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Soundwaves of Dissent: Resistance Through Persianate Cultural Production in Afghanistan

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Abstract

In the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, sound recording technologies—including radio and cassettes—proliferated in Afghanistan and reached transnational lengths. While the state came to dominate these technologies, it could not prevent users from circumventing its censors with alternative perspectives and discourses. This article highlights the examples of Farīda ‘Usmān Anwārī, a noted radio announcer, producer, and journalist, and Aḥmad Zāhīr, Afghanistan’s most popular musical icon to date, to showcase the ways in which the Persianate literary canon served as the medium for sounding dissent amid the changing social and political dynamics of the time. Pushing the boundaries of recorded speech created an alternative space where dissent became possible and the strategic use of mass media paved the way for transnational sonic solidarities among a diverse community of listeners across the Persian-speaking world and beyond.

Keywords: Radio; Poetry; Performance; Cassettes; Persianate Afghanistan; Farīda Anwārī; Aḥmad Zāhīr

For Afghans, the decades of the 1960s and 1970s marked their engagement with new forms of global communication technologies and political experimentation.¹ The establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1964 ushered in certain civil rights, including freedom of speech, which directly impacted radio, music production, and other forms of art. A coup in 1973 led to a republic that inaugurated formal state cultural institutions for film, theater, and performing arts. By 1979, experiments with communism fused radio and television through the state-sponsored media corporation Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), and further popularized regional *maḥālī* (local folk music). World historical events complemented these domestic affairs, and Afghans came to see themselves at the center of the ideological struggles spanning the globe. The Cold War, the rise of student protest movements, decolonization, anti-imperialism, and new modes of identity formation inspired revolutions from Kabul to Herat, Panjshir to Bamiyan, and Kandahar to Balkh. Radio broadcast the pulse of these events, revealing the ways in which the Afghan people responded to these historical accidents through music, poetry, and literature.

If this special issue of *Iranian Studies* considers the national and cultural diversity of Persianate societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from a variety of perspectives, this article’s main concern is how Afghans used communication technologies to

¹ I use “Afghan” here to describe a geographic and civic identity, not an ethnic one. Citizens of Afghanistan spoke multiple languages and applied a variety of ethnic, linguistic, religious, geographic and other terms of self-identification.

engage a transregional Persianate heritage and participate in local and global politics. I elucidate this through three specific examples: first, literary-focused radio programs produced by Afghan women that refashioned local traditions of poetry recitation with music and commentary, serving as a medium to respond to everyday challenges in social and political life; second, popular music that traversed broadcasting censors through the circulation of cassettes and the poetry of state-supported political activists; and third, the performance of poetry and song that considers the symbolic, affective, and embodied dimensions of Persian culture and literary production as acts of political resistance to local Afghan politics.

These examples center on two important historical figures from Afghanistan: Farīda ʿUsmān Anwārī (b. 1947), a noted radio announcer, producer, and journalist; and Aḥmad Zāhir (1946–1979), Afghanistan’s most popular musical icon to date. While Anwārī, through reciting the classical works of Persianate poets, used her voice as a medium to respond to the challenges of everyday life amid growing authoritarian rule and Cold War politics, Zāhir subverted the soundwaves to critique state and society by drawing on the poetry of more radical and leftist contributors of the Persianate literary canon. Due to their emphasis on orality *and* aurality, the contributions of Anwārī and Zāhir also exemplify how a combination of performance, radio, and cassette tape technology became the most accessible mediums for sharing knowledge across a diverse spectrum of listeners.² In other words, because these mediums placed a premium on *speaking* and *hearing*, as opposed to reading and writing, they reached a broader audience and cut across literacy barriers to disseminate information and knowledge. Moreover, the fact that Dari (Afghan Persian) served as one of the predominant languages of communication, poetry, and song allowed for subversive Afghan voices to be heard across a vast landscape of listeners, creating the space for transnational sonic solidarities among diverse communities.³

The praxis of broadcasting oral traditions (story, song, and poetry) equipped Afghan sound technology producers and consumers with the emotional, social, and intellectual capacity to cultivate forms of resistance to the state’s cultural hegemony, particularly through the 1973 and 1978 coups. Deploying their oratory skills and cultural capital, these actors countered official ideology, thus turning tools of state making (radio and recording technologies) into means of self-liberation. Within this frame, the interpretive task at hand is to look for patterns of meaning and ask what divergent interpretations and inconsistencies in popular culture might tell us about the mainstreams and margins of society. By placing subversive and state-sponsored voices in conversation with one another, and by bringing radio performers and producers into the historical fold, a more nuanced understanding of Afghanistan’s past comes into focus. In this new iteration, the oral and aural qualities of language and literature serve as keynote elements of change.

On Persian As A Transnational Language

While Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society, this article’s singular focus on Dari elucidates the language’s important historical role in mass communications and points to the various cultural functions it affords in the Afghan context. At varying times in Afghanistan’s modern history, as Aria Fani discusses, the state attempted to create a mono-lingual society by advancing Pashto as the national language. However, given the primacy of Persian as the language of education and bureaucracy, such attempts were curtailed.⁴ This resulted in recognizing both Dari and Pashto as the national languages of Afghanistan in

² My use of aurality is inspired by the work of ethnomusicologist Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, who discusses how listening has been central to the production of notions of language, music, voice, and sound that determine the politics of life. See Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*.

³ While the constitution of 1964 designates Dari as one of the official languages of the state, to maintain consistency with this special issue’s other contributions, I use Dari and Persian interchangeably.

⁴ Fani, “Disciplining Persian Literature.”

the 1964 Constitution.⁵ While radio began broadcasting in these official languages, other regional languages—including Uzbek, Turkmen, Balochi, Pashayi, and Nuristani—also received airtime, particularly in the late 1970s and 1980s, with the arrival of a leftist regime that promoted Afghanistan’s regional cultures and traditions on radio and television. Nonetheless, Persian remained the cohesive cultural force throughout the country.⁶ Parallel to regional and local languages within a given cultural setting, Persian operated as a *lingua franca* and often adopted elements of local cultures and modes of expression, leading to the existence of various Persian dialects, including Herati, Hazaragi, Badakhshani, and others. The wide dissemination of Persian poetry and song capture this linguistic versatility and adaptability.

In this regard, the element of language as a category of analysis in the Persianate performs an important historical and aesthetic function that demands critical attention. In the twentieth century, even as its global reach had significantly waned, Persian served as a medium of transnational communication and international prestige for Afghan artists, as historical and contemporary literary authorities were summoned in order to frame and comment on local issues of cultural and political import.⁷ Their use of Persian amounts to leveraging linguistic authority and prestige in order to challenge the state’s power and build cultural capital. In other words, it is the eminence of Persian as a vernacular language that directly concerns my analysis here. As such, the examples in this article showcase the diversity and multiplicity of linguistic modernity in various zones of Persianate lands. Wali Ahmadi’s reminder of Persian’s polycentric history is particularly apt here:

The engendering of a national imagination in Persian has been a complicated one, largely because the present extent of Persian cultural space does *not* correspond to any one “national soul.” Persian literature has historically transcended well-defined territoriality and has never been exclusively “Iranian literature” or “Afghan literature” or “Tajik literature” (or, for that matter, “North Indian literature”).⁸

In this sense, detaching Persian from a specific national imaginary allows for its transregional performance and function to be critically examined, even in the era of intersecting nationalisms. Indeed, many states and nations (and nation-states) can claim and contest a common literary and cultural heritage rooted in Persian. By then considering the diverse linguistic usages of Persian—in this case, through mass media in Afghanistan—what comes to the surface is the language’s variegated socio-historical reception and the complexity and intimacy of Persian literary and cultural dynamics from within and without.

Towards this end, to distill how mass media technologies allowed for expressions of social and cultural resistance through Persianate literary cultural production, I begin with a brief discussion of regional connections that showcase the *longue durée* history that precedes and informs these twentieth-century sonic collaborations. If literary radio programs and music from Afghanistan resonated with diverse communities spanning the Middle East, Central and South Asia, it is precisely due to centuries of vernacular cultural practices that entwined millions of inhabitants across regions.⁹ Poetry, performance, song, and sonic collaborations recall and rewrite more than a thousand years of textual history, and even more years of cultural memory. Against this backdrop, I then provide the historical journey of Afghanistan’s modern political formations through sound—in other words, through the aural landscape that imparted meaning on Afghan identities. Attuned to sound, content,

⁵ For a more detailed analysis of the politics of language making in twentieth-century Afghanistan, see Ahmadi, *Modern Persian Literature in Afghanistan*; and “Article 3” in *Constitution of Afghanistan 1964*.

⁶ Ahmadi, *Modern Persian Literature in Afghanistan*, 2.

