in the face of the global hierarchy of power, and therefore, it will affect my worldviews. My location as an insider continuously keeps me self-reflective, while my positionality as an outsider holds me accountable in using my voice and privilege to 'disturb the comfortable' the same way Cesar A. Cruz defines art as a process that should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.[13] Therefore, a big part of what I aim to question in this thesis while being aware of my insider/outsider positionality is the 'western gaze' on Afghan women, whether it is the western gaze by westerners, non-westerners with more power and privilege, or whether it is reproduced by the more privileged Afghans inside the country or in the diaspora.

Sonya Corbin Dwyer argues that being an insider would not make her a better or worse researcher but rather a different type of researcher.[14] While I agree with her because I also do not believe there should be superiority in being an insider, I argue that my insider positionality, as an Afghan feminist is significant if not better, in challenging the conventional western gaze on Afghan women in academia and other spheres. As an Afghan woman, I have seen that we have always been looked down upon, and in that view, many details of our lives are either lost

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[13] "Art Should Disturb The Comfortable And Comfort The Disturbed | Judith Carlin," accessed July 19, 2020, http://www.judithcarlin.com/blog/art-should-disturb-the.html.

[14] Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer L. Buckle, "The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 54–63.

or overshadowed by the victim/saved image. On the broader context of the homogenization of lives and experiences of third world women, Chandra Talpade Mohanty states that it is through "the production of this 'third-world difference' that western feminisms appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in these countries."[15] I, however, in my work, reflect on my positionality, and I bind myself to the ethic and principle of continuous self-reflection and eye level communication. I believe that there is a considerable difference between these two views, and they shall be identified throughout my work.

As I mentioned earlier, I have been aware of my identity as an Afghan woman who has always been looked at as a 'passive, agency-less, and victim,' packaged in a blue burqa, presented to and by the US and the west to justify the war of terror, to justify the invasion, to justify the western Orientalist gaze, and to bring the fantasy of civilization to life which at times fed into the salvation attitude of western feminism as well. To call out such a gaze and fantasy and the ways they intertwine with power, Mohanty further argues that, it is through the "process of discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent western feminist writing, and this power needs to be defined and named."[16] These are the sorts of discourses that I grew up with and, at times, very unconsciously participated in. Therefore, coming back to positionality, I have been consciously reflecting on the term "halfies" which Lila Abu-Lughod borrowed from Kirin Narayan in her book chapter "Writing Against Culture," [17] as I struggled with and navigated my

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[15] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (June 2013): 967–91, https://doi.org/10.1086/669576.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, Richard Gabriel Fox (School of American Research Press, 1991).

insider/outsider positionality. According to Abu-Lughod halfies as anthropologists or feminist researchers are the kind of people "whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage."[18] The importance of this kind of positionality, according to Abu-Lughod, is in its ability to reveal the particular sort of dilemmas that halfies face, which bluntly highlight the problems with cultural anthropology's assumption of an essential distinction between self and other.[19] In such distinction and through the enforcement of such separations through 'culture,' Abu-Lughod sees an inevitable form of hierarchy.[20] However, in my view and in my case as a researcher, the danger of being unaware and uncritical of my positionality as a potential 'halfie' is probable, although I am not an anthropologist and I do not use 'halfie' to write against culture in the way that Abu-Lughod does.

My experiences of being an immigrant in childhood, getting a western education in Afghanistan, my professional background with international organizations back home, currently researching in a western academy, and my connection to the west through all these locations could possibly lead me to constitute as self that is distinct from the Others that I conduct this research on, in which I could homogenize the demands of my interviewees, contribute the as the Other(s), and thereby, exercise power.

In the end, I shall underline that despite being physically away from Afghanistan for the past two years, I have not been entirely disconnected. Instead, there were many issues I would not have been able to pay attention to from the inside but getting out of the country and getting an education in gender studies have pushed me to engage with these topics and aspects critically.

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[18] Abu-Lughod. p.466
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

Therefore, I have kept myself increasingly aware of my positionality, my privileges, my voice, and its influence throughout this process.

- **Methodology**

For this thesis, I have used several methodologies. I have used an intersectional approach to choose participants. I am utilizing Oral History methodology for conducting in-depth interviews. And I have used a combination of technological channels (applications such as Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp) to communicate with my interviewees due to some limitations, which will be further explained in the coming paragraphs. I have explored WhatsApp voice messages as another way of collecting information, which will be further detailed below. Interfacing with the virtual realm and combining it with earlier on-the-ground research befits what has also recently been called "patchwork ethnography."[21] This method of ethnography, according to Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe, "offers a new way to acknowledge and accommodate how researchers' lives in their full complexity shape knowledge production."[22] They also argue that there is a need for the anthropological knowledge itself to be transformed. Therefore, Patchwork ethnography enables the researchers to redefine what counts as knowledge and what does not, what counts as research what counts as research and what does not, and how we can turn realities that have been presented to us as "constraints" and "limitations" into prospects for new insights.[23] In this research, I have been exploring this method while accommodating the needs (time and availability) and

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[21] Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe, "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography," Society for Cultural Anthropology, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe, "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography," Society for Cultural Anthropology, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography.

understanding the limitations of my research participants. This method has also guided me to think outside the box and explore the possibilities that are rested within impossibilities.

As I mentioned earlier, I went to Kabul for a different research topic in August 2019; however, in Kabul, I decided to change my research topic because of the dominant conversations on the peace process. That trip was short, and I soon had to return to Budapest. Later, due to security reasons, I did not manage to go to Kabul to conduct my interviews in person. Therefore, I decided to conduct interviews through Skype and Zoom. For this thesis, I have interviewed 12 women who mainly live in Kabul, but some of them travel between Kabul and abroad. While there are many women whose voices and perspectives would be significant for this research, I decided to focus on a smaller group of women whose activities are mainly situated in Kabul but not limited to it. Part of this decision goes back to my positionality as a feminist from Kabul, and my partial knowledge and understanding of the politics, dynamics, and activities in that place, as well as my pre-existing relationship with many of those activists and female leaders.

In a broader sense, however, moving from the personal to the political, the reason why I have chosen to focus on the activities of women's rights activists and feminists in Kabul, goes along with Julie Billaud's reason for deciding to focus on urban women in her book *Kabul Carnival,*[24] in which she explains gender politics in post-war Afghanistan. Billaud notes that she chose to focus on urban women and their stories because "their bodies, either covered or exposed, represent central sites of cultural struggles over identity and because urbanity offers a greater

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[24] Julie Billaud, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press, 2015).

spectrum of possibilities and constraints."[25] These 'possibilities' and 'constraints' in 'urbanity' that Billaud mentions are particularly contextual in the case of Afghanistan because of the lack of capacity of the state to have control (in terms of security) around the country, many of the 'women empowerment' projects remained limited to big cities and Kabul particularly.[26] Similar to Billaud, I chose to put my focus on the activism of women's rights activists and feminists in Kabul because, after the removal of the Taliban, Kabul has been the heart of various struggles, changes, limitations, and empowerment for women.

In this research, I have been committed to stand firm on the values I have learned in feminist scholarship while conducting my research. Feminist Standpoint epistemology is situated at the heart of this research. Nancy Hartsocks formulated the Feminist Standpoint theory when stating in 1983 that "a way of knowing must start from women's lives, and stress the importance of women's own understanding and experience in creating knowledge."[27] In the same manner and during this process, I, as an Afghan feminist, examining the experiences and voices of selected Afghan women who were — in the past 18 years, directly and indirectly — involved in the progress and perhaps also in the regress of the country. Afghan women as one of the main targets and in many ways victims of the Taliban regime, but also of the discourses of salvation after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Afghan government's androcentric approaches, and the western media and academia's object of discussion and analysis, have always been looked at from above.

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[25] Julie Billaud, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press, 2015). p.8
[26] Ibid.
[27] Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber; Michelle L Yaiser, *Feminist Perspective on Social Research*, Print book : English (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). p.15

Their (our) subjectivities, voices, agency, and nonconventional modes of resistance have substantially been underlined by those who produce knowledge to and about Afghan women. But also, there are not many feminists from Afghanistan who have had the opportunity or the required academic experience to amplify the voices and needs of Afghan women. In many cases, the credit has been given to others, depending on where one's ideological positioning rests. For instance, the credit for Afghan women's 'liberation' according to Islamists could be given to the Jihadists and the Taliban, who have supposedly saved Afghan women (read: their honor) from the foreign occupation. While in other current discourses, the US and western Europe (NATO members) claim credit for supposedly 'saving' and 'liberating' Afghan women. For instance, in Cheryl Benard's aforementioned article, she articulates that "As women in Western civilization, we didn't get our rights because people from a different culture far away felt sorry for us and sent their soldiers and tons of their money to lift us out of oppression. We got our rights through a lengthy and difficult struggle, by proving our capabilities and our worth and by perseverance."[28] While Benard in her article establishes the US as the ultimate savior of Afghan women and presents Afghan women as passive receivers of western salvation and aid, she does not only draw Afghan women as a homogenized and passive category, but through her condescending language, she also overlooks the many daily struggles, empowerments, and resilience that Afghan women continue to face and show in various aspects of life. Therefore, to challenge such view and by keeping the Feminist Standpoint approach, I take the responsibility of producing knowledge as an Afghan woman,

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[28] Cheryl Benard, "Afghan Women Are in Charge of Their Own Fate," Text, The National Interest, February 27, 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/afghan-women-are-charge-their-own-fate-45777"

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about an aspect of Afghan women's fears, struggles, and activisms in the face of ongoing conversations over the so-called peace process.

The participants of this research were chosen mostly from Kabul (residing in Kabul), and they are between the ages of 24 to 50. A few of the participants have lived through different regimes while others have either lived their childhood and teenage years under the Taliban's regime or have sought refuge in Iran and Pakistan during those times. They represent the more educated generation[29] of women leaders who have a voice, platform, and say in this ongoing process, and who also take part (wherever they can) in shaping the politics and actions of the country. Therefore, the participants I have interviewed have a certain level of political power and social influence as they hold relative levels of privilege compared to many other women in Afghanistan. They are well known in different domains, and almost all of them have established relationships with the world outside Afghanistan, due to their education or their work and conferences. They all understand and speak English[30]. In fact, except for two participants, all the other interviews have been conducted in English. My research informants represent the current female leaders of Afghanistan in the public, private, governmental, art, and academic sectors. Therefore, Intersectionality plays a significant role in my choice of participants as well as the outcome of this research. The term Intersectionality was coined by a black feminist legal scholar, Kimberly Crenshaw, in 1989 when she highlighted the

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[29] The term "educated" is used based on the current reports on education and literacy rate in Afghanistan. Educated does not necessarily indicate an MA and/or PhD level of education.

[30] During different times of invasion(s), the people of Afghanistan had to learn different languages. Currently, due to the relationship that Afghanistan has with the US and the west, war, immigrations, and similar circumstances, Afghans have been pushed to learn at least the basic English. In the case of Afghans with a higher education, for one to be able to travel, find opportunities, and work, learning English language is a must.

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intersection of race and gender in black women's employment in the USA.[31] As a research method, Intersectionality, in the context of this research, has been considered as the axes of gender, ethnicity (predominantly), class, age, religious sect, religion (there is one percent of Sikh religious minority), and educational background. Sexual orientation still stands as one of the aspects of identity that cannot be revealed and discussed easily due to cultural sensitivities dominant in Afghanistan. Therefore, while it was principally taken into account in my research design, it is not featured in the outcome.

Interviews come in many varieties from quantitative survey interviews to life history interviews. I conducted in-depth Oral History interviews with most of the participants about their experiences with the Taliban. Oral History is significant as it accounts for stories from various perspectives, positionalities, and places. Oral History is notable for its capacity and significance in telling stories of those whose accounts would not be seen and highlighted in hegemonic narratives. Oral History accounts vary and could be about women at the margins, minorities, and other marginalized groups. In my view, this is a process of making the invisible visible and making the unheard be heard. I chose this method because many stories that the participants shared, especially of the Taliban period, would be best told through this approach.

I conducted most of the interviews through Skype, and only a few were done through the Zoom application. Some of the challenges I faced with this method were due to weak and inconsistent internet connections in Afghanistan and issues like shortage of electricity, scheduling difficulties through time difference; therefore, managing to do these interviews took a

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[31] Nira Yuval-Davis, "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics," *European Journal of Womens Studies - EUR J WOMENS STUD* 13 (2006): 193–209, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506806065752.

considerable amount of time. We had to reschedule the meetings several times due to these problems, and also because I was interviewing women who are holding important positions in the country, the power dynamic was present. Therefore, I found it increasingly difficult to communicate and follow up with two of my potential interview participants who are holding higher positions in the government. They postponed and changed the interview dates, asked for rescheduling the meetings several times, and would not show up in the rescheduled time until finally, they stopped responding to my emails and messages. For me, these two experiences were particularly challenging as I found myself in an uneven (lower) position of power with my potential research participants.

