

Estetyka i Krytyka 37 (2/2015)

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TEMPORAL, MYSTIC AND RELIGIOUS LOVE: THE POETRY OF THE TALIBAN

ABSTRACT

Mina, *Mohabbat* and *ishq* are three Pashto words used to name two kinds of love. The first is more human while the second is divine or mystical. In this paper I have tried to analyse the poetry of the Taliban, paying special attention to the question of the aforementioned kinds of love: human, divine and religious. I decided to do that because until now most of the researchers working on the Taliban's songs have focussed more on their political, propaganda and religious message, with very little work dedicated to its 'human' character. This is why I have presented several poems selected from the collection *Poetry of the Taliban* by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (Gurgaon 2012) and enhanced my study with some comments.

KEYWORDS

poetry, Taliban, human love, divine love, religious love

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Saqi! I desire intoxication, but don't bring me more wine;
Your bottle is the murderer of love.¹

The word *saqi*² was used to refer to a handsome young boy who filled cups with wine during a feast or in a wine bar. While his youth and beauty was admired by the Persian and Pashto poets of the classical period, in mystical poetry he became a symbol of the all-embracing Absolute. Thus, if we take these two lines out of their context, and analyse only their semantic, or mystic, dimension, we might say that these words were written by a classical poet such as Khushhal Khan Khattak (1613–89) who said:

Roses, wine — a friend to share!
Spring sans wine I will not bear,
Abstinence I do abhor.
Cup on cup, my Saqi, pour.
(...)
Saqi, fill and fill again.³

In fact, these two lines are a sample of a poem entitled *Wound* composed by a Taliban poet, Lutfullah Latun Tokhi. One might ask how it is possible that the author writes about intoxication. After all, the Taliban have banned the production, import, transport and sale of all alcohol. To understand the paradox in these two lines, we should take a wider view of the poetry of Afghanistan as a whole.

In this article I would like to discuss the phenomenon of sung/chanted poetry composed by the Taliban in the Pashto language, paying special attention to the question of two kinds of love: temporal-mystic and religious. I have decided to do this because, until now, most of the researchers working on the Taliban's songs have focussed more on their political, propaganda and religious message, while very little work has been dedicated to its 'human' character. Below, I will present several

¹ A. Strick van Linschoten, F. Kuehn, *Poetry of the Taliban*, Gurgaon 2012, p. 126.

² In this text I consistently use a simplified transcription of Persian and Pashto.

³ E. Howell, O. Caroe, *The Poems of Khushhal Khan Khatak*, Peshawar 1963, p. 61.

poems selected from the collection *Poetry of the Taliban*,⁴ and enhance my study with some comments. Here I must explain that this book consists only of the English translations of certain selected poems; it contains no original Pashto poems. This means that even if we cannot ignore the thesis proposed by its authors, this collection might still be used to present the nature of this new literary phenomenon. Collections of a few original Pashto poems together with English translations and philological comments have been published by Wali Shaaker⁵ and by Mikhail Pelevin and Matthias Weinreich.⁶

Everyone has heard of the Taliban, a religious-political group that gained power in Afghanistan between 1995 and 2001. From 2001 to 2014 they waged a cruel war against American/NATO troops, but now the Afghan government of Abdul Qani and Abdullah Abdullah must cope with this problem alone. The main aim of the Taliban is to create a just political system based on the principles of Islam as in the times of the Prophet Muhammad. This return to the roots seems the simplest (and according to them the only possible) remedy against the ongoing disintegration and *Kalashnikovisation* of the country. The paradox is that the Taliban, who consider themselves the only true Muslims who can stop these processes, are simultaneously their prime mover.

