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The poetic soul of the Taliban

Review

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*"I know the black ditches
I always carry a rocket launcher on my shoulder;
I know the hot trenches
I always ambush the enemy;
I know war, conflict, and disputes
I will tell the truth even if I am hung on the gallows..."*

A new anthology of Taliban poetry aims to bring some cultural understanding of the 'violent, suppressive and fearsome Taliban' to English speakers. The book *Poetry of the Taliban* is now on sale through Amazon and Hurst Publishers in the UK, and coming out in June in the USA. It is a collection of over two hundred contemporary poems, originally combining Urdu, Persian, and Pashtu verse.

As is mentioned on the website, "their verse is fervent, and very modern in its criticism of human rights abuses by all parties to the war in Afghanistan; whether in describing an air strike on a wedding party or lamenting, "We did all of this to ourselves," it is concerned not with politics, but with identity, and a full, textured, deeply conflicted humanity".

In the preface of the anthology, Faisal Devji points out that this collection is not a product of the Islamic Emirate, thus not centrally promoted propaganda. On the contrary, it is a collective effort by men, and one woman, who express ethnic or nationalist feelings, particularly in resisting foreign occupiers. Western technology is denounced, and the local people are portrayed as victims of a foreign invasion who makes them suffer at a cultural, national and spiritual level. To which extent, however, the ideology is not promoted by the Emirate, one cannot be sure of.

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Some poems are highly descriptive, focusing on pastoral beauties of Afghan nature ("each stone a ruby, each bush a medicine") and remind the reader of ghazal Persian poetry. Some poems tend to elevate the land, the people, and the nature of Afghanistan to a near-divine existence, while other poems are more focused on contemporary issues such as battle, death, sacrifice, victimization, technology and the 'foreigner' (the invader).

The ghazal is originally a highly poetic verse written in Dari or Urdu, consisting of rhyming couplets and a refrain, mostly centering on themes of love and separation. It was dispersed throughout South Asia in the twelfth century under Islamic occupation, whence Sufi mystics adopted the form to create a genre of Sufi poetry, whereby 'the Beloved' in the poems is a metaphor for God and a quest to unite with the Spiritual. Under Sufi poets such as the famous Rumi, and Hafez, and others, the pursued Love no longer concerned the beloveds of the palpable world, or sexual union.

The ghazal in general deals with love; unattainable love. It is an expression of an unrequited feeling of longing for "the beloved", be it a man or a woman, be it a god or a person. The love is believed to raise the poet's soul to a higher rank, to a spiritual liberation; but because this love is unattainable (either because the beloved does not feel the same way, or because society does not allow for their union) the lover cannot stop being tormented by this love, although he has to accept his fate.

Sometimes, the beloved is a deceitful, violent nymph. Other times he/she is innocent; there is no format to what character the beloved will have throughout ghazal poetry, but the unattainable feature remains persistent to this day. More often than not, however, the ghazal draws a blurry line between spiritual love and human, romantic love. Through metaphors of romantic love, the poet searches for his union with God, who becomes the Beloved.

Many of the works in this anthology move beyond the romance of the ghazal, and take a localized contemporary personality. Many of them are concerned with the people's campaign to expel foreign forces from their territory, with angry battle songs or mournful laments devoted to innocent civilian casualties. Meanwhile, others still touch on themes of religious devotion, nostalgia, or even love, as does the following example:

"Soul"

by Shahzeb Faqir, written in 2007

*The village seems strange; this is separation as if my beloved has left it.
The grief of separation is so cruel that it is not scared of anyone;
When the soul does not leave the body it shakes.
Like a flower withering in the autumn,
Autumn has now come to my love.
I remain alone with my shaggy head of hair
Uncomprehending; my heart has been sad for a long time.
In a flash, it put a hole in my entire world;
Each affair is like an arrow.
Oh Faqir! Better be sad.
Who told you that love is easy?*

Hurst Publishers made a very brave move in publishing this anthology, since they have faced harsh criticism for softening the West's stance towards the fierce and violent fighters that are the Taliban. Others praise the move, since it allows for a first-time acquaintance

with Taliban culture, showing, among other things, that these fighters have a soul, a culture, and an identity which is extremely threatened by occupation; to save these ideals, they must fight.

