Poetry of the Ṭālibān: Representation of the Self and the Other

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Introduction

Poetry is probably not the first association coming to mind when western people think about the Ṭālibān in Afghanistan. The organization has become infamous for their oppression of women, the destruction of the giant Buddha-statues at Bamyan, and, of course, the ongoing battle against western peace soldiers since 2001, many of whom have had to be repatriated in body bags. Still, there is more to them, which does not fit in very well with the black-and-white image many westerners have of them. The Ṭālibān have produced a large amount of poetry which gives an insight into the movement showing a largely unseen side of the organization. This poetry will be the topic of this research, after creating a good understanding of the rise of the Ṭālibān, and the status of the scientific research about them up until now. The former will be discussed below, the latter in chapter one.

Ethnic Composition of Afghanistan

The history of Afghanistan has been very tumultuous, especially since 1973. In order to fully understand both the situation, the succession of crises, and the rise of the Ṭālibān, it is useful to know more about the ethnic composition of the country; hence it will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country that borders Pakistan in the southeast, Iran in the west, and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in the north. In the east, a small strip of land borders the disputed region of Kashmir, and continues to stretch out all the way to China.[1] Within the Afghan borders, there are five large ethnic groups to be distinguished, all spread throughout the country: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Aimaqs.[2] In between, there are also several smaller groups not belonging to any of these.[3] None of these previously named groups contain an absolute majority; the Pashtuns come closest, nearing about forty percent of the population,[4] however, all estimations about the ethnic division of Afghanistan's population are very uncertain.[5] Most Afghans are first and foremost loyal to their respective clan or tribal group, rather than to their own individual self, nor to their actual country.[6]

[1] Melissa Kerr Chiovanda, "Memory, History, and Landscape," in *State, Society, and Minorities in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Sunil Kukreja (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2015), 2.
[2] Anwar-Ul-Haq Ahady, "The Decline of the Pashtuns," in *Asian Survey* 35, no. 7 (July 1995): 621.
[3] Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: a cultural and political history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 24.
[4] *Idem.*, 56.
[5] *Idem.*, 23-24.
[6] *Idem.*, 17-18.

Ethnicity has not often been an important political instrument, [7] for a number of reasons. Firstly, ethnic and tribal identities are not fixed, but can be reshaped for political or social purposes.[8] Secondly, differences between modernity and traditionalism, or between cities and rural areas, always hold a far more important position within politics than ethnic differences, and exceed all other matters[9] Thirdly, both the elite and the common people have always considered the task of governing one for the elites being in power,[10] so a regime change could only originate from either a competitor among the elite, or from an outside invader, but not from ordinary people from a different ethnic group.[11] Since 1880, ethnicity has only been used as a political instrument by the communist government between 1978 and 1992.[12] With such an environment, the Ṭālibān came to power.

History of the Ṭālibān

The development of modern Afghanistan in an international context has been thoroughly researched in various books and articles. From these texts, it becomes clear that from 1945 onwards, there was a rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States concerning the influence on Afghanistan.[13] In 1973, the Afghan king was ousted by his cousin, and the Republic was declared.[14] A few years later, in 1978, communists committed a coup d'état, but they did not succeed.[15] Therefore, in 1979, the Soviet army entered Afghanistan in order to gain a communist control over the country.[16] The government tried to impose communism on the Afghan society, but for many Afghans, especially the Pashtuns in the south, these reforms were too radical. Especially land reforms, reforms of social customs, and the promotion of girls' education were reason to start an active resistance.[17]

As many Afghan civilians fled to Pakistan, fearful of the Soviet violence,[18] several militias started an armed resistance to the communist occupation. Islamic scholars declared in

[7] Thomas Barfield, "Afghanistan's Ethnic Puzzle: Decentralizing Power Before the U.S. Withdrawal," in *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 5 (September-October 2011): 58.
[8] Barfield, *Afghanistan,* 21-22.
[9] *Idem.*
[10] *Idem.,* 3-4.
[11] *Idem.,* 4.
[12] Ahadi, "The Decline," 622-623, 625.
[13] Alex Strick van Linschoten & Felix Kuehn, "Kandahar: portrait of a city," in *My life with the Taliban,* ed. Strick van Linschoten & Kuehn (London: Hurst & Company, 2010), xv.
[14] Thorsten Hasche, *Quo vadis, politischer Islam? AKP, al-Qaida und Muslimbruderschaft in systemtheoretischer Perspektive* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015), 282.
[15] *Idem.*
[16] *Idem.*
[17] Strick van Linschoten & Kuehn, "Kandahar," xv-xvi.
[18] *Idem.,* xvi.

fatwas that the struggle against the communists was jihād, a religious struggle which is obliged to every Muslim.[19] Not only Afghans fought to regain the control over their country, but also many Muslims from the Middle East and North Africa.[20] Among those mujāhidīn, the participants of the jihād, were also 'Ṭālibān', students from religious schools (*madrasas*), who had a very strict religious lifestyle, even within combat.[21]

The battle against the Soviet troops was supported by the secret services of Pakistan, the United States, and Great Britain.[22] These countries did not only supply the combatants with high-tech weapons and vehicles, but also with vast amounts of money;[23] The United States individually assisted the fighters in Afghanistan for a total amount of two billion dollars.[24] For the United States, this was a chance to indirectly fight its adversary in the Cold War, the Soviet Union.[25] Pakistan was also eager to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan, since the USSR was an ally of India, an important enemy of Pakistan. If Afghanistan were to become a vassal state of the USSR, Pakistan would find itself caught between two enemies: Soviet-backed Afghanistan and India.[26]

Between 1988 and 1989, the Soviet Union pulled its troops back from Afghanistan,[27] and they appointed Najībullah (1947-1996) as government leader, but he was not able to maintain peace in a country filled with different groups of mujāhidīn.[28] The war of the 1980's continued after 1989 as a civil war and, consequently, Najībullah was forced to leave his office in 1992.[29] The ongoing civil war led to widespread lawlessness, which was the reason for a group of Pashtun Ṭālibān to take up arms again, and to defend society against uncertainty and aggression. As a result, the Ṭālibān were established as an official organization in 1994.[30] Their main aims were to stop lawlessness, violence and corruption, restore law and order, and create

[19] Hasche, *Quo Vadis,* 285.
[20] *Idem.*
[21] Strick van Linschoten & Kuehn, "Kandahar," xviii.
[22] Hasche, *Quo Vadis,* 285.
[23] Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, "Glossy Global Leadership: Unpacking the Multilingual Religious Thought of the Jihad," in *Afghanistan's Islam: from conversion to the Taliban*, ed. Nile Green (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 189.
[24] Abdulkader H. Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 135.
[25] Attar Rabbani, "Making Sense of Instability in South Asia," in *The Dialogue* 6, number 3 (September 2011): 210.
[26] *Idem.*
[27] Hasche, *Quo Vadis,* 282.
[28] *Idem.*
[29] *Idem.*
[30] Strick van Linschoten & Kuehn, "Kandahar," xxii.

an Islamic state, in which a very strict interpretation of Islamic law would be the ruling principle.[31]

The Ṭālibān were very successful in their battles against the fighting warlords. The former were popular among the common people, attracting many new fighters to their ranks, and they received much assistance from Pakistan, with both money and material.[32] Therefore, they saw chance to seize control over large parts of the country and in 1996, they captured the capital Kabul.[33] They used the Islamic teachings to legitimize their authority, which became especially clear when their leader, mullah ʿUmar, presented himself as the *amīr al-muʾminīn,* the commander of the faithful. This is the title of the Islamic caliph and the use of it meant that ʿUmar saw himself as the universal leader of the Muslim population of the world.[34] While assuming this title, he wore a mantle which had supposedly belonged to the prophet Muḥammad, and he stood before a gathering of ʿulamāʾ, or religious scholars, who declared their loyalty to him.[35] Although the Ṭālibān proclaimed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, they had to continue fighting within the country. On the one hand, they fought against warlords in order to conquer more land, especially in the north, and on the other hand against ethnic minorities who were not Pashtun in regions that were already under Ṭālibān-control.[36]

The Relationship between the Ṭālibān and al-Qāʿida

During the war with the Soviet Union, the mujāhidīn from the Middle East and North Africa established their own organization, al-Qāʿida.[37] In contrast to the Afghan mujāhidīn, who wanted to liberate their country from the occupying forces, the main objective of al-Qāʿida was to defend Islam.[38] After the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, most fighters of al-Qāʿida returned to the Middle East and North Africa, including their leader Usāma bin Lādin.[39] However, in 1996, Bin Lādin was banned from Sudan, where he lived, and he moved back to Afghanistan.[40] Ṭālibān-leader mullah ʿUmar and Bin Lādin had a good understanding with each other, so mullah ʿUmar gave al-Qāʿida the opportunity to establish its own training

[31] Hasche, *Quo Vadis,* 283-284.
[32] *Idem.,* 283.
[33] *Idem.*
[34] H.A.R. Gibb, "Amīr al- Muʾminīn," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition,* eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman, et al.
[35] Fuchs, "Glossy Global Leadership," 205.
[36] Hasche, *Quo Vadis.,* 284.
[37] *Idem.,* 286.
[38] *Idem.,* 287.
[39] *Idem.*
[40] *Idem.,* 288.

locations on Afghan territory.[41] On those locations, al-Qāʿida could do whatever it wanted, with no control from the Ṭālibān-government whatsoever.[42] The friendship even went so far that mullah ʿUmar promised Bin Lādin never to deliver him to a foreign country.[43]

On 11 September 2001, al-Qāʿida attacked the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon building in Washington. The United States reacted with an attack on Afghanistan, because of the al-Qāʿida training locations there, but also because the described close ties between al-Qāʿida and the Ṭālibān.[44] Within a few weeks, the training locations of al-Qāʿida were destroyed, and the Ṭālibān-government was ousted in favor of a civil government.[45] Although both the Ṭālibān and al-Qāʿida were confronted with great losses of men, material, and infrastructure, their remaining fighters could flee to the mountains on the Pakistani border, and the organizations were not defeated.[46] This led to a situation that would last for two decades: western military troops backing the civil government of Afghanistan, and fighting against the Ṭālibān, who, in turn, tried to regain their influence using guerilla tactics.

Now we have a clear picture of the contemporary history of Afghanistan and the Ṭālibān's role in it, we can ask the question who these people are and why they did what they did. As the next chapter will show, there are different ways to answer this question. I will focus in this thesis on the poetry that the Ṭālibān have written and how they represent themselves and their enemies in it. Before I do that, the following chapter provides an overview of different kinds of researches that have been done to the Ṭālibān.

[41] *Idem.*, 290.
[42] *Idem.*
[43] *Idem.*, 291.
[44] *Idem.*, 294.
[45] *Idem.*
[46] *Idem.*, 296.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Various scholars, such as Iftikhar Haider Malik[47] and Rob Johnson[48] have published about the Ṭālibān, attempting to gain a better understanding of the movement, using various angles from which they looked at it. In this chapter, I will give a limited overview of researches that have been published by various scientists who have different points of view. I will discuss researches about the Ṭālibān's ethnic dimension, their military strengths and weaknesses, and their ideology. These are all perspectives from outside observers who view the Ṭālibān as a study object. A complete different approach comes from the personal memoirs of a high-ranking member of the Ṭālibān. After that, I will discuss a research concerning their propaganda songs, which leads to the observation that their poetry has not been researched yet. In the last part of this chapter, I will elaborate upon the relevance of this poetry, and explain why I have chosen the topic for my research.

Identity and Ethnicity

Among the researchers that tried to obtain an understanding of the Ṭālibān, Iftikhar Haider Malik uses an interesting angle. In his book *Pashtun Identity and Geopolitics in Southwest Asia: Pakistan and Afghanistan since 9/11,* he describes the role of ethnicity within the movement. He states that the Ṭālibān is a movement by and for ethnic Pashtuns, especially from the lower class.[49] The Pashtuns are a very traditional people, with an important tribal code, the Pashtunwali.[50] The Ṭālibān use this background to gain popularity by creating an image of the very traditional underdog fighting the most modern, sophisticated, and powerful country in the world successfully.[51]

As Malik demonstrates, ethnicity was also an important element during the civil war of the 1990's, in which the Ṭālibān conquered large parts of Afghanistan, for the Pashtuns had lost their 250-year-old political prominence to other ethnic minorities. Malik suggest that the Ṭālibān wanted to restore this old situation, and therefore they gained adherents.[52] It cannot be surprising Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara forces were the main adversaries of the predominantly

[47] Iftikhar Haider Malik, *Pashtun Identity and Geopolitics in Southwest Asia: Pakistan and Afghanistan since 9/11* (London: Anthem Press, 2016).
[48] Rob Johnson, "The Taliban," in *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies: National Styles and Strategic Cultures,* eds. Beatrice Heuser & Eitan Shamir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 246-266.
[49] Malik, *Pashtun Identity and Geopolitics,* 22.
[50] *Idem.,* 49.
[51] *Idem.,* 24.
[52] *Idem.,* 45.

Pashtun forces of the Ṭālibān during the civil war in the 1990's.[53] Despite the presence of some non-Pashtun Afghans among their government officials,[54] most non-Pashtun groups viewed the Ṭālibān as an enemy, because of its Pashtun origins.[55]

Furthermore, Malik points out that the Ṭālibān know excellently well how to govern the Afghans in a way they are used to. Regimes preceding them tried to circumvent local traditional leaders in an attempt to centralize power, but the Ṭālibān used those leaders wherever they could, and let them impose the new order with respect to cultural sensibilities.[56] Besides that, the ʿulamāʾ, who traditionally held a high position, were given more authority as well, since the Ṭālibān have a very strict Islamic ideology.[57]

Military Strengths and Weaknesses

Another way of analyzing the Ṭālibān is by looking at their strategic strengths and weaknesses from a military perspective. A good example of this is the chapter on the Ṭālibān by Rob Johnson in *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies: National styles and strategic cultures.* Johnson argues that an important strength of the organization, which rather consists of a mixture of several different militias operating under the flag of the Ṭālibān,[58] is its popularity among the ordinary Afghans.[59] Western forces are 'unbelievers' and 'foreign intruders' in the eyes of the local Afghan, no matter how they behave.[60] This gives them an important disadvantage relative to the Ṭālibān.

