Title
In Search of a Real but Invisible Afghan Feminist Icon: CSW Research Scholar Returns to Kabul to Explore the Legacy of Queen Soraya Tarzi

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In June this year I returned to Kabul in search of empirical data and the legacy of the first modern Afghan woman, Queen Soraya Tarzi (r. 1919–1929). The research trip opened my eyes to the particular challenges of conducting feminist scholarship in what is not only a war zone but also an authoritarian, somewhat chaotic, and misogynist society where history is largely handed down orally through anecdotes and folklore. My visit also coincided with a period in which Afghans have begun to rewrite their history, contesting the official nationhood version with ethno-centrist and pan-Islamists variations, both of which either ignore Queen Soraya or present her in a negative light either due to her modernity or ethnicity.

I began to encounter gender-specific issues even before arriving in Kabul. The first preparation for the trip was to acquire the right Islamic outfits to fit into the contemporary Afghan society where foreign and Afghan women of all ages are required to wear some form of hijab in public. The irony that almost a century earlier Queen Soraya had freed herself from such traditionalist sartorial interpretations of Islam was not lost on me, an independent twenty-first century Afghan woman, as I began a difficult search for hijab-style clothing in my stopover in Europe. I needed loose, long-sleeved tops that covered the neck, but such tops were hard to come by in Hamburg. If the tops were long-sleeved, they almost inevitably were either see-through or had deep cleavages. Sexiness and its opposite, the hijab, were the two sides of the same misogynist coin, from Kabul to California. The experience gave me a taste of the delicate balance that Soraya had to strike as a female Muslim public figure whose life moved between Afghan conservatism and European expectations of conspicuous feminine sensuality as embodied in the 1920s fashion, with its silk fabrics and knee-length dresses that show off women’s legs. Looking at Soraya’s photographs available far away from her country of origin in American online media archives abroad, what is striking is the ease with which she could dress up as a traditional Afghan woman, a British aristocrat, an Ottoman lady, or an Arab Bedouin woman, appearing in all of them as a pretender rather than the genuine item. Dressed in my baggy trousers, loose top, and headscarf, I, too, felt like a pretender in disguise. The clothing felt like a betrayal of my own feminist values, but then again, placing such degree of importance on sartorial matters itself smacked of superficiality. Or so I rationalized my discomfort.
LOOKING FOR EMPIRICAL DATA IN KABUL’S CHAOS

The key scholarly challenge I encountered in Kabul was where to look for sound, reliable empirical data on my study subject, the life and legacy of Queen Soraya. The National Archive was the first natural destination for my research. Luckily for all scholars of Afghanistan, the building had survived three decades of war for the simple reason that the various fighting parties were not aware of its function. Having been mistaken for a mosque, the building was spared rocket attacks unlike many other public edifices destroyed in the war. Even more fortunately, a visit by a Taliban delegation in the 1990s resulted in little damage, presumably because they failed to realize the value of the materials contained in the archive.

In my first visit to the archive, I noticed the presence of a female receptionist, one of the first staff members I encountered by entering the building. Later on, I met one or two other women working in the archive in middle-ranking positions. But the number of male staff by far outweighed the women. These working women still represented real progress, at least compared to the Taliban period when women were not even allowed to leave their homes unaccompanied, let alone work in public offices. I was relieved to know that I was not the only woman in the building, which was the usual scenario whenever I left the hotel. If the women’s presence was comforting,
their lack of interest in research and Afghan history was disappointing albeit not surprising, given the lack of attention to female intellectualism that has run through the country’s history.

If the women’s presence represented progress, the conceptual understanding of the purpose of an archive itself had not yet caught up with modern times. To begin with, there was the problem of getting the cooperation of the gatekeepers. The man in charge of the manuscript section was abroad on health grounds and his absence meant that the manuscript section was inaccessible to visitors. The remaining section was open to visitors but too, I encountered two basic problems: the lack of a catalogue and a reading room. The archive felt and looked like a museum rather than a storage place for keeping knowledge and making it accessible. In developed countries, a scholar learns about the available materials through a careful reading of the archive’s catalogues. In Kabul, I was told that the archive did not have a catalogue and instead was asked to tell the officials in charge what it was that I needed. Exactly how was I supposed to know what I needed in the absence of a catalogue was hard to fathom. I had no choice but to give them the basic information, the name of Soraya and the years of her reign. It was only later, at the end of my trip, that I realized that there did indeed exist a catalogue for the archive. However, this catalogue was stored in the national museum’s library, tucked away between books on Uzbek literature. Furthermore, the catalogue was outdated, published as it was in the 1980s, before the civil wars that destroyed much of the country’s historical legacy. This discovery came too late, only a day before my return flight.

