For me, autumn is the season of sorrow because of the memory attached to it. When I was a child, my mother used to tell me stories of Sarawza—our village—a place I have never visited. My siblings and I were born and raised in Kabul. My mother would recall that autumn was considered the sad season because, come autumn, the men would go away to India to make a living, leaving the village empty, dry and gloomy. Only the women, children and some old men would remain behind. For days, people would sit together and talk about their young men in places far away. Women would recite poems in remembrance of their men migrating in search of work. These poems are called Landay. Here is one such poem, recited by a lady:

زرخه نئيپيدد اتمه...مو تشروصد نئشيادمن د امز
ان هايرووش ههيشه

Za Ma De Gul Pa Shan Surat Wo…
Sta De Bilton Pa Khazan Mrawe Sho Mayana

I had a beautiful face but your [husband]
separation made it dry like the season of autumn.

Landay is a folk poetic form, specially favoured by the women of my village to express their feelings of happiness and grief. Sarawza is the capital of Paktika province in south-eastern Afghanistan. The village is located on the lower slopes of a mountain and is so named because of its red-coloured soil—‘sara’ is red in Pashtu. Nearly 4,000 families, mostly of the Kharotee community, live in the village.
They share a rugged, mountainous border with Waziristan. The infertility of the soil forces people to earn their livelihood through trade and labour in neighbouring countries.²

Governments, both past and present, have paid little attention to the economic and social needs of society. People are mostly illiterate, primarily because of the lack of security and the near absence of economic and educational opportunities. Once, there were separate primary schools for boys and girls in the village. The boys’ school still exists and has even been upgraded to the secondary level—it is in a worrying state, though. The girls’ school has been burned down by the Taliban. Currently, there are no formal schools for girls in the village, but people have established home-based schools where girls may be educated up to the fifth grade.³

Pashto landay, or anonymous Pashto couplets, also called Mesri and Tapi in different places, are a distinctive feature of Pashtun folk tradition, unique to Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan. Illiterate Pashtun men and women express their feelings, passions and hopes through landay, which are recited and sung in mountains, valleys and deserts. Each landay carries distinctive feelings of love and longing, sorrow and joy in which, usually, men are addressed by women. This is so because female emotions are considered to be more tender and insightful; also, her voice is sweeter and most suited for rendering landay (Grima, 1985).

Pashto landay are named differently, depending on the social circumstances of the particular society in which recited. Landay, quite literally, short, usually comprises only two lines. No one knows the identity of the couplet’s composer. Some scholars believe that landay also signifies a type of snake whose poison is lethal; landay’s sharpness is in its acute effect on human emotions. When sung, landay sounds so sweet that it is thought to relieve pain and give comfort. Hence it has been named tapi, or therapeutic (Hakimi, 2010).

For centuries, people have articulated the golden moments of their lives in the form of landay. Thus, each landay is considered as precious as gold, and a worthwhile investment to collect as many as possible. Its precise history is unknown. Some date them as far back as 7,000 years. The following landay was recited by a lover of Khalo, an army commander in Mohammad Ghazani’s time (Layq, 1364).
While both men and women recite landay, it is women, most often, who invoke and recite it. In tribal society, women stay at home and hardly travel. Thus, landay is addressed usually to men wandering all over the world in search of livelihoods. Also, men fought wars and many died fighting. Women recited landay to their dead lovers, sons, brothers or fathers. Interestingly, in Pashtun communities, women also took part in wars as carriers, bringing food to the men on the battlefront, tending to their wounds and protecting their children at home.4

Landay is recited by village women waiting for their husbands to return from India. Generally, villages had very little to offer by way of jobs and livelihoods, and men had little choice but to go to neighbouring countries in search of opportunities. These trips could at times stretch to 10 years or more, during which the men would visit their family only once. That little detail is a reminder of the harsh reality of long separations in which both sides would suffer. But it is the women who produced more landay than men.5

Interestingly, women also recite or sing landay at weddings to celebrate the coming of a new bride. Landay are composed to celebrate certain special moments in a wedding. When the bride cooks for the first time in her new house, the occasion is celebrated with an appropriate landay. Each landay is rendered differently from home to home; women singing it would invoke the names of their family members.6
There is a vibrant tradition of landay competitions which would take place between groups of women from two villages, a frequent happening at weddings. Both sides would address landay to each other until one side’s repertoire ran out. Since women in villages are mostly uneducated and have seldom ventured beyond their villages alone, their landay compositions are in pure Pashto. Landay recited by men often carry a mixture of Dari and Arabic words. Also, women’s landay are full of emotions and marked by a mood that conveys their experience of life in a male-dominated society in which women are generally suppressed. In landay, women raise their voice against cruel cultural practices forced on them by society. Consider, for example, the following landay on the custom which forces a young girl to marry a small boy to settle a family feud:

My destiny is to be with a child, I am to bring him up until I get old myself.