Another strength Johnson mentions is the Ṭālibān's policy of strict discipline. The Ṭālibān follow the very strict Deobandi school of Islamic theology (see below), and in order to become a commander, one has to be a successful fighter and a pious and strict Muslim, with recommendation of older commanders.[61] As a result, the Ṭālibān militias are well-disciplined in combat.

Among the strategic weaknesses of the Ṭālibān explained in Johnson's chapter is that it is only a Pashtun-movement. They articulate the interests of the Pashtuns, but have nothing to offer for the other ethnic groups in the country.[62] They have tried to change their movement

[53] *Idem.,* 22.
[54] *Idem.,* 37.
[55] *Idem.,* 43.
[56] *Idem.,* 28.
[57] *Idem.,* 49.
[58] Johnson, "The Taliban," 254.
[59] *Idem.,* 250-251.
[60] *Idem.,* 252.
[61] *Idem.,* 257.
[62] *Idem.,* 254.

into a pan-Afghan one, but they failed to do so, according to Johnson.[63] How they approached this, or why they failed, is not explained, and the only source referred to comes from 1986, eight years before the official establishment of the Ṭālibān as an organization. Johnson also mentions that even the Ṭālibān's anti-western policy is sometimes doubted. Some Pashtuns think the Ṭālibān is an American organization, simply because of the fact that the United States would be strong enough to defeat them if they were not American.[64] Another rumour is that they are a Pakistani organization, deliberately weakening Afghanistan so that Pakistan can profit from it.[65] Apparently, they are not even able to convince their fellow Pashtuns of their intentions.

Another important weakness, according to Johnson, is the Ṭālibān's lack of political strategy. They have always been fighting, and have never been in the position to develop a coherent policy.[66] Because of their abundance of violence, many Afghans have turned against them.[67] Their rhetoric of bringing protection and justice to the people was executed in such a brutal and horrific way that it made them unreliable.[68] It is clear that they cannot win their insurgency by force, for they have failed to do so for almost two decades, and their ongoing insurgency is only weakening the country as a whole, not bringing any of the parties closer to their respective goals.[69]

Although Johnson offers an insightful and elaborate overview, it is striking that he sees 'popular support' as a great strength of the Ṭālibān, whereas 'lack of popular support' is an important weakness. Additionally, since it is a military-strategic analysis, he only shortly mentions the ideological background and objectives of the Ṭālibān. It is interesting to take a deeper look into that.

The Deobandi School of Islamic Theology

Before a study of the ideology of the Ṭālibān will be discussed, it is useful to look in deeper detail to the Deobandi school of Islamic theology. This school of thought was one of the main sources of inspiration for the Ṭālibān, as we have seen already in Johnson's chapter and will become even more clear from other sources discussed below. Muhammad Moj explains the thoughts of this movement in *The Deoband madrassah movement: countercultural trends and*

[63] *Idem.,* 256.
[64] *Idem,* 254.
[65] *Idem.*
[66] *Idem.,* 260.
[67] *Idem.*
[68] *Idem.,* 264.
[69] *Idem.,* 262.

tendencies. He describes that, in the 19th century, the British tried to secularize public life in British India.[70] To counter-act that, a couple of Muslim scholars established in 1866 or 1867 a *madrasa* in the village of Deoband, in order to protect and preserve Islamic life and religion in Indian society.[71] Their thought was inspired by a strictly Sunnite and anti-Shīʿite group of Indian Muslims.[72] The Deobandi's, as the adherents of this new movement were called, strongly opposed all kinds of folk Islam[73] Furthermore, they stressed the importance of directly studying the Qurʾān and the ḥadīth, without being distracted by the many medieval commentaries written on these sources.[74]

Moj also shows how this movement has influenced the ideology of the Afghan Ṭālibān. After the establishment of Pakistan as an independent state, the Deobandi movement became very influential in the new state and saw chance to establish many *madrasas* all over the country.[75] Many Afghan Pashtuns, who fled from the Soviet Invasion and civil war from 1979 onwards to Pakistan, were educated on those Deobandi *madrasas*. Many of those Afghan *madrasa*-students, who are called 'Ṭālibān' in the Pashto language, returned to Afghanistan to join the ranks of the mujāhidīn.[76] Even many Pakistani Ṭālibān followed their classmates into Afghanistan and fought along with them.[77]

Ideology of the Ṭālibān

However, this is not the only ideological component of Ṭālibān-thinking. Aneela Sultana shows in her article "Taliban Or Terrorist? Some reflections on Taliban's ideology", as published in the journal *Politics and Religion,* that there is more to this subject. She states that the main aim of the Ṭālibān is to restore peace, safety and security, and to follow the sharīʿa, the Islamic religious law, like it should be followed by true Muslims.[78] However, next to the Islamic ideals that come from Deobandi Sunni Islam, the Ṭālibān have the Pashtun code of conduct or Pashtunwali as the other important basis of their ideology.[79]

[70] Muhammad Moj, *The Deoband madrassah movement: countercultural trends and tendencies* (London, New York: Anthem press, 2015), 6.
[71] *Idem.*
[72] *Idem.,* 4.
[73] *Idem.,* 7-8.
[74] *Idem.,* 16.
[75] *Idem.,* 9.
[76] *Idem.,* 13.
[77] *Idem.*
[78] Aneela Sultana, "Taliban Or Terrorist? Some reflections on taliban's ideology," in *Politics and Religion* 3, no. 1 (January 2017): 15-16.
[79] *Idem.,* 12.

The Pashtunwali consists of several virtues, like hospitality, apologies, shelter, seclusion, guilt, revenge and honor.[80] These virtues sometimes directly oppose Islamic law. For example, if a family-member dies, women cannot inherit according to the Pashtunwali, whereas they can, according to the sharīʿa.[81] Additionally, killing to secure the family's honor is part of the Pashtunwali, whereas the sharīʿa forbids it.[82] In these cases, the ʿulamāʾ have always tried to overrule the Pashtunwali in favor of the sharīʿa, which has led to struggles with tribal leaders who favored the Pashtunwali.[83] Sultana does not elaborate on those struggles, nor in which time period they took place. Neither does she explain how the Ṭālibān think about the specific situations of women inheritance and vendetta killings, she just claims more generally that the ʿulamāʾ have used the Ṭālibān to claim a more prominent position as lawmakers in the country.[84] Although not explicitly mentioned, Sultana therefore seems to say that the Ṭālibān generally choose to follow the sharīʿa whenever it contradicts the Pashtunwali.

Sultana also offers one clear example to show how the combination of Deobandism and Pashtunwali is concretized in the Ṭālibān ideology. The Ṭālibān have imposed the obligation for women to wear a burqa with a twofold argumentation: it protects the dignity and honor of a woman, and would also be obliged by sharīʿa.[85] Apart from that, however, she only shows that the Ṭālibān try to spread their values because that is important according to the Pashtunwali,[86] whereas the strict codes of clothing for men are merely religiously motivated.[87] The Deobandi objective of securing Islam against unbelievers becomes very clear in the Ṭālibān's explanation of jihād. Because Islam should be defended, jihād can only be directed against unbelievers. However, if Muslims support the enemies of the faith, they should be targeted as well, because they are on the wrong side.[88] The origins of various elements of Ṭālibān ideology appear clearly in Sultana's work, but the interesting domain where Pasthunwali and Deobandism overlap or contradict each other, remains a little vague.

[80] *Idem.*
[81] *Idem.,* 13
[82] *Idem.,* 13-14.
[83] *Idem.,* 14.
[84] *Idem.,* 14-15.
[85] *Idem.,* 16.
[86] *Idem.,* 14.
[87] *Idem.,* 18.
[88] *Idem.,* 19.

Personal Story

While previous studies concentrated on the ideology and political aspects of the Taliban, there are also autobiographies of certain members of the Taliban, who give insights into the life, ideology and political views of this organization. An example is ʿAbd al-Salām Ḍaʿīf in his book *My life with the Taliban*. Ḍaʿīf was a high ranking Ṭālibān official, who has published his personal memoires as a mujāhid, co-founder of the Ṭālibān as an organization and part of the Ṭālibān-government. This perspective is, of course, far more subjective than the researches discussed above, but it also gives an interesting insight into the Ṭālibān from within.

Ḍaʿīf describes that after 1979, the communist government 'ruthlessly suppressed the opposition',[89] which triggered many Afghans to start a guerrilla-war against it.[90] Other complaints against the government regarded edict 7 and 8, which regulated women's education, a maximum dowry and the confiscation and redistribution of land.[91] Ḍaʿīf and the largest part of his family fled to Pakistan, where he observed that the United States helped the refugees and mujāhidīn in Pakistan. However, when the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1988 and 1989, so did the Americans from Pakistan.[92] Ḍaʿīf attended a Pakistani *madrasa* in the refugee camp.[93] In the meantime, he heard the mullahs in the mosques call for jihād as a duty for every Muslim,[94] and in 1983 he joined the mujāhidīn in Afghanistan. Back in his home country, he joined to a group of Ṭālibān, who were *madrasa*-students, just like he used to be, because they were the most pious of the mujāhidīn, and also respected as such.[95]

This piety was very visible in their way of battling. Because the Soviets were superior in number and materiel, the mujāhidīn had to use guerilla-tactics,[96] with a high risk of dying. Therefore, every day the Ṭālibān did not only start with the morning prayer, but also with the prayer for the dead.[97] If someone wanted to join their ranks who was not a *madrasa*-student, he could receive an education in between the fighting, and after two or three years, he would be accepted as a Ṭālib. During the war, the mujāhidīn gradually became stronger, due to the Pakistani secret service, the ISI. It assisted the mujāhidīn with weaponry, materiel and trainings

[89] ʿAbd al-Salām Ḍaʿīf, *My life with the Taliban,* trans. Alex Strick van Linschoten & Felix Kuehn, (London: Hurst & Company, 2010), 10.
[90] *Idem.*
[91] *Idem.,* 13.
[92] *Idem.,* 13.
[93] *Idem.,* 18.
[94] *Idem.,* 19.
[95] *Idem.,* 22.
[96] *Idem.,* 24.
[97] *Idem.,* 26-27.

on Pakistani soil in how to use those.[98] However, Ḍaʿīf thought that in these trainings, too much attention was given to theory, and far too less to practice.[99]

After the Soviets withdrew, and Najībullah resigned, a period of anarchy and lawlessness started. A group of former Ṭālibān-fighters, with Ḍaʿīf as one of their leading figures, was desperate and afraid and wanted to do something about the situation.[100] They decided to start their own militia in an attempt to restore order and the rule of law.[101] Most participants wanted Ḍaʿīf to become leader of the militia, but he refused this, because he felt himself too prominent.[102] He argued that they should

> find a leader who is not a prominent figure, who doesn't have any standing as a commander and thus does not have any political relations from the past with any of the known commanders.[103]

The group sent messengers to meet different former Ṭālibān-commanders to ask them whether they wanted to lead the new militia.[104] Ḍaʿīf was among those who went to mullah ʿUmar,[105] who replied that other people had come to him with similar plans.[106] However, only after thoroughly thinking and consulting ʿulamāʾ, ʿUmar decided to accept leadership over the new group, which had no name yet.[107] This official establishment, of what later came to be the 'Ṭālibān', took place in the town Singasar, near Kandahar.[108]

Ḍaʿīf continues his memoires describing the Ṭālibān's raise to power,[109] his personal experiences as ambassador of the Ṭālibān in Pakistan,[110] and the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001. He describes how the Ṭālibān-government publicly condemned the attacks,[111] and how he himself tried to negotiate with the United States, but with no success.[112] Yet, despite

[98] *Idem.*, 33-35.
[99] *Idem*.
[100] *Idem.*, 62.
[101] *Idem.*
[102] *Idem.*, 63.
[103] *Idem.*
[104] *Idem.*
[105] *Idem.*
[106] *Idem.*, 64.
[107] *Idem.*, 64-65.
[108] *Idem.*, 65.
[109] *Idem.*, 67-100.
[110] *Idem.*, 101-149.
[111] *Idem.*, 144.
[112] *Idem.*, 145-146.

Ḍaʿīf's efforts to gather as much information as he could about the coming American attack, mullah ʿUmar did not believe him.[113]

During the first days of the war, Ḍaʿīf was still the Afghan ambassador in Pakistan. It took until 2 January 2002 before he was arrested by Pakistani officials.[114] After he had been arrested, he was brought from Islamabad to Peshawar by car. An interesting detail, showing his devotedness to Islam, is that he asked his guards in the car whether they could stop so he could do his morning prayer, and they did not let him.[115] Thereafter, he became a prisoner, and was moved to Guantanamo Bay, from whence he was released after four years.[116] For the future of Afghanistan, he has the following recommendations:

> National unity, tribal agreements and religious traditions form the basis for any development and progress in Afghanistan and need to be supported by its people.[117]

and

> The most important matter is to protect the honour of Afghanistan and its Islamic framework, including national Afghan traditions. These are the values which have protected Afghans, and for which Afghans have shed their blood and which have fuelled their bravery, defeating every foreign invader and superpower in the world with the help of Allah .[118]

Ḍaʿīf's report of the history and ideology of the Ṭālibān is both subjective and personal, but gives a detailed insight into the mujāhidīn-period, the establishment of the organization in 1994, and into the last days of the Ṭālibān-government in 2001. Already in the 1980's, the Ṭālibān wanted to enforce the jihād as piously as possible. In 1994, the idea to organize a militia came from Afghan people who wanted to end the violence. From 2001 onwards, both Pakistan and the United States, which had supported the mujāhidīn in the 1980's, became important adversaries.

