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Raw Whispers





Seeing through the mist.



Seeing through the mist.

This issue is an invocation to readers to see through the mist. What is this mist? Is it the fog created by our mental afflictions? The circumstances that make life difficult? The trials of being a woman? The trials of being human? The challenges of samsaric existence?

Perhaps if we learn to see through the mist, we will come to understand that we can walk through it, walk out of it, and simply just recognize it for what it is: mist. But what does that even mean?

Welcome to your new quest. Let's walk through the mist stronger and better than yesterday?

– Rinchen Angmo



Voices and Visions.

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I don't know

My head is on the verge of bursting
I feel, I don't know what I feel anymore
Fears overwhelm my mind
Tears, they seem to be frozen somewhere on their way
out

It's like I'm unsure of everything these days

It's like

I don't know what it's like. I don't.

Beneath my put together self,
There's another self that's broken and breaking.

-Rinchen Angmo



What's in my Brains?

Shabana Hashimi interviewed by Rinchen.

Shabana is the founder of Afghan Women Express. She has majored in English Literature and Media Studies at Ashoka University.

Hi Shabana, can you share a little bit about yourself?

My name is Shabana Hashmi. I'm from Afghanistan. I was brought up in Iran as an Afghan refuge. In 2005 we moved to Afghanistan because we were not able to obtain an education in Iran. So I started my schooling there in Kabul. We were there for 11 years. But then due to some security concerns we had to move back to Iran. So we moved back to Iran in 2015. But once again, being unable to get an education in Iran, I decided to come back to Afghanistan by myself. Some Iranian teachers helped me through this process as my father was not allowing me to go back to Afghanistan alone. I came to Afghanistan in 2016 and was finally able to graduate from school in 2017.

In the middle I applied to a boarding school, the only one for girls in Afghanistan. Through that school I got connected to Ashoka University in India; so I applied there and got admitted. In 2018 I joined Ashoka University with full financial aid. I have been at Ashoka University for the past 5 years.

So ya, I majored in English Literature and minored in Media Studies. So that's where the idea of running this page (Afghan Women Express) came from. I thought I'll combine my experiences as an Afghan girl with the education I have received over the past five years to create something unique so that people around the world have access to Afghan women's narratives.



Through this I wanted to share the unique stories Afghan women's resilience, hopes and desires in the English Language so that the world can read them and remember them.

I'm also an artist. I practise art in my free time.

How did moving back to Afghanistan from Iran feel, during both the first and second time? What difficulties did you face and how did you overcome them?

When I look back to the time when we first moved to Afghanistan, I can see my family and myself facing lots of challenges; amongst which living with at my relatives' house was the prominent one. I have this big family of fifteen people, so it was very difficult to stay at my relative's house for almost a month. Earlier we had been living in Iran as Afghan refugees; while moving back to Afghanistan we had to sell everything in our house in Iran. So when we returned to Afghanistan it felt like coming back to a new country and building everything from scratch. I had built my identity as a child in Iran; so I now had to rebuild everything in Afghanistan. I even had to change my accent from Iranian Persian to Afghani Persian. So there was this sense of moving to a new country and dealing with cultural shock. But personally, what was most difficult for me during that period was building a new identity. As a child since I lived in Iran, I had thought that Iran was where I belonged and Iran was my home. But on moving to Afghanistan, everything just collapsed and I had to build up everything again.



So it felt like you lost too much merely within a week: your identity, your childhood, your house and everything. It was a very difficult experience returning to Afghanistan, where I really belonged; but I had no sense of belonging to Afghanistan because I had never really lived there. It was really hard, but with time as I went to school and made friends, everything started getting better. Shifting back to Iran was difficult because for 11 years I had lived in Afghanistan and all those years, I built my identity as an Afghan in a country where I really belong. In Afghanistan there was a sense of belonging which I never felt in Iran. Though living in Iran was easier, I never felt at home there.

