Fiction Piece

The Rarest Gift

The Prologue

It was the 17th of July 2003 when the plane split the clouds and I captured the first glimpse of my home country in nearly thirty years. Twenty thousand feet above the ground. It was almost impossible to sense how much Afghanistan had transformed over the decades. The sandy cliffs and the never-ending, barren backdrop seemed exactly how I had left them. For a fleeting, blissful minute, I was hopeful.

As the plane descended and the seatbelt sign glowed above our heads, the changes began to present themselves to me. I stared, transfixed, out the window. The charred rubble of former homes emerged from the dust clouds. The carcass of an army tank was discarded at the side of the dirt track. Enormous cavities were carved into the ground where the bombs had struck, so that from up above it looked like a body punctured by a thousand bullets. The land beneath me was not simply countryside, but the graveyard of a village.

I slid down the blind.

Even through the two inches of plastic that separated me from the scene, I could still feel the scorching Afghan sun nagging at me, at the hottest part of the day. In my last summer in Afghanistan, when I was just eight-years-old, I remember my father ordering me to stay indoors whenever the sun crawled to its highest peak.

Women are far too fragile for the heat.

I glanced at the digital watch on my wrist, a birthday present from my husband back in San Francisco, and the shimmering green figures formed 13.18PM. Twelve minutes ahead of schedule. If I had only known then that the timing of my arrival would be the only positive recollection of that day, I would not have been so desperate to set foot on the tarmac of Kabul International Airport. If I had only known what was waiting for me, I would not have been so eager to return. As I strode across the asphalt, I took a deep breath and filled my lungs with the familiar air. I began to remember.

کور راغلي پخير نه و. Welcome Home.

The wheels of my suitcase squeaked along the linoleum floor of the airport terminal, as I was greeted by the clinical sting of disinfectant. I was the first of only thirteen passengers on my flight to reach customs. I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans and approached the officer, who was wearing a navy suit and a cynical expression. I held my breath and presented him with my passport. He spoke to me in English.

Name?
Safa Kohistani.

Age?
Thirty-Six.

Nationality?

I paused. I told myself that these questions were purely routine, but I was not comforted. The glittering gold emblem on my passport was not enough proof of my identity. My tatty H&M sweater and faded Levi's masked the individuality, the nationality, which I had once worn proudly, all those years ago. I was a foreigner in my own country. I avoided his eyes, absorbed in my own overwhelming shame, and said the four words which I didn't truly believe:

Learning together inspiring success

I am an Afghan.

* * *

The bus ride to the centre of Kabul lasted an uncomfortable, unforgettable twenty minutes. There were dozens more passengers than there were seats, and the heat swam before my eyes in thick, tangible waves. With every breath, every movement, my body ached. The engine snarled irritably as the bus struggled over fracture after fracture in the road, which had splintered at the hands of the insufferable heat and conflict. I had grown accustomed to public transport in America. But this was different. No air-conditioning. Not even the crack of a window, to welcome the smallest of breezes. Comfortable transportation, which I have taken for granted for most of my life, has been an unreachable luxury for my fellow Afghans.

The guilt inflated my chest.

As we ventured further into the heart of Kabul, more and more people filled its streets. On a first glance, it appeared that the vibrant, bustling life of my city still existed today: hundreds of busy people coursed through the veins of the city. Market stalls, full of colourful fruits and vegetables, lined each alley, men standing-by and shouting at the heaving crowd, inviting them to purchase their produce. Children played in the streets, flying kites of every colour: sapphire, lilac, magenta. They chased one another, giggling and smiling. I smiled too. I looked a little closer, greedily lapping up every delicious detail.

I noticed something which forced my heart to skip a beat and caused the smile to disappear from my face. The women in the streets were identical. Clothed from head to toe in burqas, it was impossible to tell the difference between them, as they glided amongst the men and children. Unnoticed. I tried to discern faces amongst the floating clouds of blue, green and red, but I could not see past the gossamer netting beneath which they hide. The burqa: a fabric cage designed to disguise one's individuality. The material shivered in the breeze, so that the figures looked inhuman.

Like شبحان. Like ghosts.

The woman sitting next to me was embracing a tiny baby girl in her arms, and murmuring an Afghani nursery rhyme under her breath.

وا ومېل ريپ د وا ريپ,
و یمم د.
رس د امز هت وسات هب زه,
وي ېسداد، ييوا هن هت ف ېک هړز هپ.

Round and round the lemon tree,
Danced the ladybird.
I'll tell you my secret,
If you dare not say a word.

