



A Bed of Red Flowers: In Search of My Afghanistan

Nelofer Pazira

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As a young girl growing up in 1970s Afghanistan, Nelofer Pazira seems destined for a bright future. The daughter of liberal-minded professionals, she enjoys a safe, loving and privileged life. Some of her early memories include convivial family picnics and New Years' celebrations overlooking the thousands of red flowers that carpet the hills of Mazar. But Nelofer's world is shattered when she is just five and her father is imprisoned for refusing to support the communist party. This episode plants a "seed of anger" in her, which is given plenty of opportunity to grow as the years unfold.

In 1979, the Soviets invade Afghanistan beginning a ten-year occupation. The country becomes an armed camp with Russians fighting U.S.-backed mujahidin fighters while trying to impose military rule. For Nelofer, daily life includes an endless succession of tanks, rockets screaming overhead and explosions in the street. During this time, she and her best friend, Dyana, seek refuge in their love of poetry. At eleven, the two girls throw stones at Soviet tanks and plot other acts of rebellion at the local school. As Nelofer gets older, she joins the resistance movement, distributes contraband books, studies guerilla warfare and hides a gun in her parent's mint garden.

When Nelofer's younger brother comes home from school in military garb, the family finally decides to flee Afghanistan. What follows is a perilous, clandestine journey across rugged mountains into Pakistan. But the life of a refugee is not what Nelofer expects. Though she once idealized the mujahidin as freedom fighters, she is shocked, as a woman, to find herself stripped of her personal freedom in their midst.

In 1990, Nelofer and her family are offered refugee status in Canada. Here she corresponds with her friend Dyana, whose letters reveal the increasing oppression of life under the Taliban. Fearing that her friend will kill herself, Pazira returns to Afghanistan to rescue her. This search becomes the basis for the acclaimed film *Kandahar*. Her journey to discover Dyana's tragedy leads her finally to Russia, the land of her enemy, where she confronts the legacy of the Soviet invasion of her homeland first-hand.

A Bed of Red Flowers is a gripping, heart-rending story about a country caught in a struggle of the superpowers – and of the real people behind the politics. Universally acclaimed for its astute insights and extraordinary humanity, Pazira's memoir won the Drainie-Taylor Biography Prize for 2005. *The Winnipeg Free Press* writes: "Powerfully written, **A Bed of Red Flowers** is a rare account of a misunderstood country and its intrepid people, trying to live ordinary lives under extraordinary circumstances." *The Gazette* (Montreal) describes the book as "an outpouring of passionate non-fiction that captivates like the tales of Sheherazade.... It's a remarkable journey. An inspiring read."

A Bed of Red Flowers: In Search of My Afghanistan Details

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Author : Nelofer Pazira

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Amanda says

Important story of revolution, refugees, and American forces in the Middle East. The writing was dry and dense, so it took me awhile to get through this.

Wajma says

In the beginning of the book, we see 1950's Kabul through the lens of the Shitte minority group, who practices secretly under a ban imposed by the Sunni majority ruler. As the story progresses, we learn more about the student rights groups on the college campus fighting for democracy under a state-owned political system that often does not represent the ideals it purports it does, either under the crown or the newly established system. We also see Kabul through the Communist dictatorship, and the ensuing civil war that make life unbearable for all. A well-crafted book, at times it reads much like a Kafka novel or Plato's Dialogues. Nullifier Pazira has a knack for leaving you on a cliff hanger, much like a political thriller does; it does not follow a chronological format, but rather a thematic. A scene may open in the 1970's during Soviet rule, then go back to Kabul in the 1950's. We see the turn of events through a myriad of perspectives: as a four year old, nine year old, teenager, and young adult.

Paper Clippers says

Recommended by Mrs. Capone!

As a young girl growing up in 1970s Afghanistan, Nelofer Pazira seems destined for a bright future. The daughter of liberal-minded professionals, she enjoys a safe, loving and privileged life. Some of her early memories include convivial family picnics and New Years' celebrations overlooking the thousands of red flowers that carpet the hills of Mazar. But Nelofer's world is shattered when she is just five and her father is imprisoned for refusing to support the communist party. This episode plants a "seed of anger" in her, which is given plenty of opportunity to grow as the years unfold.

-summary provided by goodreads.com

Sarah says

This book would have been more depressing if the narrator wasn't such a strong, lucky, Afghan female. From the beginning (the cover explains she is now a journalist in Canada), we know that whatever brutal ordeal she describes, she survives. Her survival is a needed consolation. The book brims with descriptions of the kind of human behavior that draws to question the goodness of humanity. The absolute destruction of Afghanistan that is the context for her story makes the safe passage of her and her family a precious reward. Her strength of spirit glows after the book is over, as if to say not all has been lost.

