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The Long Road to Liberation: Archive, History-Making and the Place of Women in the Dhofar Revolution

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“A marvellous Bahraini feminist, found a very creative and clever way to convince the male children of the line of the Front: ‘No women’s liberation without society liberation, and no society liberation without women’s liberation.’”¹ These are the words of Heiny Srour, Lebanese anthropologist and filmmaker, about one of the revolutionary women she met when filming the iconic 1974 documentary about the Dhofar Revolution, *The Hour of Liberation Has Arrived*. The Dhofar Revolution (1965-76) was launched in June 1965 against the absolutist rule of Sultan Said bin Taimur and the British colonial role in Oman and the region.² It lasted for over ten years as the revolutionaries sustained their struggle in the liberated areas, with broader support lines stretching from Aden, Kuwait, and Iraq to material and diplomatic support from the USSR and China at various moments. The revolution drew cadres from across the Gulf: Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iran and beyond, including Palestinian, Cuban, and European movements. By the early 1970s, the revolutionary forces were led by the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf (PFLOAG), a left-wing movement which emerged from the Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN). The PFLOAG established a social programme in Dhofar and positioned women’s liberation as central to its revolutionary project for political and social transformation.

The following text takes the form of letters between two leftist women with connections to the Persian-Arabian Gulf, who write to each other about their contemporary work to trace the largely invisibilised past lives of leftist women connected to this revolutionary movement. We explore what might be gained by centring revolutionary women and their praxis in projects of national liberation and revolutionary social transformation, thinking through questions of class, race/ethnicity, nationality, and gender and sexual politics in the encounters of Arab nationalist, anticolonial, and leftist movements in Dhofar. The letters weave together reflections on archival and history-making practices through the lives of women revolutionaries from both coasts of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, whose paths merged at the Dhofar front and its support base in the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) during the late 1960s–early 1970s. In addition to academic scholarship, we work with cultural source material comprising literature, memoirs, film, and digital sources in Arabic, Persian, and English produced by members and supporters of political movements to push beyond the symbolism of the revolutionary woman, posing questions to each other about the role of women in the revolution, society, and history more broadly.

Dear Jeyran,

I’m starting this piece while researching the link between the novel *Warda* by Sonallah Ibrahim,³ and the person Layla Fakhro, a Bahraini member of PFLOAG (Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf),⁴ who established the revolutionary school at the Dhofar front.⁵ Her operating name was Huda Salem

¹ Jirmanus Saba, 2019.

² Takriti, 2013.

³ Ibrahim [trans. Aboul-Ela], 2000 [2021].

⁴ Alekry, 2014.

⁵ Takriti, 2013, 124.

– and the students at the revolutionary school on the front as well as the primary school that she established later call themselves “Huda’s children.” There is an idea in circulation that the character Warda is based on Layla herself⁶ – although I had assumed Layla is described in the novel as another character; “the daughter of a businessman based in Bahrain and ... also a student at the American University of Beirut.”⁷ I admit to feeling a bit uncomfortable while reading the novel. I was really fascinated and compelled by it, but also felt that at times I was being carried along into a fantasised world of the character Warda through the imagination and gaze of the male author. Spectres of Layla (and no doubt other women) seem to have been crafted into Warda, a figure of the exemplary revolutionary woman, through the documentary style and method Ibrahim uses in his fiction-writing.⁸

The invisibility of revolutionary women from the Middle East (and the Global South more broadly) is arguably the result of several layers of obscurity. Layla Fakhro is part of a historical trajectory that is shrouded in layers of silence within its own locale; absent from the national or mainstream history of the Gulf. The trajectory of social histories of the Gulf are also generally absent from English-language scholarship, although this field has been invigorated by a rich array of recent works.⁹ While these works have transformed the field of Gulf studies in profound ways, we contribute to expanding it further by foregrounding the participation of women in political movements, and by reading the two coasts of the Gulf together. In thinking about the archive and history-making, if women (and other marginalised groups) are not present in works on popular and contentious movements, in line with what feminist and social historians have long argued about recovering the lives of those pushed to the margins of history, we should be asking, and writing-in why.¹⁰