⁷ For a collection of critical scholarship on language and literature in modern Afghanistan and its transnational connections, see the co-edited volume, Green and Arbabzadah, *Afghanistan in Ink*.

⁸ Ahmadi, “Exclusionary Poetics,” 408.

⁹ For a discussion of the history of music in Afghanistan that considers transregional influence, see Baily, “Music and the State”; Sakata, *Afghanistan Encounters*; and Slobin, *Music in the Culture of Northern Afghanistan*.

and context, this article is a starting point for further reconstructions of Afghan history and its enduring importance as a central producer of Persianate culture.

Persianate Poetic Soundscapes

Thinking about poetic soundscapes in twentieth-century Afghanistan requires a historical understanding of Persian as a shared language that linked diverse peoples across regions and polities. Recently, historians of the Persianate world have examined conceptions of place and movement through languages, literature, customs, and cultural imaginations. These formations spanned a broad geography and existed outside the anachronistic shadow of nationalism.¹⁰ Up through the early nineteenth century, Persian was the language of power and knowledge across the Middle East, Central and South Asia. As the *lingua franca* of literature, poetry, storytelling, and spirituality, Persian encompassed multiplicity, relationality, and similitude.¹¹ As Kevin Schwartz writes, “Turks, Arabs, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Persians, and many others used the language with little thought that doing so would define them in strict ethnic or territorial terms.”¹² Proximities and similarities constituted a framework that distinguished people while simultaneously accommodating plurality.

This growth in vernacular culture was not limited to a written tradition. It combined orality, practice, and daily rituals where various strands of spiritual knowledge were found in new forms, including songs. From the seminal *masnawī* (rhymed couplets) of Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Balkhī (d. 1273) to the poetry of the scholar-singer Amīr Khusraw (d. 1325) and the *ghazals* (lyric poems) of ‘Abd al-Qādir Bīdil (d. 1720), a diverse literary culture translated sacral and mystical sentiments into music that was shared among communities across space and time.¹³ These songs and texts served as the soundtrack of everyday life across the vast plains of the Persian-speaking world. Melodies, lyrics, and rhythms were preserved and disseminated through generations via oral traditions. The *bā-sawād* (literate) read, translated, and transported poetry to the *bī-sawād* (illiterate) of their communities. Songs preserved poems and people. Embedded in music are idioms, imagery, metaphors, and stories that recall a deeper past and have been reinterpreted by different cultures over time. Even in the prevalent tradition of *tadhkira* writing (biographical anthology), it was often hearing poetry in tea/coffee houses or recitation circles that allowed for its recording and preservation.¹⁴ Reading against this long history compels us to recognize the everyday soundscapes of the diverse societies and peoples of the Persianate world as a reflection of centuries of transregional coexistence and cultural memory.

In the 1960s and 1970s, we hear the reverberations of these transcultural connections through sonic collaborations broadcast on the radio. A lesser known, yet prevalent example comes from the duet sung in 1965 between renowned Afghan female singer Khānum Zhilā (1943–2009) and Muḥammad Rafī‘ (1924–1980), the famous Indian playback singer of Bollywood films. Together, they sang in Persian. Using the poetry of Bāriq Shafī‘ī, an Afghan contemporary, sacral and mystical imagery conveyed the theme of love.¹⁵ Khānum Zhilā and Muḥammad Rafī‘ took turns singing each line of the chorus:

¹⁰ Persianate refers to the social and cultural formations associated with the Persian language and to forms of expression and practice inspired and generated through contact and engagement with Persian across the Islamicate world. The term was first coined by Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. 2, 293–294. For more recent studies, see Ahmed, *The Loss of Hindustan*; Green, *The Persianate World*; and Kia, *Persianate Selves*.

¹¹ Kia, *Persianate Selves*.

¹² Schwartz, *Remapping Persian Literary History*.

¹³ Mawlānā is traditionally associated with Balkh, and given the *nisba* Balkhī, a name that holds particular pride for Afghans (in contrast to the Turks, who emphasize the “Rumi” part of his name).

¹⁴ For more on the production, circulation, and citation networks of *tadhkiras* of Persian poets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Schwartz, “A Transregional Persianate Library.”

¹⁵ A brief discussion of Bāriq Shafī‘ī’s works and his later involvement in the leftist party of Afghanistan can be found in Ahmadi, *Modern Persian Literature in Afghanistan*, 99.

Rafīʿ:

Ay tāza gul tū zīnat-i gulzār-i kistī?

Oh, fresh rose, whose garden did you come from?

Zhilā:

Ay murgh-i bāgh-i dil tū giriftār-i kistī?

Oh, the songbird of the garden's heart, who has captured you?

Rafīʿ:

Giriftār-i tūstam

I am captured by you

Zhilā:

Zi gulzār-i tūstam

I reside in your garden

Zhilā and Rafīʿ:

Māim hardū zīb-i gulistān-i zindagī

We are both the beauty of the garden of life.¹⁶

For Afghans, Indians, Iranians, and many others with shared Persianate culture and tradition, the imagery of the beloved, the songbird, and the garden are as familiar as the instrumental sounds of the *tabla* (drum) and accompanying harmonium. Part of this is due to the fact that Persian, particularly its literary form, has remained relatively accessible to a contemporary speaker of the language. As Dick Davis notes, a modern Persian speaker can read the works of a tenth-century poet with relative ease due to the continuity of poetic rhetoric from the earliest poems to the mid-nineteenth century and beyond.¹⁷ Moreover, Afghan classical music as a sub-branch of North Indian classical music shares instruments, *ragas* (melodies), and rhythms that resonate across borders and, like poetry, have a deep, connected history.¹⁸ Song in the realm of Bollywood films combines various genres and linguistic registers, yet speaks in a cultural vernacular that continues to hold valence across South and Central Asia and the Middle East.¹⁹ Along these lines, to imagine a community of listeners across a diverse ethnolinguistic terrain responding to the Zhilā-Rafīʿ duet is to recognize a pre-existing cultural space where textual, oral, and aural translation flowed across and between diverse communities. To situate how these cultural connections persisted well into the twentieth century, the remainder of this article turns to three sonic vignettes—radio, performance, and cassettes—that explore the historical and affective ramifications of Persian poetry in Afghanistan.

Radio

As communication technologies like the radio became a staple of twentieth-century commerce and industrialization, the Afghan state's ability to operate the technology became critical to managing the nation and demonstrating its fitness as a modern state. To this end, the state began purchasing radio technology almost immediately after its global commodification in the 1920s. After winning diplomatic independence from Britain in the victory of the Third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919, Afghan officials were deeply invested in proving they were worthy of sitting at the international policy table. Incorporating the latest

¹⁶ I thank Ahmad Rashid Salim for his assistance in translating these lyrics. For a sound recording of Khānūm Zhilā and Muḥammad Rafīʿ singing *Ay tāza gul tū zīnat-i gulzār-i kist- ī?*, see the YouTube video provided by Afghan Music HD, “Mermon Zhila & Mohammad Rafi.” This song was originally performed as a duet between Khānūm Zhilā and Ustād Khiyāl, her mentor and a notable singer, songwriter, and composer of Afghan music.

¹⁷ Davis, “A Brief History of Metaphor in Persian Poetry,” 15–16.

¹⁸ For detailed studies on the classification of Afghan classical music as a sub-branch of North Indian classical music, see Slobin, *Music in the Culture of Northern Afghanistan*; and Sakata, *Music in the Mind*.

¹⁹ Ahmed, “Future's Past,” 52.

global communication technology would bolster Afghan desires to appear competitive on an international scale alongside other nation-states emerging out of decolonization.

From the time the radio transmitter was first introduced, the state relied on international support to build its broadcasting infrastructure. This began with sending Afghans abroad to gain the technical knowledge required to operate radio. In 1926, King Amān Allāh Khān (r. 1919–1929), the royal architect of Afghan modernism, sent engineer ‘Atā’Allāh to Germany for the training necessary to establishing and installing radio in Afghanistan.²⁰ After a year of dedicated learning, he returned to Kabul with German technicians and two radio transmitters. In 1927, for the first time, radio was broadcast from Afghanistan. The official radio station—*Rādiyū Kābul*—was housed in a small room of the Kūtī Landanī building near Artal Bridge in Kabul.²¹ Literally meaning “London Box,” the building’s name was inspired by its British colonial architecture. Some accounts indicate that Kūtī Landanī was originally a café that was later appropriated for the radio station.²² However, transmissions were limited to only a few people in Kabul who could afford the broadcasting set.