Interestingly enough, a few of my interlocutors whose voices, opinions, and actions make a difference in the country and in the narratives given here, due to what they explained as a shortage of time, suggested to participate in the research through WhatsApp voice messages. In this approach, I would send the questions, and the participants would respond through voice messages. This is where I learned about and explored Patchwork ethnography in my work. For instance, in case of further follow-ups and clarifications, I would keep asking more questions, and that process taught me to deconstruct the firmed and structured form of interviews I previously had learned and practiced. However, this method was a new practice for me, and it had its limitations. It definitely affected and changed the nature of the interview(s), and therefore, the information I received, and even the questions I could ask as follow-ups. For instance, I felt very much limited when I chose my questions. I wasn't sure if I should be selective with my questions or if I could send them all my questions. I was also worried that too many questions could make them tired and uninterested. I could not see and hear them

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while speaking; hence, I missed their expressions, the place they were at, and the way they appeared. However, I still wanted to include those voices; thus, I carried on and even suggested this method to a few potential participants with a similar situation. This process was a way of reflecting on how and why such an option is available and is suggested by certain interlocutors in a higher position of power. It also highlighted another aspect, which was about the way social and material conditions, as such, could shape and limit our access to knowledge and information. For me, lack of access to the people that I somehow knew, made it clear that while holding certain privileges and coming from the same social circles had eased the process, yet other dynamics maintained the power hierarchies and stood in the way as constraints to the process of knowledge production with and related to some women in higher positions. However, what I present above is only one aspect of this process; it must not be concluded as the entire story. I am aware that there are many physical, psychological, political, and material limitations that come with living in Afghanistan, especially for women, which could inform a part of such behaviors and thereby the way we access knowledge.

Finally, throughout this thesis, I have included some of my observations, notes, anecdotes, and parts of my writings and diary from the time I went to Kabul to shed more light on different aspects of the situation, as well as presenting my standpoint and perspective as an Afghan feminist.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

1.1 Theoretical Framework

"*...find another connection to the rest of the world*
Find something else to make you legitimate
Find some other way to be political and hip

I will not be the bridge to your womanhood
Your manhood
Your humanness

I am sick of reminding you not to
Close off too tight for too long

I am sick of mediating with your worst self
On behalf of your better selves..."[32]

Discussing a situation like the one in Afghanistan: invasion, occupation, dependency, power imbalance, and war calls for a postcolonial lens and analysis. As an Afghan feminist and researcher, I continuously find space to explore my positionality justified and grounded within and through the postcolonial feminist perspective. If postcolonial feminist theories function as a response to the imperialist and racist forms of western feminism, then the already politicized and homogenized category of "Afghan women," as monolithic as an "Afghan woman," cannot and in my view, should not, be studied and analyzed without this perspective. To deconstruct the victim/saved image and identity that the US and its western allies have created for Afghan

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[32] "The Bridge Poem | Donna Kate Rushin (1981),"
https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/thebridgepoem.html.

women, should consider using a postcolonial feminist lens. Therefore, in this thesis specifically, while dealing with the dilemmas and politics of representation, and the rhetoric of salvation, one can easily trace the impact of postcolonial feminists and scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay, and Nikita Dhawan. These postcolonial feminist scholars question the hierarchical ways in which western feminism looks at, defines, and creates knowledge on and about women from the Global South.

Challenging the top-bottom view of western feminism, Mohanty, in her 1984 seminal text, "Under Western Eyes,"[33] frames the way(s) western (feminist) scholarship casts women of the Third World as mute and passive. Those western writing also position the women as victims who have no agency in their own lives and are stuck with no political opinion and voice.[34] Mohanty further argues that these women are treated as the ones in need of help from their emancipated white sisters.[35] In the case of Afghan women and the way they are represented, the same colonial view was applied and reproduced, not only by development and aid projects, but also by some western feminists and transnational feminist organizations. Lila Abu-Lughod, in her article titled "Writing Against Culture,"[36] criticizes feminist movements for reinforcing hierarchies in their essential discourses, and for failing to recognize the differences. In this context, Abu-Lughod poses an important question, "for whom did feminists speak?"[37] Further, Abu-Lughod highlights that while there is a variety of needs, requirements, and histories within

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[33] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2* 12/13 (1984): 333–58, https://doi.org/10.2307/302821.
[34] Ibid. p.
[35] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Boundary 2 p.
[36] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, Richard Gabriel Fox (School of American Research Press, 1991).
[37] Ibid. p.140.

women's movements across different cultures, it is significant to understand that western women's lives generally do not resemble those of Third World women.[38] Thus, I argue that the act of recognizing these differences in the first place provides a substantial basis for any exchange to happen between western feminists and feminists from the Third World or the so-called Global South.

In this discussion, Abu-Lughod quotes Sandra G. Harding, the American postcolonial theorist and feminist philosopher, asserting that the problem is that "once 'woman' is deconstructed into 'women' and 'gender' is recognized to have no fixed referents, feminism itself dissolves as a theory that can reflect the voice of a naturalized or essentialized speaker." [39] To avoid reproducing the pattern of a homogenized and essentialized identity that I am criticizing in this thesis, I relied on the writings and the ideas of Mohanty, Abu-Lughod, and Harding. I assert that while being aware of the differences among Afghan women, in this thesis, I, too, have used "Afghan women" at times to talk about the experiences of women in Afghanistan, not only the group of women whose stories and activities I highlighted during this process. However, there is a significant difference: I use the phrase "Afghan Women" not to say that all Afghan women have the same exprinces as my research participants and I have (see positionality and methodology) but rather, I use "Afghan women" to highlight the commonalities and the shared experiences in terms of the way we are seen and treated in the bigger global politics and picture. No matter how different the situations, lives, and experiences of women in Afghanistan are from one another, at the end of the day, the effects of the bigger political, economic, and

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[38] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, Richard Gabriel Fox (School of American Research Press, 1991 p.140.
[39] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, Richard Gabriel Fox (School of American Research Press, 1991 p.140.

cultural shifts affect all Afghan women, if not totally in the same way. For instance, the Taliban return to power, the effects of patriarchy, and the blueprints of the US war in Afghanistan affect and create limitations and constraints for all women in the country. To clarify further, when the Taliban beat women in the streets and forced a Burqa on them, in the bigger picture, it did not matter that the women were from different ethnicities, provinces, classes, ages, and so on. One of the Taliban's fundamental issues was with women's visibility and presence in society. Yet, this does not mean that all their experiences were linear and the same as some aspects of identity and social position such as ethnicity, religious sect, and class played their roles in making some experiences for women easier or more difficult than others under the same regime.

Against this background, whenever I say Afghan women, I align myself with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's term 'Strategic Essentialism,' which is about temporary or provisional acceptance of essentialist foundations for identity categories as a strategy for collective representation to pursue chosen political ends.[40] However, my aim in this thesis is not even the temporary acceptance of the essentialist term/category. My goal is to respond in the same language to the people who have framed us within the homogenized and politicized category of Afghan women. Therefore, its a way of recognizing the commonalities and the shared implications and limitations of the category 'Afghan women,' but also reclaiming the term from western hegemonic (non)feminist discourses to highlight our shared fate within an unequal world.

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[40] Pande Raksha, *International Encyclopedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment and Technology*, 2016, pp. 1-6, https://doi.org/https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118786352.wbieg1170.

Patriarchy stands at the heart of everyday gender relations in Afghanistan. From the very personal to the highly political, the ups and downs, and every detail of the one's life in Afghanistan are shaped by and around patriarchy. As a system of power that favors men over women in its most simplistic form of definition, patriarchy is practiced from households and families where a girl child is less favored or less invested in, to the division of labor at home, to the assignment of gender roles, to the public and streets where women's bodies are treated and objectified as a common commodity, to the restaurants, to the universities, to the public, to the politics, … and the list can go on. To me, an analysis related to gender dynamics in Afghanistan that discusses Afghan women's struggles without seeing patriarchy as an important element of power looks incomplete. However, this does not suggest that if one does include patriarchy as an element of control and/or oppression in her analysis, the outcome will be perfect and, therefore, the problem gets to fully understood. Instead, I would like to claim that Afghan women face different types of patriarchy, which are not limited to the dominated gender setting (Men's power over women) in Afghanistan.

Carol Cohn in *Women and Wars:* Towards a Conceptual Framework,[41] argues that patriarchy is one of the systems that structures power relations along the lines of gender difference. Therefore, she argues that while patriarchy literary means 'rule of the father,' it is typically taken to have a broader meaning in society. Hence, a patriarchal system is not only the one in which the father gets to be the head of the family with complete authority over his children and wife, but rather, it is a system within and through which men get to exercise power as well as

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[41] Carol Cohn, "Women and Wars: Towards a Conceptual Framework," in *Women and Wars* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013).

getting to dominate women in other aspects of life such as governmental, social, cultural, religious, and economic affairs. Cohn contends that some scholars are reluctant to use 'patriarchy' in their analysis, either because they are afraid of scaring their readers, or they worry that it will not adequately address the nuances and complications in gender power relations. Cohn then cites the British feminist academic and prominent scholar on women and war, Cynthia Enloe, stating, "Patriarchy allows you to talk about the relationship of constructed masculinities and constructed femininities, over time and in relationship to each other and as they relate to structures of power. If you just use 'gender,' then you can, in fact, never ask about the power relationships that both constructed masculinity and femininity and relate them to each other unequally."[42]

In Afghanistan, aside from the patriarchy that religion, culture, and tradition impose on the women, they also face and deal with the patriarchy of the Taliban (in the past and in their possible return). The patriarchy of the Afghan government, and in this period of peace negotiations, most importantly, the patriarchy of the US, in the way the US forces the peace process on Afghanistan at any cost. Dealing with various kinds of patriarchy has also led to multiple forms of patriarchal bargaining(s). In her work, the Sociologist Deniz Kandiyoti introduced the concept of "Bargaining with Patriarchy"[43] to explain the ways women learn to work around patriarchal structures and conform to the dominant gender norms in order to gain some power or benefit.[44] In the context of this research, bargaining with patriarchy is used to

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[42] Carol Cohn, "Women and Wars: Towards a Conceptual Framework," in *Women and Wars* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013) p.4.

[43] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society 2*, no. 3 (1988): 274-90. Accessed June 15, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/190357.

[44] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society 2*, no. 3 (1988): 274-90. Accessed June 15, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/190357. p.274.

underline the subtle or blatant ways; these bargainings happen in times of uncertainties, in the presence of fear, and while in time of mobilization and action.

To discuss the politics of emotions and to highlight fear as an emotion with "Affect" (see chapter three), I use "Affect theory." According to the feminist scholar, Linda A. Hall, the feminist theorization of "Affect" is essential in international relations and other spheres where "Affect" has been used to discuss global politics. She goes on to argue that "emotion" has been associated with the feminine, the body, and the personal as the constitutive other of "reason" (the masculine, the mind, the objective) in western binary modes of thinking. Therefore she maintains that emotion continues to be a political strategy to keep women, the personal, and the feminine out of politics and political domains.[45] To challenge such binaries and such view, she contends that feminist scholarship has long been involved with the emotional and, therefore, a "feminist knowledge on affect demonstrates the political power of emotion research."[46] To continue with such efforts, and to treat emotion as a feminist epistemology that highlights power and action, I use the affective theorization of fear and other emotions to highlight Afghan women's activities and subjectivities during the peace process. I aim to explain different readings of fear and to open a space for showing the ways fear has led to women's mobilization, action, and resistance in the period of my research through the work of Rachel Pain[47] and Sara Ahmed.[48]

[45] Linda Åhäll, "Affect as Methodology: Feminism and the Politics of Emotion1," *International Political Sociology* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 36–52 p.37
[46] ibid p.38
[47] Rachel Pain, "Globalized Fear? Towards an Emotional Geopolitics," Progress in Human Geography 33, no. 4 (August 1, 2009): 466–86, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508104994.
[48] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Second edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

In chapter four then, I work with 'fear' and 'hope' to highlight resistance(s), resilience, subjectivities, agency, and power of Afghan women during this period in their own authentic, non-hegemonic ways. My aim, however, is not to tell my western audience that as Afghan women, we have agency (contrary to what they/you might know or might want to know) or that we have power, too, and that we are not passive. All of these have been discussed before in one way or another. For instance, on the broader context of Muslim women's subjectivities and agency, Abu-Lughod in her book *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving*[49] and Saba Mahmood in her article "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival" highlight the various forms of agency owned and practiced by Muslim women. [50] Their contributions have informed my foundational understanding of agency, however, what I aim to contribute by using different notions of resistance(s), resilience, subjectivities, agency, and power to argue that as Afghan women we do not owe it to the western audience (academic and non-academic) to justify, reshape, and reframe our ways of survival, fight, activism, agency, resilience, and power into the frameworks that are known and readable for them.