If we delve past these layers, Layla becomes relatively visible, lovingly remembered by those who knew her – Sonallah Ibrahim says about his visit to Dhofar that everyone had one name on their lips: Huda. Her experiences have been written into English-language scholarship on the “Monsoon Revolution,” and a number of books and articles have been written both about and for her in Arabic.¹¹ While she rejected invitations to memorialise her own life, her comparative visibility is a product of Layla’s legacy as a lifelong committed revolutionary and social organiser until her death in 2006. It is also, arguably, the product of her social location as an urban Arab woman from a bourgeois family who was part of the circulations of students from the Gulf to other capital cities in the region; in Layla’s case to Baghdad first and then to Beirut, to study at the American University of Beirut (AUB). At AUB she became a member of the *Rabita Talaba-t-al-Bahrain* (Bahrain Students Association), and then head of its cultural committee. During the summer of 1968, Layla joined with other young women, including the academics and activists Sabika Al-Najjar and Fawzia Mattar

⁶ K. Diallo, 2021.

⁷ Ibrahim, 2021, 140.

⁸ Sonallah Ibrahim was himself involved in leftist student circulations in Cairo from the early 1950s, and imprisoned from 1959-1964 by the Egyptian authorities for being part of the Egyptian Communist Party (El Attar, 2009).

⁹ Beaugrand, 2018; Bishara and Wint, 2021; Chalcraft, 2016; Guirguis, 2020; AlShehabi, 2015; AlShehabi, 2017. Unpublished works include Al-Rashoud, 2016; Boodrookas, 2020.

¹⁰ Sajed, 2021; Trouillot, 1995.

¹¹ Takriti, 2013; Al-Qassab, 2008.

from Muharraq to form Awal Women's Society.¹² It was in Beirut that she joined the Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN), and later the PFLOAG which emerged from the leftist stream in the MAN.¹³ The path of national liberation and revolutionary action led her then from Beirut to Dhofar in 1970. She appears in a documentary [clip](#) (that I am unable to find the source for) which appears to be archived by the BBC, and is re-shared from time to time on social media. It shows the Dhofar revolutionary school, and Layla, discussing her commitment to revolutionary action with the interviewer in English, saying: "this is my duty, and this is the first duty, before my family relationship."¹⁴



The struggle Layla left her family behind for was fought for by female doctors, teachers and militants, and at the front the PFLOAG introduced education and militant training for boys and girls, as well as banning polygyny, child marriage, and female circumcision. Addressing gender relations was, as we noted earlier, part of the political programme of leftist revolutionary groups operating in the region at the time. Learning about Layla in isolation from the broader movement and political trajectory to which she belongs obscures this context. And part of this work, I think, is to avoid extracting her into a feminist symbol, and to see, show, and understand her within the collective dynamic – of women in revolutionary history and in the Dhofar Revolution. I wonder if Layla, and the other women at the front, understood themselves as feminists? I also wonder how Dhofari women's lives as highland peasants and their gendered roles within a rural subsistence-based society prepared and shaped their participation as revolutionaries and militants at the front.¹⁵ I ask these questions to think about what work needs to be done to invoke the word in a way that does not distort historical experiences. It asks us to recognise that tensions and negotiations undoubtedly took place over

¹² Al-Najjar and Mattar, 2017, 685.

¹³ Al Mayadeen Podcasts, 2022.

¹⁴ Abdulhadi Khalaf, 2017.

¹⁵ Takriti, 2013.

gender roles in revolutionary movements, while at the same time insist that revolutionary/ anticolonial feminisms were integral to the leftist project of social transformation in this context, not separate from it.

This is not to say we cannot understand the revolutionary women at Dhofar as feminist, but that if we are using feminist as a diagnostic, I think the feminists can be found in their rightful place – the liberation movement and the revolution! Looking at archives and history in this way contributes to more capacious understandings of feminists and feminism, and how/where it is practiced. Can you tell me more: about the leftist, anticolonial, militant women from Iran who were part of the revolution in Dhofar?

