
How Afghan Captivity Shaped My Feminism

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On December 21, 1961, when I returned from Afghanistan, I kissed the ground at New York City's Idlewild Airport. I weighed 90 pounds and had hepatitis. Although I would soon become active in the American civil rights, anti-Vietnam war, and feminist movements, what I had learned in Kabul rendered me immune to the Third World romanticism that infected so many American radicals. As a young bride in Afghanistan, I was an eyewitness to just how badly women are treated in the Muslim world. I was mistreated, too, but I survived. My "Western" feminism was forged in that most beautiful and treacherous of countries.

In 1962, when I returned to Bard College, I tried to tell my classmates how important it was that America had so many free libraries, so many movie theatres, bookstores, universities, unveiled women, freedom of movement on the streets, freedom to leave our families of origin if we so chose, freedom from arranged marriages—and from polygamy, too. This meant that as imperfect as America may be, it was still the land of opportunity and of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

My friends, future journalists, artists, physicians, lawyers, and intellectuals, wanted only to hear fancy Hollywood fairy tales, not reality. They wanted to know how many servants I had and whether I ever met the king. I had no way of communicating the horror, and the truth. My American friends could not or did not want to understand. As with my young college friends so long ago, today's leftists and progressives want to remain ignorant.

From New York to Kabul

My Afghan awakening began in New York in 1961 when I married my college sweetheart, Ali. I was an Orthodox Jewish-American girl; he was a Muslim boy from Afghanistan who had been away from home for fourteen years while studying at private schools in Europe and America.

My plan was to meet Ali's family in Kabul, stay there a month or two, study "History of Ideas" at the Sorbonne for a semester, then return to Bard College to complete my final semester.

When we landed in Kabul at least thirty members of his family were there to greet us. The airport officials smoothly confiscated my American passport. "It's just a formality, nothing to worry about," Ali assured me. "You'll get it back later." I never saw that passport again.

Upon our arrival in Kabul, my Western husband simply became another person. For two years, in the United States, Ali and I had been inseparable. He had walked me to my classes. We did our homework together in the library. We talked constantly. In Afghanistan, everything changed. We were no longer a couple during the day. He no longer held my hand or kissed me in public. He barely spoke to me. He only sought me out at night. He treated me the way his father and elder brother treated their wives: with annoyed embarrassment, coldness, distance.

My father-in-law, Amir, whom we knew as "Agha Jan" or "Dear Master," was a leading businessman and an exceedingly dapper man. In Afghanistan, he was a progressive. In his youth, he had supported Amanullah Khan (1919-29) who had boldly unveiled Afghan women, instituted the country's first educational and health care systems, and introduced European-style trolleys in the capital city. Nevertheless, he did not want an American or Jewish daughter-in-law. I was Ali's desperate rebellion. I was flesh-and-blood proof that, for fourteen years, he had actually been living in the twentieth century.

Ali had not told me that his father was polygamous until just before we had arrived in Kabul. Then he told me that, "actually," his father had two wives. He'd been "tricked" into marrying the second wife, with whom he had only two children, Ali explained, "which says everything. She's more like a family servant." Ali's mother treated the second wife Fauzia so badly that Agha Jan finally moved her into her own house. I would visit and have tea with Fauzia. She was grateful for the gesture of respect and for the company.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that Agha Jan actually had three wives. This reality was one that Ali would not or could not discuss. He and his brothers blamed their mother for this third marriage to Sultana, which had jeopardized their inheritance considerably; this was a risky, tabooed subject. This third marriage didn't count because it counted all too much.

Agha Jan was in his sixties and stood six feet tall. His black hair was thick and only flecked with gray at the temples. He had a broad, frank mustache, and velvet black eyes that matched his black Italian handmade shoes. Although he wore the jauntiest and most expensive of Afghan-style karakul hats, Agha Jan also wore European-made suits and coats. As a devout Muslim, he neither drank nor smoked. Agha Jan's grown and married children, both men and women, executed a cringing half-bow whenever they greeted him.

Agha Jan's current home, with his third wife, Sultana, had one great European-style room in which he received visitors and dined. He usually ate alone, in a sitting room hushed by thick maroon carpets and thick, European-style velvet drapes. Rozia, his fourteen-year-old daughter by his third wife, served him each dish, bowing in and out of the room, like a servant.

"How can you justify polygamy?" I'd ask Ali. "It's humiliating, cruel, unfair to the wives, it dooms them to sexual celibacy and emotional solitude at a very young age and for the rest of their lives. It also sets up fearful rivalries among the half-brothers of different mothers who have lifelong quarrels over their inheritances."