Adding to that, I aim to push this argument further, so, I suggest that there are times and situations in which Afghan women really are the victim, passive, and agency-less and that there are many historical and political reasons behind that. An extreme example of this could be the intersection of various forms of identities shaped by war, patriarchy, poverty, inequality,

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[49] Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others* (American Anthropologist Association, 2002).
[50] Saba Mahmood Reviewed work (s):, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202–36, http://www.jstor.org/stable/656537.

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inaccessibility, and gender that could at times situate individuals in truly disadvantaged positions where an academic's struggle and intention to frame those positions in the framework of agency and a different mode of power could not add much value, in my view. The critical point to reflect on for me would be, is it more relevant to declare and define that people have agency of their own, or is it more useful to see what can and cannot do with their agency? To provide an example, if a girl in northern Afghanistan is disadvantaged in every possible way for being a girl in a family that favors men, born into an uneducated and very low-income family whose lives have been affected by war and many other reasons that explain her disadvantageous position in the first place, is forced to get married at the age of thirteen, constantly gets abused and beaten by the husband's family, and finally, after some family disputes, her nose and ears get cut off by the husband, what would it mean for her, and for us if we keep trying to assert that she had agency and that she had some power in her own way? What would our fascination with 'agency' and 'power' do to help her, or to change her narrative or destiny? The example I provided is one of the many stories I personally know and am aware of. Therefore, in my view, the agency has been overrated at times, especially the way it is used in feminist theory. What I find especially problematic in the popular western understanding of agency that it is a continuous struggle to equate 'having agency' with 'being a human' or a 'full human'. I suggest that we should challenge such understandings of agency so that there is space for people whose agency is continuously violated, threatened, overlooked by different structures of power, to exist, to be recognized, and to be treated as a full human. Instead, we should direct our criticism towards the various structures of power and privilege that not only violate people's agency but also further dehumanize them by some condescending assignment of the agency. Because after all, the agency is not a cup of tea, one could easily offer to others.

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1.2 Literature Review

Following the introduction of the theories that establish a framework of the thesis relevant topic, the literature review focus on the discourses of protection and salvation and the discussions that rise around it. As one of the most relevant issues in the context of this research, these issues were named, questioned, and critically engaged within this thesis. Protection, salvation, aid, and solidarity are the common discourses that show the relationship between the colonizer and colonized, invader and the invaded, and finally the protector and the protected. Whether it is protection 'of' someone or protection 'from' someone, in either case, the presence and the practice of 'power' is undeniable. Between the one(s) who protect and the ones who get protected, there is a power imbalance that can be detected and explored if we look in the history of protection, salvation, and aid. For this thesis, I have reviewed relevant scholarly literature that discusses, studies, and questions the salvation attitude.

In her book, *The Pitfalls of Protection :Gender, Violence, and Power in Afghanistan*[51] Torunn Wimpelmann looks into the downside of protection by highlighting the ways that aid flows and geopolitics have created both obstacles and opportunities for feminist politics in Afghanistan.[52] Wimpelmann discusses the aid politics and its accomplishments and limitations while locating the struggles over gender violence in both local and global power configurations. By providing stories from the lives of the female activists of Afghanistan, she highlights the pitfalls of

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[51] Torunn Wimpelmann, *The Pitfalls of Protection: Gender, Violence, and Power in Afghanistan*, 1 edition (University of California Press, 2017).
[52] Ibid.

protection by underlying the downfalls of the protracted negotiations with powerful national actors. [53]

Sara Farris, in her book *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism,*[54] deals with the way European right-wing parties, feminists, and neoliberal organizations instrumentalize women's rights to prevent immigration and to create anti-migration and Islamophobic sentiments and rhetorics. Farris coined the term "femonationalism" to disclose and discuss the political-economic agenda "informing the invocation of women's rights"[55] by different actors, fueled by the fear of the Other, and more precisely by overgrowing Islamophobia in the western Europe. Farris explores the kind of political motivations that bring different groups together to rally in the name of women's rights and protection. Similarly, in the case of Afghanistan, women's rights and protection was used by the US and its western allies to invade the country.

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[53] Torunn Wimpelmann, *The Pitfalls of Protection: Gender, Violence, and Power in Afghanistan*, 1 edition (University of California Press, 2017).

[54] Farris, Sara R. *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

[55] Ibid.

Chapter 2 History: Recent Past and the Present

The recent history of Afghanistan that should provide an important historical background for research like this includes the USSR invasion of Afghanistan, which started on December 24, 1979, the civil-war between 1989 - 96, the Taliban era 1996-2001, and October 2001: the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. In this chapter, I will provide more detailed information about the Taliban's era, along with my participants' accounts of that period. In doing so, I will examine questions such as how and why they came to power, highlighting some aspects of broader historical, cultural, and political struggles that explain the Taliban's presence, absence, and return as well as the gendered politics of fear through which they ruled. Through a reading of these events and the narratives of Afghan women, I intend to explain the reasons for which an affective reading of fear is timely and relevant now. In doing so, I will explain what these fears are, their impact (see chapter three) and the mobilizations and actions it has led to during the so-called peace process (chapter four). Finally, I will examine the post-2001 era, looking into the hopes, and dreams that came along after that period and shed light on the present uncertainties that linger.

2.1 The period of Taliban

> "*…it was harsh, it was dark, and it was very cruel.*"[56]

The Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. They referred to themselves as the rulers of the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan (IEA). The Taliban, as a religious fundamentalist group who were supposedly fighting the Afghan warlords in the beginning of the 90s, later began to

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[56] Helal Masoomi, interview with the author, March 2020.

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use rhetoric that they were resisting the western occupation. While this rhetoric is still used when the Taliban define themselves and their mission, during their time in government, the Taliban imposed various kinds of restrictions on Afghan society. For instance, they banned all sorts of entertainment, including music, celebrations, and movies. They applied the strictest form of Shariah laws, which covered all aspects of life. From marriage rules to trade, to the way they managed crimes, to security maintenance, they clamped down on the entire structural order of personal and political life in Afghanistan. However, their restrictions and bans on women entailed another level of limitations and restrictions, both in physical and nonphysical senses. According to the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA),[57] which was established in 1977 as one of the first feminist organizations in the country, the Taliban's restriction on women included:

> "*A complete ban on women's work outside the home, a complete ban on women's activity outside the home unless accompanied by a mahram (close male relative such as a father, brother or husband), ban on women buying from male shopkeepers, ban on women being treated by male doctors, ban on women studying at schools, universities, or any other educational institution, forcing women to wear Burqa, whipping, beating and verbal abuse of women who were not clothed in accordance with Taliban rules, or of women unaccompanied by a mahram, whipping of women in public for having non-covered ankles, public stoning of women accused of having sex outside marriage, ban on the use of cosmetics (many women with painted nails have had fingers cut off), ban on women talking or shaking hands with non-mahram males, ban on women laughing loudly (no stranger should have heard a woman's voice), ban on women wearing high heel shoes, which would make sound while walking (a man*

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[57] "Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)," http://www.rawa.org/.

must not hear a woman's footsteps), ban on women riding in a taxi without a mahram."[58]

Following Billaud's argument in her book *Kabul Carnival*,[59] I argue in this chapter that the Taliban initiated a war on Afghan women's bodies, which the US and its western allies later took an active part in as well. In the interviews that I conducted, one of the recurring issues was the way my interviewees described how they perceived the Taliban. Some of the common adjectives I repeatedly heard from my interviewees when I asked them to describe the period of the Taliban were 'dark, cruel, difficult.' Among my research participants, many have lived during the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan, and a few were refugees in neighboring countries (Iran and Pakistan) during that time. Whether they lived directly under the Taliban or not, their illustration of living under the Taliban or living under its shadow effects are described below. Helal Masoomi, one of the youngest participants in my research, is originally from Faryab, one of the northern provinces of Afghanistan. Helal currently pursues her Master's education in the UK. Coming from the Uzbek ethnic minority, Helal describes the Taliban's period as following:

> *"…We were not allowed to go to school, and that was one of the biggest things that were affecting our family… but, I was lucky, I was still a child, and I was in an age that I was allowed to go outside wearing that big scarf, girls who were 15 or plus, they weren't allowed to go outside, most of the girls were forced to get married, that's very unlucky, yet I am very lucky that I was a child."*[60]

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[58] "Some of the Restrictions Imposed by Taliban in Afghanistan," http://www.rawa.org/rules.htm
[59] Julie Billaud, *Julie Billaud, Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press, 2015).
[60] Helal Masoomi, interview with the author, March 2020.

Another interviewee was Shaharzad Akbar, who is the Chairperson for Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. As one of the young female leaders in Afghanistan, Shaharzad took part in the Intra Afghan Peace Dialogues in Doha, Qatar, between 7 -8 of July 2019, where she, along with others, met with the leadership of the Taliban. Shaharzad describes that she was very young when the Taliban took over. Therefore, Shaharzad and her family did not spend much time under the Taliban's regime as they soon migrated to Pakistan. However, for the time she experienced living under the Taliban's regime, she recounts:

> *"I do remember being nervous, I would go outside, I didn't have to wear a burqa but would wear a big scarf when going out with my father in Kabul mainly to buy books and I do remember feeling a lot of anxiety and just fear, but that's the feeling that I think the whole city had. Everyone around me had that."*[61]

In describing the dominated sentiments at that time, she described:

> *"what we associated most with the Taliban regime all citizens men and women was a sense of fear which was very intentional on their part to instill this fear in the heart of ordinary citizens, to take away the voices, agency, to take away the ability to resist in any way, or shape or form."*[62]

Creating fear, as Shaharzad mentions, is one of the strategies that the Taliban used when they had a government (1996-2001) and in the post-2001 era, which they still use in the present. The Taliban created fear in the minds and hearts of Afghans and thereby ruled.

Reflecting on pain of the past, Ahmed contends that the past will not be dead as it breathes in the present. Therefore, in every wound of the past that has remained open, the past is

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[61] Shaharzad Akbar, interview with the author, May 2020.
[62] Shaharzad Akbar, interview with the author, May 2020.

present.[63] According to Ahmed, fear and pain, like other emotions, have their history and past.[64] This will be further explained in chapter three.

2.2 War on the Bodies of Women and the Rhetoric of Salvation

Through their strict restrictions on women and their mobility, the Taliban claimed control and ownership over women's bodies. Through seeking that kind of control, they sent a bold message to society about how social order was to be upheld. On the discussion of social control, co-authors, Paivi Honkatukia and Suvi Keskinen in their article "The social control of young women's clothing and bodies: A perspective of differences on racialization and sexualization,"[65] contend that it is usually "approached either as social processes, methods, and resources through which moral order is made possible or as ways for individuals to conform to norms and expectations"[66] Through such norms and expectations in the name of social order, the Taliban sought power over the bodies, mobility, and visibility of women, and therefore, in every other domain. To elaborate, through the control of women's lives, and the fear that they instilled through such control, they established a regime that controlled the whole of society. For instance, assigning wearing of the burqa as a requirement for women was one way of seeking control, ownership, and power, which in my view could be read as the initiation of this metaphorical domination and war. However, Lila Abu-Lughod, in *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?*[67] while arguing against the western notions of agency, states that burqas as

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[63] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. p. 33.
[64] Ibid. p.33.
[65] Päivi Honkatukia and Suvi Keskinen, "The Social Control of Young Women's Clothing and Bodies: A Perspective of Differences on Racialization and Sexualization," *Ethnicities* 18, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 142–61.
[66] Ibid. p.145.
[67] Abu-Lughod. p.783.

"enveloping ropes" appear to her "mobile homes" for women. One which signifies belonging to a particular community and a particular way of life…and later she links it to the question of modesty.[68] I aim to contest Abu-Lughod on this particular point, because while the history of burqa might be complicated, and we might not be able to trace since when burqa existed in Afghanistan, we do know that the Taliban coercively obliged Afghan women to wear burqa during their regime. Abu-Lughod's effort to question the western notions of agency and individual subjectivity should not be at the cost of overlooking Afghan women's sufferings, resistances, and pain. In my own family, I have heard stories of women being beaten by the Taliban for not wearing the burqa, or for not wearing them properly. In my view, a topic such as the blue burqa, or veiling, requires a careful contextual analysis. For instance, in the west, now, some Muslim women's conversations over their agency in wearing hijab, burkini, and burqa might be relevant and timely, in the face of growing Islamophobia. However, Afghanistan is not the west, and Islamophobia is not a direct, relevant, and concerning issue in there. Thus, in my view, conflating these contexts can lead to further marginalization for Muslim women on both sides. Therefore, I question the ground based on which agency is assigned, and a symbol of Afghan women's oppression (during the Taliban's regime) is used to communicate with the west.

Coming back to the topic, the Taliban elevated their control and domination by managing to remove women, their physical existence, and their faces from the public spheres. In the matter of a short time, the Taliban succeeded in excluding women from the streets, schools, universities, mosques, and many other public places. They also managed to domesticate women

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[68] Ibid. p.785.

