

The poet's melancholy

Depression, structures of feeling, and creativity
among Afghan refugees in Iran

Zuzanna Olszewska

Abstract

This article considers the relationship between depressed affect, a long-term refugee situation, and poetry among Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Based on ethnographic fieldwork on the changing subjectivities of Afghan refugee poets, it explores the relationship between a perception of collective suffering, individual mental distress, and creativity in this community. Rather than establishing diagnostic criteria for depression among Afghans, the article is mostly concerned with the social and cultural ripples of psychological distress resulting from decades of war, displacement, and marginalization in the host country. It seeks to complicate biomedical understandings of depression by drawing on anthropological studies of dysphoria in Iran and on the collective experience of social suffering and structural violence. Through a discussion of four poets and their work, it explores the productive aspects of depression and the therapeutic, political, and transcendental potential of writing poetry.

Keywords

depression, poetry, ethnography, Iran, Afghan refugees

When and how does suffering ... become a source from which poetry can spring?

– Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman (2001, 7)

In the introduction to their volume *Remaking a World*, Das and Kleinman pose this question in a general sense, considering the relationship between suffering and aesthetic expression. But I had much occasion to ponder it most directly when I first started my fieldwork with an Afghan refugee poetry circle in Iran in 2005.¹ Many, if not most, of these young people's poems had a despondent, melancholy air to them. This was not surprising: how could they *not* write of the crushing poverty of their fellow refugees in their settlements on the outskirts of Iranian cities, of their hard work and the pain of exile, of the poignancy of their simple pleasures?

For Afghan refugee poets, poetry was a way of making a statement about collective suffering and speaking on behalf of others less able to raise their voices. But it was also frequently a personal cry of pain: it often mirrored profoundly negative affects experienced on the individual level. As I started getting to know the poets better, I realised that many of them complained of frequently depressed moods, both due to their individual life circumstances and due to the many structural disadvantages – legal, economic, and social – they endured in Iran. Sometimes these symptoms strayed into territory that seemed more serious, and some confessed to suicidal thoughts, or to having been prescribed antidepressants. Most of the time, however, the sense that something was not quite right was conveyed by a subdued demeanour and by a desire for solitude: a fact readily noticeable and out of the ordinary in large refugee families that often shared cramped quarters.

Such experiences, however, did not appear to be wholly negative. Being *hassās*, or sensitive, the same quality that made people particularly vulnerable to depression, was frequently described to me as a necessary precondition for being a good poet. Some of the most talented young poets I knew were also the most troubled, and their bleaker verses some of the most successful because they had the greatest power to move their audiences and to resonate with their own sorrows. What, then, was the relationship between a perception of

1 This article is based on twelve months of fieldwork in Iran between the years 2005 and 2007, followed by regular correspondence and face-to-face contact with Afghan poets and others in a variety of countries through the time of publication. All names, with the exception of names of poets whose publications are cited, have been changed. I am grateful to Orkideh Behrouzan for the workshop invitation that encouraged me to consider what light my material shed on the mental health of refugees, and to Andrea Chiovenda and two anonymous reviewers for their very useful comments on the draft.

collective suffering, individual mental distress, and creativity? Was there anything productive about depression, and was there anything therapeutic, affirmative or transcendental about writing poetry?

This article seeks to answer these questions, taking as a given that depression is not a singular, universal phenomenon, and that various forms of dysphoria are culturally conceptualized and experienced in diverse ways (Kleinman and Good 1985; Jenkins, Good, and Kleinman 1991). I therefore draw on studies of dysphoria in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran and culturally informed assessments of depression and trauma among Afghan refugees.² I also share the perspective of anthropological and interdisciplinary studies on subjectivity and violence that marginal, discriminated populations often experience their suffering collectively, precisely because they are targeted as a group.³ However, resonating with the work of Das et al. (2001) and Behrouzan (2015; this issue), I seek to demonstrate that if mental distress in the form of depression is a signal of a broken world, it may sometimes also be harnessed to ‘remake a world’ and to feed creative responses that both articulate collective claims to social justice and offer individual healing. Emotional discontent must also be seen in the context of a tradition that valorises it to a certain extent as personally and culturally productive (Davies 2011).

When I refer to depression, melancholy, and dysphoria in this article, I refer not to a singular mental disorder with clear diagnostic criteria, but to a constellation of subjective experiences and cultural discourses describing negative affects, some of which are pathologised and others of which, on the contrary, are positively valorised in contemporary Iran. I did not carry out an epidemiological study; I certainly was not qualified to diagnose anyone, nor can I say with any certainty what the prevalence of depressive disorders was. In what follows, however, I anchor my argument both in ethnographic analyses of dysphoria in Iran, and in unmistakable trends in my interlocutors’ own descriptions of their mental states, both in interviews and in poetry.⁴ As a social anthropologist interested in poetry and changes in

2 On Iran, see Good 1977; Good, Good, and Moradi 1985; Good and Good 1988; Behrouzan 2010, 2015. On cultural approaches to mental health in Afghanistan, see Miller et al. 2006 and Miller et al. 2008.

3 For example, Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997; Das et al. 2000; Das et al. 2001; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004.