Traditionally, the media presents the Taliban as extremists and fanatically religious warriors blindly devoted to their faith, in long beards and traditional clothes, rejecting scientific progress, restricting women's rights, and being responsible for the persecution of such religious minorities as the Shi'a Hazara. Their interpretation of *shari'a* is strict but, in fact, does not exclude a local interpretation based on the *Pash-*

⁴ For more about this issue: F. Kuehn, C. Große, Die Poesie der Krieger, [in:] *Zenith. Zeitschrift für den Orient* [no. 4], 2009, pp. 26–9; W. Shaaker, Poetry: Why it Matters to Afghan? *Program for Culture and Conflict Studies: Understanding Afghan Culture, Occasional Paper Series* [no. 4], 2009; T.H. Johnson, A. Waheed, Analyzing Taliban taranas (chants): an effective Afghan propaganda artifact, [in:] *Small Wars & Insurgencies* [vol. 22, no. 1], 2011, pp. 3–31; M. Pelevin, M. Weinreich, The Songs of the Taliban: Continuity of Form and Thought in an Ever-Changing Environment, [in:] *Iran and the Caucasus* [vol. 16, no. 1], 2012, pp. 45–70.

⁵ Shaaker, pp. 14–21.

⁶ Pelevin and Weinreich, pp. 45–70.

tunwali, the code of honour of the Pashtuns. All of these factors have contributed to the word *talib* rapidly becoming a synonym for cultural backwardness, fanaticism and unreasonable cruelty. The Taliban's refusal to turn Osama bin Laden over to the Americans, who finally decided to launch Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, caused some of us to use their name as a simple equivalent of the word 'terrorist'.

One of the first prohibitions announced by the Taliban in the mid-1990s concerned the presentation of living beings, including drawings, paintings and photographs. The general belief that the Taliban reject any kind of aesthetic values was strengthened when, at the beginning of the millennium, their government decided to destroy all pre-Islamic exhibits and monuments in Afghanistan. It is therefore more interesting that in 2001 a German photographer, Thomas Dworzak, recovered, in a dusty photographic studio in Kandahar, some pictures of the Taliban with *kohl*, a kind of blacking, applied to their eyes. Colourful, stylised, even gender reversal pictures present a completely different and surprising face of the Taliban, people who have officially declared that presentation of man or animal is a great sin. In the introduction to his album, the photographer wrote: 'Man erklärte mir, dass, nachdem das Fotografieren für Ausweise wieder erlaubt worden war, die Taliban manchmal fragten, ob sie auch ein etwas schmeichelnderes und vom Fotografen retuschiertes Portrait haben könnten. Aufgenommen wurde es in einem Hinterzimmer des Studios und dann mit der ganzen Fantasie des Fotografen bearbeitet'.⁷

These photographs and their poetry show us that the Taliban world view is not as simple as we think. Specifically, their ban on music does not include all music. They allow the use of some instruments, such as the *daf* and *da'ira* frame drum, and do not prohibit unaccompanied folk songs.⁸ I believe that this is key to understanding the phenomenon of Taliban poetry: it arises from the folk literary tradition that uses monophonic but melodic intonation and creates a trance-like feeling in its listeners.⁹

⁷ T. Dworzak, *Taliban*, Freiburg im Breisgau 2002, p. 11 (non-numbered page).

⁸ Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, p. 36. Cf. Pelevin and Weinreich, pp. 46–7; J. Baily, «*Can you stop the birds singing?*» *The Censorship of Music in Afghanistan*, Copenhagen 2001, p. 35.

⁹ Pelevin and Weinreich, p. 46.

Here we can ask if the Taliban are soldiers completely lacking emotions and the need to express their feelings. The answer must be negative. As Benedicte Grima writes, Afghanistани aesthetics are closely and intimately bound up with emotions,¹⁰ and this can be seen in their poetic lines as well. The Taliban's *tarana*, also called *da talibano tarana* (Taliban chants) or *jihadi tarana* (*Jihad* chants), are different chants full of such emotions as sorrow, desperation, pride and hope. There are often modelled upon various verse forms: the *roba'i*,¹¹ *ghazal*,¹² *charbayta*,¹³ and others.¹⁴

The *tarana* confirm Louis Dupree's words: 'Most literate or non-literate Afghans, be they Persian-, Pashto-, or Turkic-speaking, consider themselves poets. Poetry, essentially a spoken, not a written, art, gives non-literates the same general opportunities for expression as literates in a society'.¹⁵ James Darmesteter observed: 'Whenever three Afghans meet, there is a song between them'.¹⁶ Of course, these *tarana* often incorporate a great deal of propaganda, as they intend to convince Afghans of their world view, but still, this is only half of the story. When one of the Taliban poets, Qatin, sings:

(...)