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[113] *Idem.*, 148-150.
[114] *Idem.*, 167-168.
[115] *Idem.*, 169.
[116] *Idem.*, 215.
[117] *Idem.*, 220-221.
[118] *Idem.*, 221.

Moreover, Ḍaʿīf's dedication to Islam and his belief in the mission of the Ṭālibān become very clear from his story. In his recommendations for the future, a strong traditional and revisionist conviction becomes visible, together with a strong anti-'foreign invader and superpower' sentiment. All this is apparently somehow part of Ṭālibān-thought.

Contextualizing Ṭālibān poetry

Rather than by reading the retrospect memoirs of one single person, one can analyze the texts the movement produced in order to probe into the Ṭālibān-thought. Thomas H. Johnson and Ahmad Waheed report in their article "Analyzing Taliban Taranas (chants): An Effective Afghan Propaganda Artifact" in the journal *Small Wars and Insurgencies* that they have analyzed Ṭālibān-songs which were distributed among the common people in Afghanistan.[119] Music and poetry play an important role in the Pashtun-culture of Afghanistan, so when the Ṭālibān outlawed music in 1996, traditional religious music was excluded from this ban.[120] Even more, the Ṭālibān started to actively spread songs as a means of propaganda.[121] The analysis of these songs by Johnson and Waheed gives an insight into the way the Ṭālibān wished to present themselves. It is important to note that this is propaganda, so the image of the Ṭālibān is probably too positive and lacks nuance, but it excellently reveals their ideology and the way they try to reach their supporters.

Johnson and Waheed show that the Ṭālibān use the traditional form of the tarana as propaganda, which is a melodious, rhythmic song in two parts, and is very popular in the Pashtun culture.[122] Not only the form, but also the literary genre fits into the traditional culture, which makes the presented ideology very attractive to local Afghans.[123] Important themes in these songs are the unbeatable Islam, which will punish the foreign invaders in the name of justice; the heroism and self-sacrifice of the Ṭālibān soldiers; the harmful acts of the foreign invaders and their puppet-government; and the duty for every Afghan to join the jihād against those foreign invaders.[124]

[119] Thomas H. Johnson and Ahmad Waheed, "Analyzing Taliban Taranas (chants): An Effective Afghan Propaganda Artifact," in *Small wars and insurgencies* 22, no. 1 (2011): 4-5.
[120] *Idem.*, 4.
[121] *Idem.*, 5.
[122] *Idem.*, 4-5.
[123] *Idem.*, 25.
[124] *Idem.*, 26.

Toward an Analysis of Ṭālibān poetry: Methodology and Organization of the Thesis

Presented above is a variety of different angles of looking at the Ṭālibān. We have seen analyses of the movement from an ethnic perspective, in military terms, by its ideology, from within, and by analyzing their propaganda-songs. Still, another source has not been analyzed yet. On the official website of the Ṭālibān, they publish self-written poems.[125] Since the Ṭālibān publish these poems themselves, they will most likely contain propaganda-messages. However, as Roland Bleiker has pointed out in *Aesthetics and World Politics*, sometimes aesthetics, and especially poetry, can tell more about politics than 'traditional' texts.[126]

In his book, Bleiker criticizes the way in which most research to international politics has been done. It comes up with theories and concepts and claims to strive to the best possible mimesis, which means that the theories and concepts should be a perfect reflection of the actual reality.[127] As Bleiker argues, perfect mimesis is just an exact copy, and will not lead to a better understanding.[128] Therefore, all theories and concepts can and should be only a limited representation of reality. The problem is that many of the concepts of social sciences in general, and international relations in particular, have been repeated so many times, that they have become part of the common sense.[129] We do not realize anymore that they are only a possible, but not a necessarily 'real' representation image of the 'actual world'. Art is a way to overcome this flaw, since it represents reality in a way that cannot be reproduced by using only prose texts.[130] Art offers the possibility of expression of feelings that lay beyond common sense, and is therefore capable of criticizing the concepts that are considered to be common sense.

When this is applied to the Ṭālibān, it poses interesting questions. The Ṭālibān are always depicted in western media as a fundamentalist, radical-Islamist terrorist organization, notorious for their cruel execution of punishments. However, this is of course just one single possible representation of the group. The researches previously discussed illustrate that there are various angles from which one can look at the organization, but except from the memoires of Ḍaʿīf, they were all visions from the outside, looking at the Ṭālibān as 'the other' and, what is more, as 'a problem'. Following Bleikers argumentation, it is important to look at art

[125] Mirwais Rahmany, Abdul Hamid Stanikzai, Alex Strick van Linschoten, Felix Kuehn & Faisal Fatehali Devji, *Poetry of the Taliban* (London: Hurst, 2012), 31.
[126] Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics,* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1-2.
[127] *Idem.,* 20-21.
[128] *Idem.,* 21.
[129] *Idem.,* 24.
[130] *Idem.,* 28-29, 46.

concerning the Ṭālibān, which dares to put these visions of 'the Ṭālibān as a problem' to question.

An excellent way to achieve this is by using their own poetry. Firstly, the idea of Ṭālibān-members writing poetry does not fit into the common sense image about them in the west. Secondly, being a form of art, poetry is capable of formulating a truth that is not easily captured in scientific descriptions. It can even use language ironically, and criticize concepts whilst simultaneously using them.[131] Thirdly, because the Ṭālibān wrote the poems themselves, they can present an alternative mode of representation that is not influenced by the orientalist dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them' which is present in western representations of the organization. Fourthly, the very fact that the Ṭālibān write poems, indicates that they themselves consider it important to reveal an image of themselves by using poetry.

This leads to the following research question: Which forms of representation are offered by the poetry of the Ṭālibān? The sub questions we will look at are: In which ways do the Ṭālibān represent themselves in their poetry? Followed by: In which ways do the Ṭālibān represent their enemies in their poetry? The answers to these questions should contribute to a better understanding of the Ṭālibān, their tactics and their followers. This has certainly societal relevance, since many local, regional and international parties interfere in the war in Afghanistan. An Afghan future without the Ṭālibān seems highly unlikely, which makes it important to understand their way of thinking.

For the research, source material is provided by the book *Poetry of the Taliban,* edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. In this book, a selection of 235 poems from the 1980s and 1990s, and from the period between December 2006 and February 2009 has been translated into English by Mirwais Rahmany and Hamid Stanikzai.[132] The poems from the 1980s and 1990s are collected from magazines, cassette tapes, and newspapers, and the newer poems are all the poems that have appeared on the Ṭālibān's official website in the given period, except the poems that were written by classical poets in another era or by non-Ṭālibān people.[133]

In this thesis, I will analyze Ṭālibān poetry, relying on the English translations as I have no command of the Pashto language. It is possible that other meanings and connotations encapsulated in the original are lost. Another limitation is that I am dependent on the selections made by the translators. There are certainly more poems which are not included in this corpus. Therefore all conclusions should be careful expressed and possess only limited value.

[131] *Idem.,* 26.
[132] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 31.
[133] *Idem.,* 31-32.

The research will be organized as follows: In the following chapter, I will elaborate on the role of poetry in Afghanistan in general, and in Pashtun culture in particular. I will continue to successively examine different themes that are present within the corpus. The last chapter presents a conclusion, which aims to answer the research question about which forms of representation are offered by the Ṭālibān.

Chapter Two: the Content of the Ṭālibān poetry

In this chapter, I will analyze the corpus of 235 poems, which are collected and translated in the book *Poetry of the Taliban*. To do so, I will first introduce the place of poetry in the Afghan society. Afterwards, I will scrutinize different themes that are present within the corpus and which concern the Ṭālibān's self-representation and their representation of the enemy. However, because the paragraphs have been arranged based on the themes of the poetry, most paragraphs consider the two kinds of representation similarly. For example, the paragraph on Qurʾānic metaphors will show that often a Qurʾānic story is used to depict the Ṭālibān as 'good guys', and the enemy as 'bad guys'. The two sub questions of this research are therefore not discussed separately. In the conclusion, I will return to them and offer an answer to them later on.

The selection of the themes that I will discuss is the following. Since this thesis is built on Bleiker's assumption that poetry is relevant for politics, I will first look at the view of the Ṭālibān on this assumption. What is in their opinion the role of a poet? After that, I will look at themes in which the presentation of the self and the other can be emphasized, because they possess a clear dichotomy in itself. Seasons are such a theme, because there is a clear distinction between spring and autumn, and also Shīʿite themes and Qurʾānic metaphors often use stories in which the 'good guy' and the 'bad guy' are evident, just like in imagery concerning certain types of animals. Besides that, I will present themes that concern the identity of the Ṭālibān, like their religious holidays, their personal experience of religion, the position of women, tradition and ethnicity. Lastly, I will look at the identity of the enemy.

I have chosen these specific themes since they either possess a clear dichotomy between the self and the other, or reveal something about the identity of the Ṭālibān or the enemy. On top of that, they were more present within the corpus than other themes that could be relevant as well. Therefore, these themes are the most relevant to discuss. The discussion will make clear how the Ṭālibān represent themselves and how they represent their enemies. Each theme is introduced with regard to its wider meaning within Persian literature and/or Afghan society, followed by examples from within the corpus. Using the introducing explanations, I will offer an interpretation of the discussed poems.

It is important to stress again the fact that all presented poems are translations from the original Pashtun poems. For example, when a poem is called 'ghazal', which is the name of a certain type of poem, it does not necessarily mean that the poem is a real ghazal. I will not

elaborate on the forms and types of poems, because these specifics are for the largest part not visible in the translations that I used.

The Place of Poetry in the Afghan Society

Afghanistan is a central part of the Persianate world, and the languages spoken in Afghanistan belong to the family of Iranian languages.[134] Within the Persianate culture, literature has been the most important cultural expression.[135] At nearly all major occasions in life, poems are recited or sung,[136] and if people possess at least one book, they possess a collection of the poems of Ḥāfeẓ, a fourteenth century poet.[137] Ferdowsī (940-1020 AD), the writer of Iran's national epic the *Shāhnāme*, was sponsored by the Samanids and the Ghaznavids, who were the rulers of Persia, with their capital in contemporary Afghanistan.[138] Hence, the area that is present-day Afghanistan has played a significant role in the tradition of Persian poetry.

During the Medieval period, many courts of rulers had their own poet, whose job it was to praise their sponsor, the ruler, in a sophisticated way. By doing so, the ruler attained a better reputation and place in the collective memory of the people, whereas the poet earned himself a living.[139] The more knowledge a poet possessed, the more he could incorporate in his works, which improved the quality of his poems.[140] However, next to these professional court poets, all educated people were able to compose poems, so people with various professions all wrote their own poetry.[141]

This tradition has continued throughout the ages. From the early 17th century onwards, famous Afghan poets started to write in the Pashto language,[142] although the elite preferred to speak Dari Persian.[143] However, many poems have been lost in time, since the Pashtun literary tradition was an oral one, rather than a written one.[144] Nevertheless, this could not prevent that,

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[134] Ehsan Yarshater, "Foreword," in *A History of Persian literature XVIII: Oral Literature of Iranian Languages*, eds. Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Ulrich Marzolph (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), xxiii.
[135] *Idem.,* xxi.
[136] Philip G. Kreyenbroek, "Folk Poetry," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* X/1, 66-71; available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/folk-poetry- (accessed on 26 November 2019).
[137] Ehsan Yarshater, "Hafez: i. An Overview," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* XI/5, 461-465; available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez-i (accessed on 26 November 2019).
[138] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 33.
[139] J.T.P. de Bruijn, "Shāʿir, 2. In Persia," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman, et al.
[140] *Idem.*
[141] *Idem.*
[142] *Idem.*
[143] L.N. Bartlotti, "Modern Pashto Written Literature," in *A History of Persian literature XVIII: Oral Literature of Iranian Languages*, eds. Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Ulrich Marzolph (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 119.
[144] *Idem.,* 125.

even in present-day Afghanistan, both in official speeches and colloquial talks, at holidays, festivals, and mourning ceremonies, there is hardly any occasion at which poetry is not (re)cited.[145]

Poetry in the Pashto language has been published in great numbers from the 1920's onwards, when the influence of the Dari-speaking elite waned in favor of nationalistic Pashtun movements.[146] The use of Pashto was politicized in order to secure the position of the Pashtun people in respect to other ethnic groups.[147] This created a sense of pride among the Pashtun population, which was eloquently presented by the Pashtun writer Hamza Shinwari, who stated that

> [t]he name Pakhtoon represents courage, bravery, swordsmanship, manliness, hospitality, self-respect and respect for others and so on. Now these are all the divine attributes and hence it will not be in vain if God were also called a Pakhtoon.[148]

Yet, this Pashtun pride did not mean that the poetry had no connection to the wider Persianate world anymore. To the contrary, Pashtun poetry uses many metaphors, subjects and forms that are common within the broader corpus of Persian poetry.[149] It just adds the emotions that fit into their tribal society, like the role of Islam, family relationships, the Pashtunwali and difficulties of everyday life.[150] The most common poetic forms are also derived from classical Persian poetry, although some rules cannot be obeyed because of limitations of the language itself, whereas other rules are adjusted to create different verse forms.[151]

Poems on the Role of Poets

The role that poetry plays in Afghan society can be found directly in some of the Ṭālibān poetry, for example in a poem entitled 'Poetic Competition':

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[145] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 33-35.
[146] Barltotti, "Modern Pashto," 119.
[147] *Idem.*, 119-120.
[148] *Idem.*, 128. 'Pakhtoon' is a different transcription of 'Pashtun'.
[149] *Idem.*, 126.
[150] *Idem.*, 127.
[151] D.N. Mackenzie, "Pashto Verse," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 21, no. 2 (1958), 319-326. See also Sergei Andreyev, "Pashto Literature: the Classical Period," in *A History of Persian literature XVIII: Oral Literature of Iranian Languages*, eds. Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Ulrich Marzolph (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 90.