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Czarny Pies says

A Bed of Red Flowers is a book about growing up in a Westernized, progressive household in Afghanistan and slowly becoming an alien in one's own country. The author's family were Dari speaking and had communist leanings. The author's father was a Doctor who recognized that bringing modern civilization to the Pashtuns in the country side would be a tremendous challenge requiring several generations of work. The book deals with many of the same themes that are presented in the brilliant Persepolis cartoon series only with a deeper analysis.

The flight of the author and her family from her homeland and the subsequent tragedies that befell many of her friends who stayed behind make this book extremely moving. Her nasty comments on Jihadists who are totally unfamiliar with the Koran and her criticisms of Westerns who expect quick fixes for long-term problems are extremely cogent.

Read this book then download Kandahar the excellent movie that the author starred in.

Jody says

This book is one of my favorite books of all time. Before I read this book, I couldn't even relate to Afghan people. I thought they were backward and uneducated. This book is written by a young woman my age and her experiences with her native country before coming to Canada. This book made me realize that Afghan women are not unlike me and that Afghanistan is a modern country that was afflicted by extremism and forever changed. Every Canadian should read this book.

Paul says

A Bed of Red Flowers provides a good account of Afghanistan's history in the late 20th century to early 2000s, mainly following the first-person account of Nelofer's life during those times. The beginning of the book gives a good breakdown of the different tribal/ cultural groups that existed in the rural/ urban areas of Afghanistan, allowing the reader to better understand all the actors involved within the country's history, and the story's plot.

As I was looking for a book that would help me better understand how Afghanistan transitioned into a relatively modern state towards a war-torn one today, I found this read to do exactly that. If anyone is looking for a less historical read regarding this country, I would recommend reading the Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini, or any other of his subsequent books.

Overall though, I found this book both informative and moving, and worth reading.

R.K. says

A Bed of Red Flowers is the true experience of a young woman who grew up in Afghanistan and her experiences during the Russian invasion and subsequent fleeing the Taliban fighting that occurred after. Ms. Pazira writes in an engaging and easy to follow manner. The telling of the escape kept me at the edge of my seat and I couldn't stop reading until that part was over.

Her experience turns full circle when she visits Russia in her adult years to discuss with leaders and the families of soldiers their experiences with the invasion of Afghanistan. I thought that was very touching and added an even greater perspective to her story.

This is a wonderful book and I highly recommend it to anyone who knows nothing of Afghanistan. I also appreciate that she includes photos of her family before the Taliban fighting that shows men and women sitting together wearing modern (at the time) clothing and the women are not wearing burqas and were educated along with men. It clearly shows the oppressive influence of the Taliban and that keeping women locked up in their houses and in burqas is not something that the women appreciate nor desire.

Eva Stachniak says

I have just finished reading "A Bed of Red Flowers." The book moved me and gave me a lot to think about. I think of the utter mess the history of Afghanistan is and has been for some time, of the dangerous relationship between tradition/religion and modernity. I think of the women of Afghanistan who are so vulnerable, especially if they are refusing to obey traditional values.

Nelofer Pazira gave me a wonderful overview of her country, made me see the people there in their complexity. A touching memoir from a fascinating woman.

Omar says

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Lily says

A beautifully poetic memoir and definitely one of the best memoirs about Afghanistan. There are countless memoirs about Afghanistan, written by both Afghans and non-Afghans, all of which proclaim to tell profound and insightful stories about this complex and conflict-ridden country. In my opinion, few of them actually do. Nelofer Pazira's memoir tells an ordinary Afghan story - her experiences are nothing special in a country where everyone has a story to tell. What marks her apart is the way she manages to convey the nuanced poetry of the Dari language in English. She comes across as brave, modest, and intelligent. A beautifully written, heartbreakingly memoir.

Linda says

Some of the narrative is choppy as description of a political or local incident is separately experienced by family, neighbors and acquaintances. Hard-hitting but concisely-written details about the personalities making up a war-torn country that wants to be hospitable through cultural tradition and soon is hostile to foreign [Soviet] incursions. Reference to ethnic maintenance through Russian occupation is appreciated as if in review but probably more discussion on historical developments would better serve to whole book. I'm about halfway through the reading and feel a certain reluctance to continue per the atrocities and sadnesses, but am invested in its completion. 08/07/2013 Really torturous reading with ending chapters describing more atrocities devastating a country and its ethnic traditions and economic competitiveness with the West. Almost makes the reader hate politics and bigotry all the more. Haven't been so relieved to finish the book even though it was pointedly written.