When he was being Eastern, Ali would say: "Don't be a silly American. You say you're a thinker, God knows, you're

always reading, and I therefore expect more understanding and broadmindedness from you. Polygamy tries to give men what they need so that they will treat their wives and children in a civilized way. In the West, men are serial polygamists. They leave their first wives and set of children without looking back. Here, we do not like the earlier wives to be abandoned, impoverished, and ripped from their social identities. If she is a good Muslim wife, accepts and obeys her husband's wishes, he will support her forever, she will always have her children near her which is all that matters to a woman, her world will remain whole."

When he was being Western, Ali would say, "Our country is not ready for personal freedoms. That's why I'm needed here, to help bring my poor countrymen into the twentieth century. It's my destined role and I need you to help me. Don't leave."

As to the veil, my Western husband would say: "You are too impatient about this damn chadari.[1] Afghan women are not stupid. Give them some time. They will, in time, probably all adopt the more Western, freeing clothing."

But Eastern Ali tried to justify the veil in other ways. He said: "The country is dusty and sometimes dangerous and a woman is better protected in many ways by the chadari. Anyway, country women do not wear chadaris when they farm. This is largely a phenomenon of the city and anyway it's dying out." This was not exactly true. Afghan countrywomen almost immediately turned their faces to the nearest available wall whenever a man to whom they were not related walked by. They tended to cover their heads and faces with their scarves.

We lived with Ali's oldest brother Abdullah, his wife Rabiah, and their two children, who all shared a home with my mother-in-law Aishah, or "Beebee Jan" (Dear Lady). Agha Jan had not lived with Beebee Jan for a very long time.

My life was akin to that of an upper class Afghan woman. My experience was similar to—but hardly as constrained as—that which an increasing number of Arab and Muslim women face today. In this first decade of the twenty-first century, women living in Islamic societies are being forced back into time, re-veiled, more closely monitored, and more savagely punished than they were in the 1960s. That said, I had never expected my freedom and privacy to be so curtailed.

In Afghanistan, a few hundred wealthy families lived by European standards. Everyone else lived in a premodern style. And that's the way the king, his government, and the mullahs wanted it to remain. Western diplomats did not peg their foreign policies to how Afghanistan treated its women. Even before multicultural relativism kicked in, Western diplomats did not believe in "interfering."

The Afghanistan I knew was a prison, a feudal monarchy, and rank with fear, paranoia, and slavery. Individual Afghans were charming, funny, humane, tender, enchantingly courteous, and sometimes breathtakingly honest. Yet, their country was a bastion of illiteracy, poverty, and preventable disease. Women were subjected to domestic and psychological misery in the form of arranged marriages, polygamy, forced pregnancies, the chadari, domestic slavery and, of course, purdah (seclusion of women). Women led indoor lives and socialized only with other women. If they needed to see a doctor, their husband consulted one for them in their place. Most women were barely educated.

In Kabul, I met other foreign wives who loved having servants but whose own freedom had been constrained. Some European wives, who had come in the late 1940s and early 1950s had converted to Islam and wore The Thing, as we called the cloaking chadari. Each had been warned, as had I, that whatever they did would become known, that there were eyes everywhere, and that their actions could endanger their families and themselves.

Afghans mistrusted foreign wives. Once, I saw an Afghan husband fly into a rage when his foreign wife not only wore a Western swimsuit to a swimming party—but actually plunged into the pool. The men expected to be the only ones who would swim; their wives were meant to chat and sip drinks.

The concept of privacy is a Western one. When I would leave the common sitting room in order to read quietly in my own bedroom, all the women and children would follow me. They'd ask: "Are you unhappy?" No one spent any time alone. To do so was an insult to the family. The idea that a woman might be an avid reader of books and a thinker was too foreign to comprehend.

Like everyone else, Ali was under permanent surveillance. His career and livelihood depended upon being an obedient Afghan son and subject. How he treated me was crucial. He had to prove that his relationship to women was every bit as Afghan as any other man's; perhaps more so, since he had arranged his own marriage to a foreigner.

Out and About in Kabul

After two weeks of marathon tea-drinking and pistachio-eating, my polite smile was stuck to my face. I could not understand what people were saying, I was bored, I wanted to get out on my own and see Kabul, visit the markets and the museum, and see the mountains closer-up. I was under a very polite form of house arrest. "It's not done," "People will talk," "Tell me what you need and I'll get it for you," were some of Ali's responses. And so, I began to "escape" from the house every day.

I never put on the headscarves and long coats and gloves pointedly left for me atop the bedroom bureau. I would take a deep breath, go out, and stride at a brisk, American pace. Always, a female relative or servant would run after me, bearing the scarves. I would smile, shake my head "no," and keep on going. Of course, I was also followed by a slow-moving family Mercedes. The driver would call out: "Madame, please get inside. We are worried that you will hurt yourself."

Sometimes, I'd walk faster, or I'd take a bus or a gaudi, a horse-drawn painted cart. The buses were quite colorful except inside, fully sheeted women sat apart from the men. The first time I saw this, I laughed out loud in disbelief and nervousness. In any event, as women moved onto the bus, men would jostle them, and make sneering remarks I could not understand.

