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# **Reconciliation in Afghanistan: Role of Art and Cinema**

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**Abstract**

*The Conflict in Afghanistan has spanned for more than four decades and we are expecting an end to it through the reconciliation process initiated after 2003. The Afghan Government and U.S, as well as the regional actors, have made efforts to politically resolve the issue by holding talks with the stakeholders and in the Hague conference, a framework was drafted for the achievement of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation of Afghanistan. The study intends to understand the role of Art and Cinema in the process of reconciliation by beginning the initiative through voicing the crimes and injustices that were committed during the war, further the paper addresses some of the vital questions in peacemaking: 'How' is it happening, 'What' is being or been done, 'When' is it going to be fruitful, 'Where' is it happening and 'Who' are being involved. But the effect of the reconciliation can only be understood if there's lasting positive peace in Afghanistan.*

**Keywords:** *Afghanistan, Reconciliation, Politics, Art, Culture, Cinema, Conflict, Peace.*

**1.0 Introduction**

Every conflict has specific causes and unique history, it is important to note that every country's experience in using art in their reconciliation process is different, anywhere from how their history of conflict influences their engagement to the state of cultural policies in the countries. Afghanistan being in the crossroads of civilizations has been a victim of global conspiracies for centuries. From the Soviet invasion (1979 to 1989) and the subsequent covert U.S. campaign to disintegrate it through the supply of ammunitions and influencing its society, all this has deeply affected the social, political and economic sphere of Afghanistan.

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, resulting in hasty U.S. departure with the completion of its goal, it triggered factional fighting and gave rise to a civil war-like situation in the country. This paved way for the extremist Taliban government that could attain neither domestic public acceptance nor the recognition in the international community. The country was further destabilized by the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. Despite the military invasion, the U.S. found itself unable to subdue the opposition groups in Afghanistan because the Taliban grew stronger and more effective, emerging as a challenge for both the Afghan administration and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

The United States failed to curb militants since it gained support among the locals as it became the culprit for the massacre ergo, it finally decided to negotiate with the Taliban for either an honourable exit or peaceful co-existence. The idea of this political engagement of the Taliban began a few years ago and U.S. representatives commenced negotiations with the Taliban at their newly established contact point in Doha, Qatar, at the beginning of 2012. Subsequently, Afghan President Hamid Karzai invited the Taliban for direct talks. The war-torn people of Afghanistan need stability and durable peace, thus indigenous Afghan-led peace process, with all stakeholders in Afghanistan on board, and with the support of regional actors as well as the United States, would be extremely essential. (Khan Summer,2012) But how to initiate reconciliation and are the stakeholders ready for Peacemaking is the question, how the reconciliation process is being executed socio-politically is our concern and what is its future.

## **2.0 Reconciliation process**

“Rebuilding of society in the aftermath of violence requires careful context-specific interventions.” Societies that have been ravaged by conflict require a range of mechanism needs to be established with the goal of:

- rebuilding society,
- re-establishing the rule of law,
- ensuring justice for victims,
- Laying the groundwork for long-term and sustainable peace.

The above-mentioned initiatives require the participation of all members of society and should take place at all levels of society along with recognition of the hurt and damage done. Reconciliation processes are just one of the ways that societies can begin to come to terms with the past, it is commonly understood as the rebuilding of relationships in societies previously divided by conflict.

The meaning of reconciliation varies across contexts and is open to interpretation by different stakeholders; it is generally a forward-looking process of social rebuilding. For reconciliation to be realized, stakeholders at multiple levels need to address injustices, acknowledge the wrongs of the past, tackle inequalities and other root causes of the conflict, rewrite new narratives that acknowledge the truths of the past, recognize the suffering of others, make available spaces for forgiveness and healing. Stakeholders may need to address similar issues as post-conflict societies, as they attempt to rebuild relations between clashing groups and address underlying sources of latent conflict. According to Johan Galtung, structural violence and cultural violence, together with direct violence, are barriers to realizing an ideal peace where conflict can be handled in a non-violent, empathetic and creative way. (Galtung & Jacobsen, 2002, pp. 1–3). Art, cultural activities and Cinema have as much potential to build peace and facilitate processes of reconciliation as they do to fuel cultures of violence and conflict. However, if strategically harnessed with the goal of rebuilding a just and peaceful society, art and culture can indeed contribute to lasting peace and reconciliation.