Gaile says

This is a very troubling book to read as Nelofer grows up in a country which becomes a focus for men

seeking power. From the time Russia decided to invade Afghanistan to today, this country went from a developing country into a downward spiral which left her devastated, broken with little hope of recovery. First Korea, then Vietnam and while we were thinking there would finally be peace, the communists in power in the USSR picked Afghanistan to pick on next. The author has little hope that her country will recover soon.

I never really knew the history of this country until reading this book.

Maria says

Having grown up in Pakistan surrounded by Afghan refugee camps and Afghan refugees both inside and outside the camps, I have been fascinated by the bloody history of the Afghan war both pre-mujahideen and during the soviet era. The book does a great job of giving a glimpse of what Afghanistan, or well Kabul, of 1980s was like.

It is ironic that the author states 'Iran has done what Pakistan has done with regard to Afghanistan for decades - look after its own interests'. Since the 1970s Pakistan has bore the burden of millions of Afghan refugees, given Afghanistan has long been the war-zone even before Pakistan became a country as the author's book itself notes. Pakistan still has the biggest refugee crisis in the world thanks to Afghanistan. The Afghan refugees, both legal AND illegal have traveled and established themselves in the heart of the country, bringing narcotics, kidnappings for ransom, selling off women in marriage for a bride price and insane religiosity with them to my country. They have been a terrible economic burden on this country. UNLIKE Iran that has established camps and enforced Afghan refugees to stay on its borders vs roam inside the country. If only Pakistan was looking after its own interests for decades, wouldn't that be peachy. It would have fortified its border with Afghanistan and sealed it right in the 70s. Its 1600 miles of unmanned border than Afghans cross without an issue, both civilians AND terrorists even to this date (welcome to Pakistan is all that was needed as author crossed over). Yet, it is our own interests we have been looking after, not sure the word 'interests' is correctly interpreted here.

Its also somewhat disturbing to find paranoia of the sort where Taliban are Pakistani. If you smuggled the entire Pakistani Pushtun population to Afghanistan it won't cover the numbers. The Afghan Taliban, sadly a product of war and anti-soviet interests of many countries in the region including USA and Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, like the mujahideen, are all afghans. Aided and funded by outside to 'revolt' against the soviets, once the Afghan heroes, now not so much.

On the other hand, it is fascinating that the story of my own country i.e Pakistan, one where I lived and grew up in the same years as when the author was a refugee (early 90s), be this different for an Afghan refugee girl and a Pakistani girl. I never knew that in Afghan refugee camps in both Peshawar and Islamabad (and possibly elsewhere), as an Afghan you were supposed to cover your head and not go out without a male. This is especially surprising for a woman who roamed the streets of these cities with her mother, cousins, aunts wearing whatever they pleased (no head scarves), the same as all other Pakistani women. I mean how could they? It was a country where the prime minister was a woman and her head, while covered with a white dupatta, definitely didn't cover her hair. Neither were the women on national television in hijab.

I actually remember Pakistanis complaining in the early 90s that Islamabad, perhaps the most westernized of Pakistani towns where you could go to markets to see women dressed in latest fashions and shopping, was turning into something quite conservative due to the presence of burqa clad or hijab wearing afghan women in every market. At one point, the number of Afghans seemed to surpass the locals. Ironically, as a kid, I have visited an Afghan refugee camp near my city of birth (near Dera Ismail Khan on the border of

KP/Punjab provinces) many times for BBQ. While I remember seeing somewhat scary looking gun toting men around, I do not recall them ever bothering us or asking any Pakistani woman in the establishment to cover hair.

I am still trying to get over how different a place might look to 2 people, both looking at it from different angles.

Bridget says

The first three quarters of this book are absolutely fantastic. Well-written, insightful, terrifying, and sad, the story grabs you by the heart and won't let go.

Then she starts to moralize. [All following quotes are paraphrased.]

"The West views Afghans as either evil or victimized." That's a fair enough criticism. Or it would be if she didn't describe the oppression of women and minority's religious groups. I mean, if you're a victim of human rights violations, you're a victim, right? And if you're in a society like the Afghan society under the Taliban, you are pretty much aggressor or victim.

"The Soviets were horrible, evil oppressors who at times BURIED PEOPLE ALIVE IN MASS GRAVES. Also, the Americans were evil to support the mujahidin against the Soviets." Um, excuse me? What choice did we have, short of fighting another Vietnam, this time in Afghanistan? And if the mujahidin were going to win anyway, why does it matter that we supported them? And if they weren't going to win, would the Afghans rather have remained under Soviet rule?