4 Psychological distress among second-generation Afghan refugees in Iran seemed to be less acute than among the general population in Kabul (studied by Miller et al. 2006 and Miller et al. 2008), who were more likely to have experienced the traumatic loss of immediate family members in war and even greater poverty and insecurity. These studies offer culturally appropriate diagnostic tools for use at the individual level; I am more concerned with the wider cultural effects of such individual distress.

subjectivity among Afghan refugees, I am most concerned with the social and cultural ripples of psychological distress resulting from decades of war, displacement, and marginalization. In this context, I examine poetry's role as therapy, and as testimony.

Afghans in Iran

Iranian policies towards the close to one million Afghans who have lived in the country since the outbreak of the Afghan-Soviet War in 1979 have been contradictory. In the 1980s, when at three million they constituted the largest refugee population in the world, the Islamic Republic generously offered them social security on the same terms as its own citizens: ration cards, food subsidies, and free healthcare and education. The revolution had, after all, been a populist one, and Afghans were examples of fellow Muslims oppressed by an invading atheist superpower, the Soviet Union.

In the 1980s, Afghans were accepted as refugees *prima facie* and issued residence permits in Iran, granting them a number of rights that were very generous given the large numbers the country was hosting – one of the largest refugee populations in the world. Holders of these permits were granted indefinite permission to stay in Iran and were entitled to subsidized health care, food, and fuel, and to free primary and secondary education and adult literacy training. The vast majority – over 97 percent – were able to settle freely on the outskirts of cities rather than in refugee camps, and although they were not legally allowed to own property, in cities such as Mashhad many enjoyed *de facto* ownership of their homes through customary contracts of sale or lease. The small percentage of Afghans living in camps is significant, for it has meant that the vast majority has established social ties with their Iranian neighbours and come into contact with local Iranian institutions.

I use the term 'refugee' rather than 'migrant' to describe Afghans in Iran, while acknowledging the complexity of life histories and the politics that the term may obscure. The label 'refugee' is used by both displaced people and host governments in ways that suit their own ends. The documents issued to Afghans arriving in the 1980s bore the label of '*mohājerin*', a term of Arabic origin for emigrants invoking the *hijrah* or flight of the Prophet Mohammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE. In an Islamic context, the word conveys the duty of hosting those choosing to leave their homes due to religious oppression. But after Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989 and the fall of the Communist government in Afghanistan in 1992, Iran's bureaucracy quietly redesignated Afghans as '*āvāregān*', a word that also means forced migrants but without the religious overtones. Later still, documents issued to them used the terms *atbā'-e kbāreji* or *atbā'-e bigāneh* (foreign nationals), deftly absolving the state of any humanitarian obligations toward them.

Nonetheless, Iran is a party to international refugee law and has its own domestic laws relating to refugees, and it does consider those Afghans who registered with the state in the early 2000s to be *de facto* refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which has run a small and underfunded operation in Iran since 1983, also regularly refers to the Afghans in Iran as ‘refugees’ and provides services to all of them but, as in many countries, has had difficulty persuading the Iranian government to override its domestic concerns and maintain internationally mandated standards of refugee recognition and rights provision.⁵ Iranian policy toward them has thus been subject to vagaries and reversals, depending on prevailing domestic and foreign policy interests, becoming more restrictive over time, such that the majority of Afghans have lived for decades in conditions of poverty and precariousness.

From the 1990s onwards, Iran began to progressively cut back many of the benefits offered to refugees. For example, the rules on refugee access to education fluctuated; many of my friends had completed high school but faced restrictions in pursuing higher education. After 2004, for example, young Afghans could only attend university in Iran if they gave up their refugee cards and registered as fee-paying foreign students, whose visas expired when they graduated. Even if educated, they faced labour market restrictions that allowed them to legally work only as manual labourers. They were unable to obtain Iranian citizenship even after decades of living there, and year after year were obliged to pay hefty fees to have their residence permits extended. Those who were undocumented (estimated at a further one to two million people) faced the constant threat of deportation, and even those who were documented needed permits to travel around the country.⁶ Even a legal resident with valid papers could be deported if he or she happened not to be carrying them when stopped by police.

Thus, even in the years of Iran’s generosity towards them, Afghans have always been objects rather than subjects of state policy (see Das and Kleinman 2001, 4). An indelible result of the Islamic Republic’s heavy investment in education, however, was the fact that many of them prized education above all else and had high aspirations for the future, only to feel great

5 The word used by UNHCR in Iran as its official Persian translation for ‘refugee’ is *panāhandeh*, which denotes a person seeking asylum or shelter. It is this word that is used in the name of UNCHR offices in Iran, and also by Afghans and Iranians when speaking about people who have been resettled by the UN to third countries or who have sought asylum in the West – but neither group uses it to refer to Afghans in Iran. Iranian official discourse similarly avoids this term, possibly because of the international legal obligations it suggests.

6 In previous work I have extensively discussed the social, legal, and economic situation of Afghan refugees in Iran: see Olszewska 2008, 2015.

bitterness when those aspirations were thwarted – a classic example of the Batesonian double bind, similar to the conflicts experienced by Iranians themselves, as explored by Behrouzan (2010).

Sadly, Afghans also frequently faced harassment, racism, and humiliation at the hands of their Iranian neighbours, employers, and institutions. I once witnessed small Iranian children shouting ‘*Afghāni kesāfat!*’ (filthy Afghans) through the window into of a classroom of Afghan children. Maryam, a female Afghan journalist who grew up in Iran, and is now living in a European country, pointed out the resonating social and psychological effects of this situation, beginning in the family: ‘Depression was a result of the violence that passed from father to mother, and from mother to child. In Afghanistan a man’s pride and honour had been everything to him. In Iran, as a refugee, he would be humiliated, threatened, and belittled every day. He would then take it out on his wife and she would take it out on the kids. We grew up with that’.