Afghanistan held its first democratic presidential elections in 2004 and till date, it struggles to come to terms with its past as democracy continues to be threatened by extremist forces, the Taliban insurgency and weak governance structures that breed corruption as well as intervention by its neighbours. This protracted conflict has shaped its culture by violence and divisions. Ordinary people lack the skills to resolve the conflict by nonviolent means and struggle to overcome the fundamentalist values instilled during the Taliban regime. Class, ethnicity and gender divisions are a few of the challenges that continue to segregate the society. Addressing this, the once destroyed by the Taliban, Afghan Cinema after 2001 came into being with the stories of the past helping the society in a way to tell its story of injustices, acknowledging the wrongs of the past, making art films and documentaries that speak of tackling inequalities and other root causes of the conflict; rewriting new narratives that acknowledge the truths of the past, recognize the suffering of others, make available spaces for forgiveness and healing for the ethnically divided society. The Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM) addresses some of the challenges by using music and music education to “build a just civil society”.

Through music, the school brings together people of different ethnicities that wouldn't usually interact with each other. "When a family goes to a concert venue, they can share the beauty of music, accepting that music does not discriminate across gender, class and ethnicity." –

Dr Ahmad N. Sarmast, Founder and Director of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music.

It recognized that the greatest needs of survivors of gross human rights violations is to tell their story for the public to bear witness to the atrocity and acknowledge the suffering. The Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO) utilized Playback Theatre where actors spontaneously enact stories that are shared by audience members in this way documenting human rights violations and publicly sharing survivors' stories. Some of the audience displayed visible signs of re-traumatization and were referred to counsellors and the documentation process culminated with the collection of over a thousand stories and personal objectives, creatively told through memory boxes. Through the medium of art, survivors-irrespective of language, religious and ethnic differences eventually found their common ground as victims working together for justice. (Naidu-Silverman, 2015, pp. 1–3)

The Bond Street Theatre is another group that informs and engages communities in Afghanistan about their legal rights, the Provincial Youth Leader Mobilization for Peace and Justice project is being implemented by eight teams of youth from across the country. They are involved in spreading information about justice practices through interactive mobile theatre performances, radio plays, workshops, and other direct awareness-raising strategies, and are engaging local police, justice officials, religious leaders, students and the community at large in the project. These initiatives are not free from criticism as it cannot be overlooked that it is funded by the United States and NGOs that according to a section of society are those who are responsible for the aftermath and for the Taliban, they are influencers promoting western cultures.

Whereas Afghan Cinema has had independent Directors telling stories and in the process helping with the reconciliation of the Afghan Society along with telling its own story of destruction in *Wounds of War* (2002). This film, showing the destruction of entertainment mediums during the Civil War and *Kabul Cinema*, (*KABUL CINEMA*, 2020, 03:15-05:21) is a short film that tells the story of a man, who has been working as a projectionist in Afghanistan's largest cinema for the past 40 years and a child who saves the cinema's reels from being burnt by the Taliban. In the end, in its iconic scene, it shows the reels in his projecting cart, that was his home, playing the cinema backwards, signifying the backwardness Afghan society fell into from the advanced and developed society it was; everything went upside-down.