Always write the truth, O poet. […]
You are the consummate translator of the Muslim *Umma,* O poet.
God has conferred great power to your pen,
Unite the Muslims with your pen, O poet. […]
Do *jihad* with your pen; that is your obligation today;
Fight cruelty on every battlefield, O poet.[152]

The poet is called to write the truth. This is important, for most court poets in past centuries had the job to praise their masters, which is, of course, not always completely the truth. It is also striking that the poet is encouraged to perform jihād with his pen. This theme returns in other poems and will be discussed below.

Another example of poetry about the role of poetry is 'Thin Tongue':

Your pen holds the power of positive change; […]
It has many effects and blessings.
Pious God has granted it great respect […]
Write each line as a prescription for the pains of the country;
Telling the truth is considered to be *jihad;*
Martyrdom is granted to he who dies for what is true.[153]

Again, the poet's responsibility to tell the truth is stressed. Furthermore, the accent is on the positive effects of writing, rather than on the duty to write, as the previous poem did. Again, writing is equalized to jihād, which will be discussed after the next poem. However, poetry is also presented as a prescription for the pains of the country. Poetry about medicine is quite common within Persian literature, but it is often about the lover who is sick from love, and can only be cured by the beloved.[154] In this poem, the country is the lover, and the poet the beloved, since he is the one who can heal the country. The illness does not stem from love, as becomes clear in the next line, that is about jihād: the illness stems from the ongoing war. The composer of this poem has played with the classical imagery of medicine, so that both the country's love for poets and the hardships of the war become clear from one single metaphor. The role of

[152] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 112, emphasis in the original.
[153] *Idem.*, 113, emphasis in the original.
[154] R. Zipoli, "Poetic Imagery," in *A History of Persian Literature I: General Introduction to Persian Literature,* ed. J.T.P. de Bruijn (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 213.

martyrdom in Ṭālibān poetry will be further, and more elaborately, discussed in another paragraph.

In the poem 'Suggestion', the point of writing as jihād is elaborated:

> Move youth! Get ready for some committed work:
> Make education your hobby and get ready with your pen. […]
> Save history […]
> [the foreigners] are sitting here; warn them with your pen. […]
> Your pride is known in swords; take the pen O brave one!
> Today is a world of education and science; beat the enemy this way. […]
> Join with the books; end these troubles of yours.[155]

This poem draws upon the ancient motif of the sword and the pen. From medieval times onwards, Persian poets have produced poems in which a pen and a sword debate about who is more powerful.[156] The role of the sword is used on the battlefield to protect and attack people.[157] It symbolizes nature, brute force, deeds, and decision,[158] and is often described as a jewel that seeds red flowers, which refers to its shimmering surface, and the blood it spreads respectively.[159] The pen plays a different role in Persian poetry. It can be a symbol of bureaucratic power[160] or of the poet himself.[161] It can also be used in a rather metaphysical way, as a symbol of human speech, ratio and soul. A poet can therefore influence the soul, which grants him a certain religious authority.[162] The pen itself is also a magic item, since it can speak, despite it being an inanimate object.[163] When poems call for jihād by the pen, like previous two poems did, they choose the side of the pen in opposition to the sword. The stress on education and science reflects the ancient habit of court poets who, as described, tried to show as much of their knowledge as possible in their poems.

There are other poems which take the side of the pen in its debate with the sword, like 'Afghanistan':

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[155] *Idem.,* 149.
[156] Geert Jan van Gelder, "The Conceit of Pen and Sword: on an Arabic Literary Debate," in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 32, no. 2 (autumn 1987): 348-359.
[157] A.A. Seyed Gohrab, *Courtly Riddles: Enigmatic Embellishments in Early Persian Poetry* (Amsterdam: Leiden University Press, 2010), 94.
[158] Van Gelder, "The Conceit," 358.
[159] Seyed Gohrab, *Courtly Riddles,* 185.
[160] *Idem.,* 178.
[161] *Idem.,* 132.
[162] *Idem.,* 180.
[163] *Idem.,* 182.

The wish in the depths of my heart:
That wish of mine remembers Afghans,
That our collapsed turbans rise up once again […]
That each individual of this nation remembers the mystics,
That the good fortune of the new generation is given,
Because they recall a properly-built Afghanistan.
These are the poems of Armani[164];
He mentions the elders in his *ghazal*.[165]

The task of the poet is to recall ancient times of 'a properly-built Afghanistan', and to mention the elders, so that the new generation gains the knowledge of how society should be. This fits into the oral tradition of Pashtun poetry: every generation has told their stories to the next generation, and so reciting poetry will remind the reciter and his public to the old times. It also connects to the role of the pen as influencer of the soul: a poet can change people by his poems.

The poem 'War Talk' elaborates this statement:

The history of epics is not lost, reopen it!
Use words about the Tatars and the Moghuls. […]
Talk a little about the Western colonisation,
About what's going on with my poor nation in my homeland,
About the words of bombardment against our innocent women.[166]

Again, the poet is encouraged to bring in mind the glorious past. What is more however, he should mention the events of this time, he should reveal what is happening now. Perhaps he is even encouraged to share this with the world, so that the injustice will not pass unnoticed. It is speculation whether or not this poem calls for that, for it does not mention any audience, but it would be of little use to write about 'bombardment against our innocent women' only for the fellow Afghans, since they are already aware of that. This makes it likely that a wider audience is meant. This would be a novelty for Persian poetry, but also a logical one, because, with the

[164] Armani is the writer of this poem. In Persian poetry, the writer often mentions him- or herself. See Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 33.
[165] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 120, emphasis in the original. A *ghazal* is a commonly used type of poem in Afghanistan, which is explained in the same book on page 217.
[166] *Idem.*, 135.

coming of the internet, the whole world is within its reach. Poetry can fulfil new roles next to ancient ones, due to technological advancement.

Concerning the self-representation of the Ṭālibān, this section has shown that the movement gives significant value to poets. Writing poetry is a way to do jihād, which is by some even preferred above fighting on the battlefield. Besides that, the poet can influence the soul of the people and win them for the Ṭālibān-cause. The Ṭālibān present themselves in these poems as connected to the ancient poetic tradition of the Persianate world, by referring to the debate between the sword and the pen, and by stressing the importance of oral tradition of Pashtun culture. However, they also stress the importance of telling the truth, which is a break with the tradition in which most poetry was panegyric.

Poems on Seasons

In Persian Poetry, the seasons are often depicted to allude the psychological condition of a person. Happy feelings and fresh starts are symbolized by spring, with all kinds of colors, and nature blossoming everywhere.[167] In contrast, sadness and hopelessness are often associated with autumn, the period with dark days, some frost, crows, silent nightingales, and colored leaves.[168] This distinction is also very clear in the Ṭālibān poetry.

A couple of poems refer to the season of 'spring' in a positive sense. In 'Change', the poet states that

> [t]he spring of change needs blood to rain down,
> It requires the irrigation of the gardens with blood.[169]

Spring means change and a new start: just like the gardens change in the spring and start growing and blossoming again, so the country has to change and needs a fresh start. This change can only be enforced by the bloodshed. The same theme, albeit less violent, comes up in the poem 'Hopes Empyrean'. It starts with a description of hardship:

> It's enough; don't light disunity's fire anymore
> In this ruined and poor village.

[167] Zipoli, "Poetic Imagery," 201.
[168] *Idem.*
[169] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 55.

But in the end, the tone changes:

> The new breeze brings new colours.
> God willing, we will climb to the heights of hopes
> With green velvet on our shoulders,
> With a burnt carpet of the dusty land.
> Ebrat's pen will be dancing to it,
> It will be writing *ghazals* of laughter.
> Spring breezes will blow again,
> The flowers' faded lips will smile again.[170]

Here again, spring is the season in which the appearance of the earth changes in a positive way. The connection between spring and happiness is made explicit in the last line, where it says that the flowers of spring will smile happily. These two poems use spring to invoke hope for a better future.

The poem 'Spring has come' is different, it merely describes the arrival of spring:

> Spring has come, come and break up the grief; […]
> Come out! Here there are new shows;
> The collar of the buds is to be torn […]
> Flowers left the cradle of dew. […]
> The zephyr kisses the cheeks of the flowers.[171]

For reasons of space, I have omitted some lines of the poem, but those do not change the message. In this poem, spring is not used as a metaphor, but simply signifies the season in which nature is reborn. It creates a sense of happiness and new beginning, and might be a metaphor as such for something, but this is not explicated. So where the previous poems clearly made a connection between the spring and the need for happiness and a fresh start for the country, this poem is less clear in its meaning.

[170] *Idem.*, 63.
[171] *Idem.*, 82-83.

The early spring is also the time of Nowrūz, the Persian New Year.[172] In Afghanistan, this is an official holiday, which is elaborately celebrated.[173] Because Nowrūz is always in springtime, it is not surprising that the poem 'New Year' combines the two:

> O New Year, bring happiness with you!
> Bring the fragrance of flowers.
> Once again, spread spring in my life,
> Once again, bring bouquets of red flowers with you.[174]

This is clearly a wish for the New Year, hoping that life will become as happy and renewed as spring itself. Just like the previous poem, this poem has no clear political message. However, exactly this lack of clear political engagement reveals something of how the Ṭālibān see themselves. Art without political connection can be in fact very political, because it creates 'a critical distance from moral norms and social practices'[175] as Bleiker explains in his book. Both poems emphasize that the Ṭālibān are people who enjoy the spring, hope for happiness in a new year, and are happy about flowers. Furthermore, these poems reveal that the Ṭālibān also value these hopes and sources of joy relevant enough to write poetry about.

Autumn is brought up as well in the corpus. The writer of 'Ababeel' complains:

> Autumn came to you instead of spring, my homeland,
> A hot wind and torrents of fire came down upon you.
> Your blossoms of wishes have faded in this world,
> Storms of cruelty and power came at you from all sides.[176]

The metaphor is used very strongly here. The fact that autumn came *instead of* spring indicates a great disappointment. Of course, autumn comes every year, but the writer apparently expected spring to come, and suddenly autumn showed up. In the following lines, the metaphor is continued: the wind is not frosty, like it can be in autumn, but it is hot, with torrents of fire and storms of cruelty from all sides. The blossoms, ready to bud in spring, have therefore faded.

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[172] Mary Boyce, "Nowruz: i. In the Pre-Islamic Period," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2016, available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nowruz-i (accessed 12 November 2019).
[173] A. Shapur Shahbazi, "Nowruz: ii. In the Islamic Period," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2016, available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nowruz-ii (accessed on 12 November 2019).
[174] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 83.
[175] Bleiker, *Aesthetics*, 45.
[176] *Idem.*, 179.

This is not only an autumn that came when spring was expected, but it is also very hot, instead of cold, which one would expect in autumn. There are clearly several opposites in this poem: spring and autumn, cold and hot, expected and unexpected. These opposites, presented in metaphors concerning the weather, makes the message of the poem very prominent: circumstances are terrible.

The ones to blame for all this misery are revealed in a poem entitled 'Self-made Prison':

> The nightingales cry and remember their lawn,
> The foreigners brought autumn to it.[177]

The nightingale crying for its lawn is a common phrase used to describe a citizen yearning for his homeland.[178] However, the reason for the nightingale to cry is that the foreigners brought autumn to it. As we saw at the beginning of this paragraph, autumn is the period in which the nightingale is silent, so the appearance of autumn is for this bird indeed a reason to cry. These two lines use the metaphor of the nightingale, on the one hand remembering its lawn, on the other hand suffering in autumns, to explain which hardship the foreigners have brought to the Afghans.

In a poem simply named 'Ghazal', autumn plays a slightly different role:

> What great times of happiness we had that have passed,
> There was no sadness, no pain, but that time has passed.
> When I go there I am reminded of those times,
> There were ceremonies that passed.
> How the saddened flower smiled once again,
> There was an autumn breeze in the lawn which has passed.
> There are no enjoyable speeches and gatherings,
> The time had its joy, which has passed.
> Don't be cheated by anyone's appearance in the future, my heart,
> These were false colours that have passed.[179]

[177] *idem.,* 185.
[178] *Idem.,* 241.
[179] *Idem.,* 192.

It is clear that this poem brings a time into memory 'which has passed'. This 'great time of happiness' is associated with the absence of sadness and pain, the presence of ceremonies and the smile of the saddened flower. However, the autumn breeze in the lawn is included in this list as well. As we have seen, autumn is mostly seen as a dark and cold period, so it is striking that it is on this list of attributes of the great time of happiness. Autumn is the period, as noticed, that leaves die, birds stop singing and days get darker, which can be associated with the feeling that everything 'has passed'. Since this phrase is a refrain in this poem, the feeling of autumn fits into the theme of the poem, though this feeling is the very thing that has *not* passed. Just like some of the poems concerning spring, this poem appeals to a certain feeling without advocating a specific political message. The sense of nostalgia shows that the Ṭālibān yearn for the situation of the past, but try to get used to the current situation in the last lines: 'Don't be cheated by anyone's appearance in the future, my heart'. If they accept the status quo, they cannot be deceived anymore.

Both spring and autumn are used to describe the enemies: they have taken away spring and brought autumn. In the meantime, the seasons are used as metaphors for happiness and sadness respectively, in poems varying from explicitly political to not political at all. Between the calling for a new spring and blaming the enemies for bringing autumn, we have seen three poems without a clear political message that just celebrate the spring and Nowrūz or recall feelings of nostalgia. These poems depict the Ṭālibān as ordinary people, enjoying the beauty of life and hoping for the best to come, yet also longing for the good old times of the past. Bleiker, as noticed, would call this 'creating distance from moral norms and practices'. By appealing to these feelings, which are universal and can be found within all people, the Ṭālibān bring themselves closer to all other people. They become more 'us' and less 'them', which creates space to re-evaluate their way of life.