Salma

Dear Salma,

Firstly, I am happy that you brought up the issue of the male gaze in Sonallah Ibrahim's novel *Warda*. It is such a widely celebrated book but I too couldn't help but feel unease in my reading of the characters, narration, and plot. When people celebrate the novel, I am curious to ask, what exactly do they find brilliant about it? For me, it was initial excitement at the popularisation and inclusion of a radical twentieth century woman from the Gulf in a story about the Dhofar Revolution and an important revolutionary period. You can imagine what my reaction was, then, when the opening paragraph of the book is about male orgasm: we learn about the narrator Rushdy's dreams about Warda, and the few times in which his desires resulted in "fruition" – waking him up "soaked, glistening, and filled with emotion."¹⁶ "*Why must it start by centring male desire,*" I have scribbled down in the margins. I am not sure if I feel greater discomfort at the centrality of male fantasy which runs throughout the novel, or the silence over this very current in the unquestioning admiration for the novel in its reception.

While this scene is obviously jarring, I think that these tensions would sit differently if the Dhofar Revolution had not had such a feminist orientation, by which I mean a political commitment to transforming the material conditions of women's lives and societal position; and, as you suggest, if there wasn't a scarcity of writing on the lives of leftist women in the radical histories of the Gulf, that together create a particular expectation about the lens through which we should remember these women. My discomfort finds frustration that envelops *Warda* as a novel – a frustration that is both combative and sympathetic – and I critique it, a comradely critique,¹⁷ because I care deeply about the future that was once imagined in a political project that is still worth holding on to; one that apparently claimed feminist possibilities as much as it claimed leftist and anti-imperialist politics.

¹⁶ Ibrahim, 2021, 3.

¹⁷ Slothuus, 2021.

The extent to which the leftist movements of the 1960s and 1970s engaged with the social and political liberation of women both practically and theoretically has been explored in the Iranian context by feminist scholars.¹⁸ In some of the earlier accounts, written by former members of political movements, there are important critiques of patriarchal and masculine political cultures, the dismissal of women's emancipation as a bourgeois construct, and the suppression of women's interests, among other issues in the leftist movement. These works should be considered in their temporal context: a haunting melancholia shapes many of these writings as they were formulated in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a period defined by feelings of failure and defeat for the left. With the distance of space and time, more recent work has started to place the women and movements of the time in their transnational and global historical contexts.¹⁹ This is a current that I feel our work is trying to speak to: we still have so much to learn about this crucial historical juncture, by contextualising political movements beyond the framework of the state, and in a moment of decolonisation, internationalism, and Third World solidarity, through the historical experiences of women.

There were other Wardas – Iranian revolutionaries as you mention, too; they were anti-imperialist women who joined the anticolonial struggle in solidarity, opposing the British-led colonial war which was heavily supported by Iranian forces. As Iran intervened militarily in support of the Anglo-Sultanic war to crush the revolution in the early 1970s, Dhofar became a site in which the Iranian political opposition faced the shah's forces and Iran's newly purchased aircraft and weapons from the US which were used against the revolutionary movement and Dhofari people.

Two sisters named Rafat and Mahbubeh Afraz volunteered as a nurse and a doctor in the Dhofar Revolution mid-way through 1975. Sent on behalf of their organisation, the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI), they were placed in the al-Shaheeda Fatima Ghanana and al-Shaheed Habkook hospitals (makeshift clinics), the former built with Cuban aid in 1974 and led by a Cuban medical team, the latter operated by the Palestinian Doctor (Marwan) Nazmi Khorshid from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).²⁰ The PMOI was a Leftist-Islamist organisation which experienced a violent split in 1975 as some of its members turned to Marxism-Leninism. By their accounts, the sisters were part of the Marxist grouping. The Mojahedin (Marxist-Leninist), as well as several other Marxist Iranian opposition organisations, established connections across the Middle East as political repression in Iran under the shah's dictatorship forced clandestine members to operate within a network abroad.