By the 1960s, radio broadcasting in Afghanistan had expanded to the entire country.²³ Once again, German technicians helped the Afghans acquire advanced Siemens transmitters that allowed radio waves to reach longer distances. King Zāhir Shāh (1933–1973) and Prime Minister

Muḥammad Dā’ūd Khān (1953–1963) revived Amān Allāh’s vision for modernization, placing a premium on radio as the prime instrument to educate the population, create a unified nation, and propel it into the future. In 1964, with the construction of seven recording studios, two concert studios, and a large auditorium, the Ministry of Information and Culture changed the station’s name from *Rādiyū Kābul* to *Rādiyū Afghānistān*.²⁴ It also became the center for the patronage and promotion of new popular music suitable for radio broadcasting. In addition to Persian and Pashto, daily radio programs of one hour to an hour-and-a-half were available in English, German, Russian, and Urdu.²⁵ The state’s support for these languages reflected Afghanistan’s bilateral relationships in the Cold War era, during which it remained non-aligned.²⁶ Moreover, the state invested in casting bilingualism as a vital survival skill in a twentieth-century world defined by international trade and business.

In 1964, like national broadcasting, the Afghan constitutional monarchy was new. King Zāhir Shāh’s (r. 1933–1973) experiments with democratic values coincided with his modernizing agenda for Afghanistan, as he sought to integrate the population outside Kabul into the national communication system through the creation of the Mūdīriyat-i kunfirāns-hā (Department of Conferences) in 1964. This bureaucratic arm of the state was responsible for organizing meetings at provincial centers and in villages with the objective of increasing the level of information circulating among local populations. These efforts were part of the plan to integrate Afghanistan into the international information system and showcase a “progressive” nation where the press reflected differences of opinion.²⁷ By the mid-1970s, the plan had worked. Afghanistan had 70 different dailies, weeklies, trade publications, tabloids, and 16 daily newspapers. Many of these publications were anti-establishment

²⁰ For more on the scientific and technical knowledge exchange between Afghans and Germans, see Wardaki, “Rediscovering Afghan Fine Arts.”

²¹ Ghīyasi, “Nīm-qarn Irtibāt wa Paywand az Tārīkh Sadā”; Shākir, “Az Āghāz Tāh Imrūz”; and Ḥusaynzāda, “Az Rādiyū Kābul tā Rādiyū Afghānistān.”

²² Ḥusaynzāda, “Az Rādiyū Kābul tā Rādiyū Afghānistān.”

²³ Anon, *Afghanistan, Ancient Land with Modern Ways*.

²⁴ Malyar, *Tārīkh-i Rādiyū-i Afghānistān*, 2.

²⁵ Upon surveying *Pashtūn Zhagh*, a state-sponsored periodical produced by the Ministry of Information and Culture and Radio Afghanistan, these foreign languages were featured in nearly every printed radio schedule throughout the 1960s and 1970s. See also, *Republic of Afghanistan Annual 1977*, 268–70.

²⁶ For a historical discussion of Afghanistan’s entanglements during the Cold War, see Crews, *Afghan Modern*; Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion*; and Westad, *The Global Cold War*.

²⁷ Rawan, “Modern Mass Media and Traditional Communication in Afghanistan,” 159.

periodicals produced mainly by leftist intellectuals, some of which were later banned, including *Kumak*, *Parcham*, *Khalq*, *Waḥdat*, *Mardum*, *Payām-i Wijdān*, and *Afghān Millat*, among others.²⁸

Broadcasting followed the subversive tide of print media. Although the government was keen to use radio technology as a propaganda machine to keep the public informed of its programs, edicts, and policies, the radio's social side effects were sometimes unpredictable and unintended. Programs that began as poetry readings and folktale recitations turned into platforms for conversations around issues of language, nationalism, and identity.²⁹ At the forefront of these programs were Afghan women. They served as the producers, creative directors, and announcers whose voices were broadcast on the airwaves. Farīda ʿUsmān Anwarī is one such example. As an intellectual, she used her voice as an art form to celebrate and popularize the poetry of the Persianate world's most enduring poets, most notably of Mawlānā. As a celebrated journalist, announcer, and reciter of poetry, Anwarī's aural and literary imprint suggests new ways to think about sound and mass media during this period.

Anwarī began her broadcasting career in 1966 while still studying as an undergraduate in journalism at Kabul University. Radio administrators—including her professor, Ḥusayn Rīyāzī, who oversaw the radio's *Prugrām-i maʿārif* (the Education Program), and Karīm Ruhīnā, the General Manager of Radio Programs—recognized her talent for public speaking and recruited her to work for the station.³⁰ Inspired by the examples of the earlier generation of trailblazing women and radio announcers—including Laṭīfa Kabīr Sirāj, Shafīqa Ḥabībī, Shukriya Raʿd, Nafisa ʿAbbāsī, Fahīma Amīn, and Nūrjān Farhānī—Anwarī took the job, with her first assignment being to manage *Prugrām-i maʿārif*. Soon thereafter, she produced other popular radio programs, including *Az har chaman samānī* (Flowers from Every Garden), *Surūd-i hastī* (The Song of Being), *Tarāzū-yi ṭilāʿī* (Golden Scales), *Naqd-i adabī* (Literary Criticism), and *Bāz-shināsī-yi khabragān-i hunar va adab* (Getting Reacquainted with Experts of Arts and Literature). She co-hosted one of her most popular radio programs, *Zamzama-ḥā-yi shabhangām* (Nocturnal Whispers), with noted Afghan writer and novelist Akram ʿUsmān.

Farīda Anwarī's broadcasting career coincided with the fluid and experimental moment of radio's transition from a local station to a national one. This presented Anwarī with the space to test the boundaries of radio speech and create new spaces for women's voices on the airwaves. Following the adoption of the 1964 Constitution, state-led modernization programs encouraged more women to join the workforce. As in other countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, there was also an attempt, if modest, to eliminate gender inequality through state action.³¹

In 1975, during a week-long seminar on the life and work of Mawlānā, Radio Afghanistan featured songs, music, and poetry recitations in his honor.³² Anwarī's recitation of Mawlānā's poems became so widely popular that events honoring the poet's life and work became a regular part Radio Afghanistan's programming. Not only did these programs have the positive effect of raising awareness and literary appreciation among both the intelligentsia and general public with access to radio, but they also exemplified the ways in which

²⁸ Āhang and Siddiq, *Dā Afghānistān Matbūʿāt- Yewā Katana*, 41. Quoted in Rawan, "Modern Mass Media and Traditional Communication in Afghanistan." Faridullah Bezhān also discusses the emergence of independent newspapers in the post-1964 period that served as one of the driving forces in the political and cultural dynamics of the time. See Bezhān, "Artist of Wonderland." The Hoover Institution Library & Archives at Stanford University holds an inventory of Afghan partisan serials.

²⁹ *Az har chaman samānī*, *Surūd-i hastī* and *Tarāzū-yi ṭilāʿī* were among the radio programs that featured poetry, literary critiques, and commentary on contemporary music, politics, and culture. For a short biography of the Afghan women who worked in radio, television, cinema and theater, see Daro, *Awāzi Mandagār-i Zanān*.

³⁰ Radio Āzādī, "Ba Bahāna-yi Shaṣt-u Panjumīn Bahār-i Ṣadā-yī Hamīsha Sabz-i Farīda Anwarī."

³¹ Al-Ali, *Women's Movements in the Middle East*; Russell, "Women's Mobilization in Latin America"; and Armstrong, "Before Bandung."

³² *Republic of Afghanistan Annual 1975*, 292; "Seminar on Life, Works of Maulana Balkhi Opens," *The Kabul Times*, October 2, 1974.

Afghans were using global technology and refashioning it to reflect local image-making practices. Indeed, the strategic use of global radio technology affected the programming the producers created and, ultimately, their relationship to their listening communities.

Poetry has played a lasting and important role in the Persian language's expression of social critique and political discontent. In her discussion of evolving forms of poetic protests in Persian, Nahid Siamdoust describes how some classical poets of the Persian canon openly criticized their social and political milieus.³³ Siamdoust contends that, in the Iranian context, it was not until the creation of the popular *Gulhā* radio programs in the 1950s that classical Persian poetry and music was disseminated via broadcasting technology to a wider public.³⁴ Similarly, in the 1940s, radio in Afghanistan helped reintroduce and circulate classical Persian poetry and music to an Afghan audience, particularly through the introduction of the Kabuli *ghazal*, a song form that uses Persian texts from a variety of sources. In musical terms, the Kabuli *ghazal* style is related to *ghazal* singing in India and Pakistan, but the setting of the texts to music is distinctly Afghan, with interpolated couplets sung in free rhythm, fast instrumental sections, and dramatic rhythmic cadences.³⁵

By the 1960s, Anwarī's literary radio programs were reaching a broad audience and gaining in popularity due to her ability to embody poetic forms that were simultaneously both old and new—old in their lyrics, new in their performance. As I explain below, while Anwarī's programs did not formally serve as a channel for political opposition, as their content was artistic rather than political, the choice of declamation based on the texts of classical Persianate poets allowed her to offer subversive political commentary while retaining an air of deniability.³⁶ This careful, albeit deliberate, meditation of dissent followed the changing pulse of all major political, social, and cultural developments of the period. While political magazines used novel tools like the publication of cartoons and caricatures—largely absent from print media in Afghanistan before 1964—to express political criticism, in the space of the mass media recording industry, Anwarī's use of Persian poetry took full advantage of the social and political context; she was able to employ this medium to voice dissent without censorship.³⁷ The new era ushered in by the 1964 Constitution needed new media, and poetry provided an ideal means for new ideas and new ways of engagement.³⁸ In addition, being the producer of her own show allowed Anwarī to control its content and strategy.