...We have the proper *shari'a* and believe in it at all times,

Shari'a is my light and I am light of heart in its light ...

(...)¹⁷

¹⁰ B. Grima, *The Performance of Emotion Among Paxtun Women. «The Misfortunes Which Have Befallen Me»*, Austin 1992, p. 6 ff.

¹¹ The *roba'i* is a quatrain based on the rhyme: aaba.

¹² The *ghazal* is a poem usually dedicated to themes of love, based on the rhyme: aa-ba-ca-da(-...).

¹³ The *charbayta* is a poem, similar to the *ghazal*, with a refrain (AA), based on the model: AA-bbbb-AA-cccc-AA(-...). On metrics in Pashto poetry see: D.N. MacKenzie, Pashto verse, [in:] *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies* [vol. 21, no. 2], 1958, pp. 319–33; on *tarana* metrics see: Pelevin and Weinreich, pp. 53–5.

¹⁴ A. Widmark, *Voices at the Borders, Prose on the Margins. Exploring the Contemporary Pashto Short Story in a Context of War and Crisis*, Uppsala 2011, p. 48.

¹⁵ L. Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Princeton 1980, p. 75.

¹⁶ J. Darmesteter, *Afghan Life in Afghan Songs*, [in:] Selected Essays of James Darmesteter, Boston-New York 1895, p. 112.

¹⁷ Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, p. 139.

he refers to Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam; *shari'a* can be understood as one of the elements necessary to knowing the Truth leading to the Absolute. In this way, the word *talib* recovers its original meaning (synonymous with *murid*) attested in Pashto writings: 'disciple in spiritual matters'.

Before addressing the heart of this topic, we must ask about the roots of this poetry and its place within modern Afghan literature. Surely, this interesting literary phenomenon must be understood through the lens of the tragic events that began with the Soviet invasion (1979–88), and continued during the civil wars (1988–92, 1992–2001). It is somehow related to a long tradition of fighting poetry represented by the aforementioned Khushhal Khan Khattak and of a spiritual tradition represented by Rahman Baba (1650–1715). Seen in this light, poetry of the Taliban must be understood as being rooted in, *inter alia*, a Pashtun heritage of both oral and written cultures.¹⁸

The cruel conflict, which lasted forty years, caused the destruction of Afghanistan as a country and of the Afghans as a society. Alevtina S. Gerasimova writes that today's Afghanistan is a true literary desert. Most Afghan poets and writers live abroad; those who came back after 2001 are relatively few.¹⁹ On the other hand, as Faisal Devji states, the war caused an extraordinary aesthetic consciousness of poetry.²⁰ When we discuss Afghan literature, we must remember Louis Dupree's words: 'Afghanistan, (...) has a literary *culture*, but a non-literary *society*'.²¹ The literacy rate, which today is less than 30%, gives only a few Afghans access to their own great literature. Even so, many illiterate people have a greater or lesser acquaintance with the classical Persian (especially Abdul-Qadir Bidel, 1642–1720) and/or Pashto (e.g. Rahman Baba) poets, because their poems still circulate in oral transmission.

Since Pashto poetry has been influenced by Persian (and Urdu) poetry for a long time, it is natural that the Persian conception of love,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 31; cf. Pelevin and Weinreich, pp. 51–3.

¹⁹ A. S. Gerasimova, *Литература Афганистана XXI века: Новые достижения* (part 1): <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/19564.html>; cf. (part 2) <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/19678.html> and (part 3) <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/20105.html> [27.12.2014].

²⁰ Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, p. 14.