Remarkably, we have considerable insight into the experiences of Rafat Afraz (Sedigheh)²¹ and Mahbubeh Afraz (Dokturah Zahra) as accounts from their time in Dhofar were collated and published in 2015 by their friend and comrade Torab Haghshenas from exile in Germany.²² In other memoirs, we find these women through the retellings and memories of their comrades, mostly men. Following the 2015 publication of the

¹⁸ For example: Moallem, 2005; Moghissi, 1994; Paidar, 1995; Shahidian, 1994.

¹⁹ Nasrabadi, 2014; Gordon, 2021; Sohrabi, 2020.

²⁰ Padilla, 2019; Takriti, 2013, 302.

²¹ Nom de guerre.

²² Afraz, 2015.

Persian-language accounts of these sisters, their lives have become of increased interest as scholars have started to engage with this material.²³ I wonder if the Afraz sisters ever crossed paths with Layla Fakhro? Whether they encountered Layla in the camp when visiting the revolutionary school, or if Layla ever visited the hospitals they were based at?

The two sisters themselves would not survive to see the 1979 revolution in Iran. Rafat Afraz died within two months of her arrival in Dhofar, most likely from malaria. In this short time Rafat contributed to the revolution as a nurse, and her sister Mahbubeh, whose notes form the majority of the published memoir, writes about the many activities and practices she engaged in daily, from Rafat's role in administering injections and dressings for patients, to cleaning, sorting and classifying medicinal supplies. Aside from routine daily activities in very difficult conditions, Mahbubeh's writings demonstrate Rafat's kindness in her encounters with the people in the hospitals in Dhofar, and her determination in seeking better conditions for women and children in the Habkook hospital in what was described a "ghost town...a deserted, lifeless place" according to Doctor Kamel Muhanna who also spent time there in the tradition of the "barefoot doctors."²⁴

The Afraz sisters made many requests to the central committee to improve the conditions of the hospitals they worked in. One request was for food suitable for infants and children to be prepared, as they were often given food that they could not digest. When the suggestion was not taken seriously, Rafat took on the responsibility and would regularly make soup or rice pudding. A hospital cadre criticised her for trusting mothers with the pots and pans which contained food for their children, as he said that local people would steal the pots – and even questioned why children needed separate food. Despite being mocked, Rafat trusted the mothers by allowing them to keep their pots overnight after use, and to bring them into the kitchen the following day to collect the next portion. Sometimes, her sister writes, she would take the portable gas stove into the patients' rooms to show mothers how to make an anti-diarrhoea remedy for infants by boiling rice and using the starch water.²⁵ I note her small but radical acts of care because care is a radical political act, and because they reveal the hidden contours of internationalism as practiced by women, with feminist values as I understand them – even if these women did not consider themselves feminist. I see a similarity between Layla's work in pressing for women's issues to be taken seriously as PFLOAG policy, and Rafat's efforts to address the needs of women and children by enabling a space for mothers to claim their agency, neither of which would have happened without the activism of women.

Rafat's younger sister Mahbubeh Afraz was a doctor, and she would have been in her early twenties when she travelled across the Gulf. At the age of 23, she became the youngest woman to graduate from medical school in Iran with a dissertation on ectopic pregnancy from the University of Tehran, before she arrived in Dhofar. Women in the hospital were often too embarrassed to tell the Cuban or otherwise male doctors in Dhofar about their problems, so Mahbubeh's arrival was important as it was the first time they had access to

²³ Sohrabi, 2020; Mojab, 2023; Mojab, forthcoming.

²⁴ Muhanna, 2012, 137.