Mirwais Rekab after returning from Pakistan where he was a refugee during the Taliban era, both directed and produced it with ideas from Siddik Barmak, a Golden Globe-winning Director who re-launched the destroyed industry and made movies like *Osama* in 2003 that spoke of the atrocities and injustices as well as the realities of Afghanistan; The grandmother of the lead actress, Marina [4], says a famous quote in the Afghan tradition as a dialogue, "*What? men and women are exactly the same, my hair has grown white but I saw that there is no difference between men and women. Both work the same and both are the same unfortunate. A shaved man, under the burka looks like a woman and every woman with short hair, who wears a pair of trousers, looks like a man.*" Making a statement against the gender inequalities and injustices on women, the script highlights the lived trauma through a true story and by casting a Victim: Marina Golbahari, an orphan of the War whose story was later covered through a Documentary by NKT (Nihonkai Telecasting Co., Ltd.) TV Japan and telecasted in Afghanistan. (*Osama 2003 Afghan Movie (English Sub)*, 2014, 03:15-05:21)

“I cannot forget, but I can forgive.” - Mandel ( Osama, 2003). Osama and Marina deliver a message of truth being spoken and forgiven initiating reconciliation through cinema. Siddiq Barmak is also the director of the Afghan Children Education Movement (ACEM), an association that promotes literacy, culture and the arts, founded by Iranian film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf. The school trains actors and Directors for the emerging cinema of Afghanistan that has made controversial movies like Neighbours (*NEIGHBOR AFGHAN MOVIE-2009* #actor#film#movie#cinema#Afghanistan#neighbor#art#Neighbor#2009,2018,03:15-05:21) (2009) by Ahmad Mueid Zubair Farghand. The movie depicts the brutalities on Afghan prisoners in an Iranian camp, Safaid Sang (White Stone) near the Iranian-Afghan border. It is based on true-life accounts from Afghan prisoners, accounting for human rights violations and documenting them. Makhmalbaf brought Afghanistan into highlight through his UNESCO acclaimed movie ‘Kandahar’, that spoke of the land during the Taliban regime and the atrocities that it committed. ‘Kabuli Kid’ and the ‘Opium War’ (*Opium War*) Afghan Movie, 2018, 03:15-05:21) both released in 2008, they speak of the realities faced by Afghans through fiction and the experience of Foreigners who used to think of them differently. ‘Wajma’ (*Afghan Movie Wajma*, 2017, 03:15-05:21), a Love story made by Barmak Akram, shows the fate of a woman in the Afghan society and the trauma they face due to the structural violence existing in society. The question of ‘How to begin reconciliation?’ has been initiated by the Art, Culture and Cinema by beginning to talk about the injustices and atrocities in the society and documentaries have also spoken of the Cultural, Structural and Direct violence that was carried out and still exists in the society. But with the display of the wounds and crimes, are the stakeholders ready to be held accountable? and what kind of reconciliation process is being initiated for peacemaking?, all these questions are yet to be studied.

In Afghanistan, people willing to be a nation again and nation-building are often advocated as security, governance, development but, the fourth leg, that is culture, has its fabrics that have been destroyed due to generations of violence and deprivation. The recreation of Afghanistan is an act of will of the people to find commonalities between them and sit together for building the nation by overcoming the differences.

Arts as a medium of exploration in a country that was denied the arts is very influential as the people now experience the joy of recognizing that art exists through cinema, films, theatre and through institutions like, Afghan Institute of Music, that takes orphans of the conflict from the street, teaching them music that helps in finding cultural leaders. This also helps them to find themselves and fight the trauma. Cultural understanding needs to be brought to the negotiating table to build trust and arts must also be an integral part of education. The symbolism of destruction of Art and heritage as well as Cinema by Taliban was the first act of War and Reconciliation began symbolically from it with the reconstruction of arenas and schools of Art in Post-War Afghanistan. “The act of nation-building is a cultural act.” (*Conflict Transformation through Culture: Peace-Building and the Arts*, 2014)

