

step to giving an important place to contemporary art as an educational resource in a hospital setting. Contemporary art connects us with the UDHR because, in fact, art is a human right in itself.

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Violation of Human Rights As Revealed in Afghan Children's Artworks

THEMINA KADER

ABSTRACT

Throughout recorded history the arts and literature have played a life-saving role in circumstances wherein human rights were threatened. During the first decade of the second millennium September 11, 2001 and Hurricane Katrina 2005 became symbolic chapters in American history. Both adults and children, who suffered emotional and physical trauma found release in graphic imagery and creative writing. And while print and electronic media has brought war in Afghanistan nearer to home, we in America remain largely ignorant of how victims of human rights abuses in Afghanistan have found solace. This article discusses two interrelated variables from a socio-historical, political, ethnographic, gendered, and religious stand points: first, violation of human rights as evinced by children's artworks; and second, what role, if any, art educators have played in the current debate on human rights in Afghanistan.

INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this article is to examine two interlinked and interdependent variables that speak, first, to the efficacy of art works as credible tools for recording violations of human rights and, second, to the role art educators have or have not played in raising the consciousness of students they teach regarding the war in Afghanistan. Artists have always been chroniclers of events whether those events are a result of natural catastrophes or instigated by human machinations. Although not many Americans had heard of Afghanistan before October 7, 2001 when the invasion began, it seems logical to ask why artworks depicting events in Afghanistan (Wintour et al., 2001) shouldn't have any relevance for art education.

International human rights have been enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and for over half a century successive UN declarations on human rights, including women's rights, have been accepted and have become part of the constitutions of most countries, including Afghanistan. In spite of that a plethora of articles and interviews collected on all electronic and digital formats have documented human rights violations in the aftermath of conflicts as they occur and affect the most disenfranchised sections of a population—women and children in every war-torn country, including Afghanistan (Ishay, 2007).

The Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, the rise to power of the Ayatollahs in Iran in 1979, and the September 11, 2001 attack on the USA are just a few examples among innumerable instances of rationales or pretexts used for invading a country based on ideological, financial, corporate, and security differences between the invader and the invaded. While both China's intransigence on the issue of Tibet and Iran's theocracy under the Ayatollahs remain politically intractable for the USA, "Operation Enduring Freedom" came to be perceived "as a springboard for U.S. strategic ambitions" (Conetta, 2002, p.44). The prevailing internal instabilities caused by "civil war, a shattered civil society and weak, non-responsive governance" (Conetta, 2002, p. 44) have been exacerbated by the varying national interests of outside powers. As a result, "Operation Enduring Freedom" presents itself as a case in point for how launching a war that would end Taliban rule and weaken Al Qaeda—which it did—became a moot point when Afghan civilians became casualties of war led by US forces.

The Rise of Taliban

In order to affirm the value of non-verbal cues that art works convey in the cases highlighted in this writing, it is essential to preface this article with a brief history of the tumultuous situation in Afghanistan from 1933 to the present. The rise of the Taliban in 1994 came through a succession of power struggles spearheaded by Mohammad Daoud Khan who abolished the monarchy of King Mohammad Zahir Shah in 1973 (Rashid, 2000). The overthrow and murder of Daoud in April 1978 by the Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) brought about Soviet rule of Afghanistan for the next ten years (Rasanayagam, 2003). The Mujahideen, or "holy warriors" waged a war against the Soviets, helped financially by the USA, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, culminating in the pullout of Soviet troops in 1989 (Kalman, 2003, p. 11). In April 1992 when the Mujahideen declared the Islamic State of Afghanistan they curtailed reforms initiated by the PDPA with regards to women's rights in the name of an Islamic ideology based on "notions of honor and shame underpinning cultural norms and practices [that] emphasize female modesty and purity" (Amnesty International Report, 1999, p. 1). The Mujahideen treated women's bodies "as the spoils of war" (Amnesty International Report, 1999, p. 3), meaning as "rewards for their wartime victories" (Abirafeh, 2009, p.15). This was the prelude to the rise in 1994 of the Taliban whose atrocities matched if not exceeded those of the Mujahideen. Finally, in response to the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001 the United States launched a successful invasion of Afghanistan to rout the Taliban government (Rasanayagam, 2003, pp. 83-94). The ouster of the Taliban, it was envisaged, would give the women of Afghanistan a voice and the opportunity to resurrect a

commitment to the education of children who for most of their young lives had been deprived of this basic human right.