²⁵ Haghshenas, 2015, 134, 138.

a woman doctor.²⁶ Dokturah Zahra, as she was known, joined the medical ranks of Cuban, Palestinian, Lebanese, and other Arab doctors who volunteered in the revolution, as medical aid was an important pillar of international solidarity. After the military defeat of the Dhofar Revolution, Mahbubeh Afraz is remembered to have remained in the PDRY, where she worked on the Persian language anti-Iranian regime broadcasts on Radio Aden. She eventually ended up in Paris, where her life ended in tragedy on the eve of the Iranian Revolution, most likely by suicide.

In addition to the now relative and increasing visibility of Rafat and Mahbubeh in academic registers, another pair of sisters, Pouran and Hayedeh Bazargan, were also connected to the Dhofar Revolution through the same organisation. Pouran Bazargan is said to have spent some time in the revolutionary school. She lived to see the Iranian Revolution, and was forced into exile because of her political activities, passing away in 2007 in Paris. Yet she leaves few traces of her revolutionary life which spanned Oman, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, and elsewhere in the Middle East. Her friend and comrade Yassamine Mather writes that she was too modest to give interviews about her involvement and experiences, an indication perhaps of her lifelong commitment to the collective even after her clandestine activities came to an end.²⁷ She too, had a sister, Hayedeh, who was based for some time in the PDRY. It's a small but important moment when people from both sides of the Gulf were included in a shared political project. I do wonder though, how far the Iranians were really part of the revolutionary Gulf's political project? I would like to know more about the complexities in the shift from the MAN to the PFLOAG – and what this meant for women?

Jeyran

Dear Jeyran,

I loved reading and thinking about the sisters Rafat and Mahbubeh (Layla Fakhro's sister Buthayna also joined the revolution sometime after Layla). I was inspired and impressed that they volunteered as medics, and felt sad to hear about Mahbubeh's death. I wondered whether the disenchantment that enveloped many revolutionaries of that generation had played a role in it.²⁸ After a long exile, Layla also died at a relatively young age back in her home country of Bahrain – she had suffered from a lung condition since her time in Dhofar, which eventually forced her to move to the PFLOAG media office in Aden by 1972.²⁹ I also wonder if they crossed paths at the front...

The students from the Gulf volunteering at Dhofar were mainly part of the PFLOAG, one of the leftist groups that emerged from the MAN and crystallised after the June 1967 war. There were members of other political groups there, who also saw the Dhofar Revolution as a crucial battle in the regional liberation struggle from

²⁶ Ibid., 41-42.

²⁷ Mather, 2007.

²⁸ Salih, 2018.

²⁹ Takriti, 2013, 125.

imperialism.³⁰ As well as Bahraini teachers and engineers, I have read about Kuwaiti and Saudi Arabian militants, and Palestinian doctors and military trainers in Dhofar too. Layla was given responsibility for the children of the revolution: to keep them safe from enemy shelling, and to begin operating a school at the front – considered by many to be the foundation of public education for the popular classes in Oman.³¹ The schooling programme had the features of a disciplined, militant leftist project. Students, regardless of their gender, were expected to participate in lessons, discussion forums in which they practiced auto-critique, and undertook training in guerrilla warfare as well as maintaining the camp, cleaning, collecting firewood, and preparing food.³²

As well as a commitment to armed struggle as a revolutionary tactic, through the adoption of class struggle, the Gulf leftist groups broke from the anti-Iranian stance of the Gulf MAN – calling instead for “joint struggle by Arab and Iranian workers.”³³ How these joint struggles linking people on both coasts were envisioned within the future of a liberated region (Gulf and beyond), is not clear to me. Have you read more on this? We know that there is a shifting imaginative geography that is being invoked and materially contested, through which possibilities are made (and at other times receded). Links across the northern and southern coasts of the Gulf are not new to this moment, as the comrade of Layla, Abdunabi Alekry, has written and spoken about: there was another left in the Gulf, that emerged in confluence with members of “the Iraqi Communist Party and the Iranian Tudeh”³⁴ in the 1950s.³⁵ For example, a communist underground movement formed by workers in Bahrain during the mid-1950s included and was shaped by experienced Arab nationalist and communist political activists from Iraq and Iran.