The baby was wearing a bright yellow dress with sun flowers on the collar, and a layer of lace rippling from each of the seams. Her flecked copper eyes glinted in the sunlight. Watching me closely, with childlike curiosity. Even when the baby drifted to sleep, her mother continued to mutter restlessly, as though it were more to quieten her own worries rather than the infant. The baby girl hadn't made a sound the whole bus-ride, utterly unaware.

How wonderful that must be.

Through the widow, I caught sight of a bronze gate, bent out of shape, but strangely attractive. I recognized that gate. Behind the rusty barrier lay a scattered collection of indiscernible rubble, a heap of unidentifiable remains. The remnants of a window rested on the dirt, a frame without the glass. The only thing which

remained standing was a giant elm tree, stark without the leaves. There were weeds twisting around the debris, marking their territory.

I stared. This was the gate I had vaulted in an act of foolish bravery, when I was only six-years-old, simply to impress my big sisters. I had to have seven stitches that day. The scars are still etched into my skin. This was the tree we had planted the first day we moved in, but we had to evacuate long before it had time to flourish. This was the house where I had grown up. This was the house where I had made all my memories. I veiled my face with my hands and wept silently.

The baby began to laugh.

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Six years have passed since my return to Afghanistan. Six times the leaves have blossomed on the lemon trees, only to fall a few months later. I can still remember everything, every piercing detail: the sensation of the hot, dry Afghan air, the hoarse cackle of the bus engine, the baby in the yellow dress. I can replay every second again and again in my mind, like a beloved family memory, captured on a VHS.

Although the past is painful, and instinct is to forget, I have a duty to remember and to share what I witnessed that day. Afghans need to speak, need to shout, on behalf of other Afghans, however hard this may be. I turned my back on my home country once before and I have had to live with that knowledge ever since. Now, finally, I am turning back.

In Afghanistan, every name has a meaning. ‘Safa’ means وهاوخ رطاخ. Serenity. To say that I have ever experienced serenity would be a lie. But by writing the tale of a forgotten country, the tale of my forgotten childhood, I hope to put my mind at rest and finally achieve an understanding of my own name.

Here is where my story begins.

As I start to write, I finally appreciate the words my mother said to me the night we fled to America – The greatest gift for an Afghan is the ability to forget. This, however, is the rarest gift of them all.

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Chapter 1...

Word Count: 1,439

Non-Fiction Piece

The First Step

Ladies and gentlemen, staff and parents, fellow students, it is my **greatest** pleasure to address you today. I recently read a book that opened my eyes to an issue which, before now, I knew little about. I wish to share with you the haunting stories and harrowing facts I have discovered, which are far easier to learn than they ever will be to forget.

Assembled here in one room we have the Board of Governors, senior staff and a group of senior students *(gestures around the room)*. We are responsible for providing solutions to unsolvable problems and supplying answers to unforeseeable questions. As leaders of today and leaders of tomorrow, we sometimes take privileges for granted, so I wish to take this opportunity to thank you for listening to what I have to say.

Throughout history, societies have dictated that a good woman should be quiet and obedient. In marriage, for instance, a woman's consent was not necessary or desired. Her father had every right to bargain with a respectable suitor, without so much as asking her opinion. Her property, along with her independence and her liberty, would be passed into her husband's care straight after 'I do'. And from that day onwards, she would be his prized and purchased property.

In the 18th century, the Age of Reason saw the beginning of change and forced the subject of women's rights into the spotlight of political debate in the United Kingdom. In 1918, women assumed the posts of the hundreds and thousands of soldiers who marched towards the front line during the First World War, and had their first taste of independence and responsibility. In 1928, the *Representation of the People Act* ensured that everyone above the age of twenty-one, including women, had achieved the right to vote. **Finally**. No going back! Well, only for the countries who made it this far to begin with.

Afghanistan is now infamous for its outdated society. This country has been left in the past, centuries behind the rest of the world; the women of Afghanistan are still suffering under a medieval regime. The women of Afghanistan are restricted by the chains of history and ancient, unbreakable laws. Women shall not speak unless they are spoken to. Women shall not leave the house without the permission and the company of their husbands. Women shall not leave the house without a burqa.

Imagine, one morning, you *(points to a female student in the audience and smiles)* wake up to the humming of your relentless alarm clock, nagging at you to get up and begin another day. Grudgingly, you untangle yourself from the warm duvet covers, and tackle the stairs. After a late night battle with a coursework deadline (which you inevitably lost!) it takes three mugs of steaming coffee before you can face your next opponent – school. Another day of lessons provokes yet another avalanche of homework, crushing any hope of free time. And it's only lunchtime (*pause for laughter).* Could it be any worse?

