

# Advocacy through the Power of Creative Writing and Storytelling



Creative Writing 2024

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# Introduction

Women in history have often been among the most vulnerable members of society, especially in places like Afghanistan where many of them haven't experienced peace in their lifetimes. This reality could be likened to living on a hill. Afghan women not only face cultural and societal barriers but also legal challenges in their daily lives. Despite these hardships, their deep love for their homeland outweighs personal struggles, motivating them to pursue personal growth and contribute to their country's progress. However, it is crucial to explore ways to support them in achieving their goals, particularly when opportunities seem limited.

We are pleased to introduce the latest edition of our Creative Writing journal, featuring four narratives written by young Afghan women and girls who participated in online sessions led by a skilled international instructor. Each narrative delves into a range of experiences among Afghan women, addressing the challenges they face, their deep connection to their homeland, and various personal reflections and stories. Our main goal with this initiative is to empower Afghan women and girls by nurturing their writing skills and providing a platform to amplify their voices.

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to the dedicated young female participants for their hard work in crafting these stories, and to Mr. Ikhtisad Ahmed, Ms. Elena Imbimbo Rathgeber and the dedicated executive team of APT for effectively managing the program and guiding the participants.

# About Us

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Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) is a youth-led nonprofit organization in Afghanistan that actively addresses human rights crises, with a specific focus on women's rights, while simultaneously promoting girls' access to education through creative and impactful initiatives.

APT's initiatives encompass a range of key areas. It connects female university students in Afghanistan with mentors from abroad, forging valuable relationships and providing guidance. APT also facilitates networking opportunities for youth, both within and beyond Afghanistan's borders, to encourage open dialogue, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas and experiences. In addition to these endeavors, APT is preparing to equip a team of young women with expertise in the "Internal Family System (IFS)" trauma healing technique. This training will empower them to offer healing sessions to others and create safe spaces for family members in need of support.

Furthermore, APT offers a platform for young women to express themselves by writing and publishing their stories, particularly significant under Taliban rule.

Over the course of its 13-year existence, APT has successfully fostered meaningful engagement among young men and women. Through discussions and dialogues, they have influenced policies prior to the collapse. These conversations center on critical topics and propose solutions for a better Afghanistan and a better world. APT's work has played a pivotal role in shaping policies on both national and global levels, owing to the development of leadership and critical thinking skills among its participants. Since its inception in 2010, APT activities have impacted and inspired over 60,000 youth and children to build a vision for a just and inclusive society.

You may read more about APT at: [www.aptyouth.org](http://www.aptyouth.org)

## A trip to Bamyan

As I sit down to recount the unforgettable journey, I embarked on in Bamyan, Afghanistan, a wave of memories flooded my mind, each carrying its own weight of emotion and revelation. Travelling to this ancient land was not just an adventure, but a transformative experience that shaped my perspective on life and resilience in ways I never imagined.

It all started with a spark of curiosity and a desire to explore that had been bubbling inside me for years. The allure of Bamyan, with its rich history, breathtaking scenery, and resilient people, called me like a siren, beckoning me to venture into the unknown and discover the beauty that lies beyond the headlines of strife and turmoil.

When I got into the car to go to Bamyan, a mixture of excitement and fear flowed through my veins. Excitement due to the fact that I had heard a lot about Bamyan, its beauty and nature, but fear due to insecurity, because many years ago, Bamyan was scarred by a devastating explosion orchestrated by the Taliban. This tragic event cast a shadow of uncertainty over the journey ahead, yet it also fueled my resolve to experience the region's beauty firsthand. Stepping on the soil of Bamyan for the first time, I was greeted by the warm embrace of the sun, the echo of several-hundred-year-old stories, and the whisper of the wind.

Bamyan, with its towering cliffs and ancient Buddha statues standing like silent guardians of the past, captivated my senses from the moment I laid eyes on them. The enormity of history and the resilience carved into the landscape left me in awe of the legacy of a civilization that had experienced triumphs and endured tragedies.

As I wandered among the ruins of the Bamyan Buddhas, I felt a deep connection to the past, as if the spirits of those who once worshiped at these sacred sites were whispering their stories to me. The scars of war and destruction that scarred the statues only strengthened my appreciation for the resilience of the Afghan people, who had weathered countless storms and emerged stronger than ever.

One particular encounter during my time in Bamyan stands out in my memory like a beacon of hope in the midst of darkness. I met an old woman named Ayesha, whose eyes sparkled with wisdom and kindness despite the difficult life she had lived. Through broken words and gestures, she shared her story of loss and survival with me, her resilience shining through every word she uttered. Ayesha had lost her three sons in the 40-year war in Afghanistan, and her husband Nir had become disabled but Ayesha's perseverance against adversity left a lasting impression on my soul and reminded me of the strength of the human spirit in enduring and overcoming the most difficult challenges. Her unwavering faith in a better tomorrow, despite the battle scars that surrounded her,

inspired me to embrace my journey with courage and grace.