WHAT ROLE HAVE ART EDUCATORS PLAYED IN SUPPORT OF HUMAN RIGHTS?

A tragedy at home is much easier to grapple with. There is a surfeit of literature on the Internet and on bookshelves across the country that will relive for posterity the tragedies of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Mitch Frank's book (2002) *A nation challenged: A visual history of 9/11 and its aftermath* is a compilation of photographs published by New York Times/Callaway. Robin Goodman (2002) and Alex Woolf (2004) have written children's books on the subject. Goodman's book. *The day our world changed: Children's art of 9/11* records a juried exhibition of 83 images executed by artists ages five to 18. Five years after Hurricane Katrina, Aperture published Richard Misrach's book *Destroy this memory*—a coffee-table-size book full of mostly horrific pictures of the hurricane. Douglas Brinkley, a historian at Tulane University and a resident of New Orleans, wrote an account titled *The great deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* that, according to Michiko Kakutani "gives the reader a richly detailed timeline of disaster" (2006, p. 2). Returning military personnel give interviews on YouTube, films are made¹ and poems are written, recited, and dramatized (Abuelo, 2002; Hill, 2008). Generosity finds an outlet in tax-deductible donations. Art teachers and students engage in making picture cards, gifts for their counterparts, and send letters of comfort to the victims. Many art educators have shared in the grief of students who have lost family in 9/11 or Katrina and teachers themselves may be bereaved. Yes, art educators have played a role in upholding human rights, because they feel outraged when injustices are visited upon people they can relate with. It galvanizes them into action. I had hoped to find instances of similar commitment in the case of Afghanistan.

After a prolonged and thorough search of sources for images made by American children and assiduously examining traditional sources on such search engines as ERIC, Education Research Complete, MasterFile Premier in libraries and Online, it became clear to me that Afghanistan had not been documented on either the front or back burner of any American art-making stove. There were no articles written by art educators in America on the subject of the war in Afghanistan, nor was there any artwork remotely connected to Afghanistan made by American children. Geographically, the closest country to the USA where teachers have engaged in doing something was Canada under the patronage of the Canadian Red Cross. *Art for Afghanistan: Helping the widows and wounded of Afghanistan*² is a kit designed for

1 See for instance, http://www.sna.gfilms.com/films/title/katrinass_children/

2 www.croixrouge.ca/cmslib/general/ewhl_art_for_afghanistan.pdf

upper elementary students and comes complete with lesson plans and a variety of fund raising activities for art teachers and their students.

Was this glaring absence of any involvement in activities that reflect American art educators' role in portraying human right violations in Afghanistan an aberration? I asked myself if this seeming educational and creative inertia was a norm that happened when violation of human rights or any other disaster knocked on doors thousand of miles away. To find an answer, I felt compelled to pursue an art-based research at the grass-root level that would emphasize the personal and experiential qualities of the victims of the Afghan war. That led me to the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) whose work with Afghan children has produced a gallery of images that are a testament to the trials and tribulations Afghan women and children have suffered under Taliban rule.