Whereas in Afghanistan, this feeling of belonging was there, which I feared losing. And as I had anticipated, on returning to Iran, again the whole childhood trauma of not being able to receive an education returned. So that way, there was a phobia of returning to Iran. Moreover, now that I had grown up, I could make decisions. So after returning to Iran, I decided to get out of there. I tried to talk my father; with the help of my Iranian teachers I was able to get my father's permission to return to Afghanistan.

So moving to Afghanistan for the second time was really exciting because I knew I was going to finish the incomplete story of my schooling. So this time I was very hopeful. However, being away from my family and staying at my aunt's house was very challenging.

This second move to Afghanistan really helped me find my true potential. Being away, I wanted to get to know myself and do something with my life. I graduated from school, applied to Ashoka University (India) and joined Ashoka in 2018.



During your constant displacement, did you feel angry at the systems that had created such difficult circumstances for you and other women like you? How was your experience at Ashoka, what did you choose to study and why?

I think the system is always to be blamed. We can rarely change the system because we're not at the top of the power structure. But the one think which I'm still angry about is the system of hierarchy which more or less can be seen in India as well.

For instance, the decision to return to Iran for the second time, was arbitrarily made by my father despite the rest of the family's opposition. We opposed the decision because in Iran we would not have the opportunity to study as we would be refugees there.

Hence, I feel the system of hierarchy has to be broken.

Women in Afghanistan, are even in this age, the victims of this hierarchical system.

In Ashoka, I studied English Literature. I'm really glad that I picked it because reading about how women have come so far to where they are today was very inspiring. When I picked the subject, I didn't know about the tremendous role played by women in literature; I chose it because I thought that if I learn how to express myself freely and properly, I would be empowered to fight for my rights and the right of all women.

Even though I still can't express myself in English, the way a native English speaker would, I have been able to improve on my English language skills. Taking up English literature and media studies helped me to brush my English language skills and gain knowledge about how societies have evolved and women's participation in societal evolution.



It enabled me to understand how to amplify the voices of women and make them heard around the world. Picking Media Studies was a conscious decision, because I felt that after studying English literature, media studies would be the right path to choose in order to pursue my goals.

In what year did you move back to Iran? At that time did women enjoy more liberties in Afghanistan compared to Iran? How is the situation for women in Afghanistan now, compares to the past? Also, which female authors inspired you the most? Do you feel a sense of fulfilment having started your 'Afghan Women Express' page? How have other Afghan women responded to your initiative?

I think it was somewhere in the middle of 2015 and of course after the collapse of the Taliban in 2005 and until 2015 women had achieved a lot; they were educated about their rights as a human being and they fought for that. And I think the most important right that they achieved over those ten years was their right to education and the right to work outside the home; which I think for a woman is very important.

Before these years women had been targets of orthodoxy as well as violence. So at least those women could gift the opportunity of education to the next generation of women. One of those women was my mother; she fought for our education. I come from a small village called Istaliff in Afghanistan. There, even today, no one has graduated from school. There both boys and girls can only attend school for until a certain age and then boys have to look for work and girls have to help with house work. My mom was a victim of Taliban regime and couldn't graduate from school; so she wanted her daughters to receive education and become independent. So that became my dream. I'm striving to achieve and fulfil that dream.



So ya, all these women received these rights and understood their other rights as well. Unfortunately, after the Taliban took over again, everything changed. In one of my articles, I picked the idea of the phoenix. The title was about how hope rises like a phoenix from the ashes of shattered dreams, something along those lines; which conveys the idea that even if they shatter our hopes and dreams to ashes, we can again rise like a phoenix. Compared to that time, women have lost a lot under the Taliban regime, but we will never give up; women will achieve what they strive for.