My family was right. They knew their country. Barefaced and alone, I looked like an "uppity" Afghan woman and was thus fair game for catcalls, propositions, interminable questions, rough advances. Men would push themselves against me, knock me around, laugh, joke. But, I could easily have been kidnapped and held for ransom, taken to a cave, kept there for days, raped, then returned. Ali finally exploded at me and told me that this exact scenario had happened to the wife of an Afghan minister who had killed himself afterwards.

I had to be brought to heel. Ali's manhood and future depended upon this. A male servant would prevent me from going out. The family would call Ali and he would call me to yell, threaten, plead, or shame. I presented myself at the American embassy, which was located right next door. The embassy rented the property from my father-in-law.

"I want to go home. I'm an American citizen," I said.

"Where is your passport?" The marine guard would ask.

"They took it away from me when our plane landed. But, they told me that I'd get it back."

Each time, the Marines would escort me back home. They told me that as the "wife of an Afghan national," I was no longer an American citizen entitled to American protection.

I did, on occasion, get to speak with diplomats. Not a single foreign voice was heard protesting the condition of women. The Western media didn't care about what Afghans did to one another, or what men did to "their" women. Gin-soaked diplomats told me that it would be "immoral" to preach to Afghans about their tribal violence or their oppression of women; these were sovereign, sacred, local customs. One American diplomat put it this way: "We can't impose our moral or cultural values on these people. We can't ask them about their system of government or justice, their treatment of women, their servants, their jails. These are very sensitive, very touchy, very proud men who happen to own a piece of land that's important to us. If we aren't careful, their kids would be learning Russian—or Chinese—instead of English and German. You've got to remember, we're guests here, not conquerors."

I was under house arrest in the tenth century. I had no freedom of movement, nothing with which to occupy myself. I was supposed to accept this.

Ali knew he was losing me. We fought bitterly every single night. Was he trying to make me pregnant so that I'd have to stay? I was afraid to go to bed. His eldest sister, Soraya, offered to sleep with me in our bedroom—an act of courage and kindness that I have never forgotten. She must have known what was going on.

Yes, my husband "loved" me and wanted to protect me, but I was, after all, a woman, which meant that he believed he owned me, and that his honor consisted of his ability to control me. Ali was also locked into a power struggle with his father and with his culture. I was the symbol of his freedom and independence, a reminder of his life lived apart. He did not want to lose such a valuable symbol. If I became pregnant, I would have to stay. His father would be forced to stop making things so hard for us.

My Escape

I devoted all my waking time to planning an escape. I gave up on the American embassy. I stopped confiding in Ali. I

began to contact foreign wives, most of whom would not or could not help me. I could only meet people through Ali or through a relative. I was not allowed to talk privately to anyone. All the public tea-houses were for men-only. I could not drift in and strike up a conversation with a man.

I finally found a foreign wife who agreed to help me. She was the German-born second wife of the ex-mayor of Kabul. She obtained a false passport for me. I had secretly written to my parents. I had also called them. They had agreed to send me a money order in care of this woman. Now, I only had to choose a flight and book a seat.

And then, I fainted. I had come down with hepatitis. I learned later that Beebee Jan had ordered the servants to stop boiling my water. Some Afghans seemed to enjoy the spectacle of Westerners succumbing to such illnesses; they took it as proof of foreign "weakness." I was finally taken to the new hospital and accompanied by at least ten family members. The doctor said:

"Honey, you are very sick and you have to get out of here. Will they let you go? If you are strong enough to sit up and walk a bit, get on a plane, go home."

He gave me a pair of dark glasses to hide my jaundiced eyes from the flight attendants. And, he prescribed intravenous infusions of vitamins and nutrients. He sent a nurse to the house.

And then, Beebee Jan tried to pull out the IV and all hell broke loose. I called Agha Jan and begged him to come over. He was the Master of the Universe as far as his family was concerned.

He came. First, he prayed "for my recovery." Then, he asked everyone else to leave, after which he spoon-fed me milk custard. He was tender towards me; only afterwards did I understand that he could afford to be. My illness and probable departure meant that he had won the battle with Ali. Perhaps he did not want a dead American daughter-in-law on his hands either. And, he'd be glad to see me gone. I only spelled trouble for his family, any foreign wife would, especially one who had tried to escape so many times.

"I know about your little plan with the German woman," he quietly said. "I think it will be best if you leave with our approval on an Afghan passport which I have obtained for you. You have been granted a six-month visa for "reasons of health."

And he gave it to me on the spot. The Kingdom of Afghanistan passport has retained its bright orange color. He also handed me a plane ticket. "We will see you off. It is better this way."