History of RAWA

In the history of women's struggles for human rights in Afghanistan, a name that is immortalized is Meena, a woman who gave her life so that the lives of other Afghan women would be better. Meena and her cohort of dedicated women founded RAWA in 1977. At the outset their activities were confined to providing basic social needs such as schools, hospitals, craft centers and training in various fields. After the overthrow of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989, RAWA's activities turned more political. Today, as in 1977, RAWA's work is carried out clandestinely mainly from Pakistan where close to 5 million refugees have found a modicum of hope and succor. This secrecy is essential because of the constant threat of death by the Taliban and their fundamentalist supporters. Still, RAWA's activities are amply documented online and in articles written by concerned citizens in various countries including the USA. Its online gallery of photographs has on view some of the most horrendous images not only of atrocities perpetrated by the Taliban but also of the so-called collateral damage caused by the on-going war. These photographs taken with all available technology represent one perspective of the war in Afghanistan. The children's artworks, produced without the aid of any technology or basic supply of art materials found so readily in most schools in the US, tell another story just as moving (Schober & Siebenhofer, 2003).

Out of a compendium of 33 children's images found on the RAWA website³ under the title "Paintings by Children of RAWA Schools and Orphanages" I have selected five as credible evidence of egregious violations of human rights in Afghanistan. I apply ethnographic principles that encompass the pedagogy of pluralism and cultural diversity, gender issues and power, religion and how it can

3 <http://www.rawa.org/kid-pic.htm>

be subverted to bring about a false sense of clarity to the actions of the Taliban vis-à-vis the women of Afghanistan.

Physicality. George Szekely (2006) extols the joys of seeing children make art at home and how that impacts art they make in school. The Afghan children who made these pictures did not have a "regular" school to go to and many had no homes either. Schools run by RAWA in Quetta, a city on the western edge of Pakistan, facilitated and encouraged children to make art. This afforded children a much-needed solace, and restored a measure of order to their lives. The therapeutic effects of the arts and literature are recognized widely as contributing to the process of healing from traumatic situations brought about by not just war, but all manner of social ills such as abusive parents, and drugs-related tragedies. Whereas storytelling and keeping a diary by older children can be very beneficial, according to Lev-Wiesel and Liraz (2007), younger children find it hard to find words to describe the traumatic event itself. They note that, "Looking at one's own drawings might enable the drawer to become a spectator to his or her negative experiences. This might facilitate the later verbalization of their experience" (p. 72). This is true of children in Afghanistan as confirmed by Zoya, a woman who was a child when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, and found comfort in drawing in her darkest moments. Zoya, now a member of RAWA, believes that sharing stories through images is one way of finding meaning in one's life (Zoya, Follain, & Cristofari, 2002).

Compositionally, out of the five images I discuss, only Figures 1, 3, and 5 have base lines. In all the images no foreground or background details obscure the protagonists. Three of the five pictures depict a Talib with his victim(s) (Figures 1-3). Judged by the prescribed standards of art making in American art rooms, none of the pictures display a so-called mastery of medium. If the works seem drab and poorly executed to eyes used to saturated Crayola colors on brightly colored construction papers we might ask whether these children had any 35-minutes long art lessons once a week as "school art" to invoke Szekely (2006). Yet there is no mistaking the message each picture imparts.

Gender and Power. What is that message? In every picture, there is a male figure who directly or covertly dominates the scene. Adam Galinski and Li Huang (2011), in a paper titled "How can you become more powerful by literally standing tall," postulate the theory that "across species, body posture is often the primary representation of power. Power is expressed and inferred through expansive postures" (Galinski & Huang, 2011, p. 1). In Figure 1, the child artist has written in the Pashto language "Stop Walking? Where are you going?" The striding Talib with his whip and rifle on the ready fits the profile of power. His posture also suggests fury at the woman who has dared to come out of her home unaccompanied by a male. Her back to the viewer, she has had to stop in her