Not every refugee family was abusive, of course, but the effects of legal exclusion and social stigma were felt directly or indirectly by all. People often spoke of the profound ‘spiritual and psychological consequences’ (*ta’sirāt-e ruhi o ravāni*) of their experiences, and the limbo of not being able to plan their lives more than six months into the future. This state was also embodied in recognizable ways. I was told about a notorious Afghan collaborator, whose job was to identify his compatriots by sight on the street in Iranian police round-ups. He apparently never failed to be accurate, and when asked for his secret, he said it was simply that Afghans always walked in a particular way: with hunched shoulders and their heads down.

The collective melancholy of second-generation Afghans in Iran was thus not a direct result of wartime trauma or other forms of overt violence, but rather the more insidious effect of the ‘soft knife of systematic discrimination’ (Das et al. 2001, vii). Yet it was certainly pervasive enough to allow us to speak of it as an instance of social suffering (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997). Another way to conceptualize it would be to describe it as a ‘structure of feeling’ in Williams’s (1977) terms: an incipient, not always consciously articulated, set of subjective experiences and sentiments common to a particular social group and determined by wider socioeconomic conditions.

Structures of feeling and depression in Iran

Understanding melancholy and depression in the Persianate culture shared by Iran and Dari-speaking Afghanistan (more notably by Shi’a Afghans), however, requires the consideration of their multiple cultural dimensions and their transformations in recent decades. On one

level, there is that aspect of negative affect that is valued in Iranian culture, explored in several articles by Byron Good and Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good and colleagues. ‘Iranians’, they argue, ‘have a well-developed affective discourse related to sadness, loss, and grieving ... [which] is grounded in a culturally shaped conception of selfhood, in a highly ritualized tradition of religious grieving, and in a tragic view of history and society shared by religious and secular thinkers in Iranian culture’ (Good, Good, and Moradi 1985, 404). An important ideal of selfhood is that of *‘omq* (depth) and *sangini* (weight, solemnity) and it is impossible to live up to this ideal if one has an overly cheerful and frivolous attitude in life and has never experienced suffering. This norm has been further entrenched as a model of moral personhood in postrevolutionary Iranian ideology, partly due to the roots of revolutionary culture and mobilization in the mourning rituals commemorating the battle of Karbala: ‘leaders of the new Islamic Republic decreed sadness to be the appropriate demeanor of its citizens and the paradigmatic emotional tone for contemporary public life’ (Good and Good 1988, 43).

Among refugees, the legal exclusions and everyday humiliations described above caused another, less positive, layer of discontent. But this was further compounded among educated refugees who aspired to the status of engaged intellectuals (*rowshanfekr*) and wore another layer of ennui almost as a badge of their status. Typically, such intellectuals felt both the duty to speak on behalf of the ‘masses’ and identify with them, yet at the same time felt increasingly cut off from (and misunderstood by) them due to their level of education and socialization into a different habitus. Indeed, Williams (1977, 134) emphasizes that structures of feeling often emerge from a process of class differentiation or from ‘contradiction, fracture or mutation within a class’. Sometimes, he says, the first indication that such a process is taking place lies in the new forms and conventions of the art or literature this group produces (1977, 133). Thus, it was in the person of the Afghan refugee intellectual in postrevolutionary Iran that all these structural sorrows aligned most sharply, reflected in and in turn nourished by poetry, with its long tradition in the Persianate world as a vehicle for the expression of all kinds of longing.

Poetry as individual catharsis

The refugee poets I worked with were quick to point out their special predispositions that set them apart from other people, often with a degree of pride: they were *bassās* (sensitive) people, one of the traits that Good, Good, and Moradi (1985) show is culturally identified as making people prone to depression. They were *tu-ye khodam* (introverted) people who often isolated themselves from others and felt alone and different even in a crowd. If such people naturally gravitated to poetic circles, the positive reinforcement they encountered there among like-minded friends would have further encouraged them to identify this way. My

female friend Mahnaz, not a poet herself but a frequent visitor to one such organisation, described the atmosphere there as follows:

I think of [the organisation], and especially its kitchen, and a circle of young men or even older ones who install themselves for hours on end in its seats and smoke and smoke incessantly. From time to time, there are words, of course – critiques, jokes, stories – but it's an atmosphere where you don't find much activity. I mean, among those who are depressed at least. They have one rule: poetry, cigarettes, tea. It's an inseparable combination. ... I believe that poetry is a kind of therapy, but it's also a drug! It nourishes the depressed mind.

The poets also felt there was a natural relationship between the state of exile and the need for poetic expression. One poet friend, who was plagued by frequent visitations from what he called the 'black dog' of depression,⁷ told me that the liminal feeling of exile had encouraged him to become a poet:

I think that being a refugee [*mobājerat*] really has an effect. It's a feeling inside a person that he can't tell anyone about, and nobody can understand it. You live in this society, but you don't belong to this society. This feeling of not-belonging always exists in my mind, its pulse keeps beating. On the other hand, you don't remember anything from your own past. You say Afghanistan, but which Afghanistan? You have no background, you have nothing from your own country. Except war – and even that you hear on the news – war, conflict, and so on, and so on. And your childhood memories are marked by *mobājerat*, by labour, sometimes by insults, sometimes by restrictions – in particular by restrictions. All these things in a way lead one to take refuge in something, something is created inside you.