Poems on Religious Holidays

Next to Nowrūz, which is closely connected to spring, there are more important holidays in Afghanistan, the most important of which is probably the fasting month Ramadan, concluded by the *ʿAyd al-fitr*, which is important to all Muslims.[180]

Various poems speak about this *ʿAyd*,[181] but they contain various messages. The poem 'Ramadan' happily describes the celebration:

[180] Zipoli, "Poetic Imagery,", 201-202.

[181] The translators of the poetry use a different transcription system than I do in this research. Therefore, I will talk about *ʿAyd* whereas the poems call it *Eid.*

‘Ramadan is the month of colourful blessings. I like the *Eid* of this month’[182]

The poem ‘Give me your Turban’ uses *ʿAyd* as a metaphor to a happy event:

That day will be my *Eid* and happiness,
When the enemy of my religion and land walks into the trap of my influence[183]

and so does the poem ‘O Eid of the Trench’:

O *Eid,* now are the days of revolution. […]
Faizani[184] is on the way
RPG on his shoulder, O *Eid.*[185]

We see that *ʿAyd* is personified in this poem. It has become the addressee: the writer tells *ʿAyd* about his plans for revolution, using his RPG. This has nothing to do anymore with the end of Ramadan, it rather suggests that the revolution will be just as festive as *ʿAyd*. *ʿAyd* has lost its original meaning in this poem and simply means ‘festive event’, which perfectly fits into Bleiker’s theory about poetry creating new meanings and connotations for existing concepts.

The next poems about *ʿAyd* are very sad. In ‘O *Eid!*’, the happiness of the holiday is compared to the sadness of the circumstances:

There is grief here,
Here is mourning.
Here is crying and sorrow,
There is tumult in every home.
And you are *Eid,*
You are very prosperous.
You are the symbol of happiness,
The symbol of wealth. […]

[182] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 100, emphasis in the original.
[183] *Idem.*, 144, emphasis in the original.
[184] Faizani is the writer of this poem, see note 162.
[185] *Idem.*, 146-147, emphasis in the original.

O *Eid!*
The source of happiness. […]
don't come here.
We aren't ready for your arrival, […]
Let us cry,
Leave us to our sorrow […]
As you are coming […]
Swear that you'll bring happiness when you come,
Bring a portion of peace to this poor nation.[186]

It is clear that the happiness of *ʿAyd* and the pain of the current situation are completely incompatible. Therefore, the writer even asks *ʿAyd* not to arrive at all, albeit a very important and happy holiday. Here again, *ʿAyd* is presented as the addressee of the poem. Whereas in the previous poem it was merely a listener to the revolutionary plans of the writer, in this poem it is advised not to do something. By inventing this new use of *ʿAyd* and therefore using poetry in Bleikerian way, the writer makes his message strike the reader very directly. The idea that *ʿAyd* is a person that can choose not to come creates a false sense of hope that it will listen to this plea. Of course it cannot and the reader knows that, so the poem creates a dramatic irony which strengthens the sad tone of the poem.

The poem 'Eid' chooses both a sad tone and a personified *ʿAyd* as well:

Howe can we celebrate *Eid* when our warriors are hungry? […]
O *Eid,* why do you come to this ruined village?[187]

Here, there is no asking *ʿAyd* not to come, but acceptance and grief that it inevitably will come.

The last poem referring to *ʿAyd* uses the holiday to contrast it with Christmas, a Christian holiday:

The picnics of *Eid* are dead as well.
At your Christmas, Bagram is alit and bright,
On my *Eid,* even the rays of the sun are dead[188]

[186] *Idem.*, 180-182, emphasis in the original.
[187] *Idem.*, 100, emphasis in the original.
[188] *Idem,* 205, emphasis in the original.

These lines tell us how unfair it is that the foreign troops celebrate their own parties in sight of the Afghans, seeing as those Afghans cannot celebrate theirs anymore.

The theme of *ʿAyd* is by definition very cheerful and happy. This is visible in the happy poems, which simply describe a happy celebration of *ʿAyd* or even equal *ʿAyd* to 'happy event'. It is even more visible in the sad poems, because of the sharp contrast between *ʿAyd* as the happy holiday, and the current situation. Phrases such as 'don't come here' and 'why do you come to this ruined village' are very powerful, for these questions are absurd in a normal situation. This is even stronger because *ʿAyd* is personified. The last poem, which compares the celebration of *ʿAyd* to that of Christmas, sketches an image of incredible unfairness, for the Afghans cannot celebrate their own holiday on their own soil, whereas the foreigners can celebrate their foreign holiday on Afghan soil.

The sad poems, therefore, do exactly what Bleiker expects aesthetics to do: they take the concept of *ʿAyd,* remove the common sense meaning of the concept and give it a completely different connotation. It is no longer a happy holiday, but transforms into a painful remembrance of the grief the people are suffering instead. The writers present themselves as victims of the situation. This change of meaning is innovative, and therefore attracts attention.

Metaphors Related to Shīʿite themes

Shīʿite themes show up in several poems. They refer to the story of the battle of Karbalā, where the Shīʿite imam Ḥusayn and most of his was killed in an unequal battle in 680 AD by his enemies, who were soldiers of caliph Yazīd. This happened on the tenth day (ʿAshūra) of the month Muḥarram. This conflict regarded the question who should be the rightful ruler of the Islamic caliphate: Yazīd or Ḥusayn. Ḥusayn was the son of the prophet Muḥammad's daughter Fāṭima and the fourth caliph ʿAlī. A group of Muslims, especially in Ḥusayn's living place Medina, wanted him to replace the fifth caliph Muʿāwiya, but Ḥusayn only started a revolt when Muʿāwiya's wanted his son Yazīd to be recognized as his successor as caliph.[189] The conflict about who should lead the Islamic community would eventually lead to a schism between the Shīʿites, who claim that only a descendent of Muḥammad son-in-law ʿAlī can be caliph, and the Sunnites who state that every capable man should have this opportunity.[190]

[189] Veccia Vaglieri, L. "(Al-)Ḥusayn B. ʿAlī B. Abī Ṭālib," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman et al.
[190] Madelung, W. "Shīʿa," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman et al.

Apparently, within the corpus of Ṭālibān poetry, there are many references to Ḥusayn's story, and the annual celebration of his dead on the ʿAshūra of Muḥarram. This is surprising, because the Ṭālibān are both convinced Sunnis and anti- Shīʿa , whereas this celebration is primarily Shīʿite. I will present a couple of poems concerning this story below, analyze them and then try to formulate what the Ṭālibān intend to say with them and how this apparent Shīʿism fits into their strictly Sunnite thought.

The motif of ʿAshūra is important in, for instance, the poem 'I am crying for your martyred face', which says:

> I am crying for your martyred face, O you, soaked in blood.
> It became Karbala on your behalf for the young and the old, […]
> I am crying for your martyred face, O you, soaked in blood.
> Yazid has come to the field and tormented dear Husein[191]

The late companion of the poet is equaled to Ḥusayn, on whose behalf it became Karbalā, and his murderer is equaled to the treacherous Yazīd. The poem 'New Era' makes a similar use of the motifs of this story:

> In this era of Yazid, I am respectable.
> May God bless us in this vicious era. […]
> the Kabul of my heart was martyred in this era.[192]

The 'era of Yazid' and 'this vicious era' are presented as synonyms, so Yazīd is again the symbol of viciousness. Furthermore, 'this era' contained the martyrdom of Kabul. The use of the word 'martyrdom' calls in mind the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, especially since Yazīd has already been mentioned.

A likewise strong anti-Yazīd sentiment can be found in 'Cruel Man':

> From this troubled and tortured nation,
> You didn't leave the young or the adults.
> In your cruel and inaccurate bombing
> You didn't spare any village or tribe.

[191] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 63.
[192] *Idem.*, 108.

O Kabul, this Yazidi army
Didn't spare your wounded chest.[193]

In this poem, an enumeration of cruelties results in the conclusion that the perpetrators are a 'Yazidi army', using again the name of Yazīd as a prototype of cruelness. In the meantime, the innocent suffering of Ḥusayn is also implicitly called to mind by naming 'the young' victims and the 'inaccurate bombing' that caused innocent suffering. The direct addressing of Kabul as Yazīd's victim silently compares the entire city to Ḥusayn himself.

The poem 'Give me your Turban' uses a different motif from the story of Ḥusayn:

I am going to the battlefield,
I will either free my dear land, or we will make a new Karbala.[194]

The possible results of 'going to the battlefield' are presented as two different options: 'free my dear land' or 'make a new Karbala'. Karbala is, of course, the place where Ḥusayn died in an unfair battle, fighting for the right cause. The writer clearly considers dying for the good cause a better option, compared to staying put in an unfree land.

The last instance in which the story of Ḥusayn at Karbalā is used, is called 'O Eid!':

Everywhere here is Karbala
Everyday for us Ashura.
It is your choice: either you want to see your graveyard,
Or you want to see a prison built around knowledge.[195]

These lines provide an intricate dilemma: either you die in battle for the good cause, like Ḥusayn did at Karbala on ʿAshūra, or you will find yourself within a 'prison built around knowledge'. It is a choice between two evils, although dying might not be a real evil, since it is like Karbalā on ʿAshūra: an honorary death for the good cause. Although this might be a small comfort, the poem sharply describes the harsh reality of battle: *everywhere* is Karbalā and *everyday* is ʿAshūra. The warrior is never and nowhere safe.

[193] *Idem.,* 133.
[194] *Idem.,* 143. This poem will be discussed more elaborately under the subheading 'Feminist Themes in *Ṭālibān poetry*'.
[195] *Idem.,* 181.

It is clear why the Shīʿite theme of Karbalā takes such a prominent rule in Ṭālibān poetry. It is the symbol of martyrdom, of fighting an unequal battle, and of dying for the good cause, which are all aspects of the daily lives of many Ṭālibān-fighters. So, despite their aversion to Shīʿism, the story of Ḥusayn bears a great resemblance to their own reality, and could even provide some comfort. Hence it is thankfully referred to.

Here, we see the mechanism at work that Bleiker mentions when he criticizes social sciences. We have seen that he considers some concepts and theories to be so often repeated that they have become part of the common sense. Whereas Bleiker pleas for the use of aesthetics to burst through these clichés, here we see the contrary: in this poetry, the story of Ḥusayn is used as a cliché to describe the glory of martyrdom, and to make the battle of the underdog one for a right cause. By doing so, the Ṭālibān use Shīʿite themes, which strictly spoken contradict their Sunnite-exclusivist ideology. This shows that they are not simply an ideology-driven machine, but rather humans in a cultural context who use certain clichés because of this context. In this sense, poetry breaks through the cliché image of the Ṭālibān by invoking the cliché of the story of Ḥusayn.

Qurʾānic Metaphors

Another important source of metaphors is the Qurʾān. Many Qurʾānic personages are used to describe the current situation. The Pharaoh is one of them, who, according to the Qurʾān, ordered to kill all Israelite boys, whereas the girls could live. In the end, he and all his people were drowned and destroyed.[196] His main adversary was Moses, who was God's messenger, but neglected as such by the Pharaoh and his people. Moses had to endure oppression and wait patiently, but eventually God saved him.[197] Next to Moses and the Pharaoh, Nimrod and Abraham form an important couple of Qurʾānic figures. Nimrod was an ancient king who built the tower of Babel, tried to kill God himself, and pretended to give life to creatures. He tried to burn Abraham in a furnace, but Abraham was miraculously saved by God. The stories end with Nimrod's death: God sent a gnat to permeate into his brain.[198] His adversary Abraham was

[196] Reuven Firestone, "Pharaoh," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, eds. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Claude Gilliot, William A. Graham, Wadad Kadi, Andrew Rippin, Monique Bernards, John Nawas, et al., accessed on 13 November 2019.
[197] Cornelia Schöck, "Moses," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, eds. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Claude Gilliot, William A. Graham, Wadad Kadi, Andrew Rippin, Monique Bernards, John Nawas, et al. Accessed on 13 November 2019.
[198] Heribert Busse, "Nimrod," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, eds. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Claude Gilliot, William A. Graham, Wadad Kadi, Andrew Rippin, Monique Bernards, John Nawas, et al. Accessed on 13 November 2019.

given a very prominent position, since he was called 'friend of God', destroyed the idols of his father, and built the Kaʿba in Mecca and is the most mentioned prophet in the Qurʾān, together with Moses.[199]

The poem 'Change', which was earlier discussed for its metaphor of spring, refers to the Pharaoh in its last line:

> The spring of change needs blood to rain down,
> It requires the irrigation of the gardens with blood. […]
> The Pharaohs want to fill the Nile with blood.[200]

This poem not just about change that requires human lives to happen, but it also shows the ones responsible for that: the Pharaohs who deliberately want to fill the Nile with blood. The Pharaoh is used in this poem as the prototype killer, which is also his role in the Qurʾānic stories.

In the poem 'Kabul is set on fire', the Pharaoh is used as synonym for a bad ruler:

> A hot bazaar of cruelty is being made out of beautiful Kabul,
> It is being set on fire, it has all turned to fire
> Because of the oppression of the Pharaohs
> Noises and cries are heard in the houses of the martyrs. […]
> O Kabul! We will clean you from thee black faces![201]

This same use can be found in the poem 'Daughter of the West' as well, where it has a place in between of many other metaphors:

> A calamity has emerged from the Western gloom;
> Blood is streaming in every direction; America has come out.
> Heads are lying in every place, body parts are coloured red with blood;
> the gunpowder strip is red; Europe has come out.
> A group of animals called NATO have come out;
> The Crusader world has come out for the murder of Jesus.

