

ANARCHY AS A WAY OF LIFE IN FARIBA NAWA'S OPIUM NATION

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Abstract

Anarchy is a complete absence of law or government where there is utter lawlessness, chaos and complete disorder. Fariba Nawa is a renowned Afghan American journalist and the author of much talked work, Opium Nation, her memoir. This paper aims to study how anarchy has become a way of life in Afghanistan. Afghanistan, a once culturally and academically rich country, has become a mere ghost of its glorious past due to constant wars for more than a decade. Various regimes like the Soviets, the mujahedeen and the Taliban has destroyed the country totally. But strangely people have learnt to survive among all these tensions. The paper explores the lives of certain characters in the memoir to study the extent of this anarchy and how this has affected the lives of people there.

Anarchy is a complete absence of law or government, where there is utter lawlessness, chaos, and complete disorder. Jacques Pierre Brissot, a French Revolution leader says, “Laws that are not carried into effect, authorities without force and despised, crime unpunished, property attacked, the safety of the individual violated, the morality of people corrupted, no constitution, no government, no justice, these are the features of anarchy”. In the absence of a stable leadership, anarchy becomes a way of life in the society. Sadly this seems to be a reality in today's Afghan ociety. This paper intends to explore the anarchy prevalent in the war-torn Afghanistan as seen through Fariba Nawa's Opium Nation. Opium Nation is a memoir by Fariba Nawa, an expatriate American journalist. Gore Vidal, the author of his memoir Palimpsest, defines a memoir as, “how one remembers one's own life”. A memoir is more about what can be extracted from a section of one's life than about the outcome of the life as a whole. Opium Nation records Fariba Nawa's memories of her life in Afghanistan as a child and also the changes she witnessed when she came back after eighteen years from America. Her family was forced to leave the country in the year 1982 due to Soviet invasion. She is irresistibly drawn towards her home country and this work is a record of present day Afghanistan, where she keeps coming back from America, her other Home. Almost twenty years of war has shattered Afghanistan.

Although Soviet intrusion sparked the conflict in 1978, their withdrawal in 1989 did not end Afghanistan's woes. Instead, war, anarchy and fragmentation followed the Soviet withdrawal, as fighting continued against the Soviet-installed Najibullah government. Mohammed Najibullah's overthrow in 1992 brought the anti-Soviet resistance groups--called the

mujahedin--to power. The mujahedin turned their guns on each other in a brutal civil war. They broke out in different factions and started fighting each other. In addition to disagreement among the various factions over the division of power, constant competition among outside states for influence also destabilized Afghanistan. Politically fragmented, their military efforts remained uncoordinated throughout the war. This competition among regional powers became more intense after Kabul's takeover in September 1996 by the Taliban guerrilla group. But they failed to generate international recognition for its harsh social policies.

Fragmentation of power had been the root cause of chaos in the country. Anyone with a gun was with his own rules. This did not start during the years of resistance to the Soviet Union. Even before that, ethnic tensions within the country gave rise to clashes between rival factions. Afghanistan's anarchy has two sets of causes: domestic and international. At the domestic level, Afghanistan's ethnic and tribal politics have long contributed to instability. "Nepotism, inefficiency, class differences, and ethnic isolation" (35), became the reasons for the present anarchical state of Afghanistan. Pashtuns being the largest minority had always sidelined the other ethnicities like Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and Turkmen. The international cause was the foreign intervention for strategic interests, fuelled ethnic tensions inside.

In anarchy the safety of an individual is violated in many ways. Fariba's memories of the war were from its fourth year of Soviet invasion. They used to hear bullet shots and bombs being dropped. She explains a day at her home in Herat when she was young as,

"A normal day at our home included the rumble of gunshots and rockets. We ignored the sounds and carried on with life.... On some days, however, the shots and explosions barely missed members of my family"(12).

Her paternal grandmother just missed a bullet from hitting her due to her short height, making her a constant target of ridicule that her height saved her life. Her father also had a narrow escape from a bullet while in his house. Communist government soldiers and the mujahedin were fighting fierce war during the period. There was no safety of life or property. People had got used to live under those harsh conditions, as if nothing had happened. People were looted and kidnapped. There was no law and order at all. There was no proper government to which the people could complain. Corrupt mujahids or taslimis who were bribed by the Soviets to join the army, carried out drug trafficking, stole money and raped women. Women who never practiced a veil started to wear them out of fear. They were kidnapped, raped and killed. Men were secretly and forcefully recruited into the army as the number of the fighting men was dwindling day by day due to the war. Fearing a recruitment Fariba's brother, Hadi escaped to Germany. One of her uncles disappeared for ever for being an intellectual and a potent threat to the KGB. Violence was everywhere. Unrest resulted when a division of the Afghan army joined the mujahedeen, who stole weapons and murdered government officials and their families. Accused were tortured and their bodies were displayed in public to instill fear. The city was bombed, killing many people. Foreign intervention further worsened the situation. The U.S. supplied guns, missiles, mines, grenades and other weapons as they wanted the Soviets to withdraw. In those riots Fariba's father was also attacked and hardly escaped from

the mob. He had to immediately change his western attire to a traditional dress in order to save himself from being caught, as a suspected soviet sympathizer.