Like anything else in Afghanistan, conducting scholarly research also requires forging personal, friendly relationships with the officials working in public offices. The lines between work and private life are blurred in Afghan society and personal relationships are considered more important than professional ones. As a result, the scholar has little choice but to spend much time socializing with the staff by drinking tea and exchanging stories, and in doing so, creating a personal relationship. It is a time-consuming endeavor but one that is worthwhile because the better the relationship the greater the scholar’s chance of getting help from the staff. After enjoying the Afghans’ famous hospitality, drinking many cups of tea and talking about my private life, I was finally allowed to meet the archive’s director. Having him on my side was key to the success of my research, which is why I ignored his misogynist jibes that were part of every visit. The visits consisted of me being the only woman in a room with about twenty or so male officials who looked at me in utter bewilderment. “Our sister is visiting from abroad,” is how the director would explain my puzzling presence in that otherwise male-only room. Having established his
authority over me, the director then signed the much-needed order requesting the staff help me in my research. The first hurdle was thus overcome successfully but not without my having to play the role of a friendly, respectful, and obedient Afghan woman, swallowing rather than fighting misogynist jibes.

Afghanistan is a deeply authoritarian, hierarchical society, which is why the director’s signed order worked its wonder, with the staff doing their utmost to help me in my endeavor. To my utter delight, I discovered that Queen Soraya had not been forgotten in the National Archive. The photographs of her official visits to Europe, unveiled and dressed in the latest European fashion of the 1920s, adorned the walls of the archive. I also discovered the photograph of the first Afghan girls’ group that was sent abroad to study in Turkey as part of the women’s rights movement of which Queen Soraya was a pioneer. Downstairs in the storage room, I discovered boxes after boxes filled with Queen Soraya’s photographs but the problem with them all was the lack of information about the date, the location, and the names of the people who appeared in the photographs alongside Soraya. The absence of such crucial information somewhat reduced the empirical value of these visual historical documents, alerting me to the fact that knowledge in Afghanistan was still something that was largely stored in persons, rather than in objects such as books, documents,
Modernity and Traditionalism: Afghan Girls Learn French in Kabul
and photographic collections. To interpret, understand, and contextualize the photographs in a sound scholarly manner, I needed the help of Queen Soraya’s living descendants, who by virtue of their belonging to a former royal family were beyond my reach as an ordinary Afghan. The only other alternative would have been to contact Nancy Hatch Dupree, an American scholar and Afghan specialist with an immense knowledge of Afghan history. Given her unique status, Dupree is not only hard to get hold of but she was also in Peshawar, Pakistan at the time of my visit. I became acutely aware of the fragility of Soraya’s legacy, especially given that even her youngest daughter was already advanced in age. Researching her life felt like running against time.

Knowledge is not the only part of scholarship that is stored in individuals in Afghanistan. Important historical manuscripts are also often in possession of families and individuals rather than the Afghan state. To access such documents, one needs to identify and get in touch with the one or two brokers who specialize in negotiating the purchase of such documents in bidding processes where often the highest bidder is ultimately the winner. With the Afghan state’s attempts since 2001 to gather, store, and own such important historical documents, the material value of these manuscripts have increased considerably, leading to attempts at forgery and the availability of unofficial copies on the market. During my visit to the archive, I met one official who had purchased a scanner with his own private money, trying to scan a significant manuscript belonging to the period of my research in my presence. I also found out later on that an unofficial copy of this manuscript was already in circulation, offered to anyone ready to pay $8,000 dollars for it. The legacy of Queen Soraya had thus become part of the wider corruption that bedevils Afghanistan. With funding for feminist scholarship being rather limited, Queen Soraya’s legacy is likely to get lost, ending up in ownership of random private individuals who may or may not have a scholarly interest in her.