"Those damn Americans had better get the hell out of our country. Why are they there, anyway? It's not like we did anything. And why don't they do a better job of rebuilding it?" 1. Society abhors a power vacuum. Just look what happened with ISIS in Iraq. 2. Osama bin Laden. 3. The Soviets tried to forcibly restructure society. America tries not to interfere too much. Could we have piped in more aid? Maybe. But we at least freed them from the Taliban. Free people can be capable of extraordinary development.

To be honest, I didn't quite finish it. Pazira's lack of understanding in how the world works, shown so clearly ten years after its publishing, is too frustrating. I have better things to do with my time, like write snarky reviews. But I still recommend it based on the first three quarters.

Chrissie says

NO SPOILERS – but I do relate some historical events!

Through page 70: I am reading another memoir; this time it is about the author and her Afghan family. Fascinating! It starts by describing her father's life. To understand why he simply cannot leave Afghanistan when all logical thinking says they must, it is necessary to understand his past. Most books start with the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. The reader is given a completely different perspective on Afghan life if you start years earlier. This is a wealthy, well educated, privileged Afghan family. The mother is a

teacher of Dari; the father is a doctor.

Sunnis are more numerous than Shias and thus have a stronger role in the government. The author's family is Shia. The father's political allegiance is to social democracy. The current year is 1978, one year before the Soviet occupation. Here follows a quote about the two servants employed in the household.

Both Aushur and Hussein-dod are in their late twenties and single. Hussein-dod cannot read or write. His parents didn't send him to school, he says, because there was no school in the village where he grew up. Aushur has beautiful handwriting. "Like pearls on paper" is how my parents describe it. He studied up to grade eight, he says, but after failing to pass the entry-to-high-school exam, he couldn't continue. All students are required to pass a national exam before they can graduate to grade nine. Those who fail become dropouts without the chance of return. "It is totally stupid," my father says in fury. "It is part of President Daoud Khan's new plan for a country that needs more schools, not more entry exams." (page 65)

By reading this book you come to understand the lives of at least one real Afghan family. You are taught about religious and political conflicts, about yearly celebrations, about the physical beauty of Afghanistan and much, much more. This is how I like to learn history:

By the time tea is served, everyone is congratulating each other, cheering the end of Daoud Khan's reign. In 1973, Daoud Khan staged a coup against his cousin Zahir Shah. He ended decades of monarchy and became the first Afghan president. At the time, Daoud Khan was supported by the leftist parties. But after consolidating his power, Daoud declared the republic a one-party state – with no prospect of elections or introduction of a party law. His Marxist allies felt betrayed; they concluded that Daoud had been seduced by Arab and Iranian gold and was distancing himself from the Soviet Union. In April 1977, during a state visit to Moscow, Brezhnev warned Daoud Khan about the increasing number of "Western spies" in Afghanistan. Daoud bluntly replied that Afghanistan would remain free, and that Russia would never be allowed to dictate how the country would be governed. (page 70)

The date is April 27, 1978, just one month after the family's visit to MazarE-Sherif for the celebration of the Afghan New Year at the Shrine of Ali, the first acknowledged caliph of the Shias.. Here the family had looked across the border separating Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. So the new Democratic Republic of Afghanistan has been established. It has stronger communist alliances. What I do know of Afghanistan's history is that the Soviet Union will not trust the competence of the new communist leadership anyhow!

I do wish my atlas had more detailed information on Afghanistan. Maps in ebooks seem to be terrible, so it doesn't matter that I have found no map in this book.

Through page 103: December 1979 the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. During 1978 three presidents were eliminated, none of which were elected by the Afghan people. Then the Soviet invasion finally came..... But how did the Afghans react? Did you know what they did in Kabul:

It is past midnight and everyone is asleep. There is a call in the distance – but it is hard to distinguish the words. Like the dim bluish light that seeps from the corner of the curtain, the sound, too, filters through my window. It is moving, growing closer, and I can now make sense of the words. "Allahu Akbar!" God is great. I walk to the balcony. My father is already there, taking in the experience. "Allahu Akbar!" Now we can hear it clearly. We climb to the roof, where we discover that the entire neighbourhood is awake and that several families, standing on their roofs, are already chanting, "Allahu Akbar." We join in. "Allahu Akbar" – all around us is the echo of one clear voice.

We use the cover of darkness to pour our hearts out with these two words, and with it our vexation. What is most potent? Is it the collectivity of the call, enabling the echo of one's own voice to reach so far? Or is it the sense of relief it provides, the feeling that we are doing something to show our discontent?.....

