SISTERHOOD IS GLOBAL

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AFGHANISTAN: The Silent Victims

by Sina Wali

Clutching at the cold prison-gate bars, Mastoora waits in the middle of a silent crowd for the posting of names of political prisoners at the Pul-e-Charkhi jail in Kabul. The entire crowd is waiting for the list that will tell them if a brother, father, nephew, son, or grandchild is being held as a political prisoner in the deadly jail. Some have laid out their prayer rugs on the frozen ground and are offering prayers to Allah to deliver their relative from torture or execution.

A young soldier approaches with the list revealing the names of those held in this particular jail. The names of those not listed conveys dreaded news: execution. The crowd draws closer. Suddenly a young child breaks away from his mother and runs to one of the guards: "Uncle, uncle, when can I see my father?" he cries, and begs to be let in. The soldier gently pushes him away. But tears glisten in the soldier’s eyes; he too is helpless in this situation. He mumbles under his breath, "I wish I could help you."

A middle-aged woman wearing the veil lets out a blood-chilling cry. A guard has risked his own life to bring news of her brother. "Sister," he tells her, "don’t trouble yourself to wait here anymore. May God forgive your brother’s soul." She passes out on the snowy ground. A few people rush to her aid. There is nothing the crowd can do to help ease her pain.

An old Pushtun woman has brought warm clothes and some food for her grandson. She may be the sole survivor of her family; it’s uncommon for an Afghan woman to visit a prison site if there are any male relatives left to undertake this task. She draws the bundle from under her veil and pleads with the guards to take it inside the prison. Finally, out of traditional compassion for the elderly, he agrees. The rapport between the crowd and the prison guards is exceptional. The crowd knows that the guards secretly help the visitors and are grateful. But soldiers have orders from higher authorities, too, and any breach can lead to their death.

Dusk is approaching and the people gathered at Pul-e-Charkhi silently disperse, pain in their hearts. Mastoora’s husband’s name is not on the list. There is no record of him anywhere. She prays that he is not being held at the Demazang dungeons. The mere name of the dungeon sends a numbing terror down her spine. Mastoora heads for home in the dark. How will she calm her children tonight when they ask for their father? She cannot erase the look that came into their eyes when soldiers came to drag their father away long after the eleven o’clock curfew.

But the next morning she will draw her veil closer to her body and return to her prison-gate vigil, despite rumors that her husband has been tortured and already killed for supposedly collaborating with those who are called imperialists and capitalists. Omar was not a political activist but was merely working with an international agency. Mastoora doesn’t want to believe the rumors. For weeks she searches for a clue, a trace that

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Afghanistan. The goddess Harity, represented as having suckled demons, was a remnant of a Mother Goddess figure from the ancient territory of the Gandaras. She was subsequently assimilated by the Buddhist (early 2nd century C.E.) and Islamic (early 7th century) cultures, but has persisted as a presence in legends.
will lead to the whereabouts of her husband. She reminds herself of the Afghan code of bravery. She counts her blessings, thankful that further violence hasn't crushed her family, and remembering the night when her neighbors' pleas and their daughter's screams woke her from her troubled sleep. She had heard voices shouting orders in an unfamiliar language. A few shots. Then silence. For Mastoora, safety and stability have vanished, possibly forever. She misses the sounds of children playing in the streets. An aura of fear surrounds each individual person.

Tonight, Mastoora gathers her children around her. She whispers to them that they are going to visit their uncle in Paktia. She trembles inwardly and keeps her real plans secret, not daring to breathe the word "escape" to her children: an innocent remark from one of them might have grave consequences. Just a week earlier, the parents of a child in the fourth grade were incarcerated. In school the child had responded negatively to a picture of the new head of state, and the teacher had informed the authorities that the child was reflecting the views of the parents. The parents were questioned and tortured for contradicting the "People's Party."

Mastoora visits Omar's friend at the bazaar. Perhaps he can get her in touch with the right person. After several weeks Omar's friend arranges a secret meeting with a cousin. Together they plan the perilous escape. The cousin owns a truck and has a merchant's pass to export carpets across the border. Boxes are hidden under the carpets, one box assigned to each fugitive, all of whom have been instructed that at a code word from the driver, they must retreat to the hiding spots. The driver and all the passengers have risked their lives in this escape, and they each carry messages of death and violence in their hearts.

Under the carpets, Mastoora glances at the frail woman huddled next to her. She had greeted her softly with the Islamic salutation “Peace unto you.” They begin to confide in and trust each other—knowing what a woman alone without a male escort or children means. She has lost her spouse and is alone. Naheed is one of the few survivors of the Kerala village massacre, and she recounts the atrocities that occurred that night. Troops under Soviet direction had attacked in retaliation against the inhabitants of Kerala for "collaborating" with the Freedom Fighters. Every male over the age of eleven was rounded up in the village mosque and machine-gunned down.