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and take their confidence away by harming women's self-image and self-esteem. Having done that, the Taliban claimed to have protected and saved Afghan women, using rhetoric similar to the USA's when they later justified their war on Afganistan. The rhetoric of 'salvation' was used by the Taliban's high authorities as they claimed that they aimed to "ensure their sisters' security in a period when the priority was the establishment of law and order."[69] Therefore, the rhetoric of salvation signifies historical continuity. To provide an example, in *The Taliban Reader*[70] Alex Strick Van Linschoten Felix Kuehn, provides the Taliban's arguments in their voice where they talk about women's protection. "Islam has also brought with it some rulings for women which protect their chastity and dignity, for example, the hijab...The hijab, in reality, is a fortress for a woman in protecting her from immodest, unreligious, and harmful people."[71]

Moreover, they call the American occupation a 'dark period of ignorance' and, therefore, state that all mujahedeen must protect women's rights and make sacrifices so that Afghan women should not be left alone to the abuse and cruelty of oppressors. The Taliban then treat Afghan women as the nation's honor, that must be saved, protected by men with full determination.[72] Interestingly enough, later, the same rhetoric of protection was used by the US, which will be discussed in the coming paragraphs. However, it's also significant to remember that Afghan women's bodies have continuously been treated as a site for the measurement of Afghanistan's political and cultural progress and regress. For instance, this form of objectification of Afghan

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[69] Julie Billaud, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press, 2015).p56.
[70] Felix Kuehn, Strick van Linschoten, and Alex Strick van Linschoten, The Taliban Reader: War, Islam and Politics in Their Own Words (Oxford University Press, 2019).
[71] Felix Kuehn, Strick van Linschoten, and Alex Strick van Linschoten, The Taliban Reader: War, Islam and Politics in Their Own Words (Oxford University Press, 2019). p.574.
[72] Felix Kuehn, Strick van Linschoten, and Alex Strick van Linschoten, The Taliban Reader: War, Islam and Politics in Their Own Words (Oxford University Press, 2019). p.575.

women's bodies is evident today in the public discourses, media discourses, and even those of historical images, both inside the country and outside. Often individuals, organizations, and media outlets recall a progressive past in which women's way of dressing and bodies are treated as the indicator of more significant political settings and climate. In the public discourses, for instance, I have engaged in conversation with taxi drivers recalling and living the nostalgia of a free, open-minded, and progressive Afghanistan (Kabul and the big cities like Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif) through the clothing of women. In the memories of many Kabulians, the reminiscences of time before the war was woven with the nostalgia of a city, in which women with short skirts once lived, studied, and worked. On the other hand, the image of a regressive, fundamentalist, and backward Afghanistan has also been shaped through the appearance and clothing of women. In both views, Afghan women have been objectified, and in both tropes, Afghan women have been treated as passive, agency-less beings in need of salvation.

According to Billaud, both in case of Amanullah Khan's 1920 reign, were wearing of 'European clothes'[73] were imposed on women in Kabul, and the Taliban's regime where women were forced to avoid wearing what was perceived as western clothing, the common signifier for marking 'modernity' and 'tradition' were translated through the physical appearance of individuals and in public.[74] Billaud further argues that in cases as such, "women's bodies stood at the front line of this ideological battle."[75] Moving forward, Billaud notes that in the Taliban's period, announcements regarding women's appearance and behavior

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[73] I believe this should mean non-traditional dressing in the context of Afghanistan. I do not quite agree with a "European style" of clothing, and I do not believe there is category like in Afghanistan.

[74] Julie Billaud, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press, 2015).

[75] Ibid. p.57.

in public were communicated through radio stations. Following is an example that Billaud mentions, *"women, you should not step outside of your residence. If you go outside the house, you should not be like women who used to go with fashionable clothes wearing cosmetics and appearing in front of every man before the coming of Islam…"*[76]

2.3 War on/of Terror: October 2001

After the September 11 attack, George W. Bush "vowed to 'win the war on terrorism' and to fight al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan."[77] In October 2001, the ongoing US war, known as 'the US-led invasion of Afghanistan'[78] that was mainly justified in the name of "saving Afghan women,"[79] begun. As explained earlier, it is significant to pay attention to the way that discourses such as Afghan women's 'salvation and empowerment' were used as a "rallying point to mobilize public sentiment in support of the war."[80] The war then received support from other world leaders such as the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) Kofi Annan, US Secretary of State Colin Powell, and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair. They all indicated that the exclusion of women and the severe degradation of women's rights is a critical barrier to restoring peace in Afghanistan.[81]

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[76] Ibid.

[77] "A Timeline of the U.S. War in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan.

[78] I call this United States war in Afghanistan. Invasion and intervention are fashionable word for 'creating war' in another country.

[79] Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others*.

[80] "Women in Peace and Transition Processes: Afghanistan (2001–2005) | Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative," accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.inclusivepeace.org/content/women-peace-and-transition-processes-afghanistan-2001%e2%80%932005. p.4

[81] Ibid. p.4.

Reflecting on the western attitude of salvation and protection, Sarah Farris, in her 2017 book *In The Name of Women's Rights,*[82] explains how the far-right governments in the western-Europe, assemble, create fear, and mobilize, in the name of protecting women's rights to achieve their political goals. Farris goes on to highlight the marriage between the objectives of nationalists, western feminists, and the neoliberals in identifying women (white and non-white) in need of protection from brown, Muslim, and refugee men.[83] Farris's work highlights the discourses of salvation and protection in the context of rising Islamophobia in Europe. However, her critical lens in depiction and description of the rhetoric of salvation, the western rallying attitude in the name of women's rights, and the construction of the cultural/religious Other (male) are relevant to criticisms this thesis offers. Similarly, Abu-Lughod, in *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?*[84] criticizes Laura Bush's 2002 speech that said: "*...Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment; the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.*"[85] According to her, those words have 'haunting resonances' because they demonstrate the continuity of colonial history as they justify the war in the name of saving Afghan women.[86]

Regarding the question of saviorism and salvation, most of my interview participants expressed similar sentiments with Abu-Lughod. For instance, Helal, while opposing the monetary and

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[82] Farris, Sara R. *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
[83] Farris, Sara R. *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
[84] Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others*.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.

project-based support that the US and its western allies provide for Afghanistan in the name of women's rights and their negligence in including Afghan women in the peace negotiations, asserts "*you cannot save people by giving them projects, one or two, or by giving them money to do something, it's not saving, also if they do say that they saved Afghan women from the Taliban, why don't we see women representing women in the peace process, there is no one there. So not involving women is the same as hurting women.*"[87]

Helal's point on 'giving projects and providing money' reveals another aspect of salvation attitude, which is not directly relevant to the arguments of this paper.

A Window of Hope

For many Afghans who experienced the Taliban regime, whether, inside the country or part of the diaspora, October 2001 opened a window of hope. I was about six years old, in 2001, when we heard that the Taliban were defeated. At the time, we were living in Pakistan. I remember it well, because this is one of the rare occasions where I heard my father, my mother, my aunts, and my uncle cheering very loud as they repeatedly thanked God for the ending of the Taliban's regime. The next moment, I saw my father sitting on the ground and slowly bending his body for Sujud[88] as he would always do as a pious man, to show his gratitude to God.

For my family as immigrants and refugees who were affected by the Taliban's regime somewhat different than those who lived directly under their regime, that news was worth a celebration. I can only imagine what it would mean to the people whose immediate worlds

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[87] Helal Massomi, Intrview with the author, March 2020.
[88] Sujud or Sajdah is the act of prostration during the Islamic prayers. It is also done when one wants to thank god and/or to ask for forgiveness.

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were shaped by the Taliban. However, similar to today's discussion on peace with the Taliban, women, and men had a different understanding of that news as they had been affected differently. For instance, an end to the regime of the Taliban would entail a different meaning to women, at least in terms of how everything looked like from the outside. To provide an example, in the narration of one of my good friends from Kabul, Parwana[89] (pseudonym), her mother and her mother's friends who worked as school teachers before the Taliban banned them from their work celebrated in the following way:

> "*One week after the fall of Taliban, my mother and her colleagues collected their burqas, dumped them in the middle of our yard, and burned them, all together, that's how they celebrated the ending of that brutal time...I was a kid, I didn't know why they did that!*"[90]

Wazhma Frogh, a peace activist who runs an NGO called Women and Peace Studies Organization where they work for women's inclusion and participation in peace and security in Afghanistan. [91] In her narrative, she remembers around 20 years of being involved with peacebuilding and peace processes. Similar to Parwana and I, Wazhma who worked with Afghan refugees in Peshawar city of Pakistan, recalls:

> "*I vividly remember the years 2001, September 11, returning from a refugee camp in Peshawar where we saw the twin towers being bombed and the whole story of Afghanistan coming back to the limelight. But at the same time, we were just so; I wouldn't use the word cheer… that we cheered for Americans to start bombing*

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[89] Parwana (*pseudonym*) is a good friend in Kabul, she has not been interviewed for this thesis, however, she contributed by allowing me to share her story.
[90] From Parwana's memories shared with the author, January 2020.
[91] Women and peace studies organization: http://wpso-afg.org/overview/.

Afghanistan, but we weren't sad that we saw the Taliban on the run and they were actually running for their lives, after October 6, which was a very hard situation where there were so many bombing that happened, of course, many Afghan lives were lost, and at the same time the Taliban regime fell off formally, so yes, while I very much understand the operation enduring freedom had nothing to do with Afghan women, but for the political sake, yes I remember Laura Bush coming up and talking about Afghan women and why they need to be saved, so I think, I'm not that naïve to get into that story, I very much know that was all sort of part of the propaganda to serve the intervention but we not being proud of warmongering. Yet, I very much remember women cheering and actually happy for the end of the dark period of the Taliban."[92]

Senteinemts similar to Wazhma's have been shared by other participants as well.

2.4 The US Military Withdrawal and The Peace Negotiations

In 2019, many dialogues between the Taliban and US government happened from which the Afghan government was mostly excluded. During these negotiations, as much as women's rights activists and feminists demanded representation and seats in the negotiating tables, the Taliban continuously denied their demands. However, in Moscow Peace Summit, (February 2019), Fawzia Kofi and Hawa Alam Nooristani, two of the former female MPs, were invited. Physical representation of two women in that dialogue did not mean that they were given equal opportunity to discuss and represent the demands of Afghan women. Both representatives' participation in the dialogue were approved by the Taliban. Therefore, there was a huge power imbalance in the room; Kofi and Nooristani's existence had been denigrated by the Taliban,

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[92] Wazhma Frogh, interview with the author, May 2020.

and yet now their participation in the dialogue would have been denied without this same group's approval.

Later, in July 7-8, another group of Afghan political-elites met with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar. This was called the Intra-Afghan peace dialogues. Shaharzad Akbar was present in these dialogues. Shaharzad describes:

> "*Intra Afghan dialogue in Doha was helpful because I think it allowed the Taliban to see a diverse representation of the Afghan society, I think they have some perceptions that was somewhat challenged for instance they might have tried to convince themselves that and any Afghan woman who is in public life is just a gift of the international community, their present and they have nothing substantive to offer and clearly that was challenged, in the few days of conversation and exchange. Similarly, they faced hard questions perhaps from Afghans face to face for the first time, and they realized that they are not immune, and they won't be immune to accountability and criticism If they join the government.*"[93]

To my question regarding her feelings while meeting with the Taliban face to face, Shaharzad responded:

> "*I mean it was very emotional for me because I felt a pressure although I wasn't necessarily representing anyone, but I felt the pressure as if I was supposed to represent my generation and also women. I felt pain also because it's hard to talk to people that have been destructive to the country, at least from my perspective....*"[94]

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[93] Shaharzad Akbar, interview with the author, May 2020.
[94] Shaharzad Akbar, interview with the author, May 2020.

In the same days of Intra-Afghan peace dialogues, the Taliban attacked Ghazni Province, and according to Shaharzad, it was painful to talk to them while they had killed people. However, she also defines the experience as empowering because:

> "…But, it was also empowering in a way because here we were ready as if it was going to be a discussion of logic and rationality and evidence and data and vision for the country, it was clear that the other side wasn't opening much so in that sense I felt empowered, I felt like perhaps having a vision for the future of country .. that can make a difference even if the Taliban joined the government."[95]

Like other Afghan women, Shaharzad also has fears and concerns for the Taliban's return, especially in the way that the US handles the process. In her opinion piece for CNN, titled " I don't want the US to bargain away my son's future in Afghanistan,"[96] Shaharzad narrates that Afghanistan's war has raged longer than she has lived. "As a new mom myself, I want my son's childhood memories to be brighter than mine, free of brutal civil war, Taliban rule and a life -- like I had then -- as a refugee."[97]

Shahrazad's fears and concerns both as a woman and as a mother, have been shared by other research informants with a similar situation as well. Describing the Taliban's attitude in the peace dialogues, Shaharzad in her opinion piece states:

> "In Doha, I witnessed their arrogant unwillingness to compromise. Their answers to legitimate questions from the Afghan delegation on women's rights, governance models, elections, international treaties to which Afghanistan is a signatory, and other key issues, were vague and well-rehearsed. They did not show any willingness to enter

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[95] Shaharzad Akbar, interview with the author, May 2020.
[96] Opinion by Shaharzad Akbar, "I Don't Want the US to Bargain Away My Son's Future in Afghanistan," CNN, https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/22/opinions/united-states-taliban-future-afghanistan-akbar/index.html.
[97] Opinion by Shaharzad Akbar, "I Don't Want the US to Bargain Away My Son's Future in Afghanistan," CNN, https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/22/opinions/united-states-taliban-future-afghanistan-akbar/index.html.

into a fruitful debate, a worrying sign for their willingness to compromise on some of
these key topics in future intra-Afghan negotiations."[98]

However, despite all the tensions and uncertainties, the document of peace agreement between US and the Taliban was finally signed on February 29, 2020 in Doha, Qatar. The government of Afghanistan was not a part of this agreement. While there remain many concerns and controversies around this agreement and the points they have agreed on, Afghan women and the protection of their rights have not been mentioned even once. This kind of intentional negligence by the government of Afghanistan and the US, led to disappointments, more fears, and distrust felt by Afghan women. In the meantime, it also led to more communication, mobilization, and collective work among Afghan women during and after the signing of the agreement. I argue that Afghan women's full realization of the power imbalance within Afghan society, the painful past with the Taliban, the growing distrust towards the Afghan government and US Foreign Policy, has led them to take action and call for solidarity among women in this particular period. This part will be discussed further in chapter four.