Fig. 1

tracks submissive and resigned to her fate. In fact, she has flouted a cardinal rule of Afghan culture that deems “women’s honor is the cornerstone on which the politics of women’s rights rests” (Abirafeh, 2009, p. 15). Although she wears the *burqa*, her feet in high-heeled shoes are visible and she is carrying a purse, both of which could be construed as proof of foreign influence. As far back as 1978, during the Soviet occupation sweeping social changes such as the enforcement of “mandatory literacy programs for women and the abolition of bride price were viewed as direct attacks on Afghan culture” (Abirafeh, 2009, p.14). It is also germane to this discussion to note that Taliban authority extended not only to women, but also to men who sought to support women. It behooves Westerners to remember that the Taliban’s seemingly irrational edicts against women, for instance, the ban against being seen alone in public, and the requirement of being veiled from head to toe pre-dated Taliban rule; so that the re-enactment of these rules, from the Taliban’s point of view, was simply business as it should be.

In Figure 2 a young boy sees his books go up in flames. His arms are tied. He can do nothing. His helplessness in the face of the snickering Talib makes the entire picture even more depressing. Not only was education a taboo for girls, it seems that the Taliban could not countenance education for boys either.

Religion. Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Islam has been condemned almost universally for its ideologies that purportedly promote violence against non-Muslims and also its own followers. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the veracity or falsehood of that perception. What is pertinent, however, is to discuss how the Taliban have conflated Islam with



Fig. 2

a discriminatory agenda emanating from their tribal traditions and beliefs to perpetuate their nefarious practices on their own kith and kin. Of all the crimes the Taliban have committed against human rights, perhaps the most outrageous one is to deny secular education to the children and women of Afghanistan. Islam has been accused of a multitude of prohibitions against women and children (al-Farūqi, 1994, p. 35), but education is not and has never been proscribed. In fact Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, categorically urged all Muslims, regardless of gender, to “pursue knowledge throughout life, even if it should lead the seeker to China” (al-Farūqi, 1994, p. 37). Thus the callous action of burning books in Figure 2 is odious to say the least and contrary to that which is held sacred in Islam. The display of such inhumanity, as represented in these images, forces us to ask: How do the Taliban treat their own mothers, wives, and sisters? Time will tell.⁴

Figure 3 is another example of the denigration of religion. Akin to Figure 1, a Talib has stopped a woman and her child. The boy recognizes the danger his mother is in. It is unclear what her crime is, but in his right hand the Talib carries the symbol of his authority and power, a whip. Is he going to hit the woman? His left hand has the *tasbeeh*. A *tasbeeh* is an artifact with 99 beads divided into three sections of 33 each. It is used for repeating some of the 99 attributes of Allah. Its purpose is to seek solace and calm in times of need. In the hands of this Talib, the *tasbeeh* becomes a mockery. Is he seeking divine help for the

4 As reported by the Minister of Education, Kabul, Afghanistan in the BBC’s World News, on January 13, 2011, the Taliban may consider allowing some schools for girls to be re-opened.



Fig. 3

nefarious act he is about to commit? Or is he justifying what he intends to do in the name of Islam? In Afghanistan, the Taliban have succeeded in obfuscating the true message of Islam in order to perpetuate a patriarchal society that allows no consideration or concessions (Abirafeh, 2009).

Ethnographic/Economic. It is a well-known fact that the first non-combatant victims of war are primarily children and women (Gangi, 2009). Surrounded by the unrecognizable detritus of a place that is no more our eyes are drawn to the woman in Figure 4. She holds center-stage and is forcing us to look inside that bag with her. There isn't much she could have found in that desolation. Ethnographers