²¹ Dupree, p. 74.

encompassing everything and everyone in the universe, must be found in the Taliban's *tarana* as well. This all-embracing affection can be the lifeblood of changes:

(...)
 Make this pleasant world beautiful,
 So it changes to a paradise with a drop.
 Make the world colourful with love.
 (...) ²²

Two opposing forms of love — towards a fellow human being, and towards God — formed (and still form) the emotional relations between the lover and his beloved, sometimes more subtle, sometimes more physical or erotic, as in this excerpt of one of the poems composed by Khushhal Khan Khattak:

(...)
 She the rose, her grace bestowing
 On the thorn that waits her pleasure.
 I the fountain, faintly glowing.
 Mirror of a garden's treasure,
 Lover, loved, together knowing
 Rapture passing dream or measure. ²³

Importantly, over the centuries the poets have created a kind of dictionary containing a rich vocabulary regarding love. The amorous *rendezvous* cited above, depicted by Khushhal Khan Khattak, takes place, probably at night, in a *bay* — a garden and a metaphorical paradise, a place full of flowers, specifically roses, another poetical symbol of love in its twofold human and divine dimensions. As we will see, the Taliban composers follow some paths trodden by the previous generations of (non)anonymous poets.

²² Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, p. 87.

²³ Howell and Caroe, p. 21.

Temporal and Mystic Love

I am Majnun and you are my Layli,
You are my flower and I am your bee.²⁴

What is human love (Pashto *mina* or *mohabbat*)? At its simplest, it is a basic form of an affection intertwined with attraction and attachment that can appear between two people, friends, family or a couple. The Afghans use different ways to express their feelings. One of these is through poems and songs: *wataniyya* (about homeland), *tura* (patriotism), *matamuna* (bravery) or *diyya* (self-appraisal). These are popular throughout the country, but among Afghans, the Pashtuns especially have a great passion for them.²⁵ The best example are *landay*, couplets usually sung by the women to speak not only about their sorrow or fears, but also about bravery. We may say that poetry represented by folk songs and ballads is a sort of repository of feelings, and simultaneously acts as a kind of a safety valve, helping people to control their tensions, emotions, and, above all, (un)happy love.

In the poem by Abdul Shukur Rasheed cited below, entitled *Freedom*, a conventional love story taken from Persian poetry, the story of the perfect lovers, Laila and Majnun, appears:

What is the good of Majnun alive when Laila dies?
What is the good of a hollowed-out body when someone's heart dies?
The heart is a lamp inside a muddy frame;
May it not pass that this lamp stops shining.
If the bird has flown the cage, the cage deserves to be broken;
If the heart dies, the hollow chest should die first.
The permanence of a living thing is never possible;
When the heart dies; the body has to die and it will die.
Freedom is the heart of each nation's body;
Without it, both the nation and eternity die.²⁶

²⁴ Widmark, p. 47.

²⁵ Cf. Pelevin and Weinreich, p. 55 ff.

²⁶ Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, p. 80.

The story of Laila and Majnun was based by a Persian poet, Nizami Ganjavi (12th–13th century AD) on the semi-historical Arabic story of Qays ben al-Molawwah ben Mozahem, adapted to Pashto classic poetry by Sikandar Khan Khattak (17th century AD), son of Khushhal Khan Khattak. The plot of Laila and Majnun's love story is simple and tragic. A youth named Qays meets Laila and falls in love with her at once. Unfortunately, her father forbids all contact between them. Separated from his beloved, Qays becomes obsessed with her. That is why others call him *majnun*, 'possessed/madman'. Since he cannot eat or sleep, the only thing he can do is think about her and compose love songs for her. Since they cannot be together, Qays-Majnun roams in the desert among the wild beasts. Meanwhile, Laila's father decides to betroth her against her will. She guards her virginity by resisting her husband's advances, and arranges secret meetings with her lover. Interestingly, when they meet, they have no physical contact. Later, when Laila's husband dies, Qays-Majnun is so focussed on his ideal picture of her that he runs away to the desert. His beloved dies of grief. Heartbroken, Qays-Majnun goes to her grave, where he immediately dies. Finally, they can be together. Importantly, the love that existed between Laila and Majnun is usually considered pure, since it was never physically consummated.

