

## BOOK REVIEW

by Jhoanna Cruz

title: *My Forbidden Face, Growing Up Under the Taliban: A Young Woman's Story*

author: Latifa, translated by Linda Coverdale

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210 pages

This autobiographical narrative, written under a pseudonym by a 21-year-old woman now living in exile in Paris with her parents, is proof that women's spirits thrive despite theocratic efforts to destroy them. The Taliban entered Kabul, the hometown of Latifa, in September 1996, when she was only 16 and dreaming of taking up journalism in college. In the five years of the oppressive Taliban regime, Latifa and many other young girls could have finished college, but their hopes were dashed systematically by the Taliban. *Mullahs* from the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice issued decree after decree banning women from working, from studying, from going out of their houses without a male chaperone, and from showing their faces in public. The *burka*, or head-to-toe veil with only a meshwork peephole to see through, has become the symbol of the Afghani woman's subjugation and invisibility.

Latifa writes that she hopes this book might "serve as the key to other women, whose words are locked away... and those who (still) live in darkness." She has indeed been able to shed light on the plight of Afghani women, not just under the Taliban, but in the past two decades of relentless war. Reading this account makes one marvel at the reserves of strength these women had to survive their daily lives. What is even more astounding is how many of them have managed to find the courage to stand up to the Taliban by setting up clandestine clinics and schools for children. Under the Taliban sky, one would have to be heroic even just to listen to music or wear lipstick.

Latifa succeeds in driving home the well-worn feminist adage "the personal is political" as she describes her and her family's efforts to assert their autonomy despite the terrorism. As her father adamantly states, "My beard belongs to the Taliban, but I don't!" From setting their canary free, to refusing to go out so as not to wear the *chadri*, to helping her doctor-mother with her secret patients, to organising an underground school with her friends, and finally to making the journey out of Afghanistan and writing this memoir under threat of a *fatwa*, Latifa's efforts are a testament to what one girl can do to change the world.

"In many rural areas, especially in the more conservative tribal belt, the situation of women has not changed to any great extent since the removal of the Taliban," UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan admits. Reuters reports that even in downtown Kabul, which is protected by troops from the International Security Assistance Force, women continue to be harassed into wearing the *burka* by a group calling itself 'Afghanistan's mojahedin.' *My Forbidden Face* should be read by all women who share the same dream of freedom especially because at present, Afghanistan remains mired in post-war turmoil.

At the onset of the Taliban regime, as Latifa and her family pack their former lives in boxes for storage, she finds a cartoon she had clipped that depicted two scientists studying some Talibs under a microscope. She realises how apt the metaphor is to describe the power of the Taliban: "a nasty germ, a dangerously virulent microbe that propagates by spreading a serious disease insidiously fatal to the freedom of women." At such a young age, Latifa begins to see how dangerous religious fundamentalism can be. "The Taliban need only declare themselves through force the absolute masters of Sharia, the precepts of the Koran, which they distort as they please without any respect for the holy book"

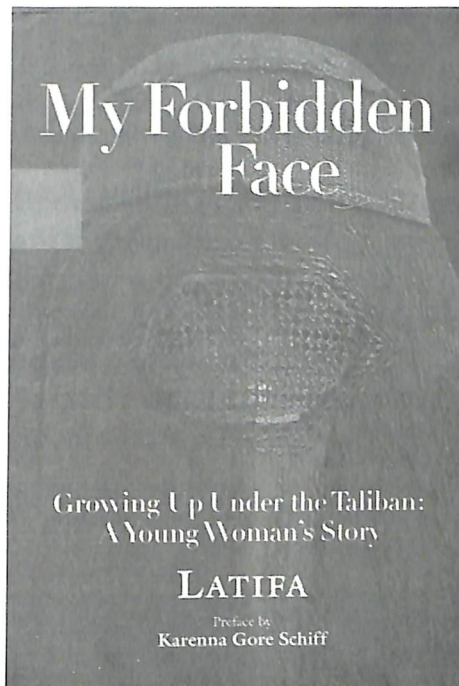
The connection between fundamentalism and the oppression of women does not require microscopic examination. It is clear as day and one can see it even through a *chadri*. Latifa, who has been raised by a "deeply religious" family, accepts the tenets of Islam and considers herself free despite the subordinate position of Muslim women. Accord-

