

## WOMEN OF THE AFGHAN WAR

Deborah Ellis.  
Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000.

BY SHAHRZAD MOJAB

The English literature on Afghan women is growing, though it still lags behind the coverage of Afghan women's suffering, struggle, and resistance in Farsi (Persian), Dari or other regional languages. This is neither surprising nor exceptional, in particular in feminist scholarship. Institutionally-based feminist knowledge production in the West responds to global affairs within the framework set by dominant political and ideological interests. In the last two decades, we have seen the rise of fundamentalisms and neo-liberalism and a decline in the power of feminism as an oppositional source of knowledge. Today's feminist literature on the situation of women of Afghanistan vividly depicts tension and confusion within feminism itself, and in feminist research about the women of Afghanistan; we are often presented with a partial, ahistorical, apolitical, culturalized, localized, tribalized, ethnicized, set of explanations. More significantly, this analysis is oblivious to international and regional geopolitics, which is orchestrated by a host of powers, in particular the United States and Britain. It is in this context that one can appreciate Ellis' effort in collecting stories of Afghan women who in few words narrate a world full of suffering, violence, resistance, hope, and dismay.

Deborah Ellis, an anti-war and women's rights activist who works as a mental health counselor at Margaret Frazer House in Toronto, collected Afghan women's stories during her several trips to Moscow and Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. In her brief introduction to the book, Ellis states that "[T]his book is about

women telling how decisions made by two super-power governments twenty years ago are still affecting them today." Stories are arranged thematically and include the following topics: "The Response," "Friends," "The Russians in Afghanistan," "Afghans in Russia," "Holy Warriors," "Rockets' Red Glare," "The Taliban," "Camp Life," "Health," "Crazy in Three Languages," "Education," "Child Bride," "Mothers and Daughters," "Princess," "Pavement Women," "A Walk in the Park," "Mightier than the Sword," "Help," "Far From Home," "Fighting Back," and "International Women's Day." There are two chronologies included in the book which readers will find helpful in contextualizing the stories. They are: "Chronology of Moments from Afghan Women's History" and "Chronology of Events Leading Up to the Soviet Invasion." The book also includes fourteen photographs and two useful additional listings which appear at the end. One is called, "Organizations that Work with and for Afghan Women," and the other is "Suggestions for Further Reading."

This is not an easy book to read; the narration and imagery of violence against women is overwhelming and the agony of women too painful to bear. Women, young and old, narrate scenes of rape, torture, fear, and indignity, and give testimony to gruesome acts of violence, indeed too disturbing to repeat in this review. There is, nonetheless, another invisible narration woven into stories of horror and that is the image of women's life in "another" Afghanistan where Kabul was beautiful, a bustling city, a city rich in cultural and educational activities; a place where women remember colours, happiness, friendship, love, neighbours, and freedom. It is in these stories that women provide the best geopolitical analysis of their lost nation and community, and thus leave the reader with little choice but to go back to those chronologies and further search for a deeper under-

standing of the history of this small nation which has been caught in the fire of imperialist powers.

There are two other distinguished features in this book, for which Ellis should be applauded. One is the due acknowledgment of and presence of the Revolutionary Afghan Women's Organization (RAWA). Since the 1970s, RAWA has been struggling, and at times, has been the only voice of Afghan women's resistance. Since September 11, 2001, when the plight of Afghan women has been used to legitimize a new round of invasion of the country, RAWA and its representatives are conspicuously absent from mainstream media coverage, forums, and public debates. It is, thus, refreshing to read in this book about RAWA's activities, including its struggle to celebrate International Women's Day under conditions of fundamentalists' death threats, harassment, and intimidation. One may wonder if it is an accident of history that fundamentalists, mainstream media, and Western states converge in their opposition to RAWA.

The other noticeable feature about the book is the stories of Russian women who participated in the war, a rarely heard and told story. These women, too, talk about the masculinity of militarism, state patriarchy in terms of their treatment as war veterans, and their sexual and psychological harassment during their service in Afghanistan. Their current situation is equally appalling, in so far as poverty, and psychological and physical scars of the war have left a life-long impact on them.