Indeed, the tradition of Persian poetry has provided a ready outlet for this impulse to creatively 'work through' all the contradictions in refugees' lives. Several anthropologists have written of the license apparently granted to poets (or artists in general) in some societies to express the otherwise unsayable – for example, to countenance independent female sexuality and extramarital romantic love in an honour-bound society defined by male control of female sexual modesty (Abu-Lughod 1986; Boesen 1983). For Afghans in Iran, too, poetry has been one of the few media through which they are able to describe the phantoms that haunt them and their sense of loss.

7 He immediately took a liking to this phrase when I told him that was how Winston Churchill referred to his depressive bouts.

Elyas, a talented poet and visual artist in his mid-twenties, was the son of a family I knew well in Mashhad, and I spent many days in their home with his parents and the five of his seven siblings who were still unmarried and had not moved out. This meant that up to eight people, not including myself, shared one main living area and two small rooms furnished only with wall-to-wall Persian rugs and cushions leaning against the walls. We would spread a simple dining cloth (*sofreh*) on the floor to eat and lay out bedrolls when we wanted to sleep, a common practice among Afghans and more traditional Iranian households. But in this crowded and highly communal life, it was all the more noticeable when Elyas went through spells of keeping to himself, staying up all night writing or drawing alone, working on the single computer all the children shared, or listening to sorrowful love songs. He would then sleep most of the day in a corner and sit around dazed and subdued for hours when he awoke. At other times, however, he was cheerful and talkative, and was even a bit of a prankster with a mischievous sense of humour. He had recently started winning awards for his poetry, but due to the restrictions on Afghans' employment in Iran, his future was uncertain. I knew he struggled with his moods; 'Sometimes I'm laughing and smiling for other people', he would say, 'but inside I feel empty'.

One of the poems he composed at the time was titled '*Mālikholiā*', or Melancholy:

You are like melancholy
 Exactly like melancholy
 You have taken over a part of my brain.

One day I'll shave your hair,
 Pull a blade across your lips,
 Sew your eyelids together.

You were always my dream
 but now that I have you
 I think
 you were more beautiful yesterday
 and the nights without you had more moonlight.
 You have to not be there
 so that I may have lost something.
 Your coming was the end of my poems
 the end of good things:
 indolence
 depression
 and, of course, sorrow.

You are like melancholy
and one part of my brain
loudly, loudly aches.⁸

This poem, in which the poet compares melancholy to his beloved's grip on his mind, is puzzling due to its apparent contradictions. Elyas illuminated its meaning for me: it is intended to show that the narrator's mind is so warped by melancholy that, though he has struck up a relationship with his beloved, he prefers the period of yearning, daydreaming, and agony that preceded it, and he classifies indolence (*tanbali*), depression (*afsordegi*), and sorrow (*gham*) as 'good things'. Although writing from experience, however, Elyas is tapping into (and almost inadvertently satirising) the prevalent trope in Persian love poetry, both classical and modern: the celebration of separation, sadness, and longing rather than joyful union; a preference for wistful imagining rather than fruition: 'You have to not be there/ so that I may have lost something'. Paradoxically, however, whilst love ought to signal the end of the delicious torment, the poet's disappointment brings yet more disaffection: the poem functions like a Möbius strip of constant sorrow, feeding back into itself. When I recently asked for a copy of the poem, Elyas, who now lives in Australia (where he was resettled by UNHCR), commented wryly in English, 'I think I was *really* depressed at the time!'

Although the word 'catharsis' or a direct translation of it was not used, it seems clear that writing poetry had to some degree a therapeutic effect on the poets. People spoke of releasing their *dard-e daruni* (inner pain) or the *takblijeh* (emptying, purging) of their turbulent emotions through poetry. Such poems did not need to be shared with others to have this effect. Such catharsis is not quite of the same kind that Aristotle described in his *Poetics*, which concerned the emotional purging and purification of the audience of a dramatic work, not of its author. But it certainly accorded with the psychoanalytic understanding of catharsis developed by Freudian psychoanalysts in the modern era, whose echoes have also been felt in Iran.

Yet this kind of catharsis through self-expression had a strongly gendered dimension. The poets described here so far have all been male, but one of the most remarkable achievements of Afghan intellectual circles in Iran has been the inclusion and active participation of women in their midst, building on the Iranian state's provision of education to hundreds of

8 Unpublished poem, translated and reproduced with the kind permission of the poet. All translations are by the author.

thousands of Afghan girls.⁹ Yet Mahnaz, who described the youths smoking incessantly in the kitchen, spoke only of men: so where were the women? I discussed with her whether the women were also depressed, and she confirmed my suspicion that women were less likely to dwell in a melancholy state: they had housework to occupy their idleness even if they were not employed, and responsibilities of care for parents, siblings, or children. Fortunately or unfortunately, although they attended poetry readings and did seek to express themselves poetically, they were less free to spend whole days with other poets, whiling the hours away idly and dwelling on their melancholy moods. The major source of grief for these women, often educated to high school or university level, was not only their situation in Iran, but also the conflict of their ambitions with their more traditional, patriarchal families. They wanted to study and to choose their own spouses, and many in fact succeeded after years of trying to persuade their families by any means available to them (including the tactical and tactful management of relationships and emotions). But this stance had to be one of active struggle rather than lassitude, and depression had to be kept at bay.