2.5 Conclusion

Chapter two discussed the historical background of the Taliban's regime and their treatment of Afghan women. The hardcore physical restrictions and limitations that the Taliban created for Afghan women can explain the many fears that women have of the Taliban's possible return and share of power. This included a metaphorical war on the bodies of Afghan women by the Taliban, as well as a justification of another war initiated by the US and its western allies in 2001. In this chapter, I aimed to draw the background and explain Taliban's treatment of

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[98] Ibid.

women, explain the relevant events and topics such as the invasion of Afghanistan and the salvation attitude of the US, the time after the Taliban and the present situation, to prepare the context for the following chapters that speak about fear(s) and explore the possibilities and (im)possibilities that Afghan women's fear of Taliban's return have brought forward. Following this, chapter three will look into what those fears are and what they can do, through to the stories of Afghan women.

Chapter 3: Fear(s) of the Taliban's Return, What Do These Fears Do?

Following the second chapter, which describes the background and the context of this research, this chapter is taking a more analytical direction by digging deeper into the currently dominant discourse of fear in Afghanistan. My analysis in this chapter focuses on discussing the 'fears' of the return of the Taliban through the accounts of Afghan women. From the perspectives of feminist scholars Rachel Pain and Sarah Ahmed, my discussion will explore the genealogy of 'fear,' as an affective emotion. In this connection, this chapter will look at the challenges and the possibilities that fear can create in the particular context where peace negotiations takes place with the Taliban, against the historical background of the situation in Afghanistan. Throughout this chapter, the main question will be: what could emotions such as fear, anxiety, and hopelessness do to women in the face of the Taliban's return and the US alarming announcement to withdraw from the country. In order to explore the direction(s) in which fear of the Taliban's return leads Afghan women, and to establish an understanding of Afghan women's emotions of the issue under discussion, I analyze interviews that I conducted with the research participants. My comments will focus on understanding what those fears are and what do these fears do to the women involved.

3.1 The Discourses of Fear/Affective Notions of Fear

In the following, I explore the concept of fear as an affective emotion and lens from which the activities and actions of Afghan women will be read and analyzed. Rachel Pain's conceptualization of fear views it as a social and spatial rather than purely psychological

phenomenon. [99] In her article "Globalized fear? Towards emotional geopolitics," [100] Pain defines fear as an emotional reaction to an apparent threat that always comes with a social meaning. One that accrues to encompass a wider spectrum of positive effects and negative effects on social and spatial relations. [101] In the same manner, Sara Ahmed, in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, [102] considers fear as an 'affective politics' that preserves and maintains itself only by announcing a threat to life. [103]

Thus, she underscores and assesses the role of fear in the preservation of power by highlighting the way narratives of crisis manage to keep the social norms secured in the present, while bearing a particular reference to the figure of the international terrorist. [104] As I draw on Pain and Ahmed's conceptualizations of fear, I intend to make sense of the situation in Afghanistan by looking into the affective power of fear in leading to various sorts of emotions and actions.

During my short visit to Kabul in the summer of 2019, I listened to, observed, and took part in many conversations regarding the peace negotiations with the Taliban. I had the opportunity to engage in discussions with both women and men, considering the fact that the concerns surrounding this issue were the dominating discussions between the people of Afghanistan and the residents of Kabul. Reflecting on those discussions, I wrote in my diary[105] in August 2019:

[99] Rachel Pain, "Globalized Fear? Towards an Emotional Geopolitics," *Progress in Human Geography* 33, no. 4 (May 21, 2009): 466–86, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508104994. p.467.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.
[103] Ibid. p.64.
[104] Ibid.
[105] The original text was written partly in English and partly in Farsi using the English letters. That is the way I usually think in both languages and write.

...Kabul has become so strange and hopeless. I'm starting to believe that being away Kabul has taken away my sense of connection with this city. Kabul is full of fears. Everywhere I go, I hear the same story. I took a taxi from Wazir Akbar Khan to Nosh Cafe in Taimani today. I could read the exhaustion in the eyes of the middle-aged driver. I asked him, "Kaka chetor asti?" [Uncle, how's it going?] and he responded: "Wala ee mamlakat delemara seyah karda…" [this country has made me so exhausted..]. He, like everyone else, spoke to me about the politics. The Taliban's return, insecurity, the complicated peace process, poverty, war, and everything that is interconnected…[106]

This encounter comes among many encounters I have had where people discussed the politics, the growing insecurity, poverty, and the Taliban's return to power. However, the difference I noticed was that while men complained or talked about the above topics in a general sense, the women I met, and I spoke to were specifically concerned and fearful about the peace negotiations with the Taliban.

3.2 What are these fears? Narratives of Afghan Women

As I discussed in chapter two, the idea of the Taliban returning to power seemed to come with a package of fears for women. In my closer network of friends and acquaintances which consists of some of the active and influential women that I know in Kabul, including some of the 'social elites' who have managed to have their own voice and influence in the society, they are being known by many, and stand in a position of power and privilege comparing to many others in the country. I also call these groups 'social elites' (the term is quite well-known among some Kabulians), since these individuals and groups are not coming from wealthy families but

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[106] Taken from my notes, Kabul, August 2019.

got this status from their public and social involvement. Those people, including myself, first have had their struggles and battles to challenge patriarchy in their families and then continued the fight in society. They have accepted the risks and the consequences of their rebellion but also benefited from the situation. Through their involvement in social projects, they have managed to build a name and fame among particular circles in society. I grew up among those circles, and I continue to be surrounded and involved with these people. Similarly, Kabul is a big city, consisting of different social bubbles, that include some expats and some Afghans. Then there are other bubbles between Afghan locals, and as far as I am aware, these bubbles keep reproducing more bubbles.

In these social bubbles in Kabul, I sought to engage in some informal conversations to further understand the situation and the fears. Among one of the described 'social elites' circles, I engaged in a conversation with Farzana Wahidy, an award-winning and very well-known artist and photojournalist in Afghanistan. I have known Farzana for ten years; she has been a member of one of the first volunteer groups I got introduced to when I was a teenager in 2010.[107] Thus, when I returned to Kabul in 2019, Farzana was among one of the first people I met. Due to Kabul's growing insecurity, we usually met at her apartment, at another friend's residence, or in one of Kabul's semi-underground coffee shops. Farzana, as an artist and a photojournalist, has spent the last eighteen years of her life documenting the lives of Afghan women.[108] Throughout her life, she has experienced living in three different regimes in Afghanistan. She has experienced the civil war 1992-96, the Taliban's regime 1996-2001, and the time after the

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[107] As much as I remember, in 2010 until 2012, there were not many activists and groups for social change. The social circles were very small and almost everyone in the civil society knew each other. Later these groups grew bigger and bigger and despite growing insecurity, many groups emerged.
[108] "Home - Farzana Wahidy," https://farzanawahidy.com/.

2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan, which leads to the present. Farzana was 13 years old when the Taliban took over the power in 1996. Her account of her first encounter with the Taliban's regime entails the concerns of a 13-year-old girl for whom even the idea of not going to school appeared both shocking and frightening. Farzana's said:

> "... I was about 13 years old, and I was at school at the time. And unfortunately, one of the very first things they did, they closed the schools for girls, and also banned women from working which my mom used to do... not able to continue with her work as well so most of the things changed for us."[109]

Correspondingly, seeing her mother being banned from going to work was another way she first got introduced to that regime. This first encounter portrayed the rigid restrictions that the Taliban put on women's lives, thus restraining and erasing them from the public spaces.

The Taliban's restraining of women from personal and political development accounts for what Julie Billaud's posits as women's bodies being at the forefront of the ideological battle.[110] Hence, Farzana's accounts and memories not only confirm Billaud's argument mentioned above but also shed light on her next point about another aspect of the Taliban's misogynist and sexist gender order. To elaborate further, Billaud reflects on the American anthropologist Nancy H. Dupree's argument, who said that the Taliban regime focused on punishing men for any neglect or infraction committed by their female counterparts, which in return would grant

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[109] Farzana Wahidy, interview with the author, November 2019.
[110] Julie Billaud, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press, 2015). p.57.

men the responsibility of controlling women. [111] In Farzana's words: "*...We couldn't go anywhere without any male members of the family. It was quite like living in jail.*"[112]

We can see here that fear(s) of the Taliban, is connected to a past, a past that is carved in Farzana's memory as imprisonment; that opens and retouches the wounds. But it also does more than that, as it affects the present and the way the future can be imagined. In Farzana's words:

"...I have lived through different regimes, it was never easy, but the Taliban's regime was the hardest one for me. I remember I was very young; I was only about 13 years old; I was beaten in the street for no reason, just because I didn't have the burqa ... I was beaten in the street, and that experience stayed with me up to now. The day it happened, the way it happened, I still remember it all... I was going to a hospital with my mom, my mom had a burqa, I didn't, but my head was covered, and my clothes were okay. I even remember that I was wearing my favorite clothes, pink color, as we were walking in one side of the road, I noticed a car in the other side of the road, a white corolla which stopped and a guy who was between 20 -30 got out of the car and started looking at me. I got scared, and I noticed that he was getting closer and closer to me. I got close to my mom because I was afraid. My mother was like 'keep walking, keep walking faster,' and he got very close to me, he took out a white cable from his coat and the moment I saw it because I knew they beat women, I turned, and he beat me in my shoulder, if I remember it correctly, about three times. And then my mom told me to run... so while he was beating me, he said in Pashto: "makh de pati ka" which means cover your face. So, I started running toward my home; it was a moment that I can't right now express in words, I couldn't go to my house."[113]

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[111] Ibid.
[112] Farzana Wahidy, interview with the author, November 2019.
[113] Farzana Wahidy, interview with the author, November 2019.

For Farzana the idea of Taliban coming back to power unfolds unhealed traumas, as she explains:

"...after that incident for about 23 or 22 years I carried a nightmare with me, a nightmare that I used to get every month, or every two months, at least. A nightmare that Taliban is after me and I'm running from them, and I would run so fast, I would run to so many places, and even to the point that I don't know... sometimes people get those nightmares that you get to the point that everything is blocked and there is only a small hole that you can escape and then you imagine you become small and you escape from the hole. Or I would jump from a roof onto another roof so that I could run from them and sometimes actually, I was able in these nightmares to run from them, but there were also times that they would get close to me and they would catch me and whenever that I had those nightmares, that they catch me, I would wake up with my heart beating so badly with the worst feeling ever in my life, and even sometimes I wouldn't be able to breathe normally... and it would take me a day or two to get rid of that nightmare."[114]

For Farzana, the fears and pains of the past are present and are affecting her life, through continuous remembrance and nightmares. In a case like this, Ahmed argues that there is always a history behind the harm,[115] and the pain is not merely an effect of the history of that harm: "it is the physical embodiment of that history."[116] Ahmed, while discussing emotions, contends that the memory might be the object of one's feeling in two senses: contact with the memory shapes feeling, and it also encompasses an orientation towards the remembered. Therefore, the person could feel pain when remembering an event, and in that remembering, they might mark

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[114] Farzana Wahidy, interview with the author, November 2019.
[115] Ahmed. p.33.
[116] Ibid. p.34.