ing to the Koran, "Men are the managers of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another" (Sura al-Nisa 4:34). Many Muslims accept this to mean that women need to be protected by men. Yet the Taliban appropriated this basic tenet in order to not just restrain women, but to punish them for refusing to accept Taliban control. There is nothing ambiguous about what Taliban fundamentalists wanted to do to Afghani women—obliterate them by the systematic withdrawal of their human rights in the name of religion.

One need not look far either, to see how even in a predominantly Christian country like the Philippines, fundamentalism has been used to denounce women's autonomy over their own bodies, particularly in the matter of reproductive health. Even though we do not have to contend with genital mutilation, young Filipinas still need to defend their reproductive rights, as well as their freedom not to be judged or chastised publicly for their private choices. An excellent novel that explores the consequences of fundamentalism in the Judeo-Christian tradition is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Despite the writer's courage, *My Forbidden Face* suffers because of erratic plotting, and the reader is hard pressed to come up with a clear chronology of events unless he or she previously read up on the history of Afghanistan. For those who follow the news coverage of the Taliban occupation, the book doesn't offer much that hasn't been more eloquently featured in *Time* or *Newsweek* (with pictures, too).

The blurb of the book describes Latifa as a contemporary Anne Frank, but upon reading the book, the astute reader may find the comparison an injustice to Anne Frank. For starters, Latifa herself admits that she is luckier than most Afghani girls because her family is well-off, so she never had to starve, or stop schooling before the Taliban came. Her own prison was much larger than Anne Frank's cabinet; thus inspiring a work that observes, rather than analyzes the situation deeply. *My Forbidden Face* is decidedly less introspective than the Diary, and peppered with didactic conclusions. Take for instance, "Opening this cage is a vital symbolic gesture," after setting their canary free. Or, "I've changed. I've grown up," after having witnessed numerous Taliban atrocities. These lines make the reader put the book down, exasperated with the obvious.



Furthermore, despite Latifa's protestations against Taliban doctrines, it seems that her Islamic upbringing has instilled in her a low regard for the real rights and power of women. She characterises her mother as someone too weak, too depressed to care, that "every night she swallows her sleeping pills to take refuge in a dreamless sleep." This, despite her mother's real accomplishments as a gynecologist. Feminists might also cringe at the irony of these lines: "Of course I understand that a woman cannot live in our culture without the protection of a man...because she has no existence on her own in society. I don't refuse this protection—on the contrary—but I want my independence and my freedom of thought."

Yet despite these weaknesses, Latifa's youth and naivete lends a certain poignancy to her narrative. The restrained tone she uses in describing scenes of gruesome violence is admirable. Her keen observations about the insidious nature of Taliban education of boys are highlights of the book. Also insightful are her accounts of the intersections of American pop culture and Afghan life, even under the Taliban. The book may be best suited for teenage readers who need a readable background on Afghan history, or teenagers who need to be convinced that school is a worthwhile activity.

Latifa ends her book with a prayer for peace in Afghanistan and a wish to return to her country a free woman. But today, as Afghanistan struggles to rebuild itself, the warning of Hamdun Dagher in the book *The Position of Women in Islam* resounds: "There is no expected harmony between the texts and judgments of the Sharia that deal with women, and reality in the Islamic countries." Yet the indomitable spirit of this young woman resonates even more loudly: "In spite of everything we went on living...and Shakila got married on a day when three hundred rockets fell on Kabul."

*My Forbidden Face* is a clarion call for all of us to pay attention to the plight of our sisters in war-ravaged countries, as well as our own. ♪

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