### **3.0 The Stakeholders and Politics**

The Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANDPF) is our plan to achieve self-reliance and increase the welfare of our people. We will build a productive and broad-based economy that creates jobs. We will establish the rule of law and put an end to corruption, criminality, and violence. Justice and the rule of law require that we step up the fight against corruption, reform our courts, and make sure that ordinary citizens can exert their constitutional rights with confidence. We will change the structure of our economy from one of import and distribution to one where a thriving private-sector, from small farmers and urban businesses to large manufacturers, can successfully export Afghan products to regional and global markets. We will make strategic investments in infrastructure, human capital, quality service delivery, and technology; backed by a robust and well-regulated financial sector that can channel money to where it can best be spent. Growth will be inclusive and balanced. As the economy grows, Afghanistan will be able to expand investments in the health and education of our people. Achieving these goals requires a collective effort to overcome fragmentation, increase accountability, and introduce proper policies for sustainable growth. (*AFGHANISTAN NATIONAL PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK (ANPDF) 2017 to 2021*, 2017–2021).

This is the vision of ANDPF that underlines its plan of action for 2017-2021 for Peacebuilding

which includes rebuilding and reconciliation, enabling women to participate in the economy and in society to a greater extent, making it a priority for Afghanistan's successful development. This grand vision needs reconciliation of the society for the reconstruction as the Taliban continues to influence the Northern Frontiers, it becomes increasingly important to accommodate them and understand the will of the people by not forgetting the history but forgiving them and bringing the rest to account for the crimes. The Government of Afghanistan took the first important step towards facing this task when it established, in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) in June 2002 mandating to, "undertake national consultations and propose a national strategy for transitional justice and for addressing the abuses of the past." Transitional justice strategy aimed to realize peace and national reconciliation, to restore coexistence and cooperation, to heal the wounds and pains of the victims and to reintegrate the citizens into a peaceful life in the society. All this was implemented through both Judicial and Non-Judicial actors having National and International actors involved. Reparations for the healing of the physical and psychological suffering and re-integration in the community of citizens, whose social relationships have been damaged, are all attempts that go beyond concepts such as court, prison and revenge and run counter to them that they have been implementing.

Efforts to promote the culture of forgiveness, affection, brotherhood and sisterhood and to strengthen the solidarity between the countries today and tomorrow, generations constitute the principal foundation of the present Action Plan. Taking into account realities of the country that relies on religious values and the need to maintain stability and security, they made attempts to incorporate all these facets within four key areas (symbolic measures, institutional reform, truth-seeking, and documentation and reconciliation). These are mutually reinforcing elements where the importance of "reconciliation" is recognized because durable peace requires social reintegration and reconciliation in this country. Re-integration of all hostile groups in the society may lead to the reduction of tensions, warmongering and bloodshed in the country. This did not mean to excuse genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and other gross violations of human rights. (*A CALL FOR JUSTICE*, 2004)

They intended to take action against these crimes but recognized criminal justice will not satisfy all the needs and expectations of victims and cannot help restore the culture of forgiveness, reconciliation and co-existence on its own. Thus, the government undertook four fields of activity along with help from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan UNAMA:

- 1) Acknowledgement of the suffering of the Afghan people;
- 2) Ensuring credible and accountable state institutions and purging human rights violators and criminals from the state institutions;
- 3) truth-seeking and documentation;
- 4) Promotion of reconciliation and improvement of national unity.

Even with all these documented efforts, there have been issues in the reconciliation process. Reconciliation efforts for insurgents have also been largely premised on a militarized/security agenda, developing separately from transitional justice initiatives emerging from a human rights perspective. For instance, as we can see, the wide-reaching but largely overlooked- Peace, Reconciliation and Justice Action Plan launched in December 2006 actually has reconciliation as its fourth pillar. (Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2005) It is stated that, “as a first step, the transitional justice strategy aims to realize peace and national reconciliation, to restore coexistence and cooperation, to heal the wounds and pain of the victims and to reintegrate citizens into a peaceful life in society.” On the contrary, currently, even as it is widely agreed that impunity and a lack of justice contribute to the insurgency, the only standard for deal-making with insurgents appears to be potential “co-optibility” as those members who as (former) warlords and commanders feared for their own fate. Complete impunity was explicitly stated in the 2007 Amnesty Resolution (2017a) by the Afghan parliament, stating that ongoing amnesty to be given to “those individuals and groups who are still in armed opposition with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and who will end their opposition after this charter is in effect, join the national reconciliation process and respect and observe the Constitution and other laws of the country.” Some analysts criticized this move as “the worst of all worlds would be to not only employ violent and predatory commanders to wage the war on terror but also to welcome back, without conditions, the most violent Talibani commanders in order to ‘win the peace’.(2017a)