The driver's warning cry brings Mastoora back to the present. They are approaching the border. They have been traveling at night and resting during the day to escape patrol guards and to avoid the suspicion of soldiers guarding the bridges.

Mastoora's entire life depends on these next few minutes. She grasps the hands of her children tightly for fear of losing one of them while fleeing across the border. The passengers have agreed collectively to divert the attention of the border soldiers to those among themselves who have exit permits; this will allow time for those who were unable to obtain permits their chance to flee.

The truck comes to a halt close to the border. The travelers descend. The border guards approach the truck, guns drawn. Those who have passports descend first, to keep the guards busy. A moment later the rest break into a run. The guards shout orders to stop. Then there are shots. Mastoora doesn't look back for fear of losing one second's flight. Every instant makes the difference between freedom and death.

Across the border the Pakistani official asks for identification. "Passport?" she wonders. "Identity Card?" Her existence is the sole evidence of her identification—that, and her children. The authorities offer her a refugee camp ID number.

On entering the refugee camp, she is struck by the sea of faces, all marked by the pain of loss of family, of country, of pride and dignity. Is there hope beyond all this? Her mind drifts back to the Pushtun nomad women who were accustomed for centuries to live in
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freedom with no restrictions on their lives. How have they come to this modern world of barbed wire, refugee camps, and iron curtains?

Mastoora is literate, young, and she has her children. Probably her chances for survival will be stronger. But what fate awaits those women who are devoid of these assets and who have learned only to survive in their own land? Who have never encountered anything foreign? How will they survive?

During her stay in the refugee camp, she sees much suffering. She sees children who have lost fingers to frostbite or limbs to bullets. But she also overhears the constant vow of those tortured or wounded: to return and fight the invaders.

The sophisticated weaponry of the superpower is not sufficient to break the will or the spirit of these brave people. They are survivors of a country often ravaged by war, resilient people who have endured countless invasions in history: Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, the British three times in the nineteenth century, and now a superpower.

In the camps Mastoora listens to the narrations of violence in the war she has fled. Always, it seems, the women and children suffer the most, as in the slaughter of women and children on April 27, 1978, at the Palace. A soldier who has deserted the army recounts the story. "I was ordered to attack the Palace along with several others. The men, women, and children were ordered to congregate in one of the Palace rooms. Then we were instructed to fire. Any soldier who refused to shoot was executed on the spot. I will never forget the horror in the eyes of this young woman before me. Her twin boys, who had been clutching at her skirt prior to the firing, now lay in a pool of blood. Her skirt was splattered with her children's blood. She just stood there and then suddenly she collapsed."

Mastoora had known the woman the soldier was describing. They had been classmates, and later their children had gone to kindergarten together. It was only a few days before the massacre that Mastoora had seen her friend take her twin boys to the kindergarten—two beautiful boys with tousled hair and eyes like those of young deer.

The new Marxist government turned the Palace grounds into a public site a day later. Crowds were forcibly assembled to witness the victories: the blood of slaughtered women and children soaking the carpets of the Palace.

The horror of this act moved the tribes to rebellion—women as well as men. Nor was it the first time Afghan women belted their image. Malalai is the heroine of the Afghan women's movement, Malalai, the Pushtun woman who carried the Afghan flag at the battle of Maiwand against British colonialism in the nineteenth century. Rabia Balkhi is another heroine; she was a poet and philosopher. A modern heroine is a young Afghan student, Naheed, who led the schoolgirls against the Russian invaders. During their march, Russian soldiers fired at the unarmed schoolgirls and many were killed.

No, we may be suppressed, killed, or exiled, but neither by Afghan men—nor by any foreign invader—can Afghan women be easily stereotyped.

Suggested Further Reading


Sima Wali was born in Afghanistan and attended Malalai High School and then Kabul University. Her family, the Mohammadzai clan, is the largest extended family in Afghanistan and one of the oldest; King Amanullah, a cousin of her father, was a well-loved reformer who was overthrown by Islamic-fundamentalist clergy. During the invasion of her country by the USSR in the late 1970's, Wali's immediate family was put under house arrest and many other relatives were executed—this despite the fact that no member of her family held a political position at the time. She fled the country under circumstances not unlike "Mastoora," and is living in exile in the United States, now pursuing her master's degree in the School of International Services, Washington, D.C., and working as Assistant Director of the Refugee Women's Program and Coordination Project of the Overseas Education Fund. Originally, she wished her article by-line to be pseudonymous, but since her immediate family has now escaped to join her in forced exile and thus can no longer be victimized by repercussions, she is proud to be able to sign her own name to her contribution.