[199] Reuven Firesone, "Abraham," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, eds. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Claude Gilliot, William A. Graham, Wadad Kadi, Andrew Rippin, Monique Bernards, John Nawas, et al. Accessed on 13 November 2019.
[200] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 55.
[201] *Idem.*, 128.

They have ruined human villages; they are throwing bomb at them;
There [sic] are taking out the roots of Islam; cholera has come.
They are sitting at Pharaoh's throne with arrogance;
Woe is here from the house of the oppressed nation. […]
Talk with the language of flames; put steps on the fiery footprint;[202]

In this poem, the Pharaoh is called by its name: America, Europe, and the NATO. They are compared to a group of animals, to Crusaders, and to cholera, which I cannot discuss in depth in this paragraph. However, it is clear that these depictions are very negative. Their place 'at Pharaoh's throne' fits neatly into these descriptions, for the Pharaoh is the symbol of bad ruling.

However, not only the Pharaohs want to shed blood, as becomes clear in the poem entitled 'Blood Debt':

Today, I write history on my enemy's chest with my sword,
I draw yesterday's memoires on today's chest once more. […]
Moscow still owes us our blood […]
we will install the white banner on the Kremlin's chest. […]
The Pharaoh of the time sends arrows everywhere,
These arrows will finally strike Washington's chest.
If anyone looks with the evil eye towards my deserts
They will find fires on their gardens' chests.[203]

The writer clearly wants to revenge the Russians and the Americans for what they have done to Afghanistan. At first glance, the writer seems to identify himself with the Pharaoh of the time, since his arrows will finally strike Washington's chest. In that case, the writer is very angry, which makes him as ruthless as the Pharaoh, in order to attack the Americans. His vengefulness is continued in the succeeding lines, in which he threatens the gardens of the ones who 'look with the evil eye towards my deserts'. However, it is not common for a writer to identify himself with the Pharaoh, since that is a prototypical 'bad guy'. Therefore, 'the Pharaoh of the time' who 'sends arrows everywhere', can also be the Russians and the Americans, who ruthlessly destroyed Afghanistan. Eventually, this will turn against themselves, for 'these arrows will finally strike Washington's chest'.

[202] *Idem.,* 153-154.
[203] *Idem.,* 71.

The poem ‘He walks’ mentions the Russians and the Pharaoh as well:

> We have always prevented invaders,
> We stand against them; they repeatedly walk in hiding from us. […]
> Remember not to forget the Russians and Khalqis and Parchamis,[204]
> They were embarrassed and helplessly walk in hiding.
> We have become a Moses to all the Pharaohs of time:
> We throw them to the Nile river; they walk in hiding.[205]

The comparison of ‘we’ to Moses and of the enemies to the Pharaohs immediately makes clear who is right and who is wrong: in the Qurʾān, Moses is good and Pharaoh bad, so the ‘we’ of this poem are on the right side, opposing the Russians and the communists. The message of this poem is clear: just like Moses defeated Pharaoh, who drowned, ‘we’ will defeat our enemies as if we throw them in the Nile. ‘We’ have done that to the Russians in the past, and we will do it again.

The distinction between Moses and Pharaoh is present in a poem called ‘Ghazal’ as well:

> Sometimes they are shot by our people and sometimes by foreigners;
> they are shooting Kabul cruelly. […]
> They shoot Afghans themselves. […]
> This black snake is full of poison;
> He doesn’t leave Afghans alone, shooting them many times.
> Time will bring a Moses to stand next to the Pharaoh,
> He who shoots at a great country.[206]

Here again, Pharaoh is the perpetrator of evil, and Moses should bring an end to it. However, Moses is not there yet. Time will bring him eventually, but, just like Moses himself had to wait patiently until God saved him, now the Afghans have to wait patiently for a Moses.

In the poem ‘Good News’ we find references to Abraham, Nimrod, and the Pharaoh:

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[204] The Khalqis and the Parchamis were factions within the Afghan communist party, see Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 219, 222.
[205] *Idem.*, 151.
[206] *Idem.*, 154.

These are days of insolence and the White House's collapse;
these are days of the collapse of the infidels' coalition. […]
For the Abrahamic nation that today they burnt with fire,
These are the days when Nimrod's forces are burnt.
The Pharaoh of the time has come, is killing our children;
These are the days when the Satanic armies are drowned.
Bush arrived impudently and wouldn't listen to anyone;
His economy is ruined; these are the days of happiness.
He didn't learn from Gorbachev's defeat;
He is disgraced in the world; these are days of shame.[207]

Abraham, the defender of monotheism, is the eponym of the Abrahamic nation. His great adversary Nimrod, who had tried to burn him in the Qurʾānic story, will now be burnt himself. The Pharaoh, who tried to kill the children of the Israelites, is still killing our children. However, just as in the Qurʾān, he will be drowned. To make clear that he is an adversary of Islam, his armies are called Satanic This metaphorical language is explained and concretized: the first lines tell the reader that the poem is about the White House's collapse, and, further on, the poem mentions president Bush and announces that the American economy will be ruined. For anyone who cannot believe that this will truly happen to such a powerful country, Gorbachev is mentioned. He was the leader of the Soviet Union who had to retrieve his troops from Afghanistan in 1988 and 1989.

Abraham and Nimrod are also characters in a love poem, called 'Abraham's love':

The sky and earth were astonished by my beloved.
However much Nimrod tried to throw him to the fire,
But by the love of Abraham, the fires were astonished.[208]

This poem refers to the story in which Nimrod tries to burn Abraham, but fails, because God saves Abraham. In this poem, it is not God, but the love of Abraham which made the fires harmless, for they were astonished by that love. The story is changed in order to show that the love of the lover for the beloved is so strong that it could even make fire a safe place. In the

[207] *Idem.*, 171.
[208] *Idem.*, 102.

original, this was God's skill, but now the lover is capable to do it as well. The message behind it is that the lover loves the beloved so much that he feels like God himself.

The last poem of this section is the poem 'Ababeel', which was cited earlier, because it starts with a metaphor of autumn and spring. Over the course of the poem, the disappointment of the developments (autumn came instead of spring) is explained:

> Wars, tension, murders and killings came upon you.
> This world has become a hell for you; you are burning in it, […]
> Satan, the ambusher, came at you from afar. […]
> Satan's puppet came at you bearing an Afghan name.
> They brought the army again, they are not yet sated,
> the great convoy – the Nimrod of its time – came for you.[209]

Here, Nimrod is brought up because of his evilness and his arrogance: he thought he could be like God himself, building a high tower and torturing Abraham. Just like Nimrod, the army of Satan that has come now to Afghanistan, is not sated and brings 'wars, tension, murders and killings'. This army consists of foreigners and Afghans, since some 'came at you from afar' while others are 'bearing an Afghan name'. This poem raises a problem that earlier poems did not: there is no Abraham in this situation. We have seen mentions of Pharaoh and of Nimrod, but always with the hope of a new spring, the call for violent resistance, or the hope for an Abraham or a Moses to come. In this poem, nothing of that nature can be found. Time is as bad as in the days of Nimrod, or even worse, since there is no Abraham to save the day.

By using these Qurʾānic stories as a metaphor for their own situation, the Ṭālibān hit two birds with one stone. On the one hand, they present themselves as very religious, having a decent knowledge of the Qurʾān, and being able to draw parallels between it and their current situation. On the other hand, using these stories enables the Ṭālibān to depict their struggle against their enemies as a battle of good against evil. The Qurʾānic stories are black and white, with absolute good guys, recognized as such by God himself, and absolute bad guys, punished as such by God himself. By comparing this to their own situation, the Ṭālibān make very clear that they are on the right side of history and all the foreigners at the wrong side. The Ṭālibān will be rewarded, their enemies punished.

[209] *Idem.,* 180.

An interesting outsider in this section is the love poem in which the story of Abraham and Nimrod was used not for a political but for a personal message. This again shows the personal ordinary life of the Ṭālibān, just like the poems about the joy of springtime did. The people we normally see as radical terrorists, appear to be in love sometimes, as well. This poem clearly breaks through the common sense image most westerners have of the Ṭālibān, which is exactly why Bleiker considers forms of art so valuable in social sciences.

Personal Experience of Religion

There is another theme in the Ṭālibān poetry which is very personal, depicting the Ṭālibān in a very unusual way. This theme is personal religion of the poets. A number of poets are very confident about their faith and their fate, for example the writer of 'A Mujahed's Wish From His Mother':

> I am going into battle tomorrow'
> I am going for *Allah's* satisfaction, without delay;
> Battle has many rewards;
> Allah will grant me paradise[210]

These are the words of a man who fights for his God, and is convinced that he will be rewarded for that, without the slightest sign of doubt. However, some poets actually do doubt their faith. Some are not convinced of their own religiousness, for example in the poem 'My God':

> O God, I cry out loud for you,
> I beg your forgiveness of my mistakes. […]
> I am leaving with the carpet of a lifetime of my sins[211]

Also the poem 'Cry to Allah' describes a great doubt in the poet's own faith:

> O my Possessor, I am thinking about myself;
> I cannot withstand any of Your examinations. […]
> Arrogance brings me up to such a position. […]

[210] *Idem.,* 138, emphasis in the original.
[211] *Idem.,* 51.

I am very ashamed, so I can't ask You.[212]

These poems sharply contrast with the self-confident poet of 'A Mujahed's Wish From His Mother'.

Some poets go even further, by not questioning their own faith or goodness, but God's reliability. A good expression of this is the poem 'Prayer':

I can't compliment you with my tongue,
I can't write it with a pen.
I can't draw your picture,
I can't compliment you. […]
Whatever your purpose was,
I don't understand it. […]
why is there so much difference in this world?[213]

However, the writer ends with a prayer for change, so apparently he still expects goodness to come from God:

Build our land once again;
give us power and honour in our homeland.
Build Afghanistan once again;
we can't beg anymore.[214]

Another poem with the title 'Prayer' also questions God's goodness:

the world has become a hell for me.
Where should I go, where I should I buy a house? [sic]
How much should I bear, O my Lord?
How much more pain should I carry in my heart?[215]

[212] *Idem.,* 92.
[213] *Idem.,* 90.
[214] *Idem.*
[215] *Idem.,* 86.

together with God's fairness:

> what is this, God?
> Some are so wealthy.
> Some are even in need of shrouds,
> Some swim in rivers of wine,
> Some others' drinking water as their hearts' blood
> Some lamps can run on water,
> Others cannot be lit with oil and are put out.[216]

However, the writer realizes that he might be a little rude:

> My God! Don't be upset with me, I apologise. […]
> I don't mean myself, God;
> I don't count being selfish in humans.[217]

In the end, he keeps expecting positive change from God:

> This difference among humans,
> That one is on the earth and another in the sky,
> Take this away with your power[218]

However, he also considers it possible that his feeling of justice is simply different from God's, for he continues:

> Take this away with your power or take
> My conscience, my feelings. […]
> I pray with humility.[219]

[216] *Idem.,* 88.
[217] *Idem.,* 88-89.
[218] *Idem.,* 89.
[219] *Idem.*

This leaves open the possibility that God is completely fine with the situation on earth, which the writer considers to be bad and unfair. The writer is willing to accept that God's understanding of good and just contradicts his own, and keeps humble.

These poems are very revealing. The Ṭālibān, which is an explicitly religious movement trying to impose God's law, the sharīʿa, as the civil law on Afghanistan, dares to question its own deeds, and is even so bold as to doubt God's goodness and fairness. This is even more striking, since there are also poems of self-confident warriors who are certain to execute God's will in the right way. The view that the Ṭālibān fight the right and just jihād is present among the Ṭālibān, but is also doubted by some of them, and this doubt is even published on their website. This shows a particular vulnerable side of the movement's members which contradicts the image of them that is presented for example in the academic literature I discussed in the first chapter. Again, we see that Bleiker was right when he stated that art is able to show what cannot easily be shown by regular social science.

Feminist Themes within Ṭālibān Poetry

The name that most frequently appears throughout the corpus is Malalai, with no less than twenty mentions. She was an Afghan heroine who fought in the Second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880.[220] The significance of this war will be the subject of another paragraph; for now, we will look at the role that women play within the Ṭālibān poetry. Earlier, we have seen that the promotion of education for girls was a reason to start the jihād against the Russians. How does a female warrior fit into Ṭālibān-ideology? A couple of poems explicitly discuss this theme, and they will be discussed in more detail below.

Two poems make very clear that Malalai was not at all a feminist *avant la lettre*. In a poem called 'Standing Confused', the writer addresses the women of Afghanistan:

> O Afghan maiden! […] I am proud of your beauty. […]
> I pity your condition […]
> You changed your own clothes to a western style […]
> You put on makeup when you leave home.
> You go to the bazaar and have fun.
> Other issues don't come to mind
> Why do you do these things?
> You are the daughter of Malalai;

[220] *Idem.,* 220.

Why don't your eyes feel shame?[221]

In this poem Malalai is presented as an ideal example of an Afghan woman, who was not spoiled by western lifestyle. However, it criticizes the contemporary Afghan woman rather than present an alternative way of life for them. The poem 'Malalai's Wish' is more clear about how an Afghan woman should behave:

Women walk around naked, modesty isn't expected of them.
What complaint can my sister Malalai have?
She sat with her *hijab,* dancing isn't expected of her.[222]

This poem also criticizes contemporary women, who 'walk around naked' and who are dancing. But the alternative is also clear: wear a decent *hijab* and sit: be quiet, don't try to get involved in public life.

