



Afghans
For Progressive
Thinking (APT)



CIVIL SOCIETY
PLATFORM

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JUST
FUTURE

Creative Writing

BOOKLET

**Through Their Pen:
Short Tales by Girls in Afghanistan**

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Introduction:

With the return of the Taliban in August 2021, Afghanistan has become a place that extinguishes the dreams of Afghan girls and women. They are no longer allowed to go to schools and universities, and are excluded from public life. In the face of this exclusion, writing has become an act of resistance and hope, a way to stand against discrimination and make their voices heard.

Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) launched a four-month Creative Writing Program for 25 Afghan young women, focusing on writing and storytelling as tools for advocacy and raising awareness about violations of basic rights. Throughout the program, they learned to write letters, short stories, poems, journals, and non-fiction pieces. In this booklet, they reclaim their narratives, lay bare their pain, and assert their right to dream of a better future.

The program provided a safe space for participants, a place to write without fear and shape their struggles into stories that cannot be ignored. This collection highlights the unprecedented challenges Afghan women live with daily. By publishing these works, APT seeks to amplify Afghan women's voices and raise awareness about the reality of everyday life in Afghanistan.

APT extends its sincere gratitude to the Just Future programme, and to its partners CSPPS and Cordaid, whose support made this Creative Writing Program possible. Their commitment to amplifying Afghan women's voices has been essential in bringing this publication to life.

APT also thanks the young women who bravely shared their stories and the facilitators Caitlyn O'Flaherty and Sara Rahimi, who guided and edited their writings. This publication would not have been possible without the leadership of Ajmal Ramyar, Head Executive of APT; Abdul Rahman Jalil, Program Manager; Boshra Moheb, Project Assistant; and Yazdan Mirdad and Mursal, who designed our posters and booklet.

About Us:

Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) is a youth-led non-profit organization founded in 2010 that works to advance human rights in Afghanistan. The organization's main focus is on protecting Afghan youth, especially women's and girls' rights, through access to education and empowerment. APT is committed to establishing a space for young girls to develop their skills in leadership, social engagement, and raising their voices by providing creative, educational, and advocacy-based programs. Since its establishment, APT has inspired and supported more than 60,000 youth to develop their skills practically and enhance their vision to take part in the establishment and development of an inclusive society, despite existing political and social challenges.

APT's activities concentrate on expanding educational opportunities for girls and young women. Writing, public speaking, and creative expression programs, alongside networking, leadership development, and programs supporting mental health and trauma healing, have helped APT's beneficiaries become their own advocates and engage in society.

Moreover, at the international level, APT has played a meaningful role in youth-led advocacy. Between 2013 and 2015, APT's contributions led to the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security, which is considered a milestone among APT's achievements. Building on this milestone, the organization launched the Afghan Youth Representative to the United Nations Program in 2018, creating pathways for Afghan youth voices to be heard in global policy discussions.

APT believes that empowered youth are key actors in peacebuilding, social justice, and long-term stability in Afghanistan. It is committed to standing with young people and families to amplify their voices and expand opportunities for meaningful participation in society.

You may read more about APT at: www.aptyouth.org

Short Stories (I)

These stories are reflections of light from a world surrounded by barriers and silence. Through these stories, Afghan girls transform their pain into narration, their imagination into words, and their silence into a voice.

A Girl Who Carried Her Own Sky

She is carrying her own sky because there is nothing around her to protect and save her from her life's storm. No matter how tough her life was, she was always looking up for her own sky.

Her family had just returned back from Iran to Herat-Afghanistan. They only carried small tools, tired hearts and big hopes. Her parents, who were a young couple, were expecting their first child and hoped everything would be fine where they came from, but life didn't greet them as they had anticipated. A daughter named Azada was born in August 1995. There were no buildings around. There was nothing above her and her mother to shield them from the burning sun and empty desert sand. Her mother gave birth to her on the ground with only one blanket on top of her. The following months, in September 1995, when the Taliban took over Herat. This occurred when she was no more than a baby, however, its significance would end up impacting her life even before she had a chance to feel its real meaning.

When Azada was one-month old, the Taliban took control of Herat. The Taliban arrested all the men including her father for investigation in Herat. Her mother didn't have anyone in this province. She was spending days and nights alone for three months without informing her husband. Her mother was really scared and will never forget that day. She tried to hold her baby tightly under their thin blanket. Her heart was beating so fast, afraid to move, and to breath loudly. The only thing she thought was to keep her baby alive. The Taliban stayed until 2001, as the girl grew up and needed to enroll in her first year at school. Her childhood was stolen but she found joy in learning. Her first day at school, holding her bag and books, feeling free like a bird who just found her wings to fly. Fly high as she could imagine.