This same morning, hundreds of miles away, a girl named Zeinab wakes up in the special burns unit in Herat. The eighteen-year-old, already a mother of two, stares down at her body, not recognising it as her own. Her arms, her legs, her torso are masked by a mesh suit, concealing the places where the flames have devoured her flesh. She can no longer endure the domestic violence, the **unbearable** suffering. She finally pours the oil from a lamp over her body and sets herself alight, as her husband watches. This is the only way for her to escape from captivity. She does not cry.

Nearby, a seventeen-year-old girl named Saida wakes up in a women's shelter in Mazar-i-Sharif, alone. She huddles in a corner and prays. After her father's unexpected death, her brothers sell her, at age nine, to a seventy-year-old man. He beats her with any household object to hand – a cooking pot, a shoe, an

ash-tray. He carts her around the country and sells her bruised and battered body to the highest bidder. Although Saida is now in care, her husband is negotiating with her family. He wants her to return. He wants his revenge.

'Law will let Afghan husbands starve wives who withhold sex'. 'Women under siege in Afghanistan'. 'Afghan women who turn to immolation'. These are headlines which frequently occupy the front page of newspapers all over the world, telling the true story of these women's lives. Although it seems to foreign to us, in Afghanistan, it is normal. I believe that something, no **everything**, should be done to force this antiquated and barbaric regime into the 21st century. It is so easy, so effortless to take for granted the countless luxuries which we (*gestures towards the* audience) thoughtlessly assume day after day: a roof over our heads, a warm bed, a caring family – luxuries which many Afghans have never dreamed of. Unlike the fallen women of Afghanistan, I have the right to a voice. I can address you today, freely, about a sensitive issue, without punishment. In fact, I have a duty to do so.

But what is the solution to this problem? What can we do to help? Masha Hamilton is a woman who has taken the first step towards reform. She used her eloquence and her freedom to pen four celebrated novels. She has also valiantly ventured beyond the security of our Western world to explore the mysteries of Middle East, Russia, Africa and Afghanistan, to reveal the truth of these unfamiliar worlds. Hamilton encountered hundreds of child brides, war widows, beaten wives – brave but barely alive. They inspired her to craft what would be the most awe-inspiring of her numerous achievements: the *Afghan Women's Writing Project*, an organisation in which acclaimed professors and authors in the United States teach the women of Afghanistan to read and write over the internet. The Afghans often register using false details: in knowledge, is life-threatening power. Hamilton said that her journey, through war zones, through bombed villages and through visions of pain and terror, explained to her that "Afghanistan was one of the worst places in the world to be a woman", so she did everything in her power to "allow the voices of Afghan women – too often silenced – to enter the world".

Siba Shakib, a film-maker, writer and political activist, is another inspirational woman. She was born and raised in Iran, so she can see the truth: she is not blind to the conflict of the Middle East, she is not deaf to the desperate cries of Afghan mothers. Shakib met an Afghan woman named Shirin-Gol at a United Nations refugee camp in Iran. She stood behind the food stall and watched, helpless, as a UN official refused to provide Shirin-Gol with the wheat that she so urgently needed for her four starving children. Shirin-Gol was the only Afghan woman in the camp who approached Shakib and asked if she could share her life story with the author. *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* was the product of this meeting, a non-fiction account of the life of the Afghan woman who witnessed more grief and pain in the first decade of her life than any of us will witness in a lifetime. The book has been translated into twenty-seven languages, so that Shakib's voice can be heard all across the world.

Before I read this book, I knew little about the conflict in the Afghanistan which has destroyed lives, homes and hopes. When I read this book, I could not seek refuge in the fact that it was merely a fictional portrait, painted by a talented author. I was forced to acknowledge that the narrative was not a fairy-tale, the woman was not simply an imaginary character. It was real. It made me realise just how lucky we are, and that it is our duty to help those who are not so fortunate.

History has taught us that, of course, change is not easy. But with every effort made, however small, it becomes that little bit more probable. Women like Masha Hamilton and Siba Shakib have led the way into unknown territory. They have paved a path which, I know, will lead to a solution. Although it will be a long, unpredictable journey, it is one which will be worth taking.

A famous Afghan proverb suggests that one flower does not make spring and one drop of water does not make a river. We have a duty to know. We have a duty to act. We have a duty to start now.

Thank you.

Word Count: 1,431

Commentary

Introduction:

I explored the theme of the role of women in Afghanistan in both my pieces, but from diverse perspectives, thereby accomplishing my aim of presenting the world from two different view-points.