Given the absence of a catalogue, a reading room, or contextual information about the many photographs that the Archive held, I was delighted to discover six pages of a women’s magazine that was published in Soraya’s period. The six pages contained a wealth of information. First of all, the paper on which the magazine was printed was very thin by comparison to other publications of the same time. This fact indicated that despite the “notorioussness” of Queen Soraya’s period for its feminist equal rights policies—which ultimately served as an excuse to bring down the state in a rebellion—the Afghan state of which she was queen did not have the necessary funds to promote feminism through printing. Reading the thin and partly damaged pages, I discovered that there were two prices for the magazine, one for local Afghan readers and one for readers outside of Afghanistan. Queen Soraya’s women’s rights project was thus international in its reach and outlook, representing an early pan-feminist movement. Equality striking was the conspicuous presence of a feminist Islamic theology which again provided evidence against the widespread interpretation of Queen Soraya’s period as a time exclusively marked by Western-style modernization. If in her appearance Queen Soraya strived to look like her counterparts in Paris, London, and New York, given the magazine’s content, intellectually she placed herself in the context of modernist pan-Islamist ideology that was a key movement in the rest of the Muslim world including Iran, Egypt, and Turkey. An article praising the bravery of female Turkish mujahedin was further evidence that despite her outwardly Western appearance, Queen Soraya was part of the Islamist anti-colonial ideology that was prominent throughout the Muslim world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The magazine’s content also included an advertisement which was an attempt at raising funds for the only girls’ schools that existed at the time. The school was founded by the queen but still desperately needed funds to purchase light bulbs and a telephone. The Afghan state did not have funds for both projects, which is why the magazine had to rely on charitable wealthy Afghans for financing the projects. It was evident that even though
Myth Replaces History: Soraya Invisible on Billboard of School’s History
Queen Soraya’s battles for Afghan women’s rights served as an excuse to attack and bring down the state in 1929, in reality the Afghan state did not spend much money on this “controversial” project.

At this point, I am happy to report that with the help of the Archive staff I succeeded in getting the six pages of the magazine scanned and copied onto a CD. The pages are random and belong to different issues, but still, they provide a wealth of sound, reliable empirical data on the role of printing and press in launching the first modern Afghan feminist movement in the 1920s.

**TURNED INVISIBLE: WHERE IS SORAYA IN HER OWN SCHOOL?**

If in the 1920s the school had struggled for funds to even purchase light bulbs, with the help of the French taxpayers its current reincarnation is most impressive. Complete with a new paint coat, a garden that is well looked after, a nursery for the teaching staff, and a well-stocked library, this school in Kabul is comparable to European schools. If this represented progress, there still was the crucial problem of my finding no sign of Queen Soraya, the woman who had founded the original school in 1928, in the entire building. Even though Soraya was a real, historical personality, she was ignored in favor of a mythical figure, Malalai, a woman about whose existence there’s hardly any evidence. Soraya was absent even in the public display sign at the entrance to the school building, which contained an introduction to the school’s history. Instead of Soraya’s picture, the display showed a poster of a painting in which Malalai appears dressed in traditional Afghan clothing, holding a flag and leading an anti-British rebellion. It was clear from this decision to bypass the real, historical heroine, Queen Soraya, in favor of an imagined, mythical heroine, Malalai, that Soraya’s role had remained a controversial one, with the Afghan state distancing itself from her rather than giving her due recognition. This distancing act was in sharp contrast to the conspicuous presence of equal rights slogans that appeared on large banners in all official buildings staffing education authorities. Despite the very real existence of misogyny in everyday life in Afghanistan, the country has never had such a considerable amount of funding for women’s rights projects and such a vigorous women’s rights movement as it has now. Yet still, one of the key, pioneering, iconic figures of Afghan women’s rights, Queen Soraya was all but invisible in this new, fragile democracy, that has otherwise done much to advance Afghan women’s cause. To the outside world, this absence might seem hard to understand, but as an Afghan I was aware that such preference for myths over historical reality was bound to happen in a country where history is largely unwritten and undocumented, handed down in colorful detail through unreliable anecdotes and tales rather than studied in sound historical books.

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