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the remembered as being painful.[117] Taking this into account, Ahmed further indicates that "…fear opens up past histories of association," this is apparent in the following recollection of Farzana from the past affecting the present:

"…and I had the nightmare actually until they made the first ceasefire during the Eid in 2018, and I went to and I faced them (Taliban) when they came to Kabul to take pictures. Which is a long story, I'm not gonna discuss the details, but after that I went and I met the Taliban I mean I saw them, not met, I saw them in the street, after that actually my nightmare was gone. Actually, I had one another time, in that dream, I was in my hometown and my sister and my family and everyone was telling hey Farzana, Farzana, Taliban is coming, you're not running, you're not running and then in that dream I stood and I said NO, I don't wanna run, and I didn't. and that was it, after that I never got any nightmare."[118]

To provide the context and clarify further, in June 2018, Taliban announced three days of ceasefire[119] with the Afghan government (15, 16, and 17 June) during three days of Eid-al-Fitr.[120] I remember those were very happy days for Afghans because in every Eid, new year, and religious celebrations, the Taliban increased their attacks. Those days were celebrated happily, but the thought of it ending soon was truly poignant to many. It seemed like people tasted a piece of peace, knowing it will all end too quickly. During those three days, the Taliban fighters and soldiers were allowed to enter the cities and areas controlled by the government and vice-versa.[121] On one of those days, when some Talibs entered Kabul, Farzana decided to

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[117] Ibid. p.7.
[118] Farzana Wahidy, interview with the author, November 2019.
[119] "Afghan Taliban Agree Three-Day Ceasefire - Their First - BBC News," https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44423032.
[120] The Islamic celebration of the end of Ramadan.
[121] In my personal view, the entire encounter was strange and peculiar. I particularly refer to the hugging(s), the laughter(s), the gatherings of the Kabulians (men) with the Taliban, who would start the killings in a matter of

see and photograph them with a friend. Later, her plan changed as her friend did not accompany her. Therefore, as she was determined to go, she found herself surrounded by many men (both Taliban and civilians). While she wanted to leave the area as quickly as possible, she managed to take a selfie of herself only, but with Taliban men in the background and she posted on Facebook. However, in the matter of a few hours, the Afghan social media were full of different posts and reactions to her selfie with the Taliban. Being the only woman among many men (Taliban and civilians), her action started many debates in the country. Some people admired her courage to go meet the Taliban the way she lives without compromises, while many others, including many women, translated her action as a way of 'welcoming the Taliban' and hence, as short-sighted. Regardless of the heated debates and its consequences in her life, Farzana explains:

"*...I noticed that the crowd was getting bigger, and I was worried of explosions, and attacks. I was like if something happens, I don't want people to die because of what I am doing. So, I had to leave as quickly as possible, and that's why…To me something was happening, and something was supposed to happen, and that's why I took the picture (selfie), I took the picture so that it's recorded. No one was there; no other photographer was there to take my picture. That's why I took a selfie, and actually at the end when I decided to leave it happened very quickly as I decided to leave I was on circled by the Taliban and by other men, I had to shout "let me get out, let me get out!" I was not scared; to be honest, I was not scared at all. But, I mean, even to think about what I did, right now sometimes I get scared, but at the moment I wasn't scared. When I was going, I mean, I went prepared, I wore the clothes I wanted to wear, I wore my*

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few days. However, regardless of my personal views, it was a signifier of how exhausted of war Afghans are on both sides.

favourite shoes, because I said, if I am gonna get killed, I wanna be killed in these shoes…[loud laughter]"[122]

In a different memory, Farzana recalls feeling afraid of losing her life because she along with her sister used to go to a secret school as well as teaching their neighbours' children secretly: "*…. But we were always afraid, and it was very difficult because sometimes it could have cost your life. Especially if they find you with English books or with the mathematic subjects…quite a difficult time. Quite a dark period. Quite a time like being in jail.*"[123]

To be afraid of losing one's life for the very fundamental right of education exemplifies at least a part of the kind of the fear that the Taliban created and maintained throughout. In this relation, Ahmed describes fear as it "envelops the bodies that feel it, as well as constructs such bodies as enveloped, as contained by it, as if it comes from outside and moves inward."[124]

In a similar account by my other interviewee, Wazhma Forgh (introduced in chapter two), who lived as a refugee and worked with other Afghan refugees in Pakistan, shared:

"*I had a personal connection to those stories because almost all my family lived back in Afghanistan where my cousins were married as young as the age of 12 and 13, because of the fear that the Taliban would force them to marry, and my aunt's sister-in-law was actually forcefully married to a Talib who took her to Quetta, Pakistan and they never returned, we never heard anything else. Every time we talk about her, everybody is teary-eyed because that's the story of how we remember those days.*"[125]

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[122] Farzana Wahidy, interview with the author, November 2019.
[123] Farzana Wahidy, interview with the author, November 2019.
[124] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. p.63.
[125] Wazhma Frogh, interviewed with the author, May 2020.

In describing the effects of these fears, Wazhma *stated, "I believe that the courage that has been lost by women during those Taliban dark years is continuously impacting how we think about ourselves for I think generations to come."*[126]

Wazhma's input next to Farzana's account highlights how the Taliban's restriction and atrocities have impacted the lives and self-image of both the women who live under the Taliban regime and those who lived in its shadow effects. However, my aim here not only to explore what the Taliban did in the past and how they instilled fear in women, it is rather the question of ongoing impact these fears may have. Helal (introduced in chapter two), asserts that while every Afghan should be afraid of the Taliban, women should be extra careful because, according to her, it's the women who will lose *"freedom of speech, freedom of going outside, freedom of education, freedom of having healthcare, freedom of traveling without a male companion, freedom of chosing whom to marry…"*[127] While Helal described her fears and concerns by naming some of the fundamental rights that the Taliban deprived women of, Shaharzad (introduced in chapter two), argues against the idea of making political settlement or peace with the Taliban at the cost of women's rights, [128] therefore she says:

> *"I still don't believe that the options have to be peace at any cost, or continued bloodshed, which also impacts Afghan women quite a big deal, it is the Afghan women who are becoming widows, who are losing the loved ones in this war, they are losing sons and husbands and brothers and their own lives as well, the civilian causalities are*

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[126] Wazhma Frogh, interviewed with the author, May 2020.
[127] Helal Massomi, interview with the author, March 2020.
[128] In the Afghan media and dominant current discourses the discussion of bringing peace and the protection of women's rights are treated as mutually exclusive that's why Shaharzad argues against this perception.

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high in this country and we have women although a very small proportion among our security forces."[129]

Highlighting and confirming that Afghan women's fears of the Taliban's return are justified, Shaharzad further added: "*I think you see despite their fears, a lot of Afghan women pursuing the political solution and advocating for an end to the bloodshed and advocating for peace. However, it is not peace if half of the population of the country loses their right to live a life a dignity, so I think that's the cost that we are thinking about.*"[130]

Shaharzad sheds light on an important aspect of the peace negotiations and the uncertainties around it, which is about the way these fears are used by the government, local media, and the western media to create an 'either, or' narrative about the peace process. For instance, 'either peace with the Taliban at any cost, including accepting their restrictions on women, or the continuation of the war.' But in both cases, Afghan women are the ones to lose the most.

3.3 Where Do These Fears Lead to What Do They Do?

This thesis argues on the basis of the current so-called peace process that fear as an affective emotion has effects and can lead to various kinds of actions and activism. In the context that this thesis presents, I do not mean to argue that it is only because of the fear(s) of a painful past and an uncertain future that Afghan women are showing subjectivity, taking action, and mobilizing themselves. Rather, I aim to highlight that emotions such a pain and fear(s) do play

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[129] Shaharzad Akbar, interview with the author, May 2020.
[130] Shaharzad Akbar, interview with the author, May 2020.

a significant role in the ways that Afghan women mobilize, resist, and take the lead during this period.

Ahmed looks into the link between emotions and *'(in)justice'* and urges us to reassess "what is it that emotions do."[131] In another chapter of her book, Ahmed connects these emotions to the *pain* one endures. I see a clear parallel between the way Ahmed links emotions to pain and the bodily and emotional experiences of (in)justice and pain that Afghan women have endured with the Taliban. In my view, it is important to pay attention to the fact that fear, as seen in Farzana's story, has not been a stopping force; instead at times it worked as a force deriving her to take action, challenge, and struggle for change. To elaborate on this point, the fear of the Taliban brought fear, but it also resulted in action, activism, and non-conventional modes of resistance for women, both during the Taliban's regime and in the present, and this must be highlighted. Among my research informants, everyone described a different and non-conventional way they resisted and challenged the Taliban's restrictions. For instance, Farzana and Helal's stories tell us about the underground schools they had, using their kitchen or basement to educate the younger girls while, according to Farzana, that could have costed one's life.[132] Shaharzad recalls buying books, listening to music, and exchanging videotapes as a way of resistance to the restriction. Wazhma's account tells us about her struggle to empower female refugees in Pakistan and later when she returned to Afghanistan:

"I used to work with another humanitarian organization where we had these kitchen gardens inside Afghanistan, and I was working with a small number of women whom we helped with having kitchen gardens. We used to write simple alphabets on the mud,

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[131] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.
[132] Taken from Farzana's interview.

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and every time there was any fear that the Taliban would come we would actually clear the mud so that nobody was seeing it and just five hours of conversation and brining five to ten women together was the only way of socialization and understanding so many women who were completely traumatized and lost…"[133]

Therefore, unlike the unreal images and narratives that western media keep producing, which characterize Afghan women as passive beings and solely victims, [134] Farzana's, Helal's, Shaharzad's, and Wazhma's stories are among the many stories that I am aware of, which can challenge the victim/saved identity applied on to Afghan women since 2001, specifically by western media's reports and images.

All my interviewees who had lived under the Taliban's regime shared stories of resisting the Taliban in indirect ways, since direct confrontation was not a possibility. For instance, Farzana recounts moments of hiding from the Taliban, being beaten by them, restrictions, continuous fears, and traumas as she encodes them as 'difficult,' 'dark,' and defined the experience as being in a 'jail.' However, she also recalls women's underground activism, resistance, and actions, which are usually overlooked in the narratives of that time. In response to my question, 'how did her life and other women's lives change after the collapse of the Taliban?' Farzana said:

"Well, to be honest, a lot of hope came. We were very hopeful that things are going to change for us and we'll be able to go to school and to have opportunities which in some ways was quite true for some. But os soon as security got very bad in Afghanistan and

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[133] Wazhma Frogh, interview with the author, May 2020.
[134] Referring to the previously mentioned article by Cheryl Benard.

especially right now, with this what they call the 'peace process' going on, it looks like things are gonna change not in a better way."[135]

In this discussion, I provide an example from the research "Distinguishing hope from optimism and related affective states," co-authors Patricia Bruininks and Bertram F. Malle[136] argue that "Overall, hope is most closely related to wishing but distinct from it. Most important, hope is distinct from optimism by being an emotion, representing more important but less likely outcomes, and by affording less personal control."[137] Therefore, when Farzana started her sentence with '*to be honest,*' in my view, she aimed to describe the 'nuance' that she hapes to keep in the face of tensions between those who support the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and those who criticize it. By recognizing that the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan did change the scenery for Afghan women, Farzana talks about the changes and opportunities that came about for many, if not all. But soon after that, she added '*...but...*' indicating that what she said before is not the full story. "*…but as soon as security got very bad in Afghanistan and especially right now, with this what they the call 'peace process' going on, it looks like things are going to change not in a better way*."[138] During the interview, at that point in the discussion, I could detect a sort of heaviness in Farzana's sentences; there was tension in her voice and an acknowledgment of 'hope' that was quickly replaced by fear of the future. The kind of hope that entailed fear of Taliban's return as a result of the ongoing peace negotiations, and the tensions that were coming along.

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[135] Farzana Wahidy, interview with the author, November 2019.
[136] Patricia Bruininks and Bertram F. Malle, "Distinguishing Hope from Optimism and Related Affective States," *Motivation and Emotion* 29, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 324–52, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-006-9010-4.
[137] Patricia Bruininks and Bertram F. Malle, "Distinguishing Hope from Optimism and Related Affective States," *Motivation and Emotion* 29, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 324–52, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-006-9010-4.
[138] Farzana Wahidy, interview with the author, November 2019.

In describing the global politics of fear, Ahmed offers a different reading of fear, which sees fear not as a symptom of transformation or a tool for governance. Instead, she suggests that the "language of fear involves the intensification of 'threats,' which works to create a distinction between those who are 'under threat' and those who threaten."[139] Thus, Ahmed contends that fear is not the origin; it is rather, the effect of the process.[140]

In this way, if we look at the Taliban and their possible return as the threat, and Afghan women as the ones under threat, while considering the past (the Taliban's period), then the fears that Afghan women experience and continue to face during the peace process, are an effect of this process, which at the same time has led to solidarity and alignment among women. Regarding the issues of sodality and alignment, Ahmed argues that "through the generation of 'the threat,' fear works to align bodies with and against others."[141] She then pushes the argument further by extending Ulrich Beck's statement on solidarity "it is through the perception of shared risk that communities become a binding force."[142] In the case of women's rights activists and feminists in Afghanistan in this specific period, through the fear of the Taliban's return, the alignment 'with' has been taking shape. The fears and pain that are coming from the past are present today and have led to solidarity, mobilizations, and actions, which I will further discuss in chapter four.