One female poet, Mahbooba Ebrahimi, represented this struggle within the self beautifully in a *ghazal*¹⁰ about the need to keep going, to make do, to accept and accommodate, while maintaining a positive attitude:

‘Life’

Morning comes and once again, a whining child;
fatigue, boredom, sorrow, bread and tea and cheese.

You can’t open your eyes to the morning.
The morning, chador on head, has gone to look for bread and milk.

Morning, dirty clothes; morning, a mountain of dishes –
once again they’ll imprison you in a small room.

You’ve pushed the dark clouds down inside yourself. You say,
‘A good, fresh morning to you, O vast and distant sky!’

9 I have discussed this situation at length in previous work (Olszewska 2015).

10 A *ghazal* is a poem with a classical form of rhyme and meter, frequently also used by contemporary poets to deal with newer concerns and newer diction. The poem is translated here in free verse to retain its original images as closely as possible.

No! Try as you might, your heart won't be free.
 Either become a bird and fly away, or get used to this home.

Pick apples, pick flowers from the minutes of the morning,
 before you're obliged to consign your heart to the dust.

From my weary throat, O life! Sing a *ghazal*,
 beneath the trampling feet of sorrow, O songfulness, don't die.¹¹

Poetry as upward mobility; poetry as testimony

If literary activity was one of the very few avenues open to refugees for this kind of cultural working through of their sorrows, it also offered individuals a degree of prestige. In Elyas's case and that of many others, then, depressed mood was not only a form of individual suffering, but also a resource for culturally sanctioned creativity and upward mobility. Indeed, poetic activity in the Persian language, as the common inheritance of Afghans and Iranians, became a 'public and shared ground' (Manoukian 2011, 74) to which Afghans also laid claim, even if many Iranians were initially unaware of this commonality. Afghan poetry circles like the Mashhad-based Dorr-e Dari (Pearl of Dari) Cultural Organisation, the main site of my fieldwork, and others in Tehran and Qom, often had Iranian guests. Afghan poets were invited to Iranian literary festivals, and often were very successful, winning some of the top prizes. Some young Afghan poets felt they had to exoticise themselves to a degree to please Iranian audiences, adopting a more 'Afghan' accent when speaking Persian (despite speaking no differently from Iranians in their everyday lives), and indeed audiences responded favourably to such markers of authenticity in the literary context. Another well-received trope was that of Muslim suffering, and for those ideologically aligned with the state, Afghans were authentic representatives of it. Thus, Elyas's many poems about the suffering of his fellow refugees or Muslims throughout the region (ranging from Palestinians to the prisoners of the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq) were praised by both secular Iranians and those ideologically aligned with the state, and won him cash prizes in many literary competitions.¹²

Although the value accorded to suffering in Shi'a Persianate culture has religious roots (reflecting the Karbala Paradigm), it resonates with the European Romantic ideal of

11 Original published in Ebrahimi 2007, 8–9.

12 These competitions, Afghan poets' participation in them, and the responses of Iranian audiences are more fully described in Olszewska 2007 and Olszewska 2015.

suffering as a source of true knowledge, personal growth, and compassion (Davies 2011, 195–198). A poet who was *gham-dideh*, who had known sorrow, was better able to identify with the suffering of others. Indeed, it was often unclear to me to what extent even the most intensely lyrical, first-person poems reflected the poet's own anguish, and to what extent they were attempts to reflect the pain of a whole people. Another of Elyas's poems, though dedicated and addressed to his poetic mentor, a celebrated older poet, sought to encapsulate the whole of the Afghan experience:

The jealous light on your brow makes you look old
 Your breaths are the desolate cry
 when tired farmers know
 the very moment that the frost will strike the opium poppies.

Your legs carry the smell of landmines,
 your mouth of hunger,
 your shoulders of wander – wander –
 wandering.

Wipe away your sweat:
 the men of Zabol are buying gold to take away your daughter.
 In the well-shafts of Tall-e Siah your son's thirst has been quenched
 for eternity.

Take a puff of your cigarette.
 These dirty coffeehouses have no green tea.
 These hungover year-seconds,
 this solace in desperation,
 this I who am you
 will end one day
 with our death.¹³

This poem contains many coded references whose meaning is obvious only to Afghans – for example, the Afghan penchant for green tea rather than the black tea commonly drunk in Iran, or the trafficking of girls in the Afghan-Iranian borderlands (for which the town of Zabol is a metonym). Elyas saw fit to explain some of these references obliquely in footnotes when the poem was published in Iran. Tall-e Siah, for example, was glossed as ‘a

13 Original published in Alavi 2008, 24–25.

camp for refugees' and most Iranians would never have heard of it, but to Afghans it was notorious as one of several camps with very poor conditions housing people rounded up for deportation.¹⁴ Such poetry, then, helped to create an 'alternate public sphere for articulating and recounting experience silenced by officially sanctioned narratives' (Das and Kleinman 2001, 3) and to bear witness to their suffering, although these narratives were fully legible only to those within the community.