When I said goodbye to Bamiyan and got into the car and returned home, a sense of gratitude and humility washed over me like a gentle tide. The lessons I learned during my time in Bamyan—about resilience, compassion, and the enduring power of hope—will stay with me forever, guiding me with strength and grace through life's trials and tribulations.

Reflecting on my trip to Bamyan, I now realize that it was not just a physical journey, but a spiritual awakening that opened my eyes to the beauty and resilience that exists in every corner of the world. The memories I carry with me from that trip will forever be engraved in my heart and remind me of the transformative power of travel and human connections that cross borders.

In the end, my trip to Bamyan was not just a chapter in my life, but a testament to the resilience and beauty that lies within all of us. It's a reminder that no matter where life takes us, we can always find strength and inspiration in the stories of those who have walked this earth before us, their legacy woven into the fabric of our own journeys to self-discovery. And enlightenment is woven.

**- Ms. Sherzai**

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# Resilience Amidst Chaos: A Memoir of Surviving the Taliban Takeover in Kabul

On August 15th, 2021, I decided to visit the bazaar. Little did I know that this decision would change my life forever. It was a day that marked a tragic historical recurrence: after two decades, the Taliban reclaimed control of Kabul, leaving an indelible impression on my memory.

As a young girl living in Kabul, I had heard stories of the Taliban and their brutal rule from my sisters and mother but I never imagined that they would come back to power in my lifetime. In the early months of 2021, I had heard that they had taken over several provinces of Afghanistan, and had hoped they would never reach Kabul, and their struggle would be pushed away to their territory.

One morning, I woke up with a sense of unease, a feeling that something was not right. Ignoring my instincts, my little sister and I were decided to go to the bazaar to pick up some things for my family. On the bus, I heard some women whispering about what we would do if the Taliban came back and how we could survive. I also heard a guy saying that the Taliban had already arrived to the gates of Kabul.

I thought it was just a rumor and got off the bus. As I walked through the bustling streets of Kabul, I could sense tension in the air. People were whispering nervously to each other, their eyes darting around as if searching for something or someone. I tried to brush off the feeling of dread that was creeping up on me, but it only grew stronger with each step I took.

Suddenly, there was a commotion up ahead. People were running in all directions, shouting, and screaming that the Taliban had come. Within a few minutes, all the shops' doors had closed, and people had run away. My heart raced as I tried to make sense of what was happening. Panic set in as people scrambled to get away. I froze in fear, unsure of what to do next. Should I run? Should I hide? My mind raced with questions as chaos erupted around me.

I walked by the main road full of cars to try and find a ride home, but everyone seemed to be in a rush. Finally, I spotted a bus and hurried to board it with my little sister. She was scared, so I grabbed her arm and pulled her onto the bus that was crowded with other frightened people who also wanted to get home safely and hide from danger. We were fortunate to make it to our home, but we didn't know what the future held in those uncertain times under the Taliban. Soon after we arrived home, the once-crowded streets became deserted as everyone had hidden themselves away in their homes. It was a terrifying experience as people screamed at us to hide and return to our houses, shouting that danger was coming.

After an hour, we could hear the Taliban soldiers marching through the streets. Their presence made us feel scared and nervous. We stayed hidden for hours, listening to the sounds of gunshots and screams that echoed all over the city. The streets of Kabul, which were once filled with life and excitement, were now filled with fear and uncertainty.

My sisters called me in tears, worrying about what would happen next. I couldn't help but constantly think about whether my family and I would be safe in our own home. We had been watching the news, and even the reporters were struggling to hold back their emotions. They announced that Kabul had been taken and there was no one left to protect us. It was hard to believe that after twenty years of war, we were right back where we started.

As night fell, we locked our doors to make sure no Taliban would come in as they celebrated their achievement of reaching Kabul. It felt like a war had broken out, and I hugged my little sister as the noise of fires and guns scared her. Both of us were crying, and it was unbelievable that our lives had turned out like this. That night was a peak point of disappointment, and it felt like a nightmare. I couldn't sleep that night, thinking about what I would do next. My twelve years of school and four years of university studies, along with all the hardship and struggles, had disappeared in just a blink of an eye.

In the days following the Taliban's takeover, life became increasingly oppressive. Women were forced to wear full-body coverings, and schools were closed. Public executions became a common sight in city squares. They also arrested individuals and monitored homes where previous military members lived, often imprisoning, and punishing them.

I felt trapped and helpless in my own home. I was unable to go out due to fear of being targeted by the Taliban, simply for being a woman seeking freedom and education. Additionally, I couldn't go out for a month due to a previous frightening experience during the COVID-19 quarantine and the fear of contracting the virus. Although the duration of my time relegated at home was the same, the feeling of isolation was worse compared to my previous experience.

Amidst the darkness and despair in Afghanistan, hope emerged in the form of resistance movements. People refused to accept the new reality imposed on them by extremists, and women led many protests that sometimes turned violent. Despite the lack of support and the fear of being targeted as representatives of their country, women fought fearlessly for their freedom.

