

## Mohib ZEGHAM

### Gender in Afghanistan

Because we fly with a single wing, my country has isolated itself from the rest of civilization. Afghanistan, as a culture, is male-centered--women are worth nothing. We believe all women are mentally defective, and have sayings in Pashto like: "A woman should either be in the house or in the grave."

Let's hear something from these women:

I am an Afghan girl  
Bound to tradition  
I am not permitted to fall in love,  
but I have.  
My lover is not with me.  
My existence is barren.  
I can bear a lifeless life,  
but not without you.

Sixty years ago, Gul Pach Ulfat, one of Afghanistan's greatest writers, began writing poems from women's point of view, and publishing them under a woman's name. Soon other male poets began to do the same. I see this as the beginning of the struggle against gender discrimination in Afghani literature, as during a time when there were no Afghani women writers, these men at least associated women's names with writing so real women would be inspired to write.

Last year an FM radio station in Kabul held a national poetry competition called "Da Arakozia Ghami," which translates as "the jewels of Arakozia," Arakozia being the ancient name of the part of Afghanistan now made up of the Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul and Urozgan provinces. I participated as a judge during the first stage of the competition and read many beautiful poems by Afghani women and girls. At the second stage, the jury selected the twelve best poets for six awards--six men and six women. The third and final period was judged by the public--people who had been listening to the competition used their cell phones to vote for their favorite poets. None of the women poets won, though in my opinion, their poetry was as good and often better than the men's. I see this as the unfortunate result of how people in my country think about gender and literature.

Now there are many Afghani women writing poems, even in rural areas, but many must still keep their writing secret from their communities. They participate in women's poetry readings by cell phone, so their activities will not be discovered. Some publish under pen names because they fear punishment from their families and villages. In May of 2012, The City of Books, a Kabul bookstore, honored five woman writers and poets with their "Zari Kerki,"--which means "The Golden Reed"--award. In covering this event for my magazine, *Sapida*, I took photographs of the winners to include in the story, but one of them asked me not to print her photo.

This woman had gone to school until the sixth grade, but fear of the Taliban, who in some rural areas warn people to not send their daughters to school, forced her to quit. Fortunately, a member of her family discovered the girl's talent and made her father take her out of the village to Kabul. Years later, Naeema Ghani, this woman, finished school and is recognized as one of the best writers of both fiction and nonfiction in Afghanistan. She is also among the 210 writers, poets and journalists who belong to Mirman Baheer, Afghanistan's largest women's social and cultural association, with branches in nine provinces as well as in Pakistan and Germany.

Let's listen to her voice:  
You and I are both explorers  
You and I are both wayfarers  
with the same destination  
But I am, I am wondering  
That I must walk on the plain, and you walk on the mountain  
You pull your hand from mine  
We do not travel side by side  
Perhaps this is the reason  
The chain is broken  
We may have the same wish  
But the path of our thought is different.

This transition from no Afghani women writers at all to an international association of Afghani women writers has not been entirely peaceful or without violence. Our women are still struggling against religious restrictions, war lords, the Taliban and a culture that favors men. They are still suffering, and we, as a culture, don't realize we are wasting half our talents and human resources by discriminating against women.

More information on Mirman Baheer is available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/magazine/why-afghan-women-risk-death-to-write-poetry.html?pagewanted=all>

and

<http://www.lorenzotugnoli.com/story/life-poetry/>