Anwarī deployed selected texts from the repertoire of classical Persian poets to suit her audience's situations and reflect their moods. Specifically, while Afghanistan's political experiments continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s—a constitutional monarchy in 1964, a republic in 1973, and a leftist government in 1978—the Sufi poetry of the classical period helped Anwarī frame the challenges of everyday life. Marī Wāhīdī (b.1950), Anwarī's contemporary and a teacher of Dari in the 1970s, recalls her illiterate mother being moved to tears while listening to recitations of the opening lines of Mawlānā's *masnawī*:

Bishnaw az nay chun shikāyat mīkunad
Now listen to this reed flute's deep lament

Az judā'ī-hā hikāyat mīkunad
As it tells the tale of separation³⁹

³³ Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 50.

³⁴ Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 50, 58.

³⁵ Baily, *War, Exile and the Music of Afghanistan*, 24–25.

³⁶ Nahid Siamdoust makes a similar conjecture in the case of Mohammad Reza Shahjarian's effect while singing his most famous ballad *Bird of Dawn*, which is based on a Persian poem that became a song of protest. See *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 37–38, 63–85.

³⁷ Bezhan, "Artist of Wonderland," 634–635.

³⁸ Bezhan, "Artist of Wonderland," 636.

³⁹ I thank Ahmad Rashid Salim for his insights into the variable ways this poem has been translated.

At a very young age, Wāhidi's mother, Bībī Lāl, had to leave her home in Badakhshan, a northern province of Afghanistan, to join her husband's family in Kabul. Mawlānā's verses provided comfort in a world that had separated her from her family. Bībī Lāl imagined these verses were written precisely for her. "Mīguft, īn az man hast" (this is mine), Bībī Lāl would say.⁴⁰ Here, metaphor enables multiple layers of meaning, especially around the crucial theme of love and separation, particularly from the beloved. As Breyley contends, in the works of classical Persian poets, the beloved may represent many ideas, including romantic partners, a spiritual companion, the divine, or "an ideal such as justice or freedom."⁴¹

Anwarī, as the performer, was guided by Mawlānā's words and works to create new meanings and relevance for a contemporary audience by playing with the multiple layers of meaning and allegorical references expected by readers and listeners of Persian poetry.⁴² Bībī Lāl's reception of Mawlānā's poetry illustrates how the timeless quality of verse could be interpreted by a listener in twentieth-century Afghanistan; in this case, the separation from one's family home demanded by societal gender norms. Moreover, one did not need to know how to read in order to understand the sorrows of Mawlānā's reed. Before literacy became widespread, the performance of poetic texts was central to cultural and social life. That these recitations occurred over the radio and reached thousands of listeners not only allowed for its dissemination, but also its multivarious interpretations. Melodic recitation and music were the primary means of transmitting poetry across social classes, including to people without access to books or other inscribed art, making it a major medium for all types of listeners to find relevance and meaning for their everyday lives. Poetry here stands for both composition and affect. In Afghan culture, there is a profound connection between poetry and experience, to the extent that many Afghans, like Bībī Lāl, consider poetry to define the essence of their identity.⁴³ Centuries of rich poetic tradition in Persian became an axis through which a national discourse was articulated and resonated with personal experiences.

Anwarī's recitation over the airwaves represented an alternate space wherein a community of listeners interested in intonations of Persian poetry and the possibility for diverse usage in the context of daily life existed. When Anwarī recited Mawlānā's poems, fused in her voice were not only a thousand years of a poetic tradition, but also the long arc of a modern political struggle for freedom and identity. Anwarī's attraction to and performance of the rich tradition of classical Persian poetry circulated as currency in the symbolic market of the Afghan search for a contemporary identity, whether in the case of Bībī Lāl and her attachments to notions of a home or in the case of a broad Afghan audience struggling to express its self-conception as a community while grappling with the contradictions inherent in it.

Anwarī capitalized on a shared language and literary heritage to create a forum for dialogue about life, spirituality, belonging, unbelonging, and love. If the state was invested in creating a national culture based on the work of these poets, that goal was inconsequential to the larger work of Anwarī's recitations: giving people comfort in the face of political and social turmoil. Drawing on the canon of classical Persian poets afforded Anwarī protection from an increasingly authoritative state in the 1970s and, despite its restrictions, allowed her to embody indigenous literary traditions that carried and fueled shared sentiments and the variegated experiences of her Afghan audience. For centuries, palaces, teahouses, and private courtyards served as venues for the dissemination of poetry in the Persianate world.⁴⁴ By the 1960s, radio was serving as one such venue for taking pleasure in the sounds

⁴⁰ Marī Wāhidi (Afghan school teacher in the 1970s) in discussion with the author, January 28, 2019.

⁴¹ Breyley, "The Language of Love," 160.

⁴² Breyley, "The Language of Love," 161.

⁴³ Baily, *The Spiritual Music of Ustad Amir Mohammad*; and Sakata, *Music in the Mind*.

⁴⁴ Breyley, "The Language of Love," 164.

and semantics of classical Persian poetry and music, while continuing to entertain and inspire.

Alongside the important role broadcast radio played in connecting classical Persian poetry to the experiences of daily life, popular music aired on the radio contributed to the era's growing sense of dissent. As seen further below, it was once again a Persian literary heritage that amplified this "revolution in sound." Perhaps no other musician from the 1960s and 1970s is better remembered for his imprint on pop music than Aḥmad Zāhir. Born on June 14, 1946 in Kabul, Aḥmad Zāhir established himself as a singer in the 1960s. His popularity swelled over this decade and the next as he took advantage of the burgeoning radio and recording industries and developed a broad repertoire of romantic, self-reflective, and politically charged songs. As the son of a court doctor, minister of health, and influential politician, valuable social connections enhanced Zāhir's artistic success. He forged long-lasting relationships with cultural leaders, including musicians, composers, and poets across the region and world. He socialized among a diverse spectrum of people, from elites to everyday Afghans, and was extremely charitable to the poor. Distinguished musically by his vocal stamina and new compositions, he sustained his career by producing an immense corpus of songs totaling over 20 albums, surpassing what many singers produce in a lifetime.⁴⁵

Like Anwarī, Aḥmad Zāhir's rise to stardom corresponded with the political transformations of the 1960s and 1970s. When, while still in high school, he began his musical career, the constitutional monarchy formed under King Zāhir Shāh in 1964 provided some civil liberties, including freedom of speech. This provision impacted musicians, specifically, by protecting recording artists like Zāhir from censorship. With President Dā'ūd Khān's coup in 1973, Aḥmad Zāhir recorded songs that celebrated the change in guard and establishment of the Afghan republic.⁴⁶ However, as the political climate between 1973 and 1978 became increasingly autocratic, Aḥmad Zāhir once again took to the airwaves to sing of society's social ills, including the famine of 1977 and the general poverty of the nation.⁴⁷ When Dā'ūd Khān and his family were brutally murdered inside the Presidential Palace and another regime change inaugurated the arrival of communism in Afghanistan in 1978, Aḥmad Zāhir again took to music to record songs of liberation and critique hegemonic power. The increasingly political tone of his songs now received pushback from state censors, who did not allow their broadcast on radio. However, these songs were circulated through cassettes and underground channels across Afghanistan and the broader region. In 1979, Aḥmad Zāhir died in what is officially reported as a car accident, although his father—a doctor—confirmed a bullet was shot in the back of his head.⁴⁸ His funeral was televised and drew thousands of Afghans, who followed his hearse through the streets of Kabul.

Radio in the 1960s and 1970s in Afghanistan, whether broadcasting the poetry of Mawlānā or the songs of Zāhir, provided a medium for political expression and social commentary that often outweighed verbal communication and behavior. While poetry and song can be analyzed for the weight of their content, their significance also lies in their reception as

⁴⁵ Nūrmal, *Aḥmad Zāhir*; Razzāq, *Aḥmad Zāhir Chigūna Tirūr Shud?*; and Madadī, "Taḥāwul-i Mūsīqī-yi Afghānistān Dar Qarn-i Akhīr."