In this chapter, I aimed to analyze fear as an affective emotion in the context of my research from the perspectives of Rachel pain and Sara Ahmed. I also sought to explain what these fears

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[139] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. p.72.
[140] Ibid. 72.
[141] Ahmed. p.72.
[142] Ahmed. p.72.

are, by providing examples of the ways in which the Taliban created fear in the minds and hearts of Afghan women. By discussing narratives of Afghan women, I intended to highlight their fears, explain how and in what ways fear works, especially in the context of the political uncertainties and peace talks with the Taliban. The following chapter will highlight some of Afghan women's actions and mobilizations taking place in the light of the peace process, in part engendered by and amidst ongoing fears and uncertainties.

Chapter 4: Mobilization and Activism

In this chapter, I shed light on subjectivities, mobilizations, and activisms of Afghan women leaders and activists during the so-called peace process. Adding to chapter two and chapter three that explained the stories of Afghan women during the Taliban's regime and the way they instilled fear mainly through their treatment of women, this chapter will focus on the kind of activisms shaped around the peace process amid all the fears and uncertainties. The main question for this chapter is, what have emotions such as fear, anxiety, and hopelessness led to in the face of the Taliban's possible return and the US's alarming announcement of their military withdrawal, and how do these fears take the direction of mobilization and activism.

While discussing affective politics of emotions, Sara Ahmed argues that "emotionality as a claim *about* a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow 'others' with meaning and value."[143] Additionally, she argues that it is not her aim to treat 'emotionality' as an individual or collective characteristic of the bodies. Instead, she wishes to reflect on the process by which 'being emotional' gets to be seen as characteristic of certain bodies and not the others.[144] I found her statement particularly relevant to the situation I observed in Kabul, in summer 2019. The dominant emotions such as fears, hopelessness, and uncertainties that I felt as an Afghan woman myself, and the ones I observed among women, as a researcher in Kabul, makes a strong case for Ahmed's argument.

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[143] Ahmed. p.4.
[144] Ibid. p.4.

Additionally, I will be writing about various ways Afghan women have been engaging with the peace process, including the ways in which they communicated with one another, raised their concerns, highlighted the fears, and mobilized in different ways to make their voices heard. While there have been various kinds of activities and mobilization taking place in the different parts of the country and the diaspora by Afghan women, in this chapter, I will remain focused on the mobilizations and actions of female leaders, influencers, and activists in Kabul. Therefore, in this chapter, I will highlight the subjectivities of Afghan women during uncertain times of the so-called peace process. In doing so, I will also discuss the means, platforms, and ways that these mobilizations, conversations, cooperations, and actions have been taking place. In the discussion of subjectivity, I will highlight a particular kind of activism, mobilization, and subjectivity that been shaped and claimed through virtual spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp throughout the peace process. Moreover, I will introduce a WhatsApp group chat that has been operating as a rallying platform, presenting a sight of Afghan women's cooperation, mobilization, and activism in the face of the peace process.

4.1 Virtual Activism: the significance and (Im)possibilities

As I discussed in the positionality section, I deliberately decided to focus on the activities of women's rights activists and feminists in Kabul city. I decided that, because after the removal of the Taliban in 2001, Kabul has been the heart of various struggles, changes, limitations, opportunities, and empowerment for women. For reasons such as security, more convenient access to education, their class location, and other reasons like the bolder presence of western embassies and the opportunities they provide, etc. Similarly, Valentine Moghadam, in her

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book, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East,*[145] contends that the "middle-class Middle Eastern women are consciously and unconsciously the major agents of social change in the region, at the vanguard of the movement to modernity."[146] According to Moghaddam, the socio-economic power of middle-class women of the Middle East can define their role in creating opportunities and challenging the norms. Moghaddam makes that statement because she aims to show that women's lives in the Middle East are shaped and affected not only by 'Islam' and 'Culture', but also by other important determinants such as economic development, class location, and the state.

I borrow Moghaddam's phrase "consciously and unconsciously the major agents of social change"[147] to describe the role of women's rights activists and leaders in Kabul and bigger cities in general, but also more specifically during the peace process. To elaborate my previous point, the role of US-led invasion in the name of salvation for Afghan women, the focus of international media in mainly highlighting the stories of women in Kabul, the victim/saved image that has been put forward through the western media, and the easier access to education and relative safety felt in Kabul, play a significant role in the ways women in big cities, especially Kabul, get to be seen as being "consciously or unconsciously the major agents of social change."[148] Women in Kabul and big cities like Mazar and Herat have had more opportunities to fight for their rights, demand medium, platform, and spaces for self-representation comparing to women in other parts of the country. However, this does not

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[145] Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Boulder, Colo: L. Rienner, 1993.
[146] Ibid. p. xiii.
[147] Ibid. p. xiii.
[148] Ibid. p. xiii.

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indicate that women who are not in the big cities are not agents of social change; instead, it is the question of opportunities, privilege, and power dynamics, determining whose activism, voice, and work can be seen, heard, and have an impact and whose cannot. Another point is that due to resources being located mainly in central Afghanistan, women in Kabul and big cities have the opportunity to raise louder voices and exhibit bolder representations. Taking this issue into account is particularly significant because then it is the women in Kabul and bigger cities who get to take action and fight for all women's rights through their positions and platforms. It is then upon these women to push the boundaries, challenge the decisions, and manage to make it to the negotiating tables with the Taliban, the Afghan government, and the US, discussing the rights of all Afghan women.

As I discussed in chapter two, the Taliban's regime affected the lives of women of all tribes, social and economic classes, ages, and areas in Afghanistan. However, today the women's rights activists, feminists, and those who work and study in bigger cities are particularly concerned about the future of peace talks with the Taliban and its consequences in the lives of Afghan women. What has largely been overlooked in the dominant media discourses is that Afghan women, especially women's rights activists, and feminists, have not been 'silent' or 'passive' in the period of peace negotiations. There have been various kinds of initiatives undertaken by Afghan women to ensure that they are seen and heard in the peace process. One of such efforts – in the light of the peace talks – has been initiated by Farahnaz Forotan, a young journalist and women's rights activist who started a social media campaign called #MyRedline.[149] The campaign attracted women from various backgrounds, different ages, and

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[149] "Afghan Women Drawing #MyRedLine For Peace With The Taliban," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty.

almost from all provinces of Afghanistan to participate and make their voices heard. The female participants of different ages (from elementary and high-school girls to elderly women) appeared in videos, sharing their concerns, drawing their redlines, emphasizing that those lines should not be crossed in the peace process. Most of the redlines drawn stated and emphasized that in the peace negotiations with the Taliban, no compromises should be made on the rights of Afghan women. The participants continuously asserted that Afghan women do not allow going back to the Taliban's time. The campaign highlighted the voices and concerns of women, even from some of the remotest villages and districts of Afghanistan. These concerns and fears highlighted those rights that were fundamentally violated by the Taliban in the past. For instance, women's ability to access the public and political spaces, their ability to move and travel without a mahram (male companion), their rights to get an education, their protection from young age marriage, their ability to participate in the society, to vote, to work, and…etc. Therefore, it was significant that despite growing insecurity and other limitations like limited access to electricity and the internet, the campaign managed to highlight the collective (but not homogenous) voices of women from different parts of Afghanistan. This was a response to the Taliban, the Afghan government, and the US that as much as peace is urged and commanded, women's equal rights and meaningful participation in the society is required and demanded. Soon after the campaign managed to enter to different provinces to capture more voices, it received support from UN Women in Afghanistan for further exposure in the political sphere and among the international community.

Similarly, in August 2019, when I was in Kabul, I was added to a WhatsApp group chat that has been the source of information, a platform for communication, as well as being a tool to

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educate, inform, and channel mobilizations during the process. This chat group is called 'Our Voice for our Future,' and it has been created around October 2018, when the serious discussions over peace negotiations with the Taliban had started. The initiators of this group are some of the prominent female leaders and activists who run the Afghan Women's Network (AWN). This network was established in 1995 after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. AWN functions as an umbrella organization for 125 women organizations all around the country that work for women on gender-based violence issues and those that advocate for girls' education.

Mary Akrami, who has been a member of AWN since 1997, is now leading the network since 2018 is one of my research participants. She started this WhatsApp group chat in cooperation with other members of AWN.

This chapter is exploring how Afghan women leaders (mainly in Kabul) are navigating their way to power by rallying and mobilizing through virtual platforms and spaces. In this regard, I want to refer to co-authors Sonia Nunez Puente and Antonio Garcia Jime's article, "Inhabiting or occupying the web?: virtual communities and feminist cyberactivism in online Spanish feminist theory and praxis,"[150] in which they examine the relationship between technology and gender in the context of Spanish online feminist praxis.[151] To substantiate their argument, they refer to Donna *Haraway's Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1985) in which Haraway argues for the significance of technology as an essential part of human's identity. Haraway further argues that "technology is central to our daily lives and, therefore, it can be productive to think of ourselves

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[150] Sonia Núñez Puente and Antonio García Jiménez, "Inhabiting or Occupying the Web? Virtual Communities and Feminist Cyberactivism in Online Spanish Feminist Theory and Praxis," *Feminist Review*, no. 99 (2011): 39–54, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41288874.
[151] Ibid. p.40.

as cyborgs; we can use this conceptualization as a tool for changing the relationships between power, identity, and technology."[152]

Similarly, I argue that Afghan women's mobilization and activism in the virtual platforms during the peace process reemphasizes Haraway's point on the significance of technology, and in this context, it is equally highlighting the significance of the virtual spaces which function as the site for the continuous exchange between power, identity, and resistance. It is in these virtual spaces that the cooperations and solidarity happen, and different group dynamics continuously get shaped, challenged, and reshaped. However, I must also explain that Afghan women's mobilization and activism through some particular kind of social media platforms such as WhatsApp application during the peace process has some contextual explanation as well. For instance, the misogynist and sexist culture of using social media in Afghanistan can also account for why most of the virtual mobilizations activism by women takes place in the relatively private virtual space like WhatsApp application but not in the more public platforms like Facebook and Twitter. In this regard, Sonia Nunez Puente and Antonio Garcia Jime, in their article, cite Cynthia Cockburn's semi pessimist opinion on technology and cyberspace, which asks "whether women experience technology as oppressive merely because men dominate its use or whether technology is inherently patriarchal?"[153] While this question is hard to answer in the context of Afghanistan, I aim to explain that within the types of social media platforms that are more commonly used in Afghanistan, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram

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[152] Ibid. p.41.
[153] Puente and Jiménez. p.40.

and other mediums such as YouTube are the spaces where Afghan women continuously get attacked, violated and humiliated by the cyberbullies which are predominately men.

While many fake ids are operating to hack women's social media accounts as well as sharing their private conversations and pictures in public mostly to shame the activists and outspoken women, it is not hard to understand that (Our voice for our future) group has been created in WhatsApp which is still a relatively closed space, and in this case, it's only for women. Having explained the context, I must also demonstrate that 'Our voice for our future' functions for a specific aim, and therefore, it allows access to particular members, and it is not open for all Afghan women. Thus, in this particular case, this group is not only maintained out of sight and reach for men, but it is also not accessible for every Afghan women, and the reasons for that will be discussed further in the chapter.

Discussing the role of Afghan women in the process, Helal (introduced in chapter two), maintains that within the patriarchal framework that the peace process is being carried, if Afghan women did not remain pro-active, today, there would have been no space for them in the peace process. In Helal's words:

> "... *if it wasn't actually for Afghan women and their activism, we wouldn't have been involved in some of the very important decisions being taken for us, which used to be taken for us in the past. We have seen a lot of movements happening in the past five years; if it wasn't for women, there wouldn't have been anything done.*"[154]

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[154] Helal Massomi, interview with author, March 2020.

While acknowledging Afghan women's activism, Helal names some of the influential movements that continue to take place during the peace negotiation period:

"...we have heard about Redline movement, and also 'where are the women?' movement, and their hashtags in social media and virtually which actually made the US envoy to involve women in the peace process, even if it's tiny and a little bit, even if physical and symbolic involvement, it has resulted to that. If this kind of activism continues, they can prevent others to chose and decide for them. They can choose their own fate!"[155]

In a similar narrative, Wazhma (introduced in chapter two), who is also a member of 'Our voice for our future' WhatsApp group chat, argues that for fear of losing their achievements, Afghan women have been proactive in cooperating and in envisioning how the peace process should look like. Regarding the acknowledgment of Afghan women's efforts and struggles during the peace process, she added: *"…of course I wouldn't attribute the credit to just one organization or to some people but to Afghan women overall and the young women who have been very vocal in voicing their concerns, their opinion and how the process should look like and what are their concern."*[156]

4.2 "Our Voice for Our Future" A WhatsApp Rallying Platform

In this section, I introduce a WhatsApp chat group that I have been a member of since August 2019. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, this WhatsApp chat group is a virtual space for activism, empathy, empowerment, resistance, and mobilization during the peace process. In

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[155] Helal Massomu, interview with author, March 2020.
[156] Wazhma Frogh, interview with author, May 2020.

this space, Afghan women claim agency, subjectivity, and influence in the light of a peace process that has systematically excluded them. This exclusion was heavy on Afghan women because one of the main justifications for the US war in Afghanistan was the salvation of Afghan women. However, on February 29, 2020, in the peace agreement that was signed between the US and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, Afghan women and the protection of their rights were not mentioned even once.[157] The four main points that the US and the Taliban discussed and supposedly[158] agreed on included: "Halt attacks against the US, withdrawal of US troops, prisoner swap, and Intra Afghan peace talks."[159] Thus, this systematic exclusion has led to a feeling of betrayal and, therefore, to distrust and more fear among Afghan women. The sentiments, thoughts, and statements related to these feelings have been discussed much in the 'Our voice for our future' group.

