



My Forbidden Face

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Shereen Pandit on an Afghani memoir of childhood.

Some of the most compelling accounts of the experience of war have been written by young people, as witness Anne Frank's **The Diary of a Young Girl**. Now a young Afghani woman, Latifa, has published a memoir of her experiences as a teenager and twenty-year-old in that war-torn country, the first from the point of view of a Muslim woman.

Shereen Pandit assesses her account.<!--break-->

My Forbidden Face is the story of a young Muslim woman who is on the threshold of adulthood when the Taliban comes to power in her native Afghanistan.

Latifa, born a year after the intervention of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, has lived all her life in a country at war, a guerrilla war against the Communist government and its Soviet Allies, followed by a civil war amongst those who opposed that regime, followed by a war of the Taliban, victors of the civil war, against its own people. The book is published as the first American bombs begin to fall on Afghanistan, of which cognisance is taken in the Afterword. Her story isn't just, therefore, as the sub-title indicates, one of a young woman 'growing up under the Taliban' but one of a young woman who has grown up under a number of regimes, all of which, including those which preceded her birth, have made her people suffer to varying degrees.

Part memoir, part history, part a piecing together of the collective experiences of her family and friends, part a reflection upon what has happened in Afghanistan in her lifetime, particularly between the ages of 16 and 21, the story is a compelling one.

A story of resistance

Opening her story with the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, Latifa takes the reader in graphic detail through those first days, devoting nearly all of the first two chapters of the book to the beginning of the Taliban's five year reign of terror. She tells the story of the initial impact of the Taliban on her family, on women and on her beloved Kabul in a way which makes her fear for all of these almost palpable. Her story is also one of resistance, of how, after the first devastation of the literal and figurative blows rained by the Taliban upon them, people, especially women, rally to prevent what Latifa sees as the Taliban's determination to eradicate women from Afghanistan completely. Ordinary people like her refuse to lose hope, even when they realise that the world is watching and doing nothing about their pain.

Latifa's story is refreshing, because she writes as a Muslim woman, a member of a family which loves its Faith, its culture, its traditions, though it may have a few Western clothes, toys and ways. In coming forward to bear testimony against the Taliban's attacks on her country and its people, especially its women, she rejects not Islam, but the Taliban's perversion of that Faith. Her struggle, her hope, is for a retention of her Faith and her culture, as well as her freedoms and that of all the men and women of her country.

Historical and political context

Interesting, too, is that whilst the central thrust of the book is 'bearing witness' to the sufferings of ordinary Afghani people under the Taliban, the writer makes some attempt to place the Taliban regime in historical and political context, and thus to account for its rise and its short though devastating reign.

Latifa does not shirk from presenting her own and her family's political perspective on the events, not only under the Taliban, but before it. She raises political questions around the responsibility of the West for the rise of the Taliban and its perpetuation in power. Despite Western sponsorship of her trip to France and of her book, she doesn't fall into the trap of designating everything non-Western as bad. Thus, for example, whilst she resents the Soviet Union's role in Afghanistan, she pays tribute to the Soviets for encouraging, supporting, even compelling, the education of the Afghan people, especially women.

At first reading, the book is a bit confusing stylistically, because of the way it moves back and forth between present tense, almost diary-style accounts of events as they unfold, to historical analysis, to pre-Taliban experiences, to her thoughts about what is happening and what has happened.

Often I had to sit with one finger in the chronology and one on the page I was reading to work out under which regime certain events took place. This happened, for example, with the story of her brothers, and the issue of conscription, their flight to the Soviet Union, the imprisonment of her older brother, the impact on her mother. This didn't detract from the power of the story for me, but it may well be problematic for young people reading the book.

A more serious reservation that I have, is Latifa's insistence that Pakistan was the prime mover behind the Taliban, and the perhaps disproportionate amount of vitriol vented on Pakistan, despite it being the only place where, for example, Afghani women could get medical treatment. Given the racism against Pakistanis in countries like Britain, the issue of Pakistan's involvement could, perhaps, have been handled with more care.

This, like all the issues raised in Latifa's book 'war, oppression, Islam' makes Latifa's story one which must be read and discussed by and with young people. There is much to learn from it, not only about Afghanistan under the Taliban, but about the country's history, its people, its culture and above all, about Islam as seen through the eyes of those who adhere to the Faith and resent the way it is distorted.

My Forbidden Face by Latifa is published by Virago (1 86049 956 2, £9.99 pbk).

Shereen Pandit is a writer who has taught English and creative writing to refugees, mainly women, from many countries.

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