The poem 'He walks' also refers to this absence of women from public life. In a tirade against the traitors of his country, the poet writes:

Those who didn't care about the country and sat in their houses,
They act like women and are walking in hiding from us.[223]

Strictly speaking, this poem does not call upon women to sit in their houses, or to hide from public life, but it takes this for granted. The traitors can be compared to women because all readers know that women are supposed to sit in their houses and hide.

An exception to this Ṭālibān common sense about the role of women is the poem 'Give me your Turban', which is written by a woman. She criticizes the passivity of men, and argues for female-participation on the battlefield:

Give me your turban and take my veil,
Give me the sword so that the matter will be dealt with.
You stay at home; I am going to the battlefield,
I will either free my dear land, or we will make a new Karbala.

[221] *Idem.,* 115.
[222] *Idem.*
[223] *Idem.,* 151.

Don't just call yourselves men, how long will you lie there asleep?[224]

This is not just criticism of the men who are too passive in the poetess' eyes. She clearly states that she is willing to fight, and is ready to die, referring to the battle of Karbalā, which is discussed above. However, she also knows that this is the opposite of the regular situation. Men are supposed to wear turbans and fight, whereas women should wear veils and stay home. Therefore, for the writer to participate in the fighting, an exchange of clothes is necessary: 'give me your turban and take my veil'. So even this poem, despite the determination of its writer, reflects the traditional division of labor between men and women.

The most positive depiction of women is presented in the poem 'My homeland'. It describes the beauties of Afghanistan, and explicitly mentions the Afghan women:

> The land of the brave and of heroes,
> The land of Malalai and Nazo. […]
> We'll sacrifice ourselves to you,
> My homeland of the partridge-eyed and those with the green mark.[225]

Nazo was an important poetess and fighter in Afghan history, who lived from 1651 to 1717.[226] The green mark is a mark that many Afghan women have on their forehead.[227] So when this poet refers to the brave and the heroes, he only mentions two women, and when he explains why he would sacrifice himself for his land, he again mentions the women. The poet does not call upon women to take up arms themselves, as the previous poem did, but he explicitly mentions women as worth to die for.

Another interesting poem in this context is 'The Malalai of the Time', which calls for Malalai to return and save the country:

> O Malalai, princess of the country, […]
> Roll up your sleeves,
> Remember your beloved's memories.
> Raise your voice for the honour of the homeland;

[224] *Idem.,* 143.
[225] *Idem.,* 120-121.
[226] *Idem.,* 221.
[227] *Idem.,* 236.

Become Malalai once more and raise the flag.[228]

Despite the fact that this poem does not say anything about the position of men or women, nor whether or not women should participate in battle, it obviously calls for a specific woman to fight and save the country. The problem is that Malalai is dead, of course, so the country needs someone to save it just like Malalai did, leaving it an open question whether it should be a man or a woman. The figure of Malalai is however too much of a common symbol in Afghan society[229] to say anything related to gender based on this poem.

The overall picture of women is that they are supposed to sit inside their houses, wear a *hijab,* and are not to imitate a western lifestyle. Even though they are depicted as beautiful, and worth dying for, that particular act still has to be performed by men. Even the single one poem that calls for women taking up arms shows an awareness of the general consensus that men should fight, instead of women. Nevertheless, the fact that this poem is about a woman who wants to fight is an interesting exception within the corpus.

Poems on Afghan Traditions

In the corpus of Ṭālibān poetry, the Afghan society is presented as a very traditional one. For example, the turban is used as a metaphor for men as distinction from women. In the previous paragraph, we have looked at the poem 'Give me your Turban', in which a woman offers to fight instead of the passive men when she says:

Give me your turban and take my veil[230]

with which she proposes to reverse the roles of men and women. With 'Give me your turban and take my veil', she seems to convey the message of: 'let me do the man's job, you can do the woman's'. 'Turban' and 'veil' fulfill a role as metaphor for 'man' and 'woman' respectively. This is also the case in the poem 'The Burnt Veil'. When the writer wants to know if only women were victim of an attack or also men, he asks:

With veils on fire, weren't turbans too?[231]

[228] *Idem.,* 148.
[229] *Idem.,* 220.
[230] *Idem.,* 143.
[231] *Idem.,* 206.

This emphasizes that these poems were written in a context in which certain habits of clothing are present. The equation of turban and veil with man and woman is not political, it is merely a sign of the habits of Afghans. This reminds us of the fact that the Ṭālibān are not only Ṭālibān, but also Afghans. There is more to them than just their membership of the Ṭālibān.

Moreover, the turban is mentioned in different poems as an identity-marker of the Afghans as a people in general or of the mujāhidīn in particular:

> May you be honoured amongst your competitors,
> Land of turbans[232]

and

> Even if time brings the ugliest revolutions,
> I will keep the fold of my turban pious […]
> I will remain the rough Pashtun of the mountains[233]

and

> Thanks to the *mujahedeen.*
> O zealous father of the turban-wearers,
> Your turban will always be high[234]

The turban is useful as identity-marker, because the western forces, against whom the poets are writing, do not wear it, whereas the Afghan men do.

This is revealing for the presentation of both the Ṭālibān and their adversaries. In these three poems, the turban is connected to honour, piousness, and pride. Because the enemy does not were them, these virtues remain solely belonging to the Afghans. This makes the turban a means to recognize virtuous people. The connection of tradition and virtuousness is also very clear in the poem 'London Life'. It describes the British capital as a very modern and very immoral place:

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[232] *Idem.*, 121.
[233] *Idem.*, 161.
[234] *Idem.*, 68, emphasis in the original.

Its bazaars and shops are full of goods,
These kinds of goods don't have a value.
Life here is so much lost in individuals that,
Brother to brother and father to son, there is no affection. […]
there is no love.
Don't expect happiness from life or being alive
When somebody doesn't have warmth in his heart. […]
Their minds are fine, their bodies are fine and their technology is great, […]
This busy life, riding on the shoulders of technology,
Doesn't give them any joy these days either. […]
Their knowledge is so great that they drill for oil in the depths of the oceans,
But even this knowledge doesn't give them a good reputation.
I see their many faults and virtues with my own eyes; […]
my heart doesn't have the patience to bear this.[235]

This poem does not as much concern the virtues of tradition, but rather the immorality of modernity, focusing on the other side of the same coin. It describes the richness and luxury of London and the enormous technological achievements of its inhabitants, silently contrasting to the traditional Afghan society which lacks all of these. However, the poem also shows the heartlessness, lack of joy and lack of love of the Londoners, silently claiming that within the traditional Afghan society these are always present. Despite showing only the London side of the story, the contrasting Afghan side is implicated and presented as the better of the two. Modernity is bad, so tradition must be good.

The introduction the editors provide to the corpus however points at the inconsistency behind this line of thought: if the Pashtuns are in fact a very traditional people with hardly any connection to technology, how could they know that the British 'drill for oil in the depths of the oceans'? In fact, Pashtuns are mobile people, they were throughout history often in between of great empires and nowadays spread across the entire globe.[236] The opposition of tradition and modernity that is suggested in this poem should therefore be unmasked as false propaganda.

[235] *Idem.,* 193.
[236] *Idem.,* 17.

Nevertheless, the fact that this poem uses a concept (modernity) to describe an opposite theme (tradition) is an excellent example of Bleikers statement that aesthetics can help to look at a subject in a new and different way.

Poems on Ethnicity

The traditional and cultural references in the poetry become more complicated when ethnicity is mentioned. The Ṭālibān is an Afghan movement, with plans for the Afghan society, but it is also a Pashtun movement which is proud to be Pashtun. The tension between the two is tangible in some of the poems. An excellent example of this is the poem 'My Cottage', which contains the following sentences:

> O homeland of beauty, be well! […]
> You are the rug of the Pashtuns,
> You are the liver of every Afghan.[237]

or 'War Talk', calling

> O Afghans and fellow Pashtuns[238]

Other poems explicitly call for the necessity of being a Pashtun, like 'Ghazal':

> O Afghans! Be a little daring; […]
> Become a bit more Pashtun and dignified.[239]

The stubbornness and dedication in battle is framed as something Pashtun in 'Death is a Gift':

> My beliefs and my Pashtun pride teaches me this:
> Even if I am chopped into pieces I will not beg from others.[240]

Being a Pashtun is presented as something to proud of in a 'Ghazal':

[237] *Idem.,* 120.
[238] *Idem.,* 135.
[239] *Idem.,* 142.
[240] *Idem.,* 161.

Even if I am destined to live in far away cities
I will remain the rough Pashtun of the mountains.[241]

Not being able to speak Pashtun is considered a punishment:

For our faults this is why we Pashtuns speak Dari[242]

and an attribute of the enemy:

there were red, red wolves.
They didn't know Pashtu.[243]

Even when criticizing the passivity of the Afghans, only Pashtun-tribes are mentioned:

The ones who are awake are drunk and high;
The sons of Abdal, Ghilzai and Zee themselves talk.[244]

The poem 'Traveller Friend' describes a village that has been murdered, which was apparently completely Pashtun:

Those strict Pashtuns
Those hospitable
Those sweet Pashtuns
Those who safeguarded Pashtu […]
You would not ask me what happened to those angel-girls:
The Pashtun Girls,
Those dignified Pashtun girls[245]

[241] *Idem.*, 116.
[242] *Idem.*, 123.
[243] *Idem.*, 152.
[244] *Idem.*, 162. Abdal, Ghilzai and Zee are Pashtun tribes, see Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 240.
[245] *Idem.*, 201.

However, other poems concern Afghanistan in its entirety, such as the ode to Afghanistan called 'On the occasion of the 89th Anniversary of the British Occupation':

> O my homeland, I haven't forgotten, you are always on my mind. […]
> Afghans in the west and in the east are all one […]
> O Afghanistan, may I be sacrificed for you.[246]

Being an Afghan is something to be proud of in 'Warning':

> I am a rough Afghan […]
> I am a Muslim who has been granted Afghan zeal; […]
> The cruelties of Bush and Gordon Brown;
> I cannot tolerate this for Afghans[247]

and in 'Star':

> Afghan conscience! […]
> Your star is the highest in the world[248]

and especially in 'I am an Afghan Mujahed':

> Look, I am a known champion in history
> I am an Afghan *mujahed*, I am an Afghan *mujahed*[249]

Another tone is used in 'I live in Flames', which describes the misery of being an Afghan:

> I am an Afghan living in the valleys. […]
> I am the son of Afghans; […]
> What happened to Afghans? I live in thought.
> The enemy came and became our boss today,

[246] *Idem.*, 126-127.
[247] *Idem.*, 176.
[248] *Idem.*, 195.
[249] *Idem.*, 139, emphasis in the original.

My country was destroyed; I live in ruins.
My country cries aloud here[250]

and in ‘Self-made prison’:

When I remember Afghanistan, my God,
Poor Afghans are suffering everywhere[251]

An even stronger negative implication about being an Afghan is conveyed in the line

I was Afghan; that’s why I wasn’t the hero[252]

in a poem that has exactly this line as its title.

One could argue that these last poems avoid the question of ethnicity by simply mentioning ‘Afghans’ and ‘Afghanistan’. This cannot be said of the more explicit pan-Afghan are poems like ‘Prayer’:

Whether they are in the East or in the West, they are all Afghans;
O God! Unite them and bring brotherhood amongst them.
Whether Pashtun, Uzbek, Hazara or Tajik,
They are all one Afghan nation; may you end their enmity[253]

Here, the different ethnicities are mentioned, and Pashtun is just one group in a long line, which also contains Uzbek, Hazara, and Tajik. Another poem, with the revealing title ‘Afghanistan is the home of Afghans’, mentions slightly different ethnicities:

Tribes and clans are found here;
This is the home of the Hazaras and Turkmen.
Tajiks, Uzbeks, Pashtuns and Baluch.[254]

[250] *Idem.*, 178.
[251] *Idem.*, 185.
[252] *Idem.*, 179
[253] *Idem.*, 122.
[254] *Idem.*, 166.

All the poems that we have seen show the difficult ambiguity of the Ṭālibān as an organization with its basis in traditional Pashtun society, but with aspirations for Afghanistan in its entirety. They also clarify that, within the organization of the Ṭālibān, there are different views on the position of the Pashtuns viz-à-viz the other groups. The movement appears to be a heterogeneous group whose members sometimes disagree with one another.

Metaphors Inspired by Animals

Just as in Persian poetry in general,[255] many metaphors in the corpus of Ṭālibān poetry make use of animal imagery. In this section, I will discuss two poems which are completely dedicated to animals. The poem 'Lolling' describes how bad the situation is in Afghanistan, and how terrible it is that some Afghans collaborate with the foreigners. The absurdity of the situation is described by using metaphors concerning animals:

> Rabbits have confused themselves and are lolling with the camels;
> Eagles left their nests and are hanging out with the ravens.
> Look at these ewes and goats, […] They prowl with the wolves
> I saw the *mujahedeen* […]
> Instead of the Russians they are lolling with the Westerners now.[256]

Most of these animals do not seem to have a fixed metaphorical meaning in Persian Poetry.[257] However, it is not difficult to understand what is meant here. Every Afghan is naturally aware that rabbits and camels do not belong together, since they are completely different in size. A crow, a bird very close to a raven, is normally associated with darkness and winter, and even separation,[258] so it is highly unlikely that eagles would search their company. Ewes and goats are usual prey for wolves, so they would never prowl with them. By juxtaposing animals that have nothing to do with each other, this poem pushes the reader to the conclusion that the mujāhidīn have nothing to do with 'Westerners', just like they had nothing to do with the Russians during the war with the Soviets.

Another poem that strongly leans on comparison to animals is called 'Hunter':

[255] Zipoli, "Poetic Imagery," 179-187.
[256] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 166, emphasis in the original.
[257] Zipoli, "Poetic Imagery," 179-187.
[258] *Idem.*, 187.