The following poem by Aman Mirza'i (2011), a young Hazara poet living in Mashhad, was another example of an empathetic attempt to articulate collective experience:

'The Sewing Machine'

The sewing machine's quiet hum
 was my mother's sad song.
 At my father's stall
 it was her rough trousers
 that could send me to school
 answer the landlord
 and buy medicine.
 My sister Marzieh, whose illness nobody understands,
 and cannot be cured even in the shrine,
 coughs continuously
 like the sewing machine's needle
 and the softness of her bones
 only feeds the earth's lust.
 Mother is the needle's thread:
 with Marzieh's every cough,
 with every breath her heartstrings rend.
 Father doesn't close his stall even in the rain
 and I talk to myself
 in a place where no one goes.
 The intellectuals in the newspapers
 write articles about us,

14 Tall-e Siah is located near Zahedan in the southeast of Iran. Another such deportation camp, Sefid Sang near Mashhad, was also frequently invoked in poetry, and was known among Afghans as the site of a massacre of detainees protesting poor conditions in the camp in 1998, the subject of a recent feature film made in Afghanistan (see Fisk 2008).

while my countrymen
have forgotten the pleasures of the *gul-i surkh* festival of Mazar.
Mother is the sewing machine's foot at night:
she trembles.
Father is the doorframe
closed into himself.
A pot of bitter tea;
in the photo album Marzieh gently laughs
and I think about everything.

This poem, in blank verse and a self-consciously modernist style that combines social commentary with lyricism (Olszewska 2013), describes what it is like to be a long-term refugee with few prospects. The poet adopts the voice of a quiet, thoughtful child whose parents work night and day to make ends meet and whose sister suffers from an incurable illness. The many ruptures of exile are metonymically referenced through the loss of the pleasures of the *gul-i surkh* festival: a new-year tradition in Mazar-e Sharif in Afghanistan, when people leave the city to admire scarlet fields of spring wildflowers (the eponymous *gul-i surkh*, a variety of corn poppy). The refugees' hardship is compounded by a sense of powerlessness and voicelessness: while intellectuals spill much ink over them in the press, the boy's father is mute, having closed himself up like a door in a doorframe. The boy himself is troubled by his thoughts but is unable to speak to anyone but himself. While Mirza'i undoubtedly drew on his own experiences – his family is from Mazar-e Sharif, though he has never been there himself – he told me the immediate spark for the poem was seeing a poor family with a sick child on the street one night, desperately trying to hail a taxi to go to hospital.

Mohammad Reza's story

We have seen on the one hand a degree of positive valuation of negative affect, both in ideal terms and in the form of rewards for those who use it in their creative work. On the other, there is a pervasive melancholic 'structure of feeling' that is a response to the injustice of refugees' sociolegal exclusion, which is felt collectively. At what point, then, can we start to speak of depression as pathology and individual illness? Certainly, some refugees did visit psychiatrists and were diagnosed and medicated, but not all. I revisit one interview transcript that sheds some light on this distinction. Over my visits to Iran I had come to know Mohammad Reza as a quiet but friendly young man, a talented poet, a student of sociology, and a highly motivated leader of various student and youth poetry groups. I was therefore surprised when, during my last visit and a catch-up interview in 2010, he told me he had

been 'completely paralysed' for almost two years and, despite being only a few months away from graduating, had dropped out of university.

Mohammad Reza: For a period of about a year and eight months, my life was totally, completely paralysed [*falaj*], in terms of literary activities, in terms of my studies and career – all of the aspects of a young person's life. So I didn't do anything, in truth I had no motivation to continue my life. What the source of this feeling or this perspective on life was – I never knew myself where it came from. In this complicated situation of limbo that lasted a year and eight months, all I did was breathe – I didn't do anything else. And note that in the past I was never like this – I was always a passionate and striving person, and I was always the kind of person that tried to be the best at everything I did, to be someone who leaves an impression on that field –

Zuzanna: Was it a kind of depression [*afsordegi*]?

Mohammad Reza: A really severe depression, so that I had absolutely no motivation. ... I didn't have the *hāl-o-homseleh* [state of mind and attention span] to do anything at all. That is, my life had become such that I would stay up until three or four in the morning, and then sleep until eleven or twelve the next day. ... I had a room of my own and I isolated myself there. And I pretty much didn't do anything, not even read in those specific areas like sociology or literary debate and criticism that I personally liked so much and used to read a lot of. I didn't read a single page.

Although Mohammad Reza did not use the term 'depression' himself, he agreed instantly and readily when I volunteered it; in his own words he spoke of 'paralysis' instead. There are some echoes here of the sensation described as 'stuckness' by an Afghan refugee in the UK (Khan 2013).¹⁵

Mohammad Reza went on to say he had little idea of why this happened to him, as objectively nothing around him had changed, just 'something that happened to my mind'. In this whole period he didn't write any poetry at all, and if he went to poetry events it was with none of his previous enthusiasm. He felt that life was meaningless (*bi-ma'ni*, *bi-kehod*) and hollow (*puch*). He did, however, suggest some reasons that might have disposed him to it: his

15 Due to his many years in Iran, no doubt, Mohammad Reza also did not use the emic terms for depressive states that Miller et al. 2006 elicited from subjects in Kabul and included in their 'Afghan Symptom Checklist', such as *jigar kebun* (literally blood-liver, or deep sadness) or *fishār-e pāyin* (literally 'low pressure', or low energy).

mother is his polygamous father's second wife, and his family life has always been very unsettled and conflictual because of this. And he is a sensitive, thin-skinned (*zudranj*) person, pessimistic, a glass-half-empty kind of person, he told me.