A gun was the symbol of power. Anyone with a gun could do anything as there was no proper government to carry on administration. People lived in constant fear. A tailor friend of the author's family was ordered to stitch outfits for the rebels, even without money for the fabric, threatening to kill his family if he had disobeyed. Anarchy was everywhere and it had become a way of life for the people. The reason for her family to leave Afghanistan was the brutal rocket attack on the all girls school Lycee Mehri in July 1982, where Fariba and her sister studied. Mujahedeen attacked the school because Communist propaganda was being taught there. Many children lost their lives. Fearing more dangers her family left the country.

Corruption was the core cause of this present state of anarchy. From ancient times opium was smuggled in and out of the country though it was banned by many rulers. Corrupt border guards and the officials were bribed in order to enhance a smooth flow of the trade. Only the difference was that it took place in very small amounts. While leaving the country through Pakistan, Fariba's family were stopped by the border police and looted of their belongings. They had to bribe the police with five dollars to get back the belongings.

Fariba Nawa witnessed the country's shift from a religious autocracy to a fragmented democracy and finally to a land of full-scale war. Afghan drug trade provided funding for the terrorists and for the Taliban. A decade long war has made the country dependent on illicit narcotics trade, without which the whole economy would collapse. The rebels who fought the soviets smuggled opium and heroin to make money and the CIA helped the mujahedin to smuggle narcotics and fund heroin laboratories. It was because the U.S. wanted the Soviets to be out of Afghanistan and found ways to make Soviet soldiers surrender due to heroin addiction. Many were called back. Now the drug trade has become a business like any other. The prolonged wars had turned the highly fertile land into a salty waste land making it capable of growing only opium. People use drugs as pain killers because of the lack of any health care. Thousands are getting addicted because of this. Women smuggle it easily without being caught because they hide the contraband under their veil. Most families having lost their male bread winner to the war force the women into the trade and make them addicts. Bibigul, one such addict speaks of her agony,

"I became addicted when my husband died three years ago in Pakistan.

We didn't have enough to eat. We opened our fast during Ramadan with water. But opium was the only cure for my aches. It's cheaper than medicine.

I didn't know it could be addictive, but now I know and I want to quit but I can't.

It's like being hungry and you need to eat. My stomach doesn't just growl, my entire body growls. So I eat it" (195).

The opium trade resulted in many young Afghan girls becoming opium brides. Often minor girls were used to settle off opium debts. If a trader could not pay his debt in the business, he agrees to give away his daughter, most often under-aged, to the drug-lord who would be nearly double her age. Darya, 12, was one such bride whom Fariba met in Ghoryan province. She was bartered to a man senior to her many years, because her father could not settle his

debts of opium trade. Her elder sister was also an opium bride. Truth becomes totally different from what the Afghan women are pictured by the western media, as weak, voiceless victims. They are epitomes of will-power and courage. They courageously go on with war and build their families. They rarely demand individual rights. Fariba, wonders at these women like Darya, even at a young age as how powerful they were and capable of overcoming their problems. She did not even come of age when she was married and was doomed to go with her husband when he returned to take her. She had no choice to refuse. Her mother explained that the war and the subsequent drought had killed all the livestock and dried up the Ghoryan River. The land became a desert and the farmers started cultivating opium since they had no other options to survive. Poverty led to this illegal trade as they could not find any work. Darya, threatened to burn herself if she was sent away with her much older husband. Self immolation had become a usual occurrence as innumerable women were forced into a marriage without their consent. A niqah or a marriage ceremony was a mutual contract to live together between a willing man and woman. But in many cases as, Darya, only the consent of the bride's father is considered necessary, in order to settle off an opium debt, a serious human rights violation.

“Darya's marriage is not a union between man and woman but an opium deal that has to be fulfilled to save her family. She is the sacrifice for the greater good....Haji Sufi may have the power to kill her entire family if he's jilted....What Darya wants is irrelevant”(123).

Women become drug peddlers in large numbers mainly out of compulsion, as they might have lost their male bread-winners of the family to the war or while smuggling. The rich drug-lords terrorize such poor families of opium traders. So the debt incurred by them fell on the women and the younger male members who also take to opium trade to settle off the debt. Gandomi, a poor widow, whom Fariba met, was one such woman who was being threatened by a drug lord Haji Sardar, as her husband could not settle his opium debts. She had lost her husband, brother and son due to the drug trade. In order to settle the debts incurred on her and to survive, along with her daughter she was forced to remain in the trade without having any other way out. Women enter the trade not only out of compulsion but also for luxury. They cultivate opium in large fields, harvest it and easily smuggled it under their veils, which was difficult to find out. They even sold their harvest in the open market without fear. Many had contacts with influential drug-dealers, who saved them if they were caught. They made use of this chance to improve their life styles.