It feels important to name these connections too as part of the radical lineage Rafeef Ziadeh and Brenna Bhandar discuss in their book, and to do what Angela Davis describes as provoking “a proximity” among peoples, across time and space. She writes that, “this connection, both imagined and real, is crucial for understanding the conditions under which revolutionary struggle, radical thought, and praxis can and do emerge.”³⁶ I think there are connections which also carry, across space and time, from the stories of Layla and her comrades, including Mahbubeh and Rafat, and the many other revolutionaries at the Dhofar front which is quite simple. We can learn from the revolutionary women we are writing about here, who worked to meet the demands of their historical moment, and made history through ongoing praxis informed by Marxist ideology. I wish we had more material produced by them to learn from – but I also think the exploration of counter-archives in the region is still growing, and within it there is more material which will emerge.

³⁰ Alekry, 2014, 212.

³¹ Al Wasat, 2007.

³² Srour, 1974.

³³ The Gulf Committee, 2018, 115.

³⁴ Alekry, 2020.

³⁵ Musa, 1987, 80-1.

³⁶ Bhandar and Ziadah, 2020.

Returning to Layla, her memory and the effect of her work is archived and resonates through the lives of those who knew her. Dhofari scholar Mona Ja'bub remembers her mother's reaction to learning about Layla's death: "I told her Huda Salem died. My mother's eyes filled with tears and she said 'Allah yerham-ha (God bless her with mercy), I did not meet her and I do not know her, but God have mercy on her soul, she taught our children."³⁷ Layla Fakhro, according to her comrade 'Abd al-Rahman al-Nuaimi (1944-2011), was encouraged to write her memoirs, but refused to do so.³⁸ Perhaps this is partly why – as we discussed about the novel *Warda* – we often read about women through the words and imaginings of others (mostly men). I feel happy and moved by the fact that you and I are writing about them today.

These thoughts bring me to our question about archives and history-making. While recognising Layla's comparative (and unique) visibility, much of what we find about women from the Global South in struggles for national liberation and revolution feels like glimmers at best, or at worst – footnotes in someone else's history. At the same time, we know there is a rich archive of material produced by movement members – magazines, memoirs, bulletins, literature, film... I draw on Avery Gordon to see us as following the traces of a sociological "haunting," "an encounter in which you touch the ghost or ghostly matter of things; the ambiguities, the complexities of power and personhood, the violence and the hope, the looming and receding actualities, the shadows of ourselves and our society."³⁹ For Gordon, haunting is not about invisibility, but about "what's living and breathing in the place hidden from view: people, places, histories, knowledge, memories, ways of life, ideas" – and these hauntings "prompt a something-to-be-done."⁴⁰

I'll end with the words of Mona Ja'bub, who wrote her doctoral thesis on the history of education and social transformation in the Dhofar Revolution. She asks, "the stories of children who travelled by foot across all that distance, from the mountains of Dhofar – were they not part of the history of education?" The short answer, of course, is yes! The stories of the Dhofar Revolution, its revolutionary women – including the Dhofari women, who I am conscious I have not written about here – and the revolutionary school belong to and give to many more worlds than we can write about in this short piece. Beginning this work together, for me, produces the sense that there is so much to-be-done.

Salma

Dear Salma,

I have found your thinking with Avery Gordon's "haunting" on the question of women in anticolonial and liberation movements instinctively compelling, and in political communion with you I am troubled by the same ghosts. What are the ghosts that haunt us? There are many, but I think here especially, the ghosts are the

³⁷ Ja'bub, 2008.

³⁸ Al Mayadeen Podcasts, 2022.

³⁹ Gordon, 2008, 134.

⁴⁰ Bhandar and Ziadah, 2020, 182.

absent women in the registers of history, a demanding presence of that which seems absent. This is what Patricia Williams means by “finding the shape described by her absence,” in reference to her great-great grandmother, which inspired Gordon.⁴¹

It strikes me that the ghosts that bind us, and our present, to these past histories are still ever present – the “lingering” of the ghosts continue because the conditions that keep them alive have not been removed; so they continue to haunt.⁴² It should not be a radical act that we, as two feminist women today, are writing about these revolutionary women as agents of history, but perhaps the continued haunting partly explains why it feels moving, as you say?