⁴⁶ The song, *Mubārak, Jumhūrī-yi Mā Mubārak* (Congratulations to Our Republic) was performed by Aḥmad Zāhir and recorded at the studios of Radio Afghanistan on the inauguration of Dā'ūd Khān's presidency in 1973. See, Nūrmal, *Aḥmad Zāhir*, 87–88.

⁴⁷ The song, '*Ajab Ṣabrī Khudā Dārad* (Astonishing is God's Patience) was recorded on the Ariana Music label; the lyrics capture the sentiment of disparity amid social impoverishment. The song was censored in 1977 for containing lyrics that equated God to man. Shams al-Dīn Shāhābī (producer and owner of Ariana Music studio) in discussion with the author, June 22, 2018. For the full lyrics of '*Ajab Ṣabrī Khudā Dārad*, see Nūrmal, *Aḥmad Zāhir*, 175–176.

⁴⁸ In an interview, Aḥmad Zāhir's sister, Zāhira Zāhir, describes how her father and other family who saw the corpse confirmed a bullet was shot to the back of his head. See, Nawabī, "Interview with Zahira Zahir." For various theories surrounding Aḥmad Zāhir's death, which has not been the subject of any government investigation to date, see Razzāq, *Aḥmad Zāhir Chigūna Tirūr Shud?*

political acts. Indeed, the reception of radio extends well beyond the technology's determining function to address transformations that occur in listener perceptions of the sounds broadcast, altering the soundscape.⁴⁹ Figures like Anwarī and Zāhir captured the sentiments of their milieus not just through their subversive critiques of society, but also through literature that allowed some to imagine an alternate present and future. These figures also illustrate how producers and musicians in Afghanistan shaped national broadcasting culture as much as geopolitics did throughout the 1960s and 1970s. As material and sonic limits were imposed on radio by successive Afghan regimes, the state did not anticipate how radio's producers and musicians would circumvent censors and use the technology to sound dissent.

Performance

While radio as a site of state control is important to understanding the state's performativity of its professed values, principles, and aesthetic and acoustic expressions (in short, its identity), it is also pertinent to locate the artists' position within this spectrum. "Performativity," as Nahid Siamdoust argued in the context of Iran, "relies on citationality, referencing fragments of traditions, cultures, discourses, and communal memories."⁵⁰ Similarly, in Afghanistan, to the extent that Afghans validated the state's existence and authority through the expression of their discontent, they also resisted it through artistic mediums, including the performing arts. To perform alternative subjectivities, Afghan artists like Anwarī and Zāhir drew on various traditions and repertoires of contention. In doing so, they challenged ideas surrounding issues of gender, freedom, religion, and politics. Anwarī and Zāhir's examples of literary and aural performativity allowed for diverse interpretations of the past and engagement in a national discourse about the future. In other words, their poetic and musical performances were simultaneous expressions of identity and political or social dissent.

While Anwarī was not a self-proclaimed feminist, her on-air personality certainly rubbed against traditional gender norms that relegated women to the private sphere and did not value the amplification of female voices on the radio. In her poetry recitations, she relayed strong emotions, changed the pitch of her voice to cater to the tone of the poem she was reciting, and used her voice to connect with her listeners. She was a self-identified artist, and she imagined her audience to understand this, declaring in a 1973 interview:

[S]omeone who can recite a poem and attract listeners is a true artist, in the way that an actor in theater can capture the attention of the audience. The declamation of poetry is, for this reason, close to the performance of theater and drama artists.⁵¹

Anwarī's talent—as a gripping orator capable of drawing in her audience—transformed radio in Afghanistan into a medium of (re)introducing and performing classical Persianate literature for the nation. By combining poetry with music and declamation, she not only encouraged contemplation of the poetry itself, but also extended and amplified localized traditions of performance and artistic expression. In this sense, her programs helped solidify her reputation as a purveyor of Afghanistan's linguistic and literary cultural heritage. At a time when various global musical and poetic influences infiltrated Afghanistan, figures like Anwarī helped deploy the popularity of Afghan arts and local cultural practices that celebrated the rich cultural tradition of reciting and reflecting on classical poetry. For Afghans, the arts embodied a unique form of cultural expression and possible space for autonomy, especially as the state attempted to enforce its legitimacy through ideological and disciplinary apparatuses that included mass media. Reproducing the legitimacy of the

⁴⁹ For more on soundscapes, see, for instance, Schafer, *The Soundscape*; and Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*.

⁵⁰ Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 10–11.

⁵¹ "Wa Ḥālā Farīda Anwarī Sukhan Mīgūyad," 22.

Afghan state, particularly in the 1970s, was often enacted performatively through discourse and practice, as evidenced by the political speeches, new forms of governance (including constitutions), edicts, and proclamations following the coups of 1973 and 1978. Citizens embodied and replicated these signifiers of state legitimacy through their choice of clothing, recitation of national anthems, and participation in national events and rituals. Nonetheless, while many accepted the state's attempts to infringe on its citizens' daily lives and activities, others resisted through subversive acts. Here, poetry and music afforded a great sense of freedom and often functioned as means of offering discreet dissent and social criticism.

In the case of Aḥmad Zāhir, his public performances and concerts allowed for a communal sharing of critical views not available elsewhere, particularly for what they allowed in terms of the spontaneity of live action. The concert space enabled the deliberate coming together of strangers who engaged with each other through certain texts via songs and became involved in a conscious act of intentionality, awareness, and an interest in imagining the ways in which the world could be. Inherent in this process was the unconscious human impulse to build the world from social conditioning, scientific rationality, artistic traditions, and the individual struggle for survival.⁵² Gatherings around music were also important because they were based on local and long-standing engagements with the embodied sense of sound, rooted in poetry as the master sonic form. Both the concert atmosphere and poetry and song as artforms and image-making practices allowed the space of public performance to turn into a national conversation outside official parameters.

In May 1978 in Kabul, only weeks after a coup brought a Soviet-aligned government to power in Afghanistan, Aḥmad Zāhir performed a concert in one of the city's main movie theaters, Dā mirmanu tulāna. At the time, Zāhir's relations with the new government were increasingly hostile, mainly due to years of tension and his refusal to publicly support Afghan leftist parties. As they began to take on political undertones, his songs were increasingly censored on Radio Afghanistan. He had already been the victim of a Soviet smear campaign that accused him of murdering his second wife, Khālida.⁵³ This confluence of events inspired a marked shift in Aḥmad Zāhir's lyrical focus. He became even more political and partisan in his song choices and more provocative in his live performances. A concert attendee, Malālī Mūsī Nizām, recalls, "As hundreds of spectators watched, the singer with the golden voice and unique humble disposition came out onto the stage alone and took the microphone to his hand and his eternal, magical voice resonated through the entire hall, singing"⁵⁴:

Zindaḡī ākhir sar āyad, bandaḡī dar kār nīst
Life will eventually end, there is no use for submission.
bandaḡī gar shart bāshad, zindaḡī dar kār nīst
If submission is mandatory, there is no life.
bā ḥaqārat gar bibārad bar sarat bārān-i durr,
If pearl raindrops were to come down on you in humiliation
āsmān rā gū: biraw, bārandaḡī dar kār nīst
Go and tell the heavens: go, there is no use for such downpour
gar fishār-i dushmanān ābat kunad, miskīn mashaw,

⁵² Nelson Goodman analyzes the philosophical value of symbols and their use in artistic practices (including performance), among other human activities. He offers a compelling argument for how humanity needs art, as much as science, to understand human existence. See Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*.

⁵³ Aḥmad Zāhir was allegedly forced to marry Khālida, the daughter of Sa'īd Dā'ūd Tarūn, an Afghan leftist and the Chief of Police under President Nūr Muḥammad Tarakī (1978–79). In 1978 Aḥmad Zāhir was imprisoned on suspicion of murdering Khālida, but was later found not guilty. See Nūrmal, *Aḥmad Zāhir*, 1–22. Ustād Armān, a noted Afghan musician and vocalist, recalls visiting Aḥmad Zāhir in prison and his contempt for those suggesting he had murdered a woman. See Yousofi, "Studio 19 – Haroon Yousofi with Ustad Arman," 19:24–20:38.

⁵⁴ Nizām, "Zindaḡī Ākhir Sar Āyad."