In order to counter the growth of poppy plant, the anti narcotics department was ordered to burn out all plantations. But this was only with the poor who had no money to bribe the corrupt officials, who would in turn, turn a blind eye towards the rich traders and cultivators, for a handsome bribe. When the British government came forward to buy the whole of opium plant cultivated in order to stop the trade, it resulted in more and more production, because people wanted to get high profits. So the plan was withdrawn. Even though it was illegal, it was a way for people to make quick money. Many people had improved their financial status

from this trade. It was a time when people were ready to do anything for the sake of money, even treachery and murder. It happens even inside the government officials.

Though drugs are banned in Islam, in Afghanistan it has become a way of life. Even Islamic clerics or hajjis, people who made their obligatory trip to Mecca, work as traffickers. Sardar, a hajji and a leading drug lord says, "It's not a shame or a crime. People here do it because they are hungry" (130). Many men opt for this job out of their desire for a woman. A man had to pay a bride price to ask for a woman's hand in marriage and to meet the bride's father's demand, they end up in drug trade as it makes easy money. "With a 40 percent unemployment rate, drug smuggling is the best paying and most available job in Afghanistan"(134). The rich and the poor are equally involved. Men and women become smugglers.

Officials turn a blind eye on it due to corruption. The rich were getting rich and the poor poorer. Since majority of people had large families, drug trafficking became the only means to feed them all. They act as mules to smuggle the drugs to Iran, China, Europe and other countries risking their lives at border cross fires, often getting killed leaving the families in poverty forever.

Murders became common due to drug feuds or while trying to curb the trade. The biggest sector of the economy was still illicit narcotics and the most accused person was General Asif's boss Daud, the former chief of counternarcotics. The drug trafficking took place under the watchful eyes of corrupt officials like him. If the dealers were related to him or were his friends, they carry a letter from their mentor, who crosses the check posts safely without being prosecuted. He was accused of helping drug smugglers to transport narcotics and receiving huge amounts as a reward for his efforts.

"In 2005 the counternarcotics highway police... intercept at least 183 kilos of pure heroine....The drugs belong to Sayyed Jan, who shows the police a signed letter from their boss Daud addressed to all government security forces"(226).

Though everyone knew the truth, no one had the courage to speak against. Daud enjoyed a good name in the society and was highly respected by the people. The anarchy in the system had made people insensitive. He was also awarded a high position in the government as he helped America in fighting the Taliban. Influential people buy protection from government officials, with huge amounts of money to run their heroine refineries and safely smuggle out the drugs. Two dedicated NIU agents Obaid and Idrees were killed in a scandal by an informant, who also worked for the drug dealers within the government. The NIU was given information about a prospective two tons of opium smuggling, and these two agents were assigned to do the raid, as per the information given by the informant. The informant who was bribed by the smugglers also, informed them that the agents were coming. The Taliban commanders, who were holding the drugs, caught these two men and shot them dead. Their families wanted to investigate the murder but there was no one to whom they could complaint to, as the government itself was involved. The drug lords justify their work and convince many younger men to participate by manipulating religion. They say, "Twenty kilos of opium for a foreigner's head- that's about a six-thousand-dollar reward offered to fresh recruits of the insurgency" (263). Nawa also narrates the story of an uncle who kidnaps a six year old

boy and his friend, to coerce the boy's father to settle an opium debt. When it was not settled, the boy's friend's body was found in the river a few days after. "He tried everything to get his money back from Najib, but he didn't get it so he resorted to kidnapping his own nephew" (250).

The government gave full freedom to people to grow and smuggle opium as it was profitable for them. Another setback of the anarchy prevalent in the country was the suicide bombers. Many people were killed and in order to take revenge and fight for justice many resort to become suicide bombers.

To bring back peace and prosperity, the aftermaths of war and opium trade have almost made it impossible. People still live under squalid conditions with no proper health care, food, electricity and water. With all these gruesome circumstances people have learned to live, making this anarchy a part of their life as usual, as nothing had happened. Orphaned children and women beg on the streets merely to survive. Even with aids from the U.N, N.G.Os and other foreign agencies, the people still suffer in a society where guns are a symbol of power, prevalent anarchism and dilapidated condition of the country.

Work Cited:

Nawa, Fariba. *Opium Nation: Child Brides, Drug Lords, and One Woman's Journey through Afghanistan*. New York: Harper perennial, 2011. Print.