Three nights of Allahu Akbar is our meek response to the nights of planes moving over the Kabul sky, the aircraft that brought the Soviet army here at the end of December. This is our welcome, Afghan style, to the Soviet invasion.(page 103)

This is why it is good to continue reading and reading over and over again about a given historical event. You always pick up another detail that brings the event to life. I imagine that protests will soon be more violent. Back to the book.

Through page 173: What can I say? This is the best book I have read about Afghan history during the 1900s, better than The Dressmaker of Khair Khana: Five Sisters, One Remarkable Family, and the Woman Who Risked Everything to Keep Them Safe and A Thousand Splendid Suns. You learn history in an intimate fashion. You learn about the differences between and similarities shared by the Sunnis and Shias. You learn about Afghan life during the decade of Soviet occupation. You learn about why the author was drawn to the underground mujahidin resistance groups. I have learned much, much more than that outlined in the books above. And the history is delivered on a personal, intimate level:

Despite the difficulties of handling visitors, hiding a fugitive, caring for a sick man and trying to find a detainee, the rest of us have to show up at school and work. If we were to miss a few days, our absence would be reported to the authorities. We have to pretend that everything is normal. Just as the war is normal. The pretence of normality is so pervasive that turmoil, physical and mental agony and family rows pass as something quite routine , just as cheating, lying, betrayal, bribery and deception have become normal.(page 173)

In conclusion: The events as they unroll keep you glued to the book. Learning is effortless, and there are so many small details that no fiction novel imparts. How food is prepared in rural villages and in the homes of wealthy Kabulis is described. More than just a clinical description you are confronted with the efforts taken to remain polite and accepting of different routines and manners.

The dilemma for us, of course, is how can we eat? All the dishes in our homes were cleaned several times before they were brought to the table. The utensils were sterilized in a pot of boiling water. Fruit and vegetables were soaked in a potassium mix and rinsed with fresh clean water. Mother Fatema was famous among our relatives for cleanliness and care. She never entered the kitchen without washing her hands, as is the routine in most city homes. But my father always demanded that extra attention be paid to hygiene, nutrition and health. And now, just a day away, here we are – so-called modern, urbanized people – driven out of our clean, tidy houses into a world of which we know nothing. With our city attitudes, we think we are above even the kindest and most generous of people simply because we use knives and forks, eat on separate plates and sit around a dining-room table. In reality, we are lost between the two worlds.....

Our behaviour is embarrassing, but there is nothing else we can do; we are terrified of falling sick. (page 219-220)

I like learning about the potassium mix, but I also like that the author values the kindness and generosity

shown to them. I like her humility!

And these are my observations:

1. Occupation of another country will **never** work, even if the occupier tries to bring freedom.
- 2; Understanding the mujahidin is no simple matter. This book shows you different perspectives. It shows you the authors own difficulty in grappling with the question of where her affiliation lies.
3. Do not turn away from this book, thinking that it is too politically oriented.
4. Afghanistan's recent history has produced very strong women. If you are interested in feminism, read this book. You should know of Malalai and Naseema and many,many others - and of course the author herself!

Really, I actually am pushing you to read this book. This goes against all my principles!

P.S. The author, Nelofer Pazira, is also a journalist and was involved with the filming of the movie *Kandahar* (director Hassan Tanti). The details of this filming are discussed in the latter part of the book.

P.P.S. There are many photos interspersed throughout the book.

Heather says

This book really gave me a good understanding of what the innocent citizens of Afghanistan had to suffer through and are still suffering through. I was torn at what to rate this book. If the rating system on here allowed half star I would have given this book 3.5 stars. At times I felt the writing was disconnected and jumped so rapidly from one event to another. I also felt at times that the author was rambling. Other times I felt like I was reading a historical text book. Despite these things though I really enjoyed learning about Nelofer's life and could really empathize with her, her family and her friends. The memoir sections of the book were very well written and I could feel Nelofer's emotions. It was heartwrenching to read at times and really made me think about all the freedom we have in the U.S. The struggles that the Afghan people have to go through is something that American's would never even imagine.

Benjamin says

I won't lie: I don't like the tendency to write about Afghanistan as if it was once a liberal or modern society. Some elite 2% of the population lived something similar to a Western lifestyle in Kabul, but I suspect this book to be a deeply biased and unrepresentative emigré account of Afghanistan's modern history. My only other complaint is that the journalistic quality of the writing breaks down toward the end of the book, especially in the Russian chapter, where it turns into a more subjective narrative. Having voiced these complaints, I think that the book was on the whole very informative and intriguing. I learned a lot and I feel that I understand the history and society there better now.

Christine B. says

Holy crap, this book was amazing. Heart wrenching and sad, but beautifully written and compelling. I

suspect that I'm going to assign this book in a lot of future classes.
