

## **Poet's Death Raises Many Questions**

**Author:** [Hafizullah Gardesh](#)

While her husband proclaims his innocence, the death of Nadia Anjuman has attracted international attention to the plight of many women in this country.

There is a lock on the door of the classroom where fourth-year students study language and literature at Herat University. Students are reluctant to return, because they do not want to see the empty space where their classmate Nadia Anjuman once sat.

At just 25 years old, Nadia was already well-known poet in Afghanistan. Her first book "Flowers of Smoke" had just been published, and she looked forward to a bright future.

But on November 4, following a fight with her husband, Nadia died.

The exact circumstances of her death may never be known. Conflicting testimony, along with her family's refusal to sanction an autopsy, means that the secret of Nadia's end may remain permanently entombed with her body.

According to Dr Barakatullah Mohammadi, head of emergency services at the Herat hospital, Nadia's body was brought to the hospital at 12:30 am on November 5. An examinations revealed some bruising around her right eye, but no other signs of an injury that could have caused her death.

"The blow alone would not have killed her," said Mohammadi.

"We told Nadia's family that we would have to [perform an autopsy] to find out the reason for her death, but they would not give their permission. So the reason for her death is not clear to us, either."

One thing is clear - Nadia's death stems from the conflict and violence, which are an integral part of many Afghan women's life.

Farid Ahmad Majid Nia, 27, Nadia's husband of 15 months, has been arrested and charged with the murder. A lecturer in philology at Herat University, he vehemently proclaims his innocence. Nadia committed suicide, he insists.

"I loved Nadia. Life makes no sense to me without her," a weeping Farid told IWPR during an interview in his jail cell.

He does not deny that he hit her. According to Farid, he arrived home late on the evening of November 4, which was the third day of the Islamic festival of Eid. During Eid, it is customary for Afghans to visit friends and relatives, to celebrate the end of the Ramadan fast.

"Nadia was all dressed up to go visiting. I told her it was late, so we would only go to her sister's. She

became angry, and cursed me, calling me names like 'ass' and 'son of a bitch'. I slapped her," he said.

A few hours later, according to Farid, Nadia came to him and told him she had taken poison, "She asked me to take care of our six-month-old son. She died before we could get to the hospital."

But Nadia's family and friends do not believe her husband.

"Farid called me and told me that Nadia had taken poison," said Nadia's mother, who did not want her name used. "But when I got to the hospital, I saw that Nadia's face and neck were all bruised. I am 80 per cent sure that she died because of a blow by her husband."

She blames Farid's mother - who has also been arrested - for her daughter's death. Following Nadia's death, Farid's mother fled from the house.

Nadia's mother categorically dismisses any possibility of suicide. "Nadia was very hopeful about her life. She never thought of suicide," she said, weeping.

A close friend of the poet, Nahid Baqi, also rejects Farid's claim that Nadia took poison.

"Nadia was very religious and she strongly condemned those who committed suicide. She said it was against Islam," said Nahid.

Nahid said it was impossible to believe she would have taken her own life and abandoned her six-month-old son, "Nadia loved her child so much. She brought in his photo every month to show us how he had grown. She would suffer anything for him."

According to Nahid, Farid was caught between his wife and his mother. It was his weakness that caused the problems, she said. She does not believe the murder was intentional.

"Farid's mother wanted him to marry someone else," said Nahid. "When he insisted on Nadia, she began to hate her."

Nadia's mother-in-law was always cursing and criticising her and trying to turn Farid against her.

"In my opinion, Farid is guilty because he could not create a balance between his wife and his mother," she said.

Farid himself corroborates this.

"I had no problem with Nadia," he said. "But she and my mother were always fighting.

“I was two years old when my father died. My mother brought me up, and faced a lot of problems. I also had problems trying to marry Nadia. I did not want to make either of them unhappy.”

According to Afghan tradition, a wife becomes a member of her husband’s household. So Nadia had little choice but to live with Farid’s mother, no matter how strained the relations between them.

“I had a house, a wife, and a child,” said Farid, while tears coursed down his cheeks. “I was so happy. I did not want to lose them.”

“If Nadia really did die because I slapped her with this small hand, then kill me, or cut off my arms,” said Farid, and then fainted.

Following his arrest, Farid attempted suicide by injecting himself with kerosene from the heater in his jail cell. He was rushed to the hospital, and soon recovered. He is now back in custody.

Farid’s mother has been arrested for complicity in Nadia’s death, but she refused to speak with IWPR.

While neither Farid nor his mother have yet faced trial, they have already been convicted by the media. Headlines proclaiming “Prominent poet beaten to death in Afghanistan” have already appeared in the Afghan and international press, and Women’s Affairs Minister Massouda Jalal recently told a conference said that Nadia had been killed by her husband.

Farid’s cousin, Dr Abdul Ghani Navid, is angry at the negative press, and bitterly condemns those who have decided the husband is guilty without having heard the whole story.

“According to the Afghan constitution, the accused is innocent until convicted by a court,” he told IWPR. “The media is not telling the truth. This is not justice. We demand that the case be handled properly.”

The head of the Crime Control Unit of Herat Province declined to be interviewed. Lawyers in Herat also refused to comment, saying that until the case was decided, they were not free to speculate.

Suraya Pakzad, head of the Neda-ye-Zan, Voice of Woman, association in Herat province is convinced that Nadia did not kill herself, “I knew Nadia, and it is simply not true that she committed suicide.”

Nadia’s death is very much in line with Afghan culture, she said. In Herat, hundreds of women die every year because of family violence.

“Not a week goes by without us going to the hospital to cry over the body of a woman who died because of violence in the family,” she said.

Salima Ghafari is an IWPR reporter in Kabul. Hafizullah Gardesh is IWPR’s local editor in Afghanistan.

Wahidullah Amani also contributed to this report.

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