The reference to Laila and Majnun's love appears in other *tarana*, e.g. in *New Year* by Farah Emtiaz, where the persona emphasises not the affection but the sweet memory of it:

O New Year, bring happiness with you!
 Bring the fragrance of flowers.
 Once again, spread spring in my life,
 Once again, bring bouquets of red flowers with you.
 Make my life full of colour;
 Bring the colourfulness of the colours with you.
 The sweetness of Laila and Majnun's memory,
 Bring some of these things with you.
 Light the spaces and bring colourfulness,
 Bring red flowers and growth with you.
 Perfume the air and turn it to spring,
 Bring the restfulness of Farah with you.²⁷

²⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

In this *tarana*, the persona looks at a human life through the prism of repetition resulting from the cosmic cyclicity of the seasons. In Afghanistan the new year, called *Naw Ruz*, begins on the first day of spring, 21 March, but in Emtiaz's song it not only represents the revival of nature after the winter, but can also be equated with the reunion of two sundered lovers. The new year brings happiness and colourfulness to nature and to the lovers. Their affection is represented by red flowers: roses, or tulips if we take into consideration the *Mila-yi gul-i surkh* 'Festival of Red Flower(s)', that is celebrated in Mazar-i Sharif for the first forty days after *Naw Ruz*, when the tulips grow in the plains surrounding that sacred city.

Emtiaz seems to say that we can, like Laila and Majnun, fall madly in love, because the new year and spring are the best time to do that. But still, his invocation of this ideal couple might suggest that we are dealing here with the kind of love that must be understood as perfect and even unrealistic. Moreover, there are also certain social, cultural and religious restrictions related to the prenuptial contacts between the youths, or to a(n) (arranged) marriage which is an expensive burden for the bridegroom. This shows that poetic fantasy and reality do not go hand in hand.

That is why separation, also an important motif in Persian and Pashto poetry, might be perceived as the parting of two lovers, each of whom already have spouses. The reasons may be different, but the separation is always shown as destroying and at the same time enhancing the feelings without which love cannot be present in a human life:

The village seems strange; this is separation
 as if my beloved has left it.
 The grief of separation is so cruel that it is not scared of anyone;
 When the soul does not leave the body it shakes.
 Like a flower withering in the autumn,
 Autumn has now come to my love.
 I remain alone with my shaggy head of hair
 Uncomprehending; my heart has been sad for a long time.
 In a flash, it put a hole in my entire world;
 Each affair is like an arrow.
 Oh Faqir! Better be sad.
 Who told you that love is easy?²⁸

²⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

This time the persona, represented by Shaheb Faqir, depicts a picture opposite that of Farah Emtiaz's *New Year*. Instead of a reunion, we read in Faqir's *Soul* about a separation represented by the autumn. Once again, we are dealing here with the motif of repetition resulting from the cosmic cyclical nature of the seasons: the spring needs the autumn, the autumn cannot exist without the spring. We can extend this metaphor to love and say that it needs separation to be strengthened. Surprisingly, the persona does not complain about his grief upon parting, but accepts it, asking himself philosophically 'Who told you that love is easy?'; in fact, he repeats a simple line of Hafiz, a Persian classic poet. I believe that this single line reveals the essence of love in the Iranian world: a passion enmeshed with sorrow can make us stronger. This includes the ability to destroy us completely, but first of all, since love is an all-embracing affection, it must be difficult to experience. Emtiaz seems to be reminding us that it is not love in itself, but all the trouble it causes, that creates us.

Although in this poem we find no reference to it, it is worth mentioning that the moon also plays a significant role in amorous poetry. It serves the lovers as an intermediary. Even if they are separated, they can look at the moon, because their gazes meet there.

As we will see in Abdullah's poem entitled *Learn!*, the lovers not only can be represented by human beings, but can also be personified by the flower and the nightingale. The eternal love of the nightingale for the flower is an allegory of an unequal passion intertwined with sorrow and desire:

Learn to speak with a melody like the nightingale,
 Learn the silent dialogue of the flower with the nightingale.
 Cover your head, come out of the blossom,
 Learn to blow like a breeze through the air.
 How long will you live like a bird?
 Learn to fly free like an eagle.
 Speed up, make the caravan go fast, the destination is close.
 Learn to project your voice like a bell.
 Leave comfort and take up hardship, O zealous Afghan!
 Learn to cry for the homeland's pain and grief.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid., p. 84.

