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BOOK REVIEW

My Forbidden Face

Latifa

Hyperion, New York, 2001. 210. pp. ISBN 1-4013-5925-6

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The book under review “*My Forbidden Face*” has been written by a young Afghan woman from Kabul under the pen name of Latifa, on the account of security. She and her family had death threats and she had to be careful as she still had friends and families back in Afghanistan, who faithfully recorded events over a five-year period as they happened to her and her family in their country (Afghanistan) after it was taken over by the Taliban. It was written after her and her family's escape to France in May 2001 and was brought to Europe in an operation organized by a French-based Afghan resistance group and Elle Magazine. Since then she has been writing *My Forbidden Face* in collaboration with Chekeba Hachemi, They both live in Paris. This is her first book. Written in seven small chapters, along with an afterword, the book gives an unusual information, as according to Latifa, though she was well-off, so things were seen from a different perspective, than the underprivileged yet she also faced subjugation. This book is a true, gloomy and brutal saga of many violations of human rights towards women in Afghanistan and an informative description of the political overthrow by the Taliban, the rapid revolution of terror and chaos to sustain control and suffocate its citizens.

Latifa's story is that of a typical girl and her response to the nasty conditions in her country. It is a fascinating and horrifying picture of life in Afghanistan under the Taliban (1996-2001), and the life of Latifa's family during and before this. She also presents interesting outlook of her taken on the Taliban, as well as their version of Islam. The explicit details of particular events carry a new understanding to the situation in Afghanistan, as well as the world's reaction to it. She gives an account of her experiences as her country had been at war her entire life. She archives the transformation that threatens her family, friends, and neighbors.

Born into a middle-class Afghan family in Kabul in 1980, Latifa spent her youth days chatting modes, fashion and movies with her friends, listening to music, and dream of becoming a journalist. The story starts, “9A.M., September

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27, 1996. Someone knocks violently on our door. My whole family has been on edge since dawn, and now we all start in alarm”. Latifa writes that, it is the time when Taliban soldiers held rule in Kabul. All of a sudden, streets were desolate. Her school was closed. Phones were cut. The radio fell quiet. And from that jiffy, Latifa, just sixteen years old, became a prisoner in her own home. According to her, the people under Taliban rule were very much destitute of all those things that make life valuable, and were forced into a dreadful life of horror and dejected darkness. The simplest and most fundamental freedoms like walking down the street alone or even looking out of a window were forbidden. In a step of rebelliousness, she set up a clandestine school in her home for a small number of young girls. To shun arousing mistrust, neither the children were allowed to attend every day, nor could they stay regular hours. Latifa was acquainted that all this will put her life into danger, still she was of the view that it could bring a change, though little. Thus the teaching gave her a motivation to get up in the morning and it helped in bringing back the gist in her life. Latifa sooner or later escaped to Europe with her parents.

Girls and women were not permitted to work outside their home or even leave their homes without being escorted by a male relative. Women and girls had to wear the *burqa* and were forbidden to wear lively and bright clothes beneath their *burqa*. Nail polish, lipstick and make-up were prohibited. The punishment for breaking these set of laws and rules was whipping and torture on the open public area and sometimes death. The writer herself had never worn a veil before, but was now forced to be wrapped in a *chadri*. Her skepticism at having to cover her face was soon put back by fear, the fear of being beaten or stoned like the other women seen in the streets. She struggled against an irresistible wisdom of vulnerability and depression. Male doctors were not allowed to touch the body of a female, "under the pretext of consultation". Women were not allowed to engage in talk with a young man. Families were not allowed to take photos or making videos even during a marriage ceremony. People were forbidden to own pets. Latifa tells that hundreds of thousands of women were viciously raped and their genitals intentionally and hideously defaced. And several little girls (aged seven to ten) were killed by the Taliban after it had been discovered they were attending classes as females were not allowed to get any type of education. In addition, the Taliban remained busy in ethnic cleansing. Thousands of the minority Hazara group were slaughtered by Taliban terrorists. Then there was the cultural genocide, the demolition of the primeval giant Buddhas in Northern Afghanistan by the Taliban. The story ends, when the incident of 9/11 took place on October 7, Americans go to war against the Taliban. Latifa writes “I’ve come to the end of my story, at a time when weapons are speaking in our place. As always *Azad* means freedom in our language. But who speaks for Afghanistan? I don’t know any more”. In the afterword, she writes, “I will do more than pray, because when the last *talib* has put away his black turban and I can be a free woman in a free Afghanistan, I will

take up my life there once more and do my duty as a citizen, as a woman, and I hope, as a mother”.

This beautifully written memoir makes the reader sob and cheer at different places as Latifa's story opens up. Her point of view truly justifies and defines the title *My Forbidden Face* as she elucidates how her life was radically distorted when the Taliban came under control. Despite the depressing mood of the book, there are strokes of wittiness as Latifa tells of how she and her friends grew up nicknaming women who wore *burqas* as ‘bottles’, ‘upside-down cauliflowers’, ‘storage sacks’ and collectively as ‘a regiment of parachutists’! Like many other books, there are few drawbacks in this book also, as chapters en route for the ending of the book were perplexing and complicated as the writer skips from one time period to another without any background or reason. On the whole, it is good book which can make one realize how the life of people vary from place to place and the difficulties they face to achieve their aims.

Biographical Note

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