For my non-fiction piece I wrote a speech intended to be spoken by myself at one of the Speaker Evenings at my school, about the advancement of women's rights in Afghanistan. This genre allowed me to present a polemic and fulfil my purposes: raising awareness and encouraging the intended audience – parents, staff and senior students at the British School of Brussels – to consider what they could do to help. The principal duty I explored is the importance of using status and power, such as being a speaker at a prestigious event, to raise pressing issues.

For my fiction piece I wrote the prologue to a best-selling novel, written from the perspective of an Afghan woman, about her return to Afghanistan. The prologue genre is significant as it represents both the beginning of the book and the beginning of the character's journey. The purpose is to allow the intended audience – readers in the Western World, who may not be aware of the plight of women in Afghanistan – to see the country through the eyes of a victim. The main duty I explored is the responsibility the woman feels toward her native country and the dilemma she faces now that it is a war zone.

Analysis:

At whole text level, I wrote both pieces in first person. I chose the most active narrative perspective to create my fictional character as this demonstrated that Afghan women can have voices. In my non-fiction, the first person perspective demonstrated that the speaker, myself, has personally taken action to fulfil her moral obligations. I also included a shift from first to second person when comparing the daily routine of an audience member to that of a young Afghan woman to put the problem in perspective and remind the audience how lucky they are.

The register of my non-fiction is high formal and is written in Standard English, as this would be appropriate for the occasion: I addressed the audience as "ladies and gentlemen" which fulfilled a suitable level of politeness. I wrote my fiction in Standard English for different reasons: I wanted to convey how long the character had been away from Afghanistan by employing orthography, to show that she is finally literate, and American spelling, such as "recognized", to show that it was in the USA where she ultimately learned to read and write.

I incorporated spoken word features in my speech to reflect that it is a spoken text: prosodic features, such as stress, which I placed on premodifying adjectives to qualify abstract nouns like "suffering", are demonstrated in bold. I indicated paralinguistic features using parentheses and italics, for example "*(gestures around the room)*", to show the body language I would use during the speech. I also added a repair – "something, no everything" – to show that I would adjust certain words, as the text would be read live.

I manipulated the structure of my fiction piece to reveal that it is a memory: the phrases in italics, such as "*I am an Afghan*", show that these are the words which she remembers exactly. The one-line paragraphs, such as "The baby began to laugh", demonstrate areas which are too painful for her to go into great detail. The white space indicates the places where she cannot, or does not wish to, remember. As a result, the form appears disjointed on the page, symbolising the fact that memories can be elusive and hurtful to recall.

At sentence level, I used minor sentences, such as “Like ghosts”, in my fiction to represent the discomfort of the female character, as the grammatical incompleteness represents her inability to think of words which would do justice to her horror. Furthermore, I was inspired by the novel *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes To Weep* by Siba Shakib to omit speech marks entirely from the text and use free indirect speech – such as “Women are far too fragile for the heat” – as this suggests that these exact words have played within her mind a thousand times over. Furthermore, when describing the true stories of the Afghan girls in my non-fiction, I transitioned into the present tense, for example “Saida is recovering”, to demonstrate that the problem is ongoing, to make the situation seem more real to a distant audience.

At word level, many of the techniques I employed in my fiction are intended to demonstrate the emotional ambiguity of the female voice. For example, I juxtaposed the Standard English with words in Pashto to demonstrate that her loyalty is torn between two cultures.

One of the literature features I crafted into my fiction was the extended metaphor of death and decay, using common nouns like “carcass” and adjectives like “charred” , to demonstrate how much damage the war caused. Moreover, I incorporated the symbol of the elm – a tree which would characteristically be found in a graveyard – which suggests that the environment, as well as the population, is in mourning.

One of the rhetorical devices in my speech was the epizeuxis “so easy, so effortless”, which subconsciously appeals to the guilt of the audience. I also incorporated a sententia, a device which quotes a well-know idiom to apply a general truth to a situation: the Afghan idiom “one flower does not make spring...” seemed an evocative and memorable way to end my speech.

Evaluation:

My wider reading has been an eye-opening experience: Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite* Runner was my starting point, encouraging me to read *A Thousand Splendid Suns* which explored similar themes but through a female voice. However, Siba Shakib’s *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes To Weep* fascinated me the most: it was also written from a female perspective, but was a true story. I explored the concept of women helping women, as it captured my imagination: I was both intrigued and appalled by the fact that the standard of living between women in the Western World and those in Afghanistan could be so inexcusably different, so I recorded the thoughts of two opposite women from two opposite ends of the world.

Word Count: 1,000

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