In all of the poems cited above we can find various poetic motifs: the pure love between Laila and Majnun, the coming of the spring as reunion, the coming of the autumn as separation, and finally the dialogue between the rose and the nightingale. All hark back to a local poetic tradition. We should not forget that in the Iranian world love and other kinds of emotions are expressed by using diverse literary stereotypes elaborated by previous generations of poets. Being a good poet requires not only talent for recitation and literary skills, but also a wide knowledge of the poetic patterns handed down from parents to offspring. The presence of these metaphors denotes that the poetry of the Taliban is ingrained in the Afghan culture, even though the Taliban are most frequently regarded as people lacking cultural roots and reluctant to countenance any cultural and entertainment-related activities that might be contrary to the *Qur'an*. The subject matter of these four poems can be staggering, especially if we are knowledgeable in the Taliban ideology, but we must remember that we are dealing here with the poetic realisation of certain ideas. This poetic conception of the essence of human love does not lend itself to simple evaluation and must always be perceived through the lens of the literary foundations of the Pashtun culture.

In this paragraph we have defined the idea of temporal love, but in fact we may call it mystical love: Pashto *ishq*. As an affection that appears between a human being and God, here it consists of simultaneous fascination and fear. Quoting Rudolf Otto, we might say that human-divine love is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Interestingly, the poetic language of the Afghans uses metaphors and pictures to express relations between the human and the Absolute that have been adopted from the language of temporal love; in mystical poetry, simple relations of submissiveness and dependence between a human being and God have been replaced by relations between *ma'shuq* 'beloved' and *ashiq* 'lover'. The important thing is that these relations always take an asymmetrical form. A human being is the subject of God, and this is reflected in the feelings existing between them.

Religious love

I want to be burned together with such a moth.
 For a little pain and pity for sympathy,
 If they exist in a heart, I want to be sacrificed for that.³⁰

Since the Taliban movement has based its political philosophy on religion, it is no wonder that some sacred elements have been also implemented into their poetry, which is the basic tool of propaganda. Their *tarana* are mainly of a religious character: the poets praise the Prophet, honour *mujahidin*-warriors, commemorate *shahidan*-martyrs, and promote *jihad*. Nevertheless, among all these religious motifs we can also find some references to religious love.

Just as in the case of temporal and mystic love, in religious love as well the beloved, God, is described as beautiful or someone who possesses beauty, and for this reason becomes an object of adoration, though, in this case, the adoration has nothing to do with passion, but rather with deep and strong faith:

O owner of beauty and beauties,
 I have a request for you,
 I raise both my hands towards you.
 I pray with humility,
 I want to be kept away from disgrace,
 I want this world from you.
 (...)

 May I be sacrificed for you, my God.
 Fulfil this wish of my mine, O my God.
 (...)

 Make this pleasant world beautiful,
 So it changes to a paradise with a drop.
 Make the world colourful with love.
 (...)³¹

³⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 86–7.

The thirty-eight-stanza poem entitled *Prayer*, written by Shirinzoy, is the longest presented in *Poetry of the Taliban*. It has all the features of a prayer, a kind of emotionally engaged creed expressed by someone who trusts the Absolute. Shirinzoy based its structure on the monotonous repetitiveness of some simple literary elements. The poet turns towards God with several requests to, *inter alia*, lighten his fate and to punish sinners. Contrary to temporal passion that makes us *majnun*, pure love coming from God can improve the world and save its beauty, because He has created the universe with love. It seems that the most important wish of the poet is hope for a better future.