If the pressure from the enemies deluges you, do not despair
mard bāsh, ay khasta-dil, sharmandaḡi dar kār nīst
 remain a man/firm, oh you tired soul, there is no shame.
zindaḡi āzādī-yi insān-u istiqlāl-i ūst
 Life is a human being's freedom and independence
bahr-i āzādī jadal kun, bandaḡi dar kār nīst
 Fight for freedom, for submission is not an option.⁵⁵

The lyrics of *Zindaḡi ākhir sar āyad* (Life will eventually end) belong to renowned Iranian poet Abū al-Qāsim Lāhūti (1887–1957), who spent much of his life in exile in the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic.⁵⁶ Originally written in 1930, the chain of transmission by which Lāhūti's *ghazal* passed through West and Central Asia is a testament to the enduring relevance of the work. Samuel Hodgkin notes that *Zindaḡi ākhir sar āyad* was formally published as a song in 1942, which coincided with World War II and thus permitted Soviet publishers and critics to read it as a rejection of fascism. As Soviet cultural influence accelerated in Afghanistan over the course of the 1970s, Lāhūti's works were sold in Kabul bookstores and recited over the airwaves on Persian-language Radio Moscow. Given the spread and circulation of his poetry, it is no coincidence that Zāhir was singing Lāhūti's love *ghazals* over the airwaves and in his concerts well before the Soviet invasion. It is when Zāhir's songs took on an increasingly political tone in the final years of his life that he drew from Lāhūti's more revolutionary verses, such as *Zindaḡi ākhir sar āyad*.⁵⁷ The groundedness and musicality of Lāhūti's poem, its depiction of oppression and freedom, and, most crucially, its avoidance of historical or geographic specificity all contributed to its successful circulation and adaptation to a variety of contexts, including Zāhir's popular song.

At a time when a strict code of conduct emanated from the established Afghan political authority, the lyrics and feelings associated with this song, and Aḡmad Zāhir's performance of it, allowed for political and cultural dissent through music. Using the poetry of a leftist sympathizer (and poet laureate) enabled Aḡmad Zāhir to initially pass through the radio censors. Indeed, it was through the usage of the state's official register (i.e., radio) that the creation of an alternative space was born, where dissent became possible in a discreet yet clever way. In his performance of this song, Aḡmad Zāhir succeeded further by traversing the space between what James C. Scott termed the "public transcript" (authorized by the dominant power) and the "hidden transcript" (the critique of power spoken behind its back) to create new meanings through an act of musical subversion and defiance.⁵⁸ According to Scott, the "public transcript" is used to invoke what is permitted by the state. The enforcement of censorship, including on the radio, is one way the Afghan state exercised its official authoritative culture and promotion of a "public transcript." The disciplinary nature of this act reinforced the state's relationship to its subjects by intruding into a very personal sphere via monitoring lyrics and sounds that evoked feelings and various emotions.

In the realm of cultural production and music, musicians like Aḡmad Zāhir had to submit to official regulations to obtain clearance for lyrics and permits for performances. The lyrics of *Zindaḡi ākhir sar āyad*, however, provided a pointed depiction of Afghanistan as captive to an oppressive state. Zāhir's performance of the song was intended to embody the people's sentiments and, in this way, helped promote the "hidden transcript," or that which was not officially approved. Zāhir used his medium—music—to widen the parameters of the

⁵⁵ Song transcribed from another performance, Aḡmad Zāhir, 4th live (majlisi) album, track 10, with the addition of the *ghazal's* final lines, which Niẓām specifically recalls from the performance she witnessed.

⁵⁶ Lāhūti is the author of [the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic's](https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2022.32) anthem. See Hodgkin, "Lāhūti: Persian Poetry in the Making of the Literary International, 1906–1957."

⁵⁷ Hodgkin, "Lāhūti: Persian Poetry in the Making of the Literary International, 1906–1957," 363.

⁵⁸ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* as quoted in Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 11.

“public transcript” through this subtle, subversive act. Persian poetry transformed into popular song, and connecting concert attendees in collective performance, augmented the possibility of its circulation. Sung anthems encouraged simultaneous and collective vocal articulation in ways that poetry alone typically did not. In doing so, music then had the power to generate senses of alliance, cohesion, and solidarity.⁵⁹ Music became the message and medium for political action.

The 1978 concert attendee concludes her recollection with thoughts on the poem’s significance. She imagined that Lāhūtī produced his *ghazal* “in loathing for the suffocation and dependence that he too had experienced under similar conditions of Soviet occupation and subjugation in a country like Afghanistan, in Tajikistan.”⁶⁰ Whether or not Lāhūtī’s intention was to be subversive in his prose is inconsequential. More importantly, the poem’s ability to traverse space and time and attract collective experiences of oppression gave new power to its declaration of defiance. The poem’s lives are a testament to the continued durability and portability of traditional Persianate poetry, which can be repurposed for new occasions, new ideologies, and new revolutions.⁶¹ The concert attendee and Aḥmad Zāhir’s shared reading of Lāhūtī’s poem indicates the poet’s literary relevance to the political moment, when a despotic leftist government took shape in Afghanistan, and the power of musical performance to connect like-minded citizens in opposition to the state.

As Farzaneh Hemmasi contends, song—particularly popular songs and political anthems—augments the possibilities of poetry’s circulation and collective performance.⁶² The effect of one of Aḥmad Zāhir’s politically and socially charged songs reveals how Persianate poetry played a strong role in connecting a diverse community of listeners. As a celebrity-type figure who embodied “freedom of expression,” he broke through the constraints of the dominant culture to experiment with new ways of being, using his voice and selected poetry as his source of cultural resistance. For many, Aḥmad Zāhir’s lyrical voice, music, and performances became a focal point for imagining an alternative world and longing for political and social change. He attracted audiences that perceived him as a symbol of change and the embodiment of their aspirations. In his quest to challenge the predominant social-political order through song choice and lyrics, he represented the aspirations of those who wanted to change the status quo, becoming an icon of dissent. But Zāhir’s deployment of Persian poetry as an act of dissent was also one of cultural preservation: he relied on a body of literature familiar to the listener, one which could withstand the test of time. Recently, with Afghanistan’s seizure by the Taliban in August 2021, *Zindaḡī ākhīr sar āyad* served as a clarion call, as people repeated Lāhūtī’s words: “*Bahr-i āzādī jadal kun, bandaḡī dar kār nīst*” (Fight for freedom, for submission is not an option).

As the United States ended its twenty-year “War on Terror” in Afghanistan, paving the way for the return of the Taliban, Afghans faced a confluence of multiple crises. Beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, drought, and dire economy, they confronted a resurgent Taliban movement that quickly mobilized to seize power. Many scrambled to leave the country, fearful that living under despotic rule would destroy any aspirations for a better future. As Afghans—particularly women—are determined to fight and deny the Taliban the opportunity to reimpose their rule, slogans of freedom, justice, and peace are bolstered by the poetry and songs of the Lāhūtī/Zāhir variety, particularly Dawood Sarkhosh’s *Sarzamīn Man* (My homeland).⁶³ The circulation of this song signals a sense of collective participation in what has become an informal anthem of resistance and the struggle for survival.

⁵⁹ Farzaneh Hemmasi, “Rebuilding the Homeland in Poetry and Song,” 193.

⁶⁰ Niẓām, “Zindaḡī Ākhīr Sar Āyad.”

⁶¹ Hodgkin, “Lāhūtī: Persian Poetry in the Making of the Literary International, 1906–1957,” 364–65.

⁶² Farzaneh Hemmasi, “Rebuilding the Homeland in Poetry and Song,” 193.

⁶³ In anti-Taliban protests after August 2021, the song *Sarzamīn Man* by Dāwūd Sarkhush has been used as an anthem for rallying shared sentiments of loss and belonging. See, Makoi, “My Homeland.”

Cassettes

The audiocassette was another form of mass media that proliferated during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s and profoundly affected the dissemination of sound and sonic experiences. Radio recording significantly improved with the advent of the tape recorder and magnetic tape, as such allowed sound to be recorded, erased, and re-recorded on the same tape multiple times. Indeed, the small, portable, and plastic audio cassette was conducive to creative energies that flowed through and beyond it, making it a highly malleable product that could be distributed on a mass scale. In Afghanistan, the production and mass distribution of commercial audio cassettes of Afghan music began in Kabul in the early 1970s. Outside the official radio station, the three major recording studios of the time were Afghan Music, Music Center, and Āriānā Music. These businesses were registered with the Ministry of Information and Culture and subject to governmental approval for printing labels, distribution, and censorship.⁶⁴

In recent decades, the term “cassette culture” has been frequently employed by scholars engaged with media and communications to describe the variety of social practices generated by audiocassette hardware. In their infancy, cassettes represented what Peter Manuel described as “an emancipatory use of media,” as it was decentralized, provided space for signal feedback, and enabled collective and self-organized production, unlike one-way transmissions of mass media like the radio.⁶⁵ As a living archive that engages people in social habits, and through which culture might be accessed, cassettes served as a vehicle for meaning, offering a secure space to create a sense of autonomy and self-determination. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi’s study of the important role small media—including leaflets and audio cassettes—played in the revolution that deposed the Shah of Iran reveals how deeply embedded cultural modes of communication, alongside media technologies, helped mobilize a population within a repressive political context.⁶⁶ Moreover, well before the technology of recorded sound, singing devotional poetry and scripture marked the soundscape of religious life across the Islamic world. Charles Hirschkind’s study of cassette-sermons in Cairo’s popular neighborhoods shows how small-time preachers, whose voices were suppressed by authoritarian regimes in the Middle East in the 1970s, could reach large audiences through the physical (hand-to hand) dissemination of tapes. While many believe that the clandestine transfer of Islamic sermons is associated with militancy, when they first appeared, their messages were rarely about inciting violence; instead, they were primarily used as instruments of promoting ethical self-improvement and pious living. Hirschkind situates cassette sermons in relation to Egypt’s Islamic revival and sheds light on the ethical labor undertaken by Cairo’s Muslim listeners in the mid-1990s. In short, the cassette-sermon contributed to the Islamic revival in various ways, manufacturing its own success through addressing counterpublics.⁶⁷

