

Sally L. Kitch

Contested Terrain: Reflections with Afghan Women Leaders

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014 (ISBN: 978-0-252-08027-2)

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The trajectory of women's lives in Afghanistan over the past 100 years has been as bumpy and challenging as Afghanistan's physical terrain. From the early modernization efforts of King Amanullah to the setbacks after his downfall in 1928; from the long and peaceful years of King Zahir Shah's reign to the communist-inspired government efforts to renew modernization by making schooling compulsory and ending maternal and child mortality; from the internationalized civil conflict of the 1980s--which accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union--to the downfall of the left-wing Afghan government in 1992; from fighting among the US-backed Mujahideen to the coming to power of the Taliban and their gender-apartheid regime; from the US bombing of Afghanistan after 9/11 to the installation of the Karzai government that ended in acrimony, corruption, and the resurgence of the Taliban; from the election of Ashraf Ghani as president to the consensus that US efforts to end poppy cultivation and thus the opium and heroin trade have failed--this bumpy, windy road has alternately raised expectations of women's advancement and set back what little progress had been made. And all this has occurred in a country with patriarchal structures as formidable as its mountain range.

Sally Kitch's *Contested Terrain* is an extended description of the lives, perspectives, and initiatives of two women leaders in Afghanistan: Marzia Basel, a judge and founder of the Afghan Women Judges Association, and Jamila Afghani, founder and director of the Noor Educational Center. As described in the introduction, the book project emerged from a conference that took place in 2005 when Kitch was at Ohio State University and continued with a subsequent meeting between Kitch and the two Afghan women leaders, in Istanbul in 2010. The discussions and conversations of both the 2005 conference and the 2010 Istanbul meeting were transcribed and form the core of the book. It is an immensely readable and intelligent book.

The book comes in three parts. Part I, "Hope," examines the period 2002–2005, providing some background and introducing Marzia and Jamila. It describes the aspirations and activities of the talented and dedicated women who emerged after the fall of the Taliban and were given some opportunities for political participation and leadership. Part II, "Reality," based in part on discussions that took place in Istanbul in 2010, looks at the social and political problems that had emerged after 2005, but it also reports on Marzia's and Jamila's decisions to marry. The discussion of their marriages is accompanied by a broader look at the way patriarchy governs gender and marital relations in Afghanistan. Part III, "Uncertainty"

covers the period 2010–2013 and reflects on Afghanistan's rather dim prospects. It also reports that Marzia—who had obtained her law degree during the era of the pro-Soviet left-wing government, stuck it out in Afghanistan during the Mujahideen period and the Taliban era, and worked as a judge in post-Taliban Afghanistan—had finally concluded that she could no longer live and thrive in Afghanistan.

Each part begins with a prologue that provides a context for the discussions and descriptions of events and activities, and each chapter ends with a reflections section that offers Kitch's own perspective. What the chapters reveal are changes that took place in Afghan society and politics between 2005 and 2010; the advances and setbacks that Marzia and Jamila experienced in their work for Afghan women's rights; the promises and perils of international and donor agency work in Afghanistan; problems associated with the presence of foreign soldiers; the weight of traditional customs and biases against girls and women in a country that remains largely rural, impoverished, uneducated, and deeply conservative; pervasive corruption and competition; the need to bypass outdated and irrational traditions/customs and replace them with a vision of an egalitarian and emancipatory Islam (a kind of "Islamic feminism"); the difficulties of effecting change in the context of a resurgent Taliban; and the setbacks to women's legal rights under Karzai.

What also becomes evident is the room for maneuver for educated and emancipated women such as Marzia and Jamila, in connection with marriage, employment, travel, and professional development. However, the section on Marzia's decision to seek asylum or immigration status in the US and eventually Canada as a result of the threats she began to receive in Afghanistan (the notorious "night letters") sheds light on the constraints and risks faced even by the highly educated and especially by those women who assume leadership roles.

The author's reflections at the end of each chapter help place the two Afghan women's discussions in a broader perspective while also alerting the reader to Kitch's learning process; as such, the technique enables the reader to come away with a deeper understanding of the issues while also appreciating Kitch's thoughtful approach. For example, at the end of chapter 5, Kitch expresses her disappointment that Marzia and Jamila would not join forces and work together on the issues that they agreed on, wondering if the lack of unity and coalition-building reflected the wider societal fragmentation. Kitch also wonders about the women's constant recourse to *culture* as a way of explaining the problems, barriers, setbacks, and resistance to change in their country, and she worries that it veers dangerously close to what Western academics call Orientalism. But could two Afghan women steeped in Afghanistan's culture and politics really be self-orientalizing?

The book makes a significant contribution to the literature on women in Afghanistan because of its innovative structure as well as its sensitive, intelligent, and ethical approach to cross-cultural issues. The writing is one of the great strengths of the book: Kitch writes in a truly beautiful manner and everything is very clearly presented. What is not so clearly explained, however, is how Afghanistan and its women have reached such a low point. Why did Karzai approve in 2012 a retrograde set of guidelines from the *ulema*, or Islamic religious leaders, basically codifying men's control over women (201)? Why are child and maternal mortality still high? Why are so many young Afghans leaving their country and making the perilous journey to Europe?

As I was preparing this review, I read in the UK's *Guardian* that more Afghan civilians were killed or injured in 2015 than in any other year on record (Rasmussen 2016). Then *The New York Times* reported that sentences were reduced for the men at the center of a mob that publicly and brazenly murdered a woman, Farkhunda, falsely accused of burning a Quran (Nordland and Sukhanyar 2016). Why are the Taliban still a deadly force? How is it that a mob of men can feel entitled to set upon a woman and kill her? It is in addressing these questions that one realizes how politics and international relations can trump culture. In my own work, I have highlighted the window of opportunity for Afghanistan's modernization that was opened up when--after decades of peace and stability under Zahir Shah but no meaningful social change for the vast majority of Afghans--a left-wing party took power in April 1978, established the People's Republic of Afghanistan, and issued a number of decrees that included compulsory schooling, land reform, and rights for women and girls. Remarkably, the US and its allies chose to oppose that government and arm the tribal-Islamist rebels, who later formed the Mujahideen. When, after six months of appeals from the Afghan government for military support, the Soviet Union finally agreed to send in troops in December 1979, the US intensified its armed support via Pakistan's government and military, prolonging the conflict until the Soviet Union withdrew its last troops in early 1989 (I was in Kabul at the time), the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991, and the Afghan government fell in 1992. Basically, it has been downhill for Afghanistan and its women ever since (Moghadam 2002). Had the US left Afghanistan alone, the government could have defeated the rebels on its own; the construction of schools, hospitals, roads, and the like would have proceeded; more women judges like Marzia would have been appointed; and after the collapse of communism, Afghanistan would have looked a bit more like the former Soviet Central Asian republics than the conflict-ridden, opium-producing country it is today, totally dependent on foreign aid (Economist 2014; Sieff 2014). What is more, Osama bin Laden would not have been trained in a CIA camp and there would be no Taliban. Farkhunda would be alive.

Women's groups continue to function in Afghanistan, but in the political-cultural environment that has developed since the fall of the Najibullah government in 1992, little progress can be expected either for the basic needs and basic rights of women and girls or for women's leadership. Still, one can only admire Kitch for putting Afghan women at the center of her book and giving voice to two remarkable Afghan women who tried to help change their country. As such, *Contested Terrain: Reflections with Afghan Women Leaders* not only should be on the reading list of women's studies classes, but it also should be recognized as exemplifying the best in feminist methodology.

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