The narratives in Ellis' book will be read as more than a collection of Afghan or Russian women's stories. Each narration should be contextualized and historicised, otherwise they remain as "stories" with little or no relevance for action and change. In fact, listening to these narrations without fully hearing the collective organizing which these women have undertaken would be a partial reading of the book. I would

have liked Ellis to make more explicit the relationship between individual stories of women and their collective efforts of resistance. This book is a rich text of women's thoughts and action under conditions of war and violence, a source which invites debate and analysis.

## **MAIREAD CORRIGAN AND BETTY WILLIAMS: MAKING PEACE IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Sarah Buscher and Bettina Ling.  
New York: Feminist Press. 1999.

BY MARIE HAMMOND  
CALLAGHAN

Although women's peace movement history is largely marginalised within the academe and general media, occasional efforts are made to highlight the peace-building work of individual women considered to have risen from "ordinary" circumstances to meet "extraordinary" challenges. In a series entitled "Women Changing the World," Nobel Peace Prize winners Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams take their place as two of the world's "global leaders for human rights" as well as becoming role models to "inspire future world-changers." Prefaced by Charlotte Bunch (founder and executive director of the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University, U.S.A.) the feminist perspective guiding the book is clearly laid out. She asserts that, regardless of global cultural and social differences, "women often share similar problems and concerns about issues such as violence in their lives and in the world, or the kind of environment we are creating for the future."

This dual biography by authors Buscher and Ling provides a brief

but engaging narrative of the Corrigan/Williams stories focusing on their family influences and the conditions they faced in their communities in violent political conflict. Largely descriptive in style, the main focus of the book is to explain how their lives became intertwined through a tragic accident which took the lives of the McGuire children in West Belfast and led to their founding of the Peace Women/Peace People in August, 1976. Attractively formatted and written in highly accessible language, the target audience appears to be American secondary/high school (especially female?) students. In this sense, it represents a pioneering (and laudable) effort to make women's peace history visible, especially for younger readers.

In the context of women's peace history and feminist peace studies, however, there are some serious theoretical and historical (as well as pedagogical) problems with this account. Key points at issue here include historical perspective and interpretation as well as social analysis.

The contemporary women's peace movement in Northern Ireland began in the early 1970s with groups such as Women Together for Peace in Belfast (1970), the Derry Peace Women (1972), responding to the outbreak of conflict which followed the brutal state repression of the civil rights movement. So many women who later joined the high profile Peace Women/Peace People (1976) had already been active in peace and reconciliation, as well as civil rights, work for some time previously. While the authors are clearly aware of the unprecedented level of public attention focused on women's peace activism in Northern Ireland, they seem unconcerned with providing any analysis of the media frenzy surrounding the Peace People. Neither do they appear inclined to question the high level of state support—from Queen and Westminster to the security forces—for this movement.

Secondly, this book seems to reflect the assumption that "all women"

would or should have been involved in the Peace People. There is now considerable feminist scholarship on women's experiences and activism in the conflict revealing the experience of being a "woman" or a "mother" in Northern Ireland was not the unifying force anticipated and idealised in the peace movement. Other critical influences—such as class, political history, and location as well as various social discourses—cut across gender conditions, thereby problematising the issue of peace for many women (and men). The binary construction of "peace women" and "men of violence" articulated in mainstream media and amongst many British politicians shaped a specific perspective in the public that those who did not support the Peace People were in fact supporters of the IRA—who in turn were deemed largely to blame for the conflict. Despite their initial historically-balanced background to the conflict, Buscher and Ling appear to advance this view uncritically on numerous occasions throughout their narrative on the Peace People. Strangely, they fail to ask why the so-called "guerrillas of peace" might be encouraged by state and security force officials to inform on neighbours and even family members within their communities. Might there have been some political utility to the notion that the peace movement was a potential ally for the government in a situation where a military solution was applied to a political problem and therefore found to be failing? Also, the authors appear to accept the notion that the conflict was fundamentally about a war of religious identities. Why did they fail to explore the "peace and justice" assertions of republican opponents to the Peace People in their narrative?

Feminists theorising around militarism along with peace studies scholars have recently highlighted the importance of interrogating concepts of peace and violence. Also, they have long argued that violence is perpetuated at many different levels