

Elaha Soroor and Kefaya. *Songs of Our Mothers*. London: Bella Union, 2019. 10 tracks, 42:55. BELLA950CD (CD) and BELLA950V (LP), streaming available.

Review

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Folk music in Afghanistan is strongly masculine.¹ No matter whether the songs are about war, love, or any other topic, they mostly represent the men's point of view. This, however, does not mean that women in Afghanistan do not participate in musical practices – they do. But because of the gender segregation in the country, their music is usually confined to private spaces such as homes and does not circulate in the public sphere as widely as it should. In *Songs of Our Mothers*, a debut album by Elaha Soroor and the music group Kefaya, we now have a collection of folk songs by women that for generations were only performed in private spaces.

Elaha Soroor has carefully selected ten songs that tell the stories of women in Afghanistan, depicting their experiences of life in a difficult country. What especially stands out in this album is the love songs. In these songs, women are no longer the desired, as is common in Afghan folk songs, but the agent of desire. There is a song about a woman expressing her love for a “hashish-smoking boy” and a song about a lover with “two black eyes.” Highlighting the agency of women in Afghanistan's folkloric music is an important achievement of this album – the agency long denied by the patriarchal culture.

Although the album could be categorized as “world music,” a vaguely-defined genre that refers to non-Western folk music, it is a product of both Western and Eastern music cultures. And as a result, it is as modern as it is folkloric: the vocal artist performs folk songs from Afghanistan, but, with the exception of the occasional *tablah* and *dambura*, there are barely any Afghan instruments accompanying her. Instead, the folk tunes are

¹ Afghan folk music encompasses the diverse vernacular music traditions in the country. The songs are generally accompanied with instruments. Corresponding to Afghanistan's multiethnic disposition, Afghan folk music mirrors the country's linguistic and cultural diversity.

performed by modern jazz instruments in a slightly stylized fashion, making the tones more palatable to Western audiences. The instrumentalists are from Kefaya, a London-based indie group with members coming from different musical backgrounds. The collective tends to experiment and mix various musical genres and traditions in their work, and this experimental attitude is very much present in their collaboration with Elaha Soroor.

Afghan folk music has a geographical nature in the sense that each melody is associated with one particular region. In *Songs of Our Mothers*, various areas are represented that include Herat, the central highlands, and some other Persian-speaking places. Soroor herself is a Hazara from the central province of Ghazni. She sings each song in this album with the accent of the region to which the song belongs. This adds a layer of authenticity that native listeners might appreciate.

As a Hazara, she feels most at home with the musical tradition of her own people. Hazaras are a persecuted ethnic minority who mostly live in the mountainous provinces in central Afghanistan. Several Hazara songs are included in this album, including “gul-e sadbarg” (Rose of a Hundred Petals), an iconic song from her own province. The song was popularized by Delaram, a Hazara woman folk singer who is better known as Abeh Mirza, or “Mother of Mirza.” The melancholic song tells the story of a woman separated from her homeland, Malistan, and her loved ones. When Elaha Soroor sings this song, it is hard not to notice the similarities between the lyrics she performs and the life she has lived as an exile.

Elaha was born to refugee parents in Iran and moved back to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. In 2009, she was a high school student in Kabul when she took part in Afghan Star, a television song contest similar to American Idol. She did not win the ultimate title, but the show turned her into a household name in Afghanistan. On stage, she was fearless, outspoken, and good at what she did. Although she had many fans, her ill-wishers, of whom there were not a few, made her life difficult in Kabul. She had to leave the country for good and settle in the UK as a refugee. Afghanistan is a dangerous place for Hazaras, and especially Hazara musicians. In 2016, the Taliban abducted and killed a Hazara folk singer, Mohammadullah Dilshad. Elaha, therefore, had to escape from Afghanistan to save her life. In “Rose of Hundred Petals,” the opening lines go: “I’m a rose of hundred petals in summer / an escapee from the land of Malistan / Since the day I was parted from my homeland / my body is in pain and my heart is in yearning.” For years this song has been a familiar sound for Hazara exiles who have fled their homeland, mostly because the option to stay was taken from them.

There is also a political undertone in some other songs in this album as well, which reminds us that folk songs are more than just melodies: they often carry the historical experiences of the people who have produced them – the kind of historical experiences that are mostly absent in official history. As an example, in “Lalay Lalay,” a Hazara lullaby, on the surface the song is just the words of a mother trying to get her child to sleep. But considered more closely, it is about an imagined world, different from her own, where her girl will go to school, gets an education, becomes famous and respected,

and becomes the governor of Bamiyan province. This world is not attainable for most children in Afghanistan, especially girls and children of Hazaras, who have faced systematic barriers when it comes to accessing political power and other resources.

The album has been received very well in Europe so far. In Songlines Music Awards 2020 in London, it was awarded the Best Fusion album and Elaha Soroor received the Newcomer award. This was well-deserved recognition for Elaha Soroor and Kefaya and their ambitious attempt to mix Afghan folk music with modern instruments. This is a great start for Elaha Soroor's career as a musician in exile. A self-described "city girl" who has never lived in a village in her life, Elaha Soroor has now given us an album that could easily be considered one of the best Afghan folk music albums in years.

Author Biography

Ali Karimi is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. His areas of research include global media studies, surveillance technology, and Afghan history. He holds a Ph.D. in Communication from McGill University. His most recent publication, on Afghan media, appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Before moving to Pennsylvania, he was a Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellow at the Humboldt University of Berlin in Germany.