

# 10 QUESTIONS FOR NELOFER PAZIRA

**C**anadian-Afghan journalist Nelofer Pazira starred in Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf's 2001 film *Kandahar*, a fictionalized account of Pazira's search for a friend in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. In her new memoir, *A Bed of Red Flowers*, Pazira writes of her experiences in a land caught in the cross fire of the cold war and its aftermath. She spoke with Leigh Anne Williams.

## WHY WRITE A MEMOIR AT THE AGE OF 31?

A lot of my memories were unhappy, and I didn't want to revisit them. But making *Kandahar*, I was forced to think about those memories. Once we finished the movie, I felt that I had started something, and instead of closing that door, I should go through it.

## WHY DID YOU FEEL AFGHANISTAN'S STORIES NEEDED TO BE TOLD?

All discussions stop with the Taliban, as if the country had no past, no history. There was an invasion and a police state and then a civil war, which all probably led to what became the Taliban. I wanted to do a first-person account of that time to provide some context to what we in the West have forgotten about Afghanistan.

## YOUR FATHER WAS INVOLVED IN PRO-DEMOCRACY PROTESTS AGAINST THE MONARCHY, BUT WERE YOUR EARLY YEARS RELATIVELY IDYLIC?

From a child's perspective, those were the best days. War was something we never thought of. I have memories of family picnics and happy times. There were injustices, but

there was a democratic development in the country. If the West had wanted to help those democratic movements, it really had a choice, but instead it poured money into radical, extremist groups that became the *mujahedin*.

## WHAT WAS THE WORST THING ABOUT THE SOVIET OCCUPATION?

The occupation itself. Just the word. There is a very dangerous thing about it. It can make you justify anything. You can easily fall into becoming a very extreme per-

son. You can grow to hate without questioning. I began to hate Russians.

## THEN WHY DID YOU GO TO RUSSIA LAST YEAR?

Going to Moscow was the biggest step, because that was the first time when I resolved this hatred in myself. I listened as a mother [of a Russian soldier killed in Afghanistan] told me how the politicians play games and the people pay the price for it. She gave me a hug, knowing that I was Afghan, and I thought, this is what I have come for.

## AS A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT, YOU SUPPORTED THE MUJAHEDIN BECAUSE THEY WERE FIGHTING THE SOVIETS. WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME DISILLUSIONED WITH THEM?

There was a time in my life when I was ready to die for them because I thought their cause was my cause, but the very first few days [after my family escaped to] Pakistan, I was shocked to discover that they were so antiwomen, nothing like what I had assumed them to be.

## KANDAHAR WAS BASED ON YOUR SEARCH FOR YOUR FRIEND DYANA. WAS HER SUICIDE A REACTION TO THE TALIBAN'S REPRESSION?

The Taliban brought it to the final point, but I think it was the result of a prolonged period of repression and suffering, the depression that war brings.

## HAS THE WORLD FORGOTTEN ABOUT AFGHANISTAN SINCE THE INVASION OF IRAQ?

It's gone out of the headlines, but I don't think the world can really afford to forget about Afghanistan. There was a claim that the Taliban are gone, but everyone knows that they are not totally gone.

## WHAT ARE YOUR FEARS FOR AFGHANISTAN NOW?

The problem of corruption is so enormous. It goes from the top level of ministers to the very low ones. We haven't dealt with the warlords. We haven't disarmed the country. The danger is, if such corruption continues, it will create more disillusionment among ordinary people.

## YOUR BOOK IS SUBTITLED THE SEARCH FOR MY AFGHANISTAN. DID YOU FIND IT?

The Afghanistan that remains in my memory and my imagination is a very different country from what I see now. I acknowledge the reality of what I see now, but there is still hope for the future.



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