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

What type of peace is being negotiated for and how far is the reconciliation percolating the society remains debatable and can be answered by what happens in future. Currently, through this study we understand that the process has begun through Governmental, International and Local actors as almost all are exhausted by the decades of War. In 2009, the people have highlighted the broader issue that the insurgency is being treated as the disease rather than as a symptom of a wider malaise, as the focus is too much on reacting to the violence where it manifests itself rather than tackling the underlying conditions; fighting an insurgency, military efforts must focus on protecting the population and not the insurgents. (Nathan, 2009, pp. 1–3) The same logic of concentrating outreach and empowerment efforts on local communities rather than violent actors were yet to be applied to political approaches but have been put to focus now, as these issues have led to the initiation of talks with the Taliban leaders. The talks have been conducted for years now and are not free from violations by the Taliban, the regional actors and neighbouring countries have also played a key role in the political reconciliation process. America has given peace a chance for many reasons such as, military pullout which suits the Taliban cause of Americans out of Afghanistan. These talks have been held in Islamabad, UAE, Moscow and Qatar as the world watches keenly, it would mark an end to a deadly era or the stalemate will remain. (Hindu, 2019) The issue that remains is that the years of social and political reconciliation will remain a mess if the US pulls out suddenly without a deal or if the current government is kept out of the talks. The US, Taliban, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Pakistan (the last three being the only ones, which recognized the once existent Talibani government) have over the last few months been negotiating a possible deal, which will allow a full US pullout from its involvement in Afghanistan. Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special representative for Afghan reconciliation said that the Meetings here were more productive than they have been in the past. We made significant progress on vital issues after the six days of talks with the Taliban in Qatar. The Afghan National Unity Government (NUG) led by President Ashraf Ghani has been absent at the supposed conflict termination talks because of Talibani objections, but some progress has been made in the six days of negotiations at Qatar as Zalmay Khalilzad headed to Kabul for discussions with President Ashraf Ghani.

Yet, the absence of the NUG itself, like the Taliban, refuses to talk with its representatives, out of fear of revealing weaknesses and legitimizing an entity it opposes tooth and nail, and the US remains uncertain of the future with such an absence. It is a non-state entity with war crimes, ergo, difficult to negotiate as it is not bound by any conventions or rules, hence, there isn't any assurance that they will honour the accord. (Hasnain, 2019) There has been continued Spring Offensive in 2019, which usually result in a large number of casualties to the Afghan security forces that have been, on an average, losing 7,000-8,000 men annually in the last few years and the US has consistently refused to adequately arm them with weapons considered appropriate to stem the Taliban's frequent offensives. (Gul & Gul, 2018) Thus, a full US withdrawal without adequate safeguards of better armed and equipped Afghan security forces, is the surest opening to a civil war with the undoing of the entire reconciliation process, if the Taliban doesn't accept the NUG and stops attacking. It is a progressive drawdown that will give President Donald Trump the political leverage he seeks and yet, continue the support to the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the NUG. Social reconciliation largely depends on Afghanistan's political future and the advancements it has made through Art, Culture and Cinema. Justice mechanisms depend on the talks and the future government that will continue its Peace, Reconciliation and Justice in the Afghanistan Action Plan, as well as, the role of its neighbouring countries in helping with the reconciliation process.

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