Ali raged and swore—and begged me to stay but I remained adamant.

Thirty relatives dutifully came to see me off. Kabul was hidden in snow. I was booked on an Aeroflot flight to Moscow. The minute that plane took off a fierce joy seized me by the throat and would not let go. I was both jaundiced and pregnant. Had Ali discovered this while I was still in Afghanistan, I would never have been allowed to leave. Given my medical condition, it would have been my death sentence.

It was not the last time I would see Ali, though. In 1979, after the Soviet invasion, Ali escaped by crossing the Khyber Pass into Pakistan, disguised as a nomad. Since 1980, he, his new wife Jamila and their two children, Iskandar and Leyla, have been living near me in America. Oddly, but happily, we relate as members of an extended family.

My Feminist Awakening

I had experienced gender apartheid long before the Taliban made it headline news. I came to understand that once an American woman marries a Muslim, and lives in a Muslim country, she is a citizen of no country. Never again could I romanticize foreign places or peoples in the Third World— or marriage.

Once a Western woman marries a Muslim and lives with him in his native land, she is no longer entitled to the rights she once enjoyed. Only military mercenaries can rescue her. I have since heard many stories about Western women who have married Muslim men in Europe and America but whose children were then kidnapped by their fathers and kept forever after in countries such as Saudi Arabia,[2] Jordan, Egypt, Pakistan and Iran. The mothers were usually permitted no contact.

Today, women in the Islamic world are increasingly pressured into arranged marriages, forced to veil themselves, not allowed to vote, drive, or travel without a male escort, to work at all, or to work in mixed gender settings. Worse, many are genitally mutilated in childhood, and routinely beaten as daughters, sisters, and wives; some are murdered by their male relatives in honor killings, and stoned to death for alleged sexual improprieties or for asserting the slightest independence. Such violations of women's human rights are increasingly taking place among the Muslim community in Europe and in North America.

Westerners do not always understand that Eastern men can blend into the West with ease while still remaining Eastern at their core. They can "pass" for one of us but, upon returning home, assume their original ways of being. Some may call this schizophrenic; others might see this as duplicitous. From a Muslim man's point of view, it is neither. It is merely personal Realpolitik. The transparency and seeming lack of guile that characterizes many ordinary Westerners make us seem childlike and stupid to those with multiple cultural personalities.

A woman dares not forget such lessons—not if she manages to survive and escape. What happened to me in Afghanistan must also be taken as a cautionary tale of what can happen when one romanticizes the "primitive" East.

Did Ali really think that I would be able to adjust to a medieval, Islamic way of life? Or that his family would ever have accepted a Jewish-American love-bride?

There are only two answers possible. Either he was not thinking or he viewed me as a woman, which meant that I did not exist in my own right, that I was destined to please and obey him and that nothing else was really important. He certainly helped shape the feminist that I was to become.

When I returned to the United States, there were few feminist stirrings. However, within five years, I became a leader of America's new feminist movement. In 1967, I became active in the National Organization for Women, as well as in various feminist consciousness-raising groups and campaigns. In 1969, I pioneered women's studies classes for credit, cofounded the Association for Women in Psychology, and began delivering feminist lectures. I also began work on my first book, *Women and Madness*,^[3] which became an oft-cited feminist text.

Firsthand experience of life under Islam as a woman held captive in Kabul has shaped the kind of feminist I became and have remained—one who is not multiculturally "correct." By seeing how women interacted with men and then with each other, I learned how incredibly servile oppressed peoples could be and how deadly the oppressed could be toward each other. Beebee Jan was cruel to her female servants. She beat her elderly personal servant and verbally humiliated our young and pregnant housemaid. It was an observation that stayed with me.

While multiculturalism has become increasingly popular, I never could accept cultural relativism. Instead, what I experienced in Afghanistan as a woman taught me the necessity of applying a single standard of human rights, not one tailored to each culture. In 1971—less than a decade after my Kabul captivity—I spoke about rescuing women of Bangladesh raped en masse during that country's war for independence from Pakistan. The suffering of women in the developing world should be considered no less important than the issues feminists address in the West. Accordingly, I called for an invasion of Bosnia long before Washington did anything, and I called for similar military action in Rwanda, Afghanistan, and Sudan.

In recent years, I fear that the "peace and love" crowd in the West has refused to understand how Islamism endangers Western values and lives, beginning with our commitment to women's rights and human rights. The Islamists who are beheading civilians, stoning Muslim women to death, jailing Muslim dissidents, and bombing civilians on every continent are now moving among us both in the East and in the West. While some feminist leaders and groups have come to publicize the atrocities against women in the Islamic world, they have not tied it to any feminist foreign policy. Women's studies programs should have been the first to sound the alarm. They do not. More than four decades after I was a virtual prisoner in Afghanistan, I realize how far the Western feminist movement has to go.

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