The question of archive and history-making feels important here – we know that these women were there, even if we do not have all of the evidence. There are multiple layers of social violence: marginalisation in the male-dominated movements of their times and marginalisation in the History that is written today. If the political organisations, the PFLOAG, had an official archive which was not lost in the 1994 Yemeni Civil War, do you think we would find the women in there?⁴³ In locating revolutionary women like Layla in the revolutionary school, and the Afraz sisters in the clinic and hospital, the gendered nature of these roles in the revolution have become apparent to me; and I think this has implications on the sources required to find and tell women’s stories.

At the very least, if we had a full inventory of some of the cultural productions as you mention, less time would be spent on the searching and piecing together, as romantic as the endeavour can be, and more on the retrieval and understanding. *Sawt al-Thawra*, the PFLOAG’s weekly bulletin, offers a rich source of material on women’s political participation in the Dhofar Revolution.⁴⁴ It is there that we find details about the Omani Women’s Organisation which was officially formed in June 1975, led by Wafa Yasser and deputy Huda Muhad.⁴⁵ In the bulletin we learn about the first congress which was supported widely by the Revolution and the PDRY, and the international visits made by these women to places such as the Soviet Union or Vietnam. These women, their organisation, and their activities were part of the revolutionary project and its history, they should not merely be relegated to *women’s history* as we often find in the history books.

Mona Ja’bub has also raised the point that the women’s organisation was formed in 1975 near the revolution’s military defeat – why not earlier? Mahbubeh Afraz, from her short time spent in Dhofar, wrote a detailed critique of the revolution. Her reflections on the women’s organisation specifically are fascinating... and could possibly offer an answer. Mahbubeh mentions the Bahraini women (although not by name) who sought to organise women around the same time as the establishment of the revolutionary school in 1970–1, but notes that the women’s organisation at this early stage could not fulfil its aims.⁴⁶ Mahbubeh’s critiques, in general,

⁴¹ Gordon, 2008, 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xix.

⁴³ Takriti, 2013, 4.

⁴⁴ Shamshiri-Fard, 2022.

⁴⁵ *Sawt al-Thawra*, 1975; see also Salim Al-Jadidi, 2020.

⁴⁶ Afraz, 2015, 170.

are around the class tensions between the bourgeois women cadres and the local Dhofari women, which she claims resulted in ineffective organising, rooted in a lack of understanding and a fundamental distance between the women cadres and their social base – the Dhofari women. She suggests that Dhofari women could not relate to circuits of internationalism that were limited to activists from an urban and bourgeois social location. Part of her critique is that even after the Omani Women’s Organisation formed in 1975, the foundational work of revolutionary political education was lacking, and she implies that ideas about forms of women’s organising were taken from internationalist circuits and applied inorganically in Dhofar, inattentive to the specificities of the local conditions and context.

Concerning these limitations of the revolutionary project, I am conscious of the intersections with class. We have barely addressed Dhofari women themselves in our discussion of the Dhofar Revolution. We know that Dhofar was the epicentre of a bigger revolutionary project in the Gulf, and yet, where do we find the Dhofari “peasant,” let alone the Dhofari “peasant” woman? I am glad Mahbubeh’s critique offers us something. (I don’t like academics’ use of the word peasant in English, I often wonder what my grandfather, who would never self-refer as such, would say if he knew history books refer to him as a peasant...) The Omani women that we learn about through periodicals such as *Sawt al-Thawra*, Wafa Yasser and Huda Muhad for instance, who led the women’s organisation, were presumably literate women. Of course, the PFLOAG had a variety of activities and outputs depending on specific aims, but I do wonder what it means that the Dhofari revolutionary subject could not read or understand the materials produced by the PFLOAG such as *Sawt al-Thawra* or *9 Yunyu*? Arguably these publications were intended for a regional and global audience, to cohere with internationalist politics and build global solidarity, but the gaps between the political outputs of any revolutionary project and its subject or social base warrant some kind of reflection.

