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Bringing the arts to women in prison is a brave venture, but it won’t remove all the burden of social and personal disaster that the convicted have to bear, writes Susan Rosenberg in a reading of Rena Fraden’s Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women and Jean Trounstine’s Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women’s Prison, p. 15.

In Heartbreak, Andrea Dworkin looks back in anger, while in Sleeping with Cats, Marge Piercy recollects in tranquility: Meryl Altman reads the life stories of two very different feminists, p. 6.

Rosellen Brown admires the “solid writing, efficient, elegant and poignant” of Sue Monk Kidd’s first novel, The Secret Life of Bees, p. 11.

Ingrid Betancourt, running in Colombia’s presidential race, was kidnapped by guerrillas in February: now Margaret Randall reviews Until Death Do Us Part, the autobiography of a tireless, and fearless, campaigner for a Colombia free of corruption, p. 9.

Denounced by doctors, dress reformers and feminists for centuries, it continues to outrage its critics: Suzanne Kammlott reads Valerie Steele’s illustrated history of The Corset, p. 13.

Rhodessa Jones of Imagining Medea

History lessons

by Christine Nolle-Karimi

In Afghanistan’s decades of confrontation with modernity, women have always been the focus of conflict.

Afghanistan is a harsh country that has seen nothing but the bitterness of war and poverty during the past twenty years and more. Yet it leaves a lasting impact on all those who have had a chance to go there.

My acquaintance with Afghanistan goes back to happier days in the 1970s. At first as a tourist, I stumbled into a country with a tremendously rich culture. I was an onlooker, fascinated by the self-contained, proud bearing of women and men alike, the ethnic mix and the variety of physical features and modes of dress. With the communist revolution of 1978 and the unfolding civil war, I witnessed this beautiful country disintegrate. The Soviet occupation during the 1980s closed Afghanistan to all westerners except a few daring journalists, and I turned my attention to the refugee camps that sprang up along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

As a tourist, I had fit more appropriately into the male, public domain of tea houses, hotels and the bazaar. In the refugee camps a new world opened up to me. I was not a spectator any more, but had the privilege of working together with

and more...
History lessons

continued from p.1

men and women to provide a service almost non-existent in the camps: basic and higher education for boys and girls. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 the NGOs also had to continue its activities in Afghanistan. But as the war continued and wave upon wave of refugees arrived, our work in the refugees camps also had to continue, because the war became a powerful marker of male authority over women's bodies.

In the West, the bunga has become a symbol of the Western military involvements in Afghanistan and in women's struggle for respect and recognition worldwide. Western women have always been involved in the women's movement in Afghanistan and support, from policies like those of the Taliban be granted political asylum.

For all its merits, this debate has provoked and continues to provoke considerable debate and controversy, and to be renewed, as in the case of women in Afghanistan. Since the takeover of the Northern Alliance in Kabul, it has become evident that the removal of the Taliban and the end of the Taliban's war in the lot of women. Even before September 11 scattered bits of information called the Western focus on the bunga as the sole determinant of the status of women in relation to the bunga.

Veiling takes different forms and meanings in different social and regional contexts. The veil is worn by middle-aged women, to signalize that they did not have to work with their hands. It also indicates the difference between men and women. Those whose husbands had secured government employment. For rural women busy in the fields, a head scarf or a head covering was more practical, and they reserved the chadori for visits to town. As the veil at the social fabric, the chadori/bunga acquired a new meaning. In the anonymous and tense setting of the refugee camps in Pakistan, it became the most common form of veiling for women of all age groups. The bunga, many of whom were a product of the Pakastani camp environment, conceived of it as the only proper form of veiling. From a sociopolitical viewpoint, it suggested a political statement imposed from above. In the past, the debate about veiling had revolved around the Koranic injunctions concerning decency of dress. Now the chadori/bunga came to symbolize Taliban control over society, especially in the towns. In the rural areas, by contrast, it was no longer such an issue. Many tradi-

tional clad women continued to work the fields. In 1997, a survey conducted among 120 women in eastern Afghanistan revealed the new dress code had little bearing on their daily lives. The women even expressed a certain amount of appreciation for the Taliban who, unlike the previous regime of warlords, guaranteed them a degree of safety. This view of ami-

tudes in rural Afghanistan is corroborated by a study that Physicians for Human Rights published last year. On the basis of 200,000 women interviewed, it concluded that women had gained access to government services and the right to education, not to mention public or professional positions.

This is not to say that the Taliban were "not to be afraid" after all. They were clearly one of the most oppressive regimes in Afghanistan have been exposed to in their recent history. At the same time, certain political continuities stand out. I would argue that these continuities can only be properly understood if we widen our perspective beyond the simplistic equation of veiling and backwardness.

In a similar vein, the popular identification of Taliban rule with a return to medieval times or even the Stone Age obscures the fact that they are in many ways a very modern political phenomenon. The Taliban and the Islamic backlash they represent form part of a larger ideological conflict over modernity in Afghanistan. It is not just the fact that they are against the backdrop of existing political conventions and conceptions; what unites all parties involved is a continuing debate on what constitutes "good" and "bad" and how they are manipulated for political purposes.