Access to audio hardware and the societal impact of literacy were closely connected in the context of Afghanistan in the 1960s and 1970s, helping to usher its own type of counterpublic. In 1978, Anwarī recorded three cassettes of her poetry recitations with the Āriānā Music recording studio. This marked the first time that a recording of poetry was in high demand and sold in the market in Afghanistan. The cassettes featured poems by Mawlānā, Hāfiẓ-i Shīrāzī, and Ḥamid Muṣaddiq (1940–1998).⁶⁸ Recordings of Anwarī’s recitations reveal a warm and invitingly pitched voice that inflects the anxiety or calmness of the poetry. Her

⁶⁴ Shams al-Dīn Shāhābī (producer and owner of Ariana Music studio) in discussion with the author, June 22, 2018.

⁶⁵ Manuel, *Cassette Culture*, 4.

⁶⁶ Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution*.

⁶⁷ Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*.

⁶⁸ Dānīshnāma Aryānā, “Farīda Anwarī”; and Ahrārī, “Farīda Anwarī.” A newspaper article from 1983 details high-demand recordings in Afghanistan, including Anwarī’s cassette of poetry. See, “Taking Music to Every Home,” *The Kabul Times*, February 16, 1983.

delivery is measured and professional, speaking at a natural, if not soft, pace while clearly articulating all the words. The new circulatory potential of cassette tapes allowed Anwarī's recitation of classical Persian poetry to reach a broad audience, creating cultural literacy and an affect that attracted listeners. Furthermore, the new objectlike quality of poetry recorded on tapes transformed Anwarī's speech into individual assertions, and oral mnemonics into analytical memory.⁶⁹ Equipped with these newfound abilities and the autonomous reasoning they facilitated, Persian-speaking listeners were able to reconnect with aspects of their literary cultures as well as reflect and revise their meanings within daily life.

Instrumental music served as another important aspect of both literary programs and cassette recordings featuring poetry. As popular foreign styles began exerting influence on Afghan music and performance art in general, there was growing interest to preserve the native classical "art music" of Afghanistan; music that featured eastern instrumentation including the *rubab*, harmonium, *tabla*, and sitar. This, however, does not mean that western music was altogether absent from these programs. 'Abd al-Wahhāb Madadī, a former Radio Afghanistan Director, recalls that in radio programs featuring European and western music, Anwarī was the only person familiar with the appropriate languages and capable of pronouncing the associated technical words correctly when explaining song choices.⁷⁰ The distinction here is that when the programs featured poetry, the choice of eastern music complimented the recitations in an effort to garner listener appreciation for both poetry and music.

In an interview published in 1974, Anwarī commented on the importance of poetry in contemporary society, stating:

[T]ruly speaking, these days the phrase of a contemporary Arab poet that has become popular is: "a poem is the whisper of a human being to himself or the whisper of a poet to his contemporary." But I do not agree with this because a poem is not always a whisper, sometimes it can be aggression. It can be a loud cry, and sometimes it is directed at an individual or thing. If we imagine a poem to be a whisper then it is like a soft dream, then we cannot think of the *Shāhnāma* of Firdawsī to be a poem because it mostly deals with protests of the poet and his dissatisfaction and objection to his land. Why should the prophecy of a poem be so small that a poet should be confined to writing it only for his contemporaries? When we read Sa'dī, Māwlānā, Hāfiẓ and Niẓāmī, we are not their contemporaries, but we still appreciate their poetry...a poem is a melody that surpasses time and that is what makes it last.⁷¹

Anwarī's assertion of the multivalent significance of Persian poetry and its ability to transcend meanings across space and time points to the medium's diverse contestations and instantiations. Anwarī would argue that it is the declamation of Persian poetry that gives it power and preserves its longevity. Cassette tapes and literary programming amplified this power by deploying speech and sensory modes of understanding as public practice and participation. The mass distribution of cassettes aided figures like Anwarī in the ongoing task of preserving language and Persian literature in Afghanistan.⁷² Via cassettes, the acoustic modulation of emotion through the declamation of classical Persian poetry was rebirthed,

⁶⁹ Charles Hirschkind pointed out the functional efficiency of the cassette tape in Egypt as a vessel for transporting Islamic sermons to a broad audience. See, Chapter 3 "Cassettes and Counterpublics" in Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 105–142.

⁷⁰ Radio Āzādi, "Ba Bahāna-yi Shaṣt-u Panjumīn Bahār-i Ṣadā-yī Hamīsha Sabz-i Farīda Anwarī."

⁷¹ Anon, "Reciting Poetry a Delicate Art."

⁷² John Baily discusses the importance of documenting music censorship in Afghanistan in order to support suppressed cultural expressions and the preservation of Afghan music in the diaspora. See, *Can you stop the birds singing?* and "Kabul's music in exile." For a discussion of the circulation of Persian ballads in the Afghan context, as well as their recording in historical manuscripts, see Schwartz, *Remapping Persian Literary History*, 124–164.

providing another space where the concerns and characters of the Afghan public could be elaborated and understood.

Cassettes were also increasingly important for circulating otherwise censored sounds and lyrics. Indeed, some of Aḥmad Zāhir's songs circulated via informal cassette recordings. Here, cassettes represented a particular advantage in the transmission of sound. In addition to the technology's immense mobility and low price point, cassettes also allowed citizens of diverse backgrounds to play a part in disseminating Afghan culture in ways other devices could not.⁷³ In this regard, the informal circulation of cassettes was particularly key to bypassing state censors and enabling the proliferation of evolving forms of artistic and poetic protest to a mass audience.

One of the last songs performed by Aḥmad Zāhir borrowed from the poetry of celebrated Persian poet Sīmīn Bihbahānī (1927–2014). Although this song was never formally released, it gained popularity through its informal, underground circulation via cassette tape. This speaks to the longevity and efficacy of this technology, as it allowed people to build vibrant cultures under the thumb of repressive institutions. In this sense, cassettes played an important role in the construction of such spaces. While it would be easy to dismiss the informal circulation of cassettes as a channel of mass media distribution, such a view overlooks the fact that it was actually a rich site in which people constructed and enacted ambivalent subjectivities in relation to the state.

As a purveyor of political poetry, Bihbahānī's verse lent itself to transnational mobilizations across the Persian-speaking world. An interesting aspect of her treatment of the *ghazal* is that while she retained its poetic structure, she also expanded its subject matter to include a woman's experience of romantic love, desire, and disappointment, as well as increasingly took on political and social issues.⁷⁴ While Aḥmad Zāhir's repertoire included a broad range of poets from across the Persianate canon, his selection of a contemporary feminist poet from Iran had as much to do with his cosmopolitan sensibilities as it did the political climate of the time.⁷⁵ The chosen lines (turned into lyrics) borrowed from the poetry of Sīmīn Bihbahānī were as follows:

Āsmān khālīst khālī, rawshanānash rā ki burd?
The skies are empty, who took away its light?
Tāj-māhash, sīna rīz kahkashānash rā ki burd?
Its moon's crown, its galaxy's necklace, who took them?
Bāghbān tanhāst, tanhā, gird-i ū juz khār nīst
The gardener is alone, lonely, surrounded by thorns
Bīd mushkash rā, gulash rā, arghawānash rā kī burd?
His fragrant willow, his rose, his judas-tree, who took them?
Pīsh az īn-hā īn zamīn rā asmān-i sabz būd
Before this, this earth and its sky were green
Nīst īnak juz siyahī, asmānash rā kī burd?
It's nothing but barren now, who took away its sky?⁷⁶

⁷³ Andrew Simon argues this point in the context of Egypt's cassette and mass media culture. See, Simon, *Media of the Masses*. Blake Atwood discusses the informal circulation of videocassettes in Iran after their ban in 1983. See, Atwood, *Underground: The Secret Life of Videocassettes in Iran*.

⁷⁴ Hemmasi, "Rebuilding the Homeland in Poetry and Song," 194.

⁷⁵ In addition to Persian, Aḥmad Zāhir sang in English, Hindi, Pashto, Urdu, and Russian. For an anthology of his musical repertoire and collection of recorded albums, see Nūrmal, *Aḥmad Zāhir*.