I found comfort in resisting tyranny and oppression. It gave me the strength to

continue fighting for my rights and freedoms despite the dangers that lurked outside my door. I searched for job opportunities in Kabul but was faced with many closed doors. After six months of searching, I finally found a job in one of the humanitarian organizations, which ignited hope for my future.

As time passed, the city of Kabul became a place of constant violence and persecution, with its people living in fear under siege-like conditions.

Throughout all the hardships we faced, one thing remained certain - we refused to be silenced or defeated by those who aimed to control us. We were determined to persist in our efforts to secure our rights until our voices echoed loudly and resolutely throughout Afghanistan.

As I reflect on the day when the Taliban seized control of Kabul on August 15th, 2021, I am struck by the bravery and determination of my fellow Afghans. Despite facing insurmountable challenges, they refused to give up on their aspirations and continued to persevere.

We may have lost our city that day, but we did not lose our spirit or determination. If people are willing to stand up against injustice and tyranny, there will always be hope for a brighter future ahead.

**- Ms. Sultanzada**

## A Journey of Introversion and Self-Expression

Silence has always been my comfort zone. As an introvert, I find solace in the quiet spaces, in the world of introspection and contemplation. Growing up, I was often labeled as shy or reserved, my voice rarely rising above a whisper in large groups. While I yearned to express myself, the fear of judgment and the overwhelming feeling of vulnerability kept me locked within the confines of my own mind.

My journey of finding my voice has been a gradual and ongoing process, one filled with self-doubt, small victories, and a growing sense of empowerment. It began with a love for the written word. In the pages of my journals, I found a safe haven to pour out my thoughts and emotions, to explore my inner world without the fear of external scrutiny.

Words became my allies, allowing me to articulate the complexities of my experiences and to connect with others on a deeper level.

As I delved deeper into the world of literature, I discovered the power of storytelling. Through the voices of diverse characters, I found echoes of my own experiences and emotions. I learned that my voice, however quiet, had the potential to resonate with others, to spark empathy, and to ignite conversations. This realization was both humbling and inspiring, pushing me to explore new avenues of self-expression.

The digital age offered a unique platform for my introverted nature. Online forums and social media allowed me to engage in conversations at my own pace, to carefully craft my words before sharing them with the world. I found communities of like-minded individuals who celebrated introspection and valued thoughtful dialogue over superficial small talk.

Stepping outside my comfort zone, I ventured into the realm of creative writing. Poetry became a canvas for my emotions, each verse a brushstroke of vulnerability and self-discovery. The act of sharing my work, initially terrifying, gradually became a source of empowerment. The positive feedback and encouragement I received from others fueled my confidence and affirmed the value of my voice.

Beyond the written word, I explored other avenues of self-expression. Photography allowed me to capture the beauty of the world through my unique lens, sharing my perspective without the need for words. Music became a refuge, a language of emotions that transcended spoken communication.

Finding my voice has not erased my introversion. I still cherish solitude and find large gatherings draining. However, I no longer view my quiet nature as a limitation but rather as a source of strength. I have learned to embrace my introspective tendencies, recognizing that they fuel my creativity and allow me to connect with the world in a meaningful way.

The journey of finding one's voice is a deeply personal and ever-evolving process. It requires courage, vulnerability, and a willingness to step outside of our comfort zones. For introverts like myself, it may take time and patience, but the rewards are immeasurable. When we find our voice, we unlock the power to connect, to inspire, and to leave our unique mark on the world. And in that, we find true empowerment.

**- Ms. Amarkhil**

## Comparing Women's Situations Before and Under Taliban Rule

Today, I want to share my perspective on a topic that's close to my heart. Many people claim that their lives have changed since the arrival of the Taliban. However, I believe that for most girls, life wasn't much different before their resurgence.

Even before the Taliban, numerous girls faced barriers to education. Some were denied the opportunity to attend school altogether, while others were restricted from pursuing higher education or entering the workforce. In truth, the main culprits behind these limitations are often not the government or the circumstances, but rather the parents.

I've known many girls who deeply regret not being allowed to pursue their education. They had dreams and aspirations but were held back by outdated beliefs. Sadly, the Taliban's return hasn't altered the trajectory of their lives because their struggles existed long before the current regime.

Parents play a pivotal role in shaping their children's futures. Those who prioritize education can defy any situation to ensure their daughters receive an education. Conversely, there are individuals within families who oppose girls' education, be it a grandfather, father, brother, or uncle. This narrow-minded mindset has been perpetuated through generations, leading to the oppression of women within households.

Instead of placing blame solely on external factors, we must introspect within our own homes. Are all family members open-minded? Are girls encouraged to pursue education and work? Do they have the freedom to make their own choices? Addressing these issues within our families is the first step towards creating meaningful change.

To all the girls out there, I urge you to persevere and strive for your dreams. Education is a powerful tool that can empower you to shape your own destiny. Embrace learning, value yourself, and fight for your rights. Remember, where there's a will, there's a way. Keep pushing forward and never stop learning.

- Ms. Sherzoi

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