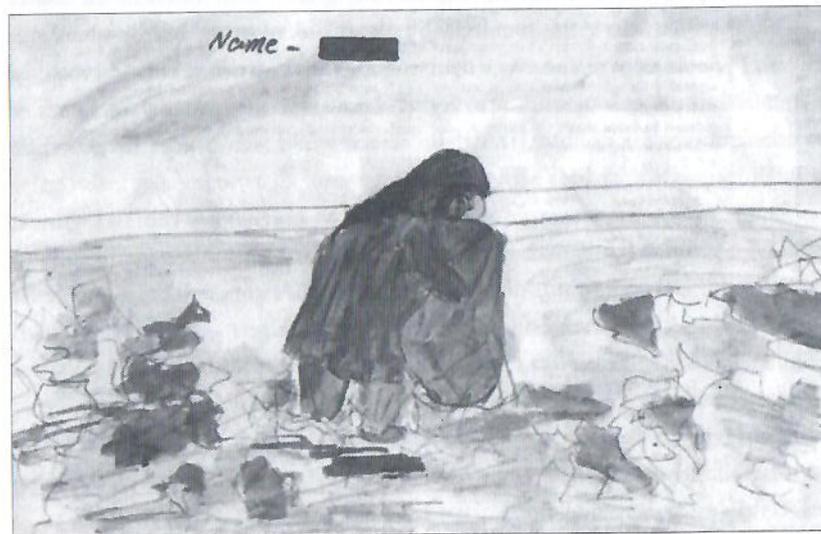


Fig. 4

in years to come will be hard pressed to write about the materiality of this location (Lubar & Kingery, 1993; Menzel, 1994). That the woman isn't wearing a *chador* (a traditional outer garment) doesn't absolve the perpetrators, Taliban or not, for the war that has reduced her to such abject poverty.

In Figure 5, the child who produced this picture depicts a Talib, pointing his gun at a tree that bears not fruits but everything that the Taliban as a group find distasteful. How would a 13 year-old student in our schools read this image? The Taliban consider television and other electronic media offensive alien cultural icons that must be destroyed because of their corruptive influence. Granted that many Americans also believe that the television and other media influence and affect children adversely (Comstock & Scharrer, 2007). We have parental control devices to counter these effects, so one might ask why the Taliban can't exercise that same right to control what Afghans can or cannot watch. But what is abhorrent about the



Fig. 5

Taliban's tactics is that they claim to draw upon Islam and its teachings as the prime justification for their mandates. Neither the Qur'an nor the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad categorically prohibits music or any form of play and entertainment (Michon, 2007).

By the rubrics used by a large number of art teachers to assess children's art, the above images may be construed as naïve, superficial, and lacking in aesthetic sensibilities; they may be read as facile. On the contrary, I believe, the children who made these images have demonstrated a thought process that enables them to create an embedded meaning. The images are undoctored; no technology was used to touch-up or improve their so-called aesthetic qualities. Yet their message is powerful. As pictorial narratives they truthfully disseminate the experiences of children and women in Afghanistan. I argue that imposing the ubiquitous listing of elements and principles of art such as line, shape, color, value, balance, proportion, rhythm, movement to mention a few, would have rendered meaningless the children's work. There are other elements and principles of meaning at work here.

CONCLUSION

The main focus of this article is on the five images that document the tragedy of Afghanistan and the tyranny of the Taliban. Under Taliban rule any semblance of rationality and standards of human decency are lost in a hunger for power, control, and its concomitant vices. My reading of the children's works was not to provide answers, but to sensitize the reader to the complexities that shroud the entire concept of human rights and to ask whether art educators, as a collective body, have the wherewithal to support it. We are in a conundrum. We are torn between what we want to do and what we can do. Is that because injustices in Afghanistan are beyond our orbit? Thoughts spiral round and round in our heads as we self-talk to rationalize our noncommittal attitude. "It's a different world, with no resemblance to our culture," we intone; "and these Taliban people in Afghanistan are so weird with their long beards and turbans." "What if a parent of a child objects to my talking about Afghanistan in class?" Omnipresent blogs, websites representing national and international TV channels, newspapers and magazines, YouTube videos, commentaries on Facebook pages, and succinct and cutting remarks on Twitter are brimming over with daily broadcasts of news about Afghanistan. The horror of war is there to see and read about whatever our medium of news retrieval. Yet amidst all that cacophony art educators in the USA have remained silent.

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