I wonder if we have to increasingly shift our medium from the textual to the visual, as you already do so well, in order to trace those other Dhofari women. Heiny Srour’s footage comes to mind, as well as photographic material we have in archived collections: Helen Lackner, Fred Halliday, and many more personal and private collections. I recently learned from Patricia Hayes the conceptual importance of the visual in our writing and analysis of history – in a central and not supplementary way, which seems appropriate in retrieving the subaltern histories from below that we are interested in.⁴⁷ It returns us to the arguments that feminist and social historians made just a few decades ago, political histories must also engage social histories.

In terms of the wider revolutionary project of liberation in the Gulf, there seemed to be a moment of possibility as you mention, but also of limitations even in that momentary (transnational) potential. The popular revolutionary movement in Dhofar was Arab-centric, given its genealogy as you have noted, and the numbers of Iranian cadres that volunteered and joined the revolution were small. The Iranian engagement was always in terms of solidarity, although some of the leftist Iranian organisations who sent cadres to Dhofar and who operated across the Middle East state that they viewed their transnational activities as part of a “regional revolution.”⁴⁸ In addition to the Iranian cadres who joined the Dhofar Revolution, Iranian students and activists

⁴⁷ Hayes, 2006; see also Azoulay, 2019.

⁴⁸ Anonymous, 2022.

across the world widely supported the liberation struggle and condemned the shah's role in crushing the revolution. An obvious point of contention is that the "Persian" Gulf was not envisioned in the PFLOAG's project, as they viewed the pro-US and pro-British shah as an occupying and invading power in the region. As expressed in the PFLOAG's name, the project was for the "Arab/ian" Gulf, such that Iranian student supporters of the revolution in the Confederation of Iranian Students National Union (CISNU) across metropolitan centres questioned their support for the Dhofar Revolution.⁴⁹ They decided that they would support the revolution, putting political liberation before nomenclature albeit stating their commitment to the "Persian" Gulf. In this period, multiple solidarity committees abroad such as the Gulf Committee in London, UK, and the Support Committee for the Liberation Movement in the Gulf, based in California, US, were advocates of a transnational liberation project in which a mutual "Gulf" was envisioned.⁵⁰ Fred Halliday made such an important argument in seeing the people of both the Arab and Persian sides of the Gulf as united in the same struggle – against the tyranny of the shahs and sultans of the region.⁵¹

I am intrigued to learn that Layla Fakhro did not want to write her memoir. The same applies to Pouran Bazargan, for whom, as I briefly mentioned, it was a political decision to be discreet about her role in collective movements even after the period of her clandestine activity.⁵² This is why we are able to become more familiar with the narratives of women such as Mahbubeh and Rafat Afraz, based on the little traces we have, as opposed to Pouran and her sister Hayedeh Bazargan. But as compelling as the ghosts may be in activating our imagination, I would love to know more about Pouran's revolutionary and internationalist life. It remains possible, through her living friends, family, comrades – that work remains to be done. I am not sure what to make of it when political commitment ultimately means that people like Pouran Bazargan and Layla Fakhro are active in their own historical forgetting, making it harder for us to remember?

Perhaps we can end with Avery Gordon's words, which capture the past and present/future stakes for why we are engaged in this conversation:

To be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost that never even existed, really. That is its Utopian grace: to encourage a steely sorrow laced with delight for what we lost that we never had; to long for the insight of that moment in which we recognize, as in Benjamin's profane illumination, that it could have been and can be otherwise.⁵³

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⁴⁹ Matin-Asgari, 2002, 138.

⁵⁰ See Shamshiri-Fard, 2022.

⁵¹ Halliday, 1974.

⁵² Mather, 2007.

⁵³ Gordon, 2008, 57.

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