

FEATURE: In Western Afghanistan, an ancient love of poetry thrives again

5 October 2017 – As she begins to read her poem, Fatema’s voice is faint and unsure of itself. She has been writing poetry only for the last six months because, as she explains, she wants to get in touch with her inner feelings. What emerges in her recitation has echoes of Afghanistan’s ancient past, and signs of a new and modern passion. What is heard, translated from Dari, is a short narrative about the horrors of war – “The color of blood and cold corpses ... fresh bodies thrown into battle” – and Fatema’s own story, one that ends with the hope that, “somewhere between the lines, set in the sweetness, is a space without war.”

Afghanistan has for centuries been a cradle of poetic expression. One of the world’s best-known poets, Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi, or “Rumi,” was born here over 800 years ago. His lines of poetry, in ancient Dari, speak to the thoughts of many Afghans, as do the lines of other great Persian, Pashtun and Arab writers.

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What is extraordinary about the graceful expressions this afternoon at the Herat Literary Association, however, is the newfound enthusiasm combined with the clicks of cell phone technology – which together suggest a cultural revival amid the uncertainty of war. Much of Afghanistan’s newfound love of poetic expression – which has taken hold in Kabul and Kandahar as well – is coming from young Afghans seeking new ways to interact and express themselves.

“Our words are – in their way – a defense against war,” said Fatema Rahimi, 23. “Poetry is important to me because it can describe aspects of the conflict.”

Weekly in Herat, poets meet to share their latest works. Some bring freshly printed booklets marked by ornate calligraphy but others read directly from lines composed on their phones. Invariably, as new poems are read out around the table mixed with men and women, a round of applause will go up as the poem ends. This is, however, the moment that the sometimes-dreaded critique begins, often initiated by rows of sharp-dressed young ladies, who are quick to remark on what they think is imprecise imagery or inappropriate language.

The poetry is as often about love as it is about conflict, and an observer quickly notices that there is a curious interplay between the young men and women in the room. When an excited young man reads a poem about a tiger, representing a man, chasing a lovely gazelle draped in a veil, several women

chirp up to insist that the veil seems out of place. When another man talks about an unattractive bride, who runs from her groom, stumbles and falls, only to be laughed at by a wedding party, the women are incensed. "You shouldn't joke about the plight of women!" one pregnant mother snaps. "I'm not critiquing your language, only your subject matter."

When another first-time participant reads from a pamphlet of poems printed inside a glossy yellow cover, the women nod in appreciation and give him kind advice. One says, "It was beautiful but I didn't find enough meaning in it," adding, "You need to play more with the language, don't be so direct, and a study of the classics will help you."



Fatema Rahimi, (left), reads her poetry aloud to a group of 30 poets in Herat, Afghanistan. Above her is a portrait of Afghanistan's most famous poet, Maulana Mohammed Balkhi, also known as "Rumi." Photo: UNAMA/Fraidoon Poya

Yet most of the poetry is subtle if not profound, hinting at notions of spiritualism, and an Afghan sense of the transcendental.

"I grew up with poetry," said Ghulam Haidar Ghudsi, 35, who looks forward to his weekly indulgence at the literary association. "We are tired of war. There are poems for peace, but after all, things happen all around us, even suicide bombers. In my district, up along the Turkmen border, the Taliban are active and it is hard to even move.

"I like the Sufist poetry – that of Maulana [Rumi] Jalaladdin Mohammed Balkhi," he added. "I like his outlook. His poetry – particularly his imagery – speaks to me about peace. I've learned that there is a big difference between my moon [romantic aspirations] and where the moon rises, and his imagery makes this clear to me. I can tell you this, though, the school of Maulana promotes peace, not a culture of violence."

In the United States and Europe, Rumi is a highly-appreciated poet and sales of his poetry have skyrocketed in recent years even as many in North America and Europe do not recognize him as an "Afghan poet," since he rose to fame in Persia and Turkey, after his family left Afghanistan. The Sufi school of thinking that he founded and led still prides itself in creativity, tolerance, and an emphasis on unique spiritual journeys.

It is not clear what the growing popularity of poetry will mean for Afghanistan. In many cases, poetry serves as a welcome outlet for frustrated men and women, who often feel cornered by war and tied down by tradition. Still, the interest is growing, and though the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan ([UNAMA](#)) helps support events at the Herat Literary Association, the price to participate is always minimal, particularly when you compose lines on your phone as many literary club members do.

"I'm not a poet myself," said UNAMA Public Information Officer Fraidoon Poya. "But I like to come and listen. There is a special magic in the room every

week. I like to hear the new voices, the young men and women who come looking to be heard for the first time.”

The literary association’s Secretary-General, M. Daoud Monir, said he has seen a newfound appreciation of poetry across Western Afghanistan, one that is growing quickly and is often in line with aspirations for peace.

“These gathering give the youth a chance to express their views – even, as you see, when they contradict each other. On any given week, you can be sure that the main subject will be war and peace, but there is a lot going on here, including that these sessions give our women a chance to critique the patriarchy.”

The UN Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) has a mandate to support the Government of Afghanistan and its citizens in a shared goal of becoming a stable, open and peaceful nation. This feature story highlights one of the many ways the UN and Afghanistan are working together to overcome the many challenges to achieving this goal.