⁷⁶ For a recording of Aḥmad Zāhir singing *Āsmān khālīst* with these selected lyrics, refer to YouTube video "Ahmad Zahir: Asoman Khalist Khali." For Sīmīn Bihbahānī's full poem from which Aḥmad Zāhir selected lyrics, see Nūrmal, *Aḥmad Zāhir*, 379. For an analysis of Sīmīn Bihbahānī's poetry in Aḥmad Zāhir's songs, see Paymān, "Jāyghāh-i Shī'r"; and Muḥammadi, "Yādbūd-i Sīmīn-i Bihbahānī."

Sung in 1979 in the shadow of the increasingly authoritative atmosphere created by the rule of President Nūr Muḥammad Tarakī (1978-1979) and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), these lyrics can be read as a response to the state's oppressive, bullying, and stringent policies. Cold War sentiments of disillusionment and loss of meaning are captured in the song: "The gardener is lonely, alone, surrounded by thorns." Those elements of nature and life that used to sparkle like the "moon" or grow like a "flower" no longer existed. The "empty skies" demonstrated the fear and desolate environment left in the wake of the morally bankrupt regime that rose to power through a bloody coup.⁷⁷ The rhetorical questions scattered throughout the *ghazal* also serve the purpose of confronting power, speaking back to it. While Bihbahānī's avoidance of historical specificity allows for the poem's malleability in different contexts, Zāhir's adoption of her poetry presents an alternative iteration of the nation and call to engage Afghanistan's problems through questioning the identity of the perpetrators. The refrain "Who took them?" reveals a callous and complacent political system and the unfortunate stifled truth of despotism.

As Afghanistan experienced political changes in yet another coup in 1978 and entered a new era of repression, Zāhir positioned himself as an agent willing to both articulate and question the country's transformation. Here, informal cassette circulation played a key role in distributing Zāhir's message and also raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of censorship. Despite the broad bans imposed by state authorities, the distribution of cassettes on the informal black market allowed for the extensive, illicit enjoyment of prohibited music. Banned music and songs—like Zāhir's *Āsmān khālist* and *Zindaḡi ākhir sar āyad*—were able to bypass censors and circulate among the general populace. The widespread popularity of Zāhir's songs is indicative of his ability to capture the Afghan popular imagination during a specific moment of political and social change, as well as the search for an alternative world. While the censorship of music reflected a profound and persistent concern about the fate of national culture, alongside freedom of speech, the state was also testing official boundaries and the limits to which artistic and creative work could be controlled and suppressed. At best, oppression through sound entailed recalibrating calls to action into something discreet to bypass censors. At worst, reducing creativity to the production of state-controlled propaganda created an emboldened public, leading impregnable violence, not change.

Recorded music became a weapon in the cultural war advanced by successive Afghan leaders, including the PDPA. Such leaders used recorded music as a medium to persuade people how to behave and act, a "soft power" to be wielded in larger cultural battles around religion, tradition, modernity, and freedom. Musical styles and content were carefully considered before being broadcast or circulated to the world, but the gap between what the state sought to promote and the realities of everyday life for a typical Afghan is evident in the popularity of Aḥmad Zāhir's songs, despite the fact that such songs had to bypass censorship and circulate informally. While the state enforced different criteria around the production and selection of appropriate cultural work, musicians like Zāhir were not as easy to manipulate. These performing artists were not without agency in the messages they produced and embraced through their lyrics. As increasingly autocratic regimes took strong measures to ban freedom of speech, thought, and creativity, Afghans engaged in cultural dissonance through music, poetry, and protest, ultimately forging their own revolutions. Informal cassette circulation triggered significant anxiety, as it decentralized the state-controlled Afghan media. Entangled within this anxiety was a struggle over what constituted Afghan culture and who had the right to create it. Indeed, circumventing censors enabled the success of that deemed forbidden and prohibited; that which would ultimately make its way into Afghanistan's historical record.

⁷⁷ Leftist Nūr Muḥammad Tarakī came to power through a bloody coup involving the seizure of the Afghan presidential palace and death of President Dā'ūd Khān, along with his family members, in 1978.

Conclusion

This article articulated how radio, cassettes, and performance served as important political, societal, and ideational spaces, as well as how Afghans—producers and consumers alike—imbued such media with meaning and importance in their cultural lives. Indeed, there are many reasons to consider Persian poetry, poetic recitation, sung poetry, and song as a continuum of expressive cultural forms that rely on words, sound, and affect.⁷⁸ The examples of Farīda Anwārī and Aḥmad Zāhir showcase the ways in which the Persianate literary canon served as the medium to preserve the traditional Afghan cultural practices of reciting, memorizing, and singing poetry, as well as sounding dissent during a time of social and political upheaval. While Anwārī's declamation of Mawlānā's poems promoted a sense of comfort, identity, and stability in turbulent times, Zāhir's usage of Lāhūtī and Bihbahānī reflected dissent. Taken together, both artists' use of classical and modern Persian poetry indicates the central and important role this literature and its concomitant sounds played in Afghan historical memory and everyday life.

As Afghanistan transformed from a constitutional monarchy to a republic, the decades of the 1960s and 1970s revealed the disjuncture and fissures inherent in the project of nation-building. Against this backdrop, the voices of Anwārī and Zāhir sought to capture and relate public sentiments of these tumultuous events by engaging with and drawing inspiration from the classical and modern masters of Persian poetry. These texts were employed to help articulate and memorialize local events and identities amid chaos, a usage of poetry that is not uncommon to Persian-speaking communities across Central and South Asia and the Middle East.⁷⁹ Given this history, Anwārī and Zāhir's deployment of Persianate literature reveals that Afghans were actively engaged in forms of experience and thinking that transcended the assumption that the nation's political borders determines the nature of its experiences, ideas, or politics.

If one of the functions of the "Persianate" as an analytic category is to question the character and role of political boundaries and state structures, then, as described here, radio, music, and poetry are among its fiercest advocates. The movement of aural technologies and sounds transcended political boundaries and embedded Persian linguistic cultural practices across a diverse terrain of people and communities, which continue into the modern period. Lyrics by Persian-speaking poets served as the textual fabric upon which the Persianate universe thrived and sustained, despite the creation of modern states and ethno-linguistic nationalisms. Poetry imbued into music and song often received a wider audience due to its ability to transcend literacy and the emphasis on memory that helped circulate it. The common motifs in musical systems and the development of musical instruments are areas of lost commonality. Lyrics as a method of memorizing intricate details of a vast repertoire, vocal styles, and the transmission of an oral musical tradition are not unique to specific nations, but rather attest to a larger regional and cultural sphere where such practices are common and sustained.

In Afghanistan, the practice of collective listening to Persian poetry through recitation or song was founded on a certain discursive openness, understood as a necessary condition for the task of collectively rethinking the past's contribution to an unfolding future. As both a new and modern phenomenon of its time, radio represented this space of possibility for a variety of experiments in thought and culture, as well as their unexpected outcomes. Subsequent recording technologies like the cassette also changed the ways in which Afghans were able to actively participate in the recreation of their social and political milieus. They formulated their own sonic revolutions rooted in classical and modern Persian texts and aided by musical improvisations and the circulation of sound. Protecting and preserving a vast literary heritage through sound became one of the most

⁷⁸ Hemmasi, "Rebuilding the Homeland in Poetry and Song," 193.

⁷⁹ Kevin Schwartz provides an erudite discussion of the place of war-ballads within Afghanistan's literary and national history. See Chapter 3 in Schwartz, *Remapping Persian Literary History*, 124–162.

potent weapons to combat various state attempts at remaking Afghan culture and redefining Afghan pasts.

One of the attractive features of the category of the Persianate world is the varied range of its application. While many scholars have leaned primarily towards explorations of literary, textual, and linguistic matters, this study of the space of sound and music provides a unique aural guide to the social, cultural, and political formations and activities in which notions of the Persianate have resonance. The boundless and ethereal qualities of sound also aids the study of the “Persianate” through the extent to which we conceptually grasp it as a way to question the character and role of boundaries and state structures, as well as probe socio-cultural complexity. Nonetheless, it is important not to use the term restrictively. Explorations of its fluidity and heterogeneity across space and time allow for nuance and its stronger impact as an analytical tool. Borrowing from Joanna de Groot’s discussion, the Persianate is employed to indicate something continuously in process, rather than a fixed or uncontested entity.⁸⁰ In short, this study of soundscapes in Afghanistan has attempted to offer a fresh standpoint from which to engage and appreciate Afghan identities and their centrality in the making of poetry, music, and art in the Persianate world.

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⁸⁰ de Groot, “Inclusion and Exclusion in the ‘Persianate World,’” 196–215.

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