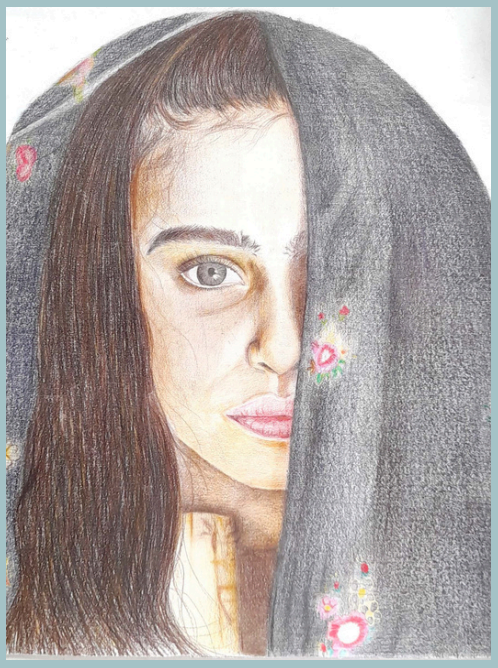


The Lady of Words

Written by Sadaf Safi



Anonymous Afghan artist

IN THE LAND OF SILENCE

It was a winter morning in 2021. The weather was cold, but our hearts were warm. We were in the middle of our school exams. My sister and I, with our neatly ironed uniforms, put our notebooks into our bags and walked toward school with excitement and enthusiasm. Our school was not far from our home, and every day we used to go there with happy hearts and clear minds.

On the way, I talked with my sister and we discussed our exams. Slowly, we got closer and closer to the school gate. When we wanted to open the gate, the school official said, “The school is closed, and you are not allowed to enter.”

My hands were shaking. My sister and I looked at each other. It was a strange feeling. We just stayed silent, with tears shining in our eyes.

I asked the school official, “Why can’t we enter the school?”

He said, “It has been ordered by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan that girls are not allowed to enter school.”

That day was when the girls of Afghanistan went back many years—about 30 years earlier, when the Taliban first came to Afghanistan. After they were gone, the country had made a lot of progress, but with their return, we went back many years. With tearful eyes, we returned home. Home felt like a prison to me. I felt like there was no hope for the future, and darker days were waiting for us—which actually happened. We experienced months, and then years, of not going to school. School was no longer like before, and there were no lessons to learn.

I used to sit in my room and cry. It was hard for me not to be able to go to school all of a sudden, and not to be able to spend happy times with my friends like before. People used to say we should stay hopeful and things would get better, but I no longer had hope.

After a while, another piece of news was broadcast on TV. The Taliban said that women were not allowed to go outside alone, and if they wanted to go out, a male guardian must accompany them. Their way of thinking was really strange to me. Day by day, they brought more rules and made religion harder for people.

What was more surprising than the rules was that nothing like this is written in the Qur'an—that women are not allowed to get an education. And no valid source confirms this lie.

Anyway, the days passed as if there was no life at all. We heard terrifying news about what horrible things were happening to innocent people. Every day the condition of girls being away from school and education made me more disturbed—and I was one of them.

This awful situation continued. Some families forced their daughters into early marriages. I saw girls being treated violently just because they defended their rights. The painful condition of the girls in my homeland always affected me deeply.

And until today, although several years have passed since the schools were closed, the situation of the girls remains the same. But I have become stronger than before. With the few resources I have, I started online learning and did not let this huge injustice break me. Even though I went through months of depression and hopelessness, seeing the crisis in my country has made me stronger.

I believe that only through education can we rebuild our country, and this belief has motivated me to work hard and continue my online studies.

As Rumi says: “If everything around you seems dark, look again, you may be the light.”

I have come to believe in this sentence—that in the middle of all this darkness, maybe I am the light, and so are girls my age. I know it’s not easy, but it’s not impossible either. Girls will rise again and show the world how we did not accept oppression and how we kept going, becoming stronger than before.

This is the story of Afghan girls.
They did not let us have dreams, but we still dreamed.
They did not let us speak, but we broke the silence.
They did not let our voices be heard, but each of us became a voice.
This is the Afghan girl. This is our courage—we continue to fight and never give in to injustice.

Hoping for the day my country will be free and rebuilt.