Mohammad Reza finally decided the situation was unbearable and travelled alone to Afghanistan for the first time in his life, for a change of scenery and to shake off his lassitude. This journey – full of new experiences, risks, thrills, and danger – cured him. Movement proved to be the antidote to his paralysis, as was the discovery that his poetry was known and admired in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Thus, being a poet had given Mohammad Reza a special status, fame, and the privileges that came with it. He returned to Iran, managed to re-enrol at university and got his undergraduate and master's degrees. He made an income from professional copy editing and returned to poetry. Life is currently quite good for Mohammad Reza: he is the editor of an independent newspaper and a lecturer at a private university in Kabul, and he fell in love with and married an old friend and fellow poet. He still sometimes reflects on the futility of life, but he no longer believes this is a reason to give up the fight. He is particularly determined to make sure his little sister can continue her education without any obstacles, and feels he can be useful.

In this case, the period of depression was clearly viewed as an aberration in this poet's life, likened to physical paralysis. It was marked by an emotional flattening that led him to isolate himself even from his family and give up the activities he'd once loved. (I would almost be inclined to use his lack of interest in turning his sorrow into poetry as a diagnostic criterion for serious depression.) His sleep was disrupted and he had low energy. He told me he'd thought long and hard about what caused this, but there seemed to be no external, objective reason for it: he faced the same hardships as many refugees, and was in fact doing better than most. Yet this young man managed to turn this period of his life into a spur to mobility and new experiences that proved greatly enriching and returned to him his zest for life. For many other young people I knew, too, depression was often a precursor to major reflection and big life changes, usually migration or leaving an unhappy marriage, and indeed could have positive outcomes for personal development. In the case of one young woman, a period of deep unhappiness and medication led her to have enough of the *sukhtan o sākhtan* expected of women (an idiom that may be loosely translated as 'putting up or shutting up'),

16 I do not wish to give the impression that movement across the border with Iran is easy for all Afghans, nor that it implies that they are labour migrants rather than refugees, although this category may indeed be appropriate for many single young men pushed by the poor Afghan economy and attracted by Iran's labour market. The Afghans I worked with did not fall into this category, and their border crossings in both directions were generally 'illegal' and fraught with danger.

to leave her abusive marriage and undertake the risky journey via Turkey and the Aegean Sea with her young son, and seek asylum in Europe.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how poetry can be therapy, it can be testimony, and it can be a resource. It can make the difference between what Freud called 'melancholia' – an unresolved, unresolvable, often unconscious grief for a lost, beloved object – and the healthy and conscious 'mourning' that requires a confrontation of loss and leads to closure (Freud [1917] 2001).¹⁷ In the cases we have seen, Mohammad Reza seemed to be plagued by a melancholia that resisted conscious articulation, a kind of paralysis that could be resolved only by movement, a blockage that had to be physically cleared. It was not writing poetry that cured him, but the social appreciation of his poetry certainly helped. But paradoxically, it was the young men who dwelt on (or in) their low moods and poetically indulged them, more than the young women who were less able to entertain them, who seemed to suffer more from depression, at least according to Mahnaz and Mahbooba Ebrahimi. For these women, poetry and poetic gatherings provided a different kind of resource: a network of like-minded people outside the patriarchal family who could bolster their ambitions and support them in pursuing various unconventional life choices. For Afghan refugees in Iran, then, poetry is an effective therapy when it is used for action, rather than when it is simply expression for its own sake.

I have described the multiple, interrelated angles from which we can approach depression in a refugee population. On one level, there are individual life circumstances and personal experiences. On another, there is a 'structure of feeling' that captures a collective sentiment in a given time and place and links it to the aesthetics and cultural production of that population. Finally, there are the cultural discourses that label those individual and collective feelings as positive or negative, and valorise or pathologise them. I have shuttled back and forth between these levels to weave together a more richly textured image of the politics and aesthetics of depression in a refugee population than the biomedical model provides. I share the view of Davies (2011) that we neglect a profound dimension of human experience if we accept wholesale the 'negative model' that came to dominate in the twentieth century – that emotional suffering is a purposeless annoyance – at the expense of older religious and philosophical traditions that see it as a vehicle for spiritual growth and greater insight. Even

17 For an affecting discussion of what a contemporary anthropology of melancholia might look like for people in a state of limbo or blocked political resolution, see Navaro-Yashin 2012.

for refugees living in a state of poverty and marginality, it can be the key to great imagination, self-improvement, solidarity, and creativity.