Importantly, at the beginning, the persona defines the relations between him and God. The poet places himself lower than his beloved, or God, whom he perceives as inaccessible. We can distinguish here between physical and intellectual inaccessibility. God is like the rose adored by the nightingale or the flame of the candle that burns the moth. This motif of self-destruction recurs in other Taliban poems such as Abdul Basir Ebrat's *Discomforting Path*, where we read 'I am happy in fire just like the butterfly',³² and in Mullah Abdul Wali Halimyar's *Martyr Friend* 'The youth who got love's inspiration from a butterfly'³³ and symbolises the relations of the *ma'shuq* and *ashiq*. This apparent divine inaccessibility causes the persona to prepare to devote himself to God or even to sacrifice his life, knowing that his *shahadat* (martyrdom) will be accepted by Him. Moreover, it implies that Shirinzoy places absolute hope and trust in the Absolute.

This motif of confidence appears also in Azizurrahman's *tarana* entitled *Collapse* and in Bismillah Sahar's *My God*. For both of these poets, the most important thing in their relations with God is a conviction that every human being is simply a cripple. Therefore they ask Allah to forget about their weaknesses:

O God, keep me from hell's fire;
 I am a poor creature, don't look at my sins.
 I am the guilty and you are too kind;
 I have nobody besides you.
 You gave me the right way as an inheritance,
 But I am weak in front of Satan.

³² Ibid., p. 58.

³³ Ibid., p. 59.

Strengthen me in my fight with Satan;
 I will go to the grave under your protection.
 I ask for your forgiveness;
 I stand in front of you with bound hands and bare head.
 I, Aziz, won't count on anyone else,
 Even if this world collapses around me.³⁴

O God, I cry out loud for you,
 I beg your forgiveness of my mistakes.
 In order to reach this destination, you created me,
 A destination that I am surprised to go to.
 It is a pity that from the courtyard of this transient world view
 I am leaving with the carpet of a lifetime of my sins.
 My, Sahar's, sins are less than your blessing.
 If you forgive me, I will be very proud.³⁵

They seem to build these two *tarana* on the *Basmala* phrase '*bis-millahi-r-rahmani-r-rahimi*' 'In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful'. Indeed, as we can read in the *Qur'an* (e.g. 7.156) Allah is gracious and merciful to all of His creations, although, just as in the anonymous poem *Human*, He can be disappointed with them:

The blood of Adam's heart,
 As it changed to love.
 Look at the power of Allah,
 Humans were created by him.
 Time passes,
 People don't know it.
 Angels have brought to this world
 This nice human.
 Human love and humans
 Were created by the Lord of the universe.
 He is surprised by this world,
 The grandchild of Adam, human.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 91–2.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 104.

But, to return to Azizurrahman's and Bismillah Sahar's poems: these are, in fact, a sort of a prayer as well. Once again, the persona defines the relations between himself and God. He places himself lower than his beloved, whose feelings towards a human being are pure and sincere. But this time, God's love not only saves the beauty of the world, but helps the human being to live piously, to keep the religious commandments of *shari'a*. Divine love becomes something more than its human equivalent, because it can save a human being and ensure his next life in paradise, while temporal passion can be even highly destructive. On the other hand, when Azizurrahman says 'I, Aziz, won't count on anyone else, / Even if this world collapses around me', he, just like Shirinzoy, emphasises his trust in God, the trust that one might have in someone one really and sincerely loves.

All the aforementioned elements describing the relations between the lover and his beloved, between the lover and his God-beloved, i.e. a separation, self-destruction, trust, confidence, etc., can be found in Zahid's *Love of God*:

Don't talk of leaving the fortresses with me;
 I don't care for death, don't talk about the knife.
 I've come out to sacrifice myself to God;
 I am pleased to burn, don't talk about fire.
 I am the sign of morning, I attack the heart of darkness;
 I go up in brightness, don't talk of dark nights.
 Until the very end, I wage jihad with the enemy;
 Don't talk of compromise and schemes to me.
 I determine my own fate by fighting of fortresses;
 Don't talk of the decisions of my rivals to me.
 It doesn't matter if it is cut, let it be;
 Don't talk of bowing down to others to me.
 I will raise the flag of Islam with my blood;
 I devote myself, don't talk of injuries.
 I've come out against colonialism with my sword;
 Don't talk of returning until I succeed.
 As long as an Islamic government is not installed,
 Don't talk to me about laying down arms.
 Spring will come, the buds of freedom will smile,
 Autumn will pass, don't talk of the falling of the leaves.