It is very difficult to pick any authors, but I would say that my favourites are the ones who are feminist and who fight for women's rights and education. They employ writing as a form of activism in order to inspire other women to voice themselves. All these authors say something that encourages, at least one woman amongst many. The two recent books that I've read are my favourite; one of them is Maureen Murdock and the title of the book is *The Heroine's Journey*. In this book she talks about how women have accepted so many burdens throughout history and to what extent they should accept them. She talks about how women should not accept more responsibilities than they can actually handle. The other book I like is by Julia Quinn.

The relative freedom that women have today is because of the battles women have fought in the past.

Coming to the second part of your question, Afghan Women Express has fulfilled a certain part of my dream to some extent and I'm still on the journey. I'm really happy about it because instead of sitting and dreaming of change, Afghan Women Express has enabled to actually initiate change from my side. I think even though most people are unaware of the value of this page, it will hopefully soon receive more attention. Talking to the incredible women of Afghanistan through this page has been wonderful.



It not only enabled me to convey their story to the world, but also taught me a lot and inspired me to inculcate strength and positivity. I might change the name from Afghan Women Express to Asian Women Express and thereby broaden the ambit; because I feel that the women of Asia have share sort of a collective story in many ways.

Educated Afghan women have been very forthcoming to support my page. I want women to find the page themselves, because if they value the vision they will search for itself themselves. Through these stories, I hope people take inspiration and make an effort to bring educational opportunities and awareness to more women.

What would you say to young women who are struggling to voice themselves? During your struggles, what is it that kept you going? In what ways do you feel individuals or collectives can change the world for the better?

My advice to women who are struggling to voice themselves would be to not give up. They should keep going, believe in their power and do whatever they can with whatever they have, specially in this day and age where there are limitless opportunities and limitless tools. Today we see women achieving things that seemed impossible in the past. So they should just believe in themselves and never give up.



All I'm saying is resistance is the key. We always think that we should be powerful in order to make a change, but I don't think that is the case. Today we have tools like social media and writing. Even if one person hears our voice, it is enough.

Also, we need to start fighting the battle against equality within our homes; I personally started my battle for equality from my own home. My father, my relatives, were against my education. I cannot really blame them because that is how they were brought up. But I still fought for my education.

For the second part of your question, there are many factors that keep me going. The first reason being my mom's dream to educate her daughters. The second reason was that because the children in my village were coerced to stop their education prematurely, I realized the value of education and the transformative effect it could have on my life and on the lives of people around me. So I wanted to take the lead and open the way for other children around me. The third and the most important reason was that I wanted to become a voice for my mother, sisters, other women and for myself. I wanted to learn and do something in order to add value to the world.

Also, I wanted to gain financial independence as well.

Though the three reasons comprise my motivation.

I was the first girl among my relatives to start getting offers from 6th grade itself, I taught and the first to get a University degree. And I can see how this has a positive effect on my cousins.

I think everyone can achieve anything with whatever they have. Everyone has unique stories; whether individually or collectively we can make the world hear these stories and that in itself would be a step towards change.



Which is why I'm here to share these stories because stories have extraordinary power. They can bring awareness and teach people something. These stories can truly educate people. The greatest stories come from ordinary people. Our stories might be difficult but they changed us into powerful individuals.

Going forward, what is the vision of your journey? What do you want to bring to the world with your journey?

This question is the hardest question I've ever been asked. I can't really give a concise answer because I've never come across such a question and I never gave it a thought; nonetheless, I'll give it a shot. We all have many fears living in such a dangerous world and at the same time fear that none of us can really change it by ourselves. But I confess that each one of us can bring positive change in our own way by taking small steps and by becoming the change that we really want to see in the world. And I feel that in this part of the world where I live, I want to see more women being involved in all spheres of life. My main focus is women because I'm a woman and I have been a victim of oppression all my life and I really want to change the way this works. I want my page to be a documentary of this change through the years. Through this journey, I want to inspire more women, specially young girls to take the lead. Hence, I created the Afghan Women Express platform whereby women's stories can inspire other women. Also, it will allow both women and men who read the articles to understand women's struggle. That will hopefully change their perspective regarding women and their role in the world.