About the author

Zuzanna Olszewska is Associate Professor in the Social Anthropology of the Middle East at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford, and Tutorial Fellow in Archaeology and Anthropology at St. John's College. She specialises in the ethnography of Iran and Afghanistan, with a focus on Afghan refugees in Iran, the Persian-speaking Afghan diaspora, and the anthropology of literature and cultural production. She is the author of *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran* (Indiana University Press, 2015), an ethnographic inquiry into how poetic activity reflects changes in youth subjectivity in an Afghan refugee community, based on fieldwork with an Afghan cultural organisation in Mashhad, Iran.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1986. *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Alavi, Elyas. 2008. *Man gorg-e khiālbāfi hastam* [I'm a Daydreamer Wolf]. Tehran: Ahang-e Digar.
- Behrouzan, Orkideh. 2010. 'Prozāk Diaries: Post-Rupture Subjectivities and Psychiatric Futures'. PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Behrouzan, Orkideh. 2015. 'Writing *Prozāk* Diaries in Tehran: Generational Anomie and Psychiatric Subjectivities'. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 39, no. 3: 399–426. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11013-014-9425-4>.
- Boesen, Inger W. 1983. 'Conflicts of Solidarity in Pakhtun Women's Lives'. In *Women and Islamic Societies: Social Attitudes and Historical Perspectives*, edited by Bo Utas, 104–127. London: Curzon Press.
- Das, Veena, and Arthur Kleinman. 2001. 'Introduction'. In *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery*, edited by Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Margaret Lock, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, 1–30. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Das, Veena, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, eds. 2000. *Violence and Subjectivity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Das, Veena, Arthur Kleinman, Margaret Lock, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, eds. 2001. *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Davies, James. 2011. 'Positive and Negative Models of Suffering: An Anthropology of our Shifting Cultural Consciousness of Emotional Discontent'. *Anthropology of Consciousness* 22, no. 2: 188–208. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1556-3537.2011.01049.x>.
- Ebrahimi, Mahbooba. 2007. *Bād-hā kbāharān-e man and* [The winds are my sisters]. Tehran: Sureh-ye Mehr.
- Fisk, Robert. 2008. 'Making Movies the Afghan Way'. *Independent*, 20 November. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-making-movies-the-afghan-way-1027758.html>.
- Freud, Sigmund. (1917) 2001. 'Mourning and Melancholia'. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey and Anna Freud, vol. XIV, 243–58. London: Vintage.
- Good, Byron J. 1977. 'The Heart of What's the Matter: The Semantics of Illness in Iran'. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 1, no. 1: 25–58. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00114809>.
- Good, Byron J., and Arthur Kleinman. 1985. 'Epilogue: Culture and Depression'. In *Culture and Depression: Studies in the Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Psychiatry of Affect and Disorder*, edited by Arthur Kleinman and Byron J. Good, 491–505. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Good, Mary-Jo DelVecchio, and Byron J. Good. 1988. 'Ritual, the State, and the Transformation of Emotional Discourse in Iranian Society'. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 12, no. 1: 43–63. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00047038>.
- Good, Byron J., Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, and Robert Moradi. 1985. 'The Interpretation of Iranian Depressive Illness and Dysphoric Affect'. In *Culture and Depression: Studies in the Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Psychiatry of Affect and Disorder*, edited by Arthur Kleinman and Byron J. Good, 369–428. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jenkins, Janis H., Byron J. Good, and Arthur Kleinman. 1991. 'Cross-Cultural Studies of Depression'. In *Psychosocial Aspects of Depression*, edited by Joseph Becker and Arthur Kleinman, 67–98. Hillside, NY: Laurence Erlbaum Associates.

- Khan, Nichola. 2013. 'A Moving Heart: Querying a Singular Problem of "Immobility" in Afghan Migration to the UK'. *Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness* 32, no. 6: 518–34. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2012.757607>.
- Kleinman, Arthur, and Byron J. Good, eds. 1985. *Culture and Depression: Studies in the Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Psychiatry of Affect and Disorder*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kleinman, Arthur, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, eds. 1997 *Social Suffering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Manoukian, Setrag. 2011. *City of Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran: Shiraz, History and Poetry*. London: Routledge.
- Miller, Kenneth E., Patricia Omidian, Abdul Samad Quraishy, Naseema Quraishy, Mohammed Nader Nasiry, Seema Nasiry, Nazar Mohammed Karyar, and Abdul Aziz Yaqubi. 2006. 'The Afghan Symptom Checklist: A Culturally Grounded Approach to Mental Health Assessment in a Conflict Zone'. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 76, no. 4: 423–33. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.76.4.423>.
- Miller, Kenneth E., Patricia Omidian, Andrew Rasmussen, Aziz Yaqubi, and Haqmal Daudzai. 2008. 'Daily Stressors, War Experiences, and Mental Health in Afghanistan'. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 45, no. 4: 611–38. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1363461508100785>.
- Mirza'i, Aman. 2011. 'The Sewing Machine'. Original in Persian and translation by Zuzanna Olzewska. *Words without Borders*, 'Writing from Afghanistan', May. <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-sewing-machine>.
- Navaro-Yashin, Yael. 2012. *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Olszewska, Zuzanna. 2007. "'A Desolate Voice": Poetry and Identity among Young Afghan Refugees in Iran'. *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2: 203–24.
- Olszewska, Zuzanna. 2008. 'Afghanistan. XIV, Afghan Refugees in Iran.' *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/afghanistan-xiv-afghan-refugees-in-iran-2>.
- Olszewska, Zuzanna. 2013. 'Lyric Realism: Poetic Reflections of Refugee Life in Iran.' In *Afghanistan in Ink: Literature between Diaspora and Nation*, edited by Nile Green and Nushin Arbabzadah, 185–207. London: Hurst.

Olszewska, Zuzanna. 2015. *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy and Philippe Bourgois, eds. 2004. *Violence in War and Peace*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.