Today or tomorrow, Zahid says, the morning will come,
So don't talk of the gloom and the darkness.³⁷

The amazing reliance of the persona can arise only from strong feelings of Zahid towards God. Love, an all-embracing affection, becomes the main point of his life. The possibility of immersion in these feelings becomes the main aim of his existence. Zahid emphasises this, calling himself the moth that would like to burn in the fire, i.e. God's love. Once again, I would add that the Taliban poets, in this case as well, use diverse literary metaphors elaborated by previous generations. As I have already mentioned, being a good poet requires not only talent for recitation and literary skills, but also a wide knowledge of the poetic patterns handed down from parents to offspring. The presence of these metaphors regarding temporal, mystic or religious love shows that poetry of the Taliban is deeply ingrained in the Afghan culture.

Conclusions

Malalai wants a red spot by her lover's blood
So as to embarrass the rose in the heart of the garden.³⁸

The tree of my lover's beauty cannot be irrigated with just a few drops,
O tears, flow, because it wants this flow from me.³⁹

A British poet, Daljit Nagra, in reviewing Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn's book for *The Guardian*, wrote: 'My initial feeling when faced with a title that includes the words "Taliban" and "poetry" is that it is oxymoronic'.⁴⁰ No wonder, if we remember the crimes of the Taliban from the late 1990s.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 144–5.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁰ D. Nagra, Poetry of the Taliban — review. A revelatory collection from Afghanistan, [in:] *The Guardian*: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/25/poetry-of-the-taliban-review> [27.01.2015]. Cf. M. Pelevin, Poetry of the Taliban. Translated by Mirwais Rahmany, Hamid Stanikzai; Ed. and introduced by Alex Strick van Linschoten, Felix Kuehn; Preface by Faisal Devji, London: "Hurst

John Baily adds that ‘the texts (in Pashto) are of a religious nature, with frequent mention of the Taliban themselves, and of their *shahids* (martyrs) killed in fighting with anti-Taliban forces. There is heavy use of electronic devices such as delay and reverberation, much favoured in the secular music of the region but which here could refer to the echoing acoustics of religious buildings, and there are sometimes two singers together, singing closely in unison. In terms of performance, the singing uses the melodic modes of Pashtun regional music, is nicely in tune, strongly rhythmic, and many items have the two-part song structure that is typical of the region. But without musical instruments it is not considered to be “music”’.⁴¹

At the end I must add something I probably should have said at the beginning of my paper. The main aim of my paper was to present the poetry of the Taliban, paying special attention to the question of two kinds of love, human-divine and religiously involved. To do that I was inspired by the book by Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn. Their work has received some positive reviews, from Anna Badkhen,⁴² for example, but has aroused controversy as well. One of a group of former commanders fighting in Afghanistan, Richard Kemp, said: ‘What we need to remember is that these are fascist, murdering thugs who suppress women and kill people without mercy if they do not agree with them, and of course are killing our soldiers (...). It doesn’t do anything but give the oxygen of publicity to an extremist group which is the enemy of this country’.⁴³ Despite all the controversies surrounding this poetic phenomenon, I deeply believe that studying poetry of the Taliban can help us to understand better their world view; however, it does not mean that we must accept it.

and Co. Ltd.’, 2012, 247 pp., [in:] *Iran and the Caucasus* [vol. 17, no. 4], 2013, pp. 443–8.

⁴¹ Baily, *Can you stop*, p. 43.

⁴² A. Badkhen, *Purple Darkness: Poetry from the Taliban*, [in:] *New Republic*: <http://www.newrepublic.com/book/review/purple-darkness-poetry-the-taliban> [27.01.2015].

⁴³ J. Berger, *Taliban poetry book denounced by former British commander*, [in:] *The Guardian*: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/04/taliban-poetry-book-denounced-british> [27.01.2015].

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