One could speak of it as a kind of peaceful resistance against male-dominated social and cultural practices, similar in terms of its broader objectives to women’s movements in Europe and America. However, such resistance is invariably ignored, not only in general histories, but also in feminist historiography. There are hundreds of landay in which a woman, although uneducated and marginalised, shows her generosity, intelligence and courage.
Women of the village learn landay from their mothers, aunts and friends. The process continues through generations. Typically, landay would be recited by the young to express intense emotional feelings, particularly when they fall in love for the first time, or for other moments in life, such as war, love, pain and separation. For example, in the village, girls go to the godar (water stream) to fetch water where they also meet boys from the village. Going to the godar every day is thus seen as a joyful practice, both for boys and girls, and is the place where they meet and fall in love. In one landay, a woman says to her lover:

Ka Khola May Akhli Zhare Akhla……
Mangai May Wali Shorawe Landa De Krama

If you want to kiss me do it quickly,  
but why do you shake my ‘mangai’ [water pot]  
and make me wet with the water.

The landay has two special characteristics that distinguish it from other genres of poetry. First, it is very short, usually comprising only two lines. Second, a landay’s first line must have nine syllables, and the second, 13. A poem that does not conform to this specification cannot be called a landay. Another key feature is that each composition inscribes an event that occurred at a specific time and place. Thus, each landay lends itself to a careful analysis that reveals a particular story, situation, place and time, and each such story carries within it a philosophical message. For instance, consider the following landay:

Yaar Mai Pa Makh Sapera Rakra……
Za Pa Dakan Ki Bi Wroraka Wo Ledama

My fiancé gave me a slap on my face when he saw me in Dakan  
[a place in India] without my brother.
It reveals the following about the circumstances in which the landay is likely to have been composed: first, it appears to have been composed in India, as Dakan is situated in India; second, its composer would have been a Kandahari woman, because wroraka (brother) is a term used by Kandaharis; third, it shows certain acute cultural anxieties which forbid women to travel alone. The injunction is that women should always be under the supervision of a close male blood relative.10

Landay are still recited in tribal areas but they have changed with social and political situations of the time. Some examples of certain specific situations follow.11

Pa Tor Rosi Mashin May Wala……
Pa Spena Khola Ma Ra Kawa Rat Jawabona

This landay was rendered during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. Translated, it reads: ‘Shoot me with a black Russian gun but do not give me rude words from your mouth.’

De Kabul Jan Mani Jragezi……
Ya Kho Qiamat Sho Ya Najeeb La Takht Na Zena

This landay was rendered in the shadow of President Najeebullah’s assassination: ‘Kabul’s palace is shaking, either the day of judgment is arriving or Najeebullah is leaving the presidency.’

Yaar May B Bond Tayara Da……
Zra May Kabul Da Wro Pa Wro Ye Ranga Wena
This was recited on 7 October 2001 when the Americans bombed Kabul: ‘My lover is like a B Bond airplane, my heart is in Kabul that is being destroyed slowly.’

Godar De Peghlo ParlimanDa……..
Botali Nashta Pa Mango Weshta Kawena

This landay is a satirical take on the Afghan Parliament, a medium for expressing non-violent political dissent: ‘Godar [water stream] is the parliament of ladies, they do not have bottles but hit each other with mangai [a container for water carried from rivers].’

The rich folk culture which sustained landay compositions is steadily receding, especially with the younger generation increasingly migrating to urban spaces in search of jobs and education. However, this process has also operated in the reverse direction. Some among the younger generations have begun to deploy their familiarity with the written word and the power of social media—Facebook, in particular—to preserve and transmit what is essentially an oral tradition. Thus, the future of landay appears to hold some promise. While its content may change drastically, owing to cataclysmic changes in Afghan society induced by war and massive human displacement, it is a tradition that one ardently hopes will continue and flourish.

NOTES
1. This paper is based on a research study undertaken in 2010 at the American University of Afghanistan, Kabul.
2. Interview with Shah Sarawzawal Daud on ‘Ethnography of my Village’ by the author on 1 December 2010.
3. Ibid.
4. Interview with Habibullah Seranmal on ‘Pashto Research’ by the author on 20 November 2010 in Kabul, Academy of Science, Afghanistan.

5. Interview with Sher Ahmad Fizar on ‘Pashto Research’ by the author on 20 November 2010 in Kabul, Academy of Science, Afghanistan.

6. Interview with Abdul Rashid Waziri by the author on 2 November 2010.

7. Interview with Sher Ahmad Fizar on ‘Pashto Research’ by the author on 20 November 2010 in Kabul, Academy of Science, Afghanistan.

8. Interview with Anonymous by the author on 15 November 2010.

9. Interview with Abdul Rashid Waziri by the author on 2 November 2010.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

REFERENCES


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