Their letter

It is the time of the pandemic. Outside, the trees look serene oblivious to the sound of ambulance sirens in a nearby society compound. I am sitting inside glued to the wall, listening to my mother's wailing of how she could have done better if she had that job, how she would have had control over herself if she was financially independent.

When I see my parents and the arguments that they forge, the entire house becomes silent after a while, as if mourning the loss of love that existed between them; a love so small that perhaps its existence was never noticed before. From such arguments, I believe that love and marriage are two funny words to deal with. An alliance between two ethnic communities cannot churn love, it can only remain as an alliance meant to fulfill each other's needs. It is the social institution of marriage which perhaps introduces them to trust each other and make them fall in love at a later stage. In such an arranged marriage, love manifests itself in the form of a dominant and submissive subject. The result is that the submissive product of marriage repents. They are generally the ones with the most sensitive hearts. In my family's case, 'they' represent the woman. They, in my household, repent. Maybe if they were financially stable, they would have divorced him. Maybe my sister and I would have lived with a babysitter and lived fearlessly in school. Maybe our allowances would have been better; our lifestyle a little fancier.

When I look at my parents, irrevocably I think about my own fate, whether it is written in the same way as my mother's fate. In my childhood days, there was always this urge to break away from my mother, in an attempt to break the fate which I would eventually inherit from her. But over time I realized that worrying about my fate would only torment my present, past and future. It was futile to know the future and nonsensical to reverse something which was already set in motion. It is at that moment itself that I began to grow closer to my mother as I started shedding my insecurities and began embracing her faults and her ideas. She became different, I saw then that she had been everything a child could ask for. Our connections and our minds, as a mother and a daughter are interconnected and often transmigrate between the lines of our stories. Perhaps somewhere down in the deepest corners of my heart, I want her to smile again and revive her glow as she did some 10 years ago, even if that means unloving someone she cares about truly and who is probably the only one for her in this world. Perhaps somewhere in the stories that I write I often find myself narrating something which my mother would have probably felt and written. Perhaps in the manifesto that I present below, I want to speak this out loud to you:



You stood still, maybe to avoid his gaze, to avoid the embarrassment of falling in love with such a man. When he doesn't respond or speak to you as a dignified being, what should one do? Secretly unlove him.

Wait, isn't love blind?- A love that keeps you away from the realities and practicalities of the existing world. Can a blind love be unloved? Maybe you can try raising your voice at the slightest and the silliest of the discomforts.

'But isn't this cruel to his feelings? Isn't it immoral to intentionally hurt him?' What about the hurt that he imposes on you?

You place him at the highest pedestal and do everything according to his say, still, there are moments when you take the brunt of his anger, never at once realizing how much of your self-confidence shrinks. Do you remember the first time he shouted at you for not doing things in his way, when he first threatened to leave you and your children because of a silly argument? Do you remember when you realized the first time that you chose some emotionally unavailable husband and regretted each decision you ever made for him, for the sake of him?

Wait, you weren't allowed to choose. You were not given any options. If you did not fall in love with him willingly, then does it mean that despite not loving him from the beginning, you cannot unlove his love towards you?

Your memories under one roof will never be forgotten. Maybe leaving is not the best option. I know that on some days you will crave for him on lonely nights and wish to talk to him, maybe hold conversations when no one is around. But unloving him is necessary. Perhaps he should try it too. The nights will be less tormenting and maybe he'll understand why you chose to unlove someone you loved the most for most of your life. Perhaps this unloving process will teach you how to stay away from him, to grow independent and make your own decisions, financial or otherwise. When your kindness feels like a forced act, it is time to let go of it.

-Sonam Chhomo



Thank you!

Open for submissions for the following issue.

Email : rawwhispers@gmail.com

Instagram: @rawwhispers.