The Taliban regime is often con-
trasted with the 1970s and 1980s, a time when urban women took an active part in public life and gained access to positions in the fields of health care, education and administration. Yet subsequent developments revealed how thin the veneer of progress was: it was not only an illusion of achievements but rather a by-product of government empowerment to teach their children. In view of the above, the debate over modernity focused on externals. Marking the boundary between the inner (female) and outer (male) worlds, veiling served as an emotionally laden symbol for all parties involved. The reformers rejected it as the ultimate expression of backwardness. The Taliban, on the other hand, supported it. In the late 1990s, in contrast, focused on it as a symbol of female modesty, by extension stood for the integrity of the entire social order. Reformers and tradi-

tionalists were locked into the same set of concepts, which proved to be remarkably durable throughout the twentieth century. The idea that women should wear the burqa, the icon of progress, of the Taliban, the embodiment of religiously motivated oppression, was very similar. While arguing from opposite ends, both sides focused on veiling and the right of girls and women to acquire education and employment in the public domain.

While the push towards modernity flourished, "the expression in the rejection of veiling, it coincided with a larger venture—the opening up of the closed circuit of rural society to state control. Germans who noticed that it comes as no surprise that Amanullah Khan and the communists both devoted much energy to implementing new marriage laws. Officially, these reforms were intended to free soci-

ety from irrational and wasteful customs, such as the bride money usually paid as part of arranged marriages. But the ulti-

mate goal was to transcend the role of the extended family as the basic unit of social reference. Declaring weddings to be a personal affair between bride and bridegroom, the government attempted to break into local relations of exchange and to take over functions that had tradi-

tionally been in the domain of the kinship group. At first sight, the Taliban endeavor to implement the utopia of a pure Islamic state denied from an imagined tradition may hardly seem like a very modern enterprise. Yet the methods they resorted to were not unlike those employed by pre- modern societies. Like their communist predecessors, the Taliban meddled with local marriage practices, purportedly aiming at the eradication of "polygamy. More importantly, they deliberately used the debate over women and their proper role in society to galvanize the support of a generation of women raised in war. Their propaganda served to penetrate those realms of society which had previously been entirely beyond the reach of government. It encouraged and enacted their concept of social order on behalf of Afghan society, brutally punishing all perceived deviations. Men were deprived of their former preogative of deciding how their women were to dress and how far they could venture from home. Pariahism was no longer a matter of public disapproval, but the infamous "vice squads. This entailed a loss of honor for the men, who, no longer able to protect their wives, were forced to become helplessly as they were beaten in public.

For their appeals to overthrowing Islamic tradition, the Taliban are very much a product of the political environment. The decrees they issued in quick succession reflect simplistic religious notions that must have been soaked up either during basic religious training in

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Letters

Editor's Note:

King-Kok Cheung, professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, now a visiting professor at Hong Kong University, describes "Journey to the West," an essay about her experience teaching Asian American literature in Asia, to our February special issue on "Women Teaching Diaspora." She sent this letter to her journalist friend Myrna Baruh as a postcard to her essay.

Pedigrees of Resonance* was written by my Suman, second cousin, in his 21-member commission in charge of preparing the Jaya jirga, or grand assembly. Mahbuba Hoquepal is a landscape painter and Soray Begum is a housewife, and its most famous figure, Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest. Although the name of the country has been changed to Myanmar, most people in and outside Myanmar, in their relunctance to acknowledg the legitimacy of the existing gov ernment, continue to refer to it as Burma. I am Alice K. Neuwald, a recent Ph.D. from Harvard, of the burgh, ignoring the fact that the women concerned did not feel safe to do so. At the same time, there are indications that from below is not really welcome. The spontaneous women's demonstrations which erupted after the fall of the Taliban were quickly suppressed. The Pakistan government began publishing a weekly women's magazine entitled Azma-i Zam (Women's Mirror), operating under the watchful eyes of a central committee.

But there are rays of hope. All over Afghanistan girls are entering schools. The region of Andkhoi on the northwestern border is a telling illustration of the prevailing mayhem. Despite immense economic hardships the fteship of the population of 80,000 is schooling for their children. The NGO I work for has been able to reopen a girls' high school with one thousand students, which had been closed by the Taliban. The high school which first opened as a temporary expatriate wishing to return to Kabul who had completed their work in home schools, have taken up their regular posts again. Another six thousand girls in Andkhoi have signed up for education. The potential of change is there, but it will need time and much support to grow. If anything gives me hope for the future it is the bravery and resilience of the Afghan women.


5 Kreil, p. 401.

The countrywide or in the sandstorm atmosphere of refugee camps. The dra conian measures imposed by the authorities seem like a futile attempt to solve the complex problems within the population. To include a quota of women in all levels of the new government only provides a partial answer to the problems in Afghanistan. Quotas would pri vately protect the urban elite from the needs of the overwhelming majority of women, only three percent of whom have had the chance to attend school. While the attitudes of those in charge do not change, the only effect of quotas will be that women are appointed to please Western sponsors. The dif ficulties of the Taliban regime is not clear in the interim administration, is currently battling a case in point. Unlike her male colleagues, she has no links to the religious groups in neighboring countries. Her ability to make her influence felt is hampered by lack of funds and by insinuations that she is not a true Muslim.

But all the problems should not diminish the fact that a number of women are now contributing to the political process, notably regarding the 21-member commission in charge of preparing the jaya jirga, or grand assembly. Mahbuba Hoquepal is a landscape painter and Soray Begum is a housewife, and its most famous figure, Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest. Although the name of the country has been changed to Myanmar, most people in and outside Myanmar, in their relunctance to acknowledge the legitimacy of the existing government, continue to refer to it as Burma. I am Alice K. Neuwald, a recent Ph.D. from Harvard, of the burgh, ignoring the fact that the women concerned did not feel safe to do so. At the same time, there are indications that from below is not really welcome. The spontaneous women's demonstrations which erupted after the fall of the Taliban were quickly suppressed. The Pakistan government began publishing a weekly women's magazine entitled Azma-i Zam (Women's Mirror), operating under the watchful eyes of a central committee.

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