The WhatsApp group chat 'Our voice for our future' is also a space in which many sorts of disagreements, discontents, clash of different views and values, trust, and distrust continuously happen. A lot of different emotions get expressed in the group, and power dynamics and contradictions are also seen in the group as the group members keep having different conversations and views related to the peace process. The discussions not only highlight the fears and concerns but also hopes and dreams for the future. The very existence of women from different backgrounds and age groups makes the conversations very much compelling and

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[157] "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan," *United States Department of State* (blog), https://www.state.gov/agreement-for-bringing-peace-to-afghanistan/.

[158] I say supposedly because from 29 February 2020, the Intra Afghan peace talks has been stopped, the process of swapping prisoners have been facing problems and it has been stopped as the Taliban continuously use violence and launch attacks against Afghans.

[159] "The US-Taliban Peace Deal: 10 Weeks On," *ACLED* (blog), May 22, 2020, https://acleddata.com/2020/05/22/the-us-taliban-peace-deal-10-weeks-on/.

pushes the debates to be more informative. This group consists of some of the prominent female leaders of Afghanistan from different fields. For instance, female governors, ministers, members of parliament, well-known journalists, activists including those who run NGOs, researchers, and many other women who are either known for their activism or the position they hold.

In chapter three, through the works of Sara Ahmed and Rachel pain, I explained the affective power of fear, and in this part, through this WhatsApp group, I examine how fear has led Afghan women to align, mobilize, and take action during the peace process. Hence, looking at fear of the Taliban's return as a deriving mobilizing emotion, Mary, the initiator of this group tells us: *"I created this group 'our voice for our future' to stand as a unified voice and a unified address for Afghan women during the peace process. We aimed to bring Afghan women from different sectors and different positions under one umbrella. So, this group is for women who believe in solidarity and unity."*[160]

Despite the issue of 'unified voice' continuously being challenged by the members of the group, in the way they debate and show their interests, what remains prevalent is the issue of 'homogenized' identification and self-image. In this regard, what is seen in this chat group is similar to the way Julie Billaud explaining the gender politics in Afghanistan, argues in *Kabul Carnival,*[161] that "the way Afghan women self-identify has been tied to the nationalist discourses that form their political identity around the discourses of dedication, struggle, and sacrifice, which mirrors the conventional form of resistance and political struggle for nation-

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[160] Mar Akramy, interview with the author, March 2020.
[161] Billaud, *Julie. Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan*.

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building.[162] Similarly, the way that the majority of women in this group identify themselves is not separate from the discourses of sacrifice for the nation, their roles as mothers and sisters of the nation, and the agents of peace whose hands are not stained with the blood and killings. This way of homogenized self-identification as the category 'Afghan women' informs and affects the way the conversations are shaped in the WhatsApp group. It also defines who gets to speak for whom, as well as creating a homogenized demand for peace, which does not take into account the various intersecting factors that inform different needs of different women.

Coming back to the actions this group has taken by the women in this group, Mary proudly contends that the group has now changed to women's coalition for peace, she names this as one of the first achievements of this group, she then added:

> *During the Moscow peace dialogues, women were not consulted for representation, to show our objection, through this group, we managed to have four big meetings with women in one week. Around 70 women who are in the leading positions in every relevant sector, starting from the Human Rights commission to all the local organizations, Minister of Women's affairs, and the three other female ministers took part, and thereby we announced women's statement regarding women's representation in the peace talks.[163]''*

Mary's point on representation sheds light on the present struggles in the group over voice, subjectivity,   and   representation   that   go   along   the   same   lines   with   what

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[162] Ibid.
[163] Mary Akrami, interview with the author, March 2020.

Deniz Kandiyoti defined as "Bargaining with Patriarchy."[164] Kandiyoti argues that women at patriarchal societies "strategize within a set of concrete constraints,"[165] which she identifies as patriarchal bargainings. In the face of the peace process, in the presence of fear and uncertainties, Afghan women in this WhatsApp group strategize, mobilize, and optimize their choices. However, the difference that is worth highlighting here is how these women bargain with the patriarchy of Afghan politics that is mainly male-dominated, but also those of the USA's and the Taliban's. From this perspective, the bargainings can be evident in the form of 'compromises' that some of the women in this group make, to achieve their political goals. For example, in summer 2019, when the discussion of having an interim government was growing, some members of this group arranged a meeting with the former president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, to discuss the possibilities. While their action would go against what the group collectively wanted, which is the 'Islamic Republic of Afghanistan', not an interim government or the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'. Additionally, the bargainings and compromises have been seen in various struggles to challenge and question the way the western media and policies has located Afghan women in the discourses of 'passivity' as well as claiming agency and pushing for representation in the politics that is decided by the US, the Taliban, and the Afghan government. The bargainings have also happened in other forms. For instance, some of the women from this group have met with the opposition groups, while the others remained supportive of the current president, Ashraf Ghani, and his promise of keeping the Republic.[166]

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[164] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society 2*, no. 3 (1988): 274-90. Accessed June 15, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/190357.
[165] Ibid. p. 39.
[166] The Taliban have been pushing for the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.'

From the address of AWN and with the support of the members of this chat group, a letter has been sent to the Sheikha Moza bint Nasser (Qatari leader's mother), requesting her to call on the Taliban to stop the bloodshed, since the Taliban reside in Qatar. "We have heard and read stories of your generosity to people in need. As the women of Afghanistan who are losing our lives and the lives of our beloved ones daily, because of attacks by the Taliban, we are humbly urging you to personally take a stance and support our call for a temporary COVID-19 ceasefire in Afghanistan, to be followed by an inclusive and reconciliatory political settlement with a permanent ceasefire and peace for all." [167] These kinds of negotiations and bargainings have been happening several times throughout the past two years. For instance, on a different occasion, members of this group wrote a letter to the Iran government to stop its violence against Afghan refugees.

In response to how she keeps the group going, Mary stated that it is such a challenging task to keep 250 women committed and going. She continued: " *…But as Afghan women, we are vulnerable, we need to stay together, we need to keep this group going and make it a strong movement.*"[168] Regarding the members, she added: " *A lot of times we have heated arguments and disagreement, we want to believe that everyone is committed to this cause, but that's not true, we even have members that take the conversations out by sharing screenshots with other people…that's unfortunate… we also have some stubborn and self-centered members*, *it's difficult, but we have to be patient.*"[169]

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[167] 1TV Afghanistan and Ziaulhaq, "Afghan Women's Network Urges Qatari Leader's Mother to Call on Taliban to Declare Ceasefire," www.1tvnewsaf, http://www.1tvnews.af/en/news/afghanistan/41992-afghan-womens-network-urges-qatari-leaders-mother-to-call-on-taliban-to-declare-ceasefire-.
[168] Mary Akrami, interview with the author, March 2020.
[169] Mary Akrami, interview with the author, March 2020.

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In terms of representations, this group has been diverse and has managed to have representatives in the peace dialogues, both former members of parliaments, Fawzia Koofi and Hawa Alam Nooristani, who have been present in Moscow Peace Summit (February 2019), are the members of this group chat. Shaharzad Akbar and the other women who took part in Doha Intra-Afghan peace dialogues (7-8 July 2019) are also the members of this group, and thereby aware of the conversations, questions, contentions, concerns, and fears. Mary additionally states that the group has been able to train negotiation skills to 40 members who shall represent Afghan women in the future peace talks. Members of this group have been lobbying to receive a letter from the US congress supporting women's inclusion in the peace process, many position papers, statement papers, lobbying, and conversation have been managed throughout this process, which can be found in the website of AWN.

4.3 Conclusion:

In the final chapter, I highlighted some of the activism and mobilizations of Afghan women during the so-called peace process. As I examined the role of virtual activism by showing it's significance and limitations while used by Afghan women in the context of my research. This chapter looked into a WhatsApp rallying platform, which has been the source of continuous communication, cooperation, and mobilization among female leaders in Afghanistan. The group chat has been created by the leading member of Afghan Women's Network, aiming to bring Afghan female leaders together, creating a unified voice and address for peace. While I highlighted the problem of creating a unified voice in the peace process, issues such as representation, identification, and bargaining with patriarchy have been raised. Each one of these issues plays a role in how this group carries itself as a mobilizing platform. In the end, I

highlighted some of the many activities being done by the members of this group chat who are fearful and concerned of the uncertain future.

Conclusion

Writing this thesis amid an ongoing uncertain process has been both emotional and challenging. I was looking into several aspects of the complicated so-called peace process that called for patience, motivation, passion, and constant reflection on my privileges.This required me to navigate my way through western feminist scholarship as an outsider, and being aware of the subjectivities, activities, and mobilizations of Afghan women in this critical period, as an insider. As an Afghan woman and as a researcher located in an insider/outsider positionality, I took it upon myself to work on this topic and to carry out this research. My positionality, time, space, and education have all been playing a significant role in my choice of topic, despite faceing limitations. When I say limitations, I to refer to Sara Ahmed work. In her book, *Living a Feminist Life,*[170] she argues that "In becoming feminists we are doing intellectual as well as emotional work; we begin to experience gender as a restriction of possibility, and we learn about worlds as we navigate these restrictions." [171]

Similarly, as this thesis discusses emotions, it also presents my emotional journey, because I have chosen a topic for which I am not solely a researcher. My role, throughout this research, demanded more emotional capacity because, in simple words, the topic affects my life, my future, and my safety. Therefore, in many ways, I have been both the researcher and a

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[170] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
[171] Ibid. p.7.

respondent at the same time. Hence, akin to my interlocutors, the fears and uncertainties of the Taliban's return have been present in my life throughout this process. The interviews that I conducted unfolded the fears, pains, and traumas that I either had lived through or I had seen and heard from others while growing up. This has been on the personal level. On a broader scale, the limitations included lack of access to feminist scholarship and resources written by scholars from my country as well as facing lanagauge barrier in the process of writing.

I am well aware that this thesis can only provide knowledge on a few aspects of the enormous pool of knowledge of Afghan women that is still untouched. This research looks at a side of the story that is significant but has been undermined by many scholars working with Afghan women. My thesis does not provide answers to the uncertainties, questions, and complications; however, it is a timely research, and it highlights a different side of the story from the standpoint of an Afghan feminist amplifying the concerns, fears, hopes, and activism of Afghan women in times of fear and uncertainties.

 Chapter one provided the theoretical framework and a literature review. Following that, in chapter two, I provided a historical context of the Taliban's period, looking into their treatment of women and the way they created fear. I explored and argued that the Taliban initiated a metaphorical war on the bodies of Afghan women, and following that, I presented a discussion of salvation and saviourism. In what followed, I explained the 2001 US-led war on terror, including an account of a short moment of hope, and finally, I arrived at the present, which is about the peace process with the Taliban and the current discourses of fear.

In chapter three, I looked into fear, and through the works of Sara Ahmed and Rachel pain, I discussed how the fear that the Taliban created has affected the past and the present of Afghan women. Through the stories of Afghan women, I looked into possibilities and impossibilities that fear constitutes in the context of the peace process.

In chapter four, I followed the arguments of chapter three that said fear could lead to solidarity, alignment, and action. Therefore, I looked into the mobilizations, activism, and cooperation of Afghan women, which happened through virtual platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp applications. In the last chapter, I also aimed to look into discourses of representation, self-identification, bargaining with patriarchy happening within and by the members of the WhatsApp group chat 'Our voice for our future.'

This multi-folded thesis discussed interconnected topics such as representation, the rhetoric of salvation, war on the bodies of Afghan women, war on terror, patriarchy, fear, hope, mobilization, and activism amid the uncertain times of the Taliban's return. I acknowledge that engaging with all the mentioned topics goes beyond the scope of an MA thesis; however, I am hopeful that it will highlight the need for research that covers such topics from Afghanistan.

I understand that my work is a small contribution and, in fact, the beginning for more detailed and substantiated research that must be dealt with more time, resources, and focus. While there has been a lot to highlight and discuss, considering the limitation, I hope that I have been able to provide the base for more detailed academic contributions. I aim to look into this topic and expand it once I am given the emotional endurance and further academic capacity and training.

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List of Interviewees:

- Farzana Wahidy, November 2020.
- Helal Masoomi, March 2020.
- Mary Akrami, March 2020.
- Shaharzad Akbar, May 2020
- Wazhma Frogh, May 2020.