O hunter! why did you hold the arrow in your bow? […]
Yes, I am that deer in this forest […]
I trusted you, your bravery […]
Your homeland is being controlled by the pigs.
They have brought a sick dog with them
To rule over your honour. […]
These jackals will be
Either killed or will flee.
So, hunter, go!
If you were a follower of the dog
Or a slave of the pigs
Then go and bow down. […]
Conditions will change
You will see on every path,
In every cave and ditch,
Those murdered pigs.
And those lions of the mountains
Will be walking in the cities.[259]

Here it is clear that dogs and pigs should not be obeyed, and, instead, the lions of the mountains should be in power. If a reader does not yet know which parties are compared to which animals, the poet explains that '[the hunter's] homeland is being controlled by the pigs. They have brought a sick dog with them to rule over your honour.'[260] The pigs and the dogs are obviously the western occupation forces, whereas the lions of the mountains are the Afghans themselves, or maybe the Ṭālibān.

The deer or gazelle is often mentioned in Persian poetry, because it is a solitary animal with an instinct to flee the lion.[261] However, this poem is not about tension between deer and lion, but between deer and hunter. This is not a surprise, since the gazelle is the stereotype prey in Persian poetry, especially in love poems, where it represents the beloved whom the lover wants to catch.[262] This poem is absolutely not a love poem, and the hunter is not a lover, nor is

[259] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban*, 174-176.
[260] *Idem.*, 175.
[261] Zipoli, "Poetic Imagery," 179.
[262] *Idem.*

the deer the beloved. The deer is Afghanistan or the Afghan people and the hunter is also an Afghan, since his 'homeland is being controlled by the pigs'. However, he decided to cooperate with the occupying forces and is about to kill his fellow countrymen: the hunter has his arrow already in his bow.

Pigs are impure animals in Islam, just like the dog.[263] However, the meaning of the dog is ambiguous. As Zipoli describes in his chapter about poetic imagery in Persian poetry, the dog is often filthy and ugly, quarrelsome, angry, and false.[264] However, it can also be a symbol of loyalty or of vigilance.[265] Furthermore, the dog is sometimes used as a synonym for a hunter, and it was also used as company for rulers.[266]

The poet also writes about jackals. This animal is one of the main characters in a famous fable in the *Khalīla wa Dimna,* a Persian collection of fables from about the sixth century AD.[267] In this fable, the jackal is an opportunist who sets up his king, the lion, against the lion's good friend, the bull, for reasons of jealousy.[268] The abovementioned poem might refer to the corrupting influence of jackal on the lion. The lion can be in Persian literature a metaphor for the king, like in the *Khalīla wa Dimna*, but also a metaphor for bravery and strength.[269]

Taken together, this poem seems to tell the following story. The rightful rulers, who are brave and strong like lions, will eventually defeat the occupational forces of the West, who are as impure, heathen, aggressive and corrupt as pigs, dogs and jackals. These forces are assisted by collaborating Afghans, who chase after their fellow countrymen as a hunter for a deer. However, for those collaborators, there is still hope when they can be convinced by the people they are hunting for. Given this explanation, the poem appeals to the Afghans who collaborate with the Western forces to stop their collaboration, for it kills the Afghans, favors the unbelievers, and will be the losing strategy in the end.

The self-presentation of the Ṭālibān has much similarity in both poems. In the first poem, they are the rabbits, eagles, ewes and goats who should not give up their natural behavior. In the second, they are the deers. All are not particularly strong animals, and they all have to do with bigger and stronger animals: camels, ravens, and wolves in the first poem, and dogs, pigs, jackals and a hunter in the second. The Ṭālibān are the innocent victims, dominated by the

[263] *Idem.,* 184.
[264] *Idem.*
[265] *Idem.,* 184-185.
[266] Mahmoud Omidsalar and Teresa P. Omidsalar, "Dog: i. In Literature and Folklore," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* VII/5, 461-470; available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/dog (accessed on 12 November 2019).
[267] Jany János, "The Origins of the Kalīlah wa Dimnah: Reconsideration in the Light of Sasanian Legal History," in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22, no. 3-4 (October 2012): 505.
[268] *Idem.,* 510-511.
[269] Zipoli, "Poetic Imagery," 185.

foreign forces and not capable to turn the tide on their own, although the second poem states that those conditions will change eventually. It can be seen as an excuse: since we are simply the smaller animals, we must tolerate those foreigners on our soil. Again, it is striking that the use of poetic imagery can explain a complicated political situation quite easily without using concepts and theories that belong to the academic common sense.

Identity of the Enemy

The Afghan history is another important provider of metaphors for the Ṭālibān poetry. Especially the Anglo-Afghan wars of 1839-1842 and 1878-1881 have occupied a place in the collective memory of the Afghans.[270] In both wars, the Afghans were defeated by British troops from India, but managed to turn the tides, defeat the British, and regain autonomy.[271] Important figures from those wars, such as William Macnaghten, the British commander during the first war;[272] dr. William Brydon, the only soldier of the British troops who survived the British withdrawal from Kabul to Jalalabad;[273] the Battle of Maiwand, where the Afghans defeated and annihilated a British army in 1880;[274] Ayyub Khan, who led the Afghan army at this battle;[275] and Malalai, a woman who participated in the Battle of Maiwand,[276] are mentioned in the poems. Malalai in particular became a mascot of all kinds of Afghan political movements, even of the Ṭālibān, [277] as we have already seen in the discussion of feminist themes within Ṭālibān poetry.

Because the Afghans managed to beat the great British Empire in its glory days, the Anglo-Afghan wars have become an important source for Afghan pride. The defeat of superpowers is a continuous theme in contemporary Afghan history, for, as we have seen, the Afghans beat the Soviets in the 1980s, and although the Ṭālibān-government was ousted by the United States in 2001, the Ṭālibān are still far from defeated two decades later.

Within the corpus of poetry, Malalai is mentioned no less than twenty times. The Battle of Maiwand appears in seven poems, Ayyub Khan in six. The British or the English are nine times called by their name, Macnaghten thrice and dr. Brydon twice. The poem ‘London Life’

[270] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban,* 19-20.
[271] For a detailed description of the Anglo-Afghan wars, see Barfield, *Afghanistan,* 110-163.
[272] Barfield, *Afghanistan,* 117.
[273] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban,* 216-217.
[274] Barfield, *Afghanistan,* 144.
[275] *Idem.*
[276] Rahmany et al., *Poetry of the Taliban,* 220.
[277] *Idem.*

as a whole is a condemnation of the British capital, blaming it for having enormous materiel luxury but being completely loveless.[278]

Those mentions of the British as enemy outnumber the Americans (fourteen times) and the Russians (ten times). The American prison in Guantanamo Bay is referred to three times as well. Another foreign invader of Afghan history, the thirteenth century Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan, is mentioned only three times and also the term 'crusaders' is mentioned three times in order to depict the western forces in a negative way.

It is clear that the Ṭālibān's most important enemies are the British. They fought two Anglo-Afghan wars with this former colonial power in the nineteenth century, defeated it both times, and now again they have to fight the British as part of the NATO-troops in Afghanistan. Faisal Devji discusses this in his preface to *Poetry of the Taliban*. He states that the British are presented as a stubborn enemy that is almost unbeatable. However, the Afghans have managed to defeat them, and therefore the Russians and the Americans do not have the slightest chance.[279] On top of that, the references to the Anglo-Afghan wars are also an important source of pride to the Afghans, since different poems explain that

> Afghans have always been independent throughout history[280]

and

> Metal and faith have clashed against each other here many times;
> The atheists have gained nothing but defeat[281]

and

> The unbelievers have always been defeated on your soil[282]

The sequence of victories over the British, combined with the defeat of the Russians a century later, makes the Afghans proud and self-confident.

[278] *Idem.*, 193.
[279] *Idem.*, 20.
[280] *Idem.*, 98.
[281] *Idem.*, 162.
[282] *Idem.*, 170.

Conclusion

Following the theory of Roland Bleiker that aesthetics can show certain aspects of reality that social sciences cannot, I have investigated a corpus of 235 poems written by Afghan Ṭālibān in an attempt to find out how they represent themselves and their enemies. I have studied poems on the role of poets, on seasons, religious holidays, Shīʿite themes, Qurʾānic stories, personal experience of religion and feminist themes, on tradition, ethnicity, animals and on the enemy. These themes were relevant for discovering the representation and were also significantly present within the corpus. Due to limited space, I could discuss only a very small part of the entire corpus. Still, based on the presented research, several conclusions can be drawn about both the self-representation of the Ṭālibān and their representation of the enemy.

The Ṭālibān present a very varied image of themselves, which is neither coherent nor unanimous. They claim that real jihād is executed by poetry, but also that a new violent Karbalā is necessary, and that the enemy deserves the same punishments as Nimrod and the Pharaoh. They are proud of their own religious piety, but are also disappointed in God, and doubt his good intentions. They consider Shīʿism as heresy, but use Shīʿite themes and stories to describe their own situation. They claim that women should stay at home, but also celebrate Malalai as heroine of the country. They claim that they are like weak animals in the presence of the enemy, but are also certain that the current occupiers will be defeated just like the English and the Russians in the past. They are proud of being a Pashtun, but also want a free Afghanistan for all its ethnic groups. In the meantime, they enjoy springtime and fall in love. Summarized, they speak with different voices, showing that they are not homogeneous as a group, and no pre-programmed robots as individuals, but real people of flesh and blood, with doubts, inconsistencies, and opposing views.

Their representation of the enemy is clearly more coherent, which is not very surprising, because of the negative connotation to the word 'enemy'. The enemy has taken away springtime and brought autumn. He should be battled, either by pen or by sword. He has changed the happy holiday of *ʿAyd* into a day of grief, and his presence is a reason to doubt God's goodness. He does not wear turbans, and does not speak Pashtun, so he does not belong in Afghanistan, yet he is still present in the country, and is difficult to chase away, just like stronger animals cannot be chased away by weaker ones. The situation is as bad as during the wars with the English in the 19th century, but the Afghans will prevail eventually, just as they did in the wars with the English, and in the war with the Soviets of the 1980s.

So where the Ṭālibān present themselves as a heterogeneous group with different opinions, convictions and principles, they see the enemy as the evildoer whose presence should not be tolerated. The images used to describe this have partly been derived from the poetic imagery of poetry within the wider context of Persian literature, but also from the specific context of the Ṭālibān, using aspects of Islam, Afghan history, and local culture. All those factors have influenced Ṭālibān poetry, and therefore the Ṭālibān themselves. This conclusion is all the more relevant since the Ṭālibān have published these poems on their official website. Apparently, they want the world to see this inconsistent and vulnerable side of the movement, which contradicts the usual images with which they are depicted in western media.

Bleiker claimed that art is able to reflect reality in a way that breaks through cliché-concepts and theories. The Ṭālibān clearly show this aspect of art and poetry, offering new insights into their ideology. They did so when they referred to the happy holiday of *ʿAyd* to make clear how terrible and sad their situation is, when they described modern life in London to show the virtues of tradition, and when they used the motives of the Shīʿite tradition, which they hate, to explain their own feelings and situations. They also did this when they celebrated spring, Nowrūz, and *ʿAyd*, when they expressed their religious doubts and struggles, when they used the story of Nimrod and Abraham to express love for someone, and when they called for jihād by writing poetry. All these poems present a truth about the Ṭālibān that is not present within the general western discourse on them. This is notwithstanding the poems that only confirm the common sense image prevalent in the west. There are several poems that call for the death of the foreigners, for women to sit quietly in their houses, and for God to receive the martyrs of Islam in paradise. We have seen cries for change that 'requires the irrigation of the gardens with blood' in a poem concerning spring, and we met the stereotype Ṭālibān-warrior who 'is on the way / RPG on his shoulder, O *Eid*'. Nevertheless, the use of these clichés does not restore the stereotypes that were dismantled by other poems. To the contrary, it contributes to their dismantling, since it shows a heterogeneity among the Ṭālibān-members that is completely contradicting the existing stereotype.

Moreover, even those poems on their own reveal an inside perspective that is not part of the western common sense. In the west, we see the Ṭālibān as the fundamentalistic, terroristic bad guys, but when the Ṭālibān present themselves as fundamentalists and terrorists, they never identify themselves as bad guys. When they call for a new Karbalā, they reveal that they really believe in the good cause they are fighting for. Especially the most radical and violent Ṭālibān-warriors are convinced that they are on the good side, with approval of God himself. Reading

those poems creates a sense of understanding the Ṭālibān-side of the story, which is not part of western common sense.

I would therefore argue that Bleiker's theory can be augmented. Art can break through certain constructs of common sense, but not only by showing a different perspective. Since art is a personal creation of the artist, it can even break through constructs of common sense by *confirming* these stereotypes *from within*. When an expert in International Relations, who is the main addressee of Bleiker's plea for the use of aesthetics, would write a poem on his main concepts and theories, the reader will identify himself with this scientist, and gain a better understanding of why he uses those concepts and theories. Furthermore, the reader will understand that this is merely a possible, but not necessarily an ultimate, representation of reality. The use of aesthetics creates understanding for the author, and also a critical distance from the subject and from the language used to describe it.

Summarized, the poetry of the Ṭālibān teaches us that the Ṭālibān use a rich imagery, highly influenced by their own specific context. They are a very varied group of people with many different opinions, principles, and beliefs, and therefore become real people who are close to us, instead of far-away monsters. Even their extreme points of view become more understandable and personal when they are made explicit in a poem. This makes the corpus of translated poems that I investigated a very valuable document, let alone the entire corpus of Ṭālibān poetry in the Pashto language on their website.

Even the corpus of 235 poems I investigated is, of course, far richer than the limited excerpts I have presented in this research. Further research could identify more forms of representation of both the Ṭālibān and their enemies. I will also highly recommend to research this poetry in Pashto, since both the form, metre, and rhyme can tell a story which I was not able to grasp, since my research was limited to translations only.

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