Years passed, and the wide, empty world she was born into slowly filled with voices. Her two younger siblings came along, fragile and tiny adding life yet also new weight to her shoulders. Being the elder child, she quickly realized that she occupied the role that her mother was no longer able to sustain. Azada was too worried constantly at school, her thoughts were at home, wondering if her siblings were fed or if the mother could rise that day.

Sometimes she was very angry at the unfairness of growing so fast, in a world that asked too much from her as a child. Despite that, she was a warrior, exhausted, anxious but something inside her said stay strong.

Azada was accepted to the university into her favorite field, psychology. When she had checked her result and got this news, her heart was filled with happiness. Her tears could not stop, she was feeling proud of herself that finally her dreams came true. She was looking to graduate and help other girls as she was witnessing her mother's struggles with mental health. Azada was dreaming to graduate and find a job to support her family beside her father as he was only a daily labor. But life changed accidentally. In December 2022, the Taliban banned women from working in humanitarian aid programs and are not allowed to work in INGOs. She was shocked, she cried constantly, until she couldn't breathe. She checked the news again and again, hoping that was not true. In one moment, she has lost everything while she was receiving a call from her manager to not come after tomorrow and we would decide later and this later never comes because all women and girls are forced to stay at home. At the same time, her mother's depression and anxiety increased. The situation was too complicated, the pressure became overwhelming and Azada felt exhausted, anxious by problems from every side. Her parents, especially her mother, pushed her to marry. She said, as an eldest daughter at age twenty-nine it's too late to get married. Even though Azada tried to be a good daughter and always obeyed her mother's speeches but didn't know she was losing her self-esteem and her true feelings. She was always compared to the married girls calling them successful while Azada's dream is being a good psychologist. In a society where a girl's value is measured by marriage, she felt awful.

She was carrying her pain silently, feeling like dying inside every day with no one truly understanding her.

Azada, the girl who is trying to not give up, is still fighting mentally inside. She has started looking for online courses to build her capacity and find a way to continue her education. After three years of effort, she received multiple partial and full scholarships from US universities. She imagined studying abroad, freely, and building her future. But travel banned for Afghans blocked her path to education. She woke each day to the reality of closed borders but still with the same restriction, family pressure and uncertain future. She was always asking herself for years, What now? What next? How long will this situation continue? How long could she suffer? No one knows the answers.

The days ahead remain uncertain. It's probably a difficult time for her. A time when she struggled to live, to progress, to be happy, to cry but not to be silent. To breathe without pain, not to be afraid, to fight, not to leave, to stay, to create, to be human, to survive, to survive, to survive.

- Elaha

A White Dress, A Silent Goodbye

Laying down on my bed for the very last time, I stared at the walls as if I were seeing them for the first time. My chest felt heavy, caught between uncertain fear. The wallpaper had elegant dark golden flowers on a light golden background suddenly felt unfamiliar. A framed picture above my head. In the picture, my father was watching my mother, the strong bond between them was very visible even in the image. For all these long years, I imagined myself as my mother, believing that one day someone would love me the way my father loves her.

Suddenly, I snapped out of my thoughts when my dad knocked gently on my door. "Bachem, are you awake?" he asked with usual soft smile and the sparkle in his eyes which were always my favorite; it gave me strength, comfort, and a sense of safety. At that moment, I wished this safety could protect me from the life I was about to step in.

He softly walked in, sat beside me on the bed, and gently held my hand. "Did you see your wedding dress? Najeeb just brought it," he said.

I felt shy and whispered, "it is okay... I will wear it tonight anyway." My heart raced softly, unsure whether I was excited or afraid.

But he insisted, "If you don't like it, we will go and find the one you love."

I looked at him with tears in my eyes, remembering how he always fulfilled my smallest needs and tiniest wishes; from buying my favorite notebook to choosing my bridal dress.

Before I could answer, my mom entered the room .

"Wake up, get ready! They can arrive anytime. This is not an ordinary day." Her voice was rushed as she was hiding her worries behind excitement. However, being loud could not make everything turn out fine.

Indeed, it wasn't. This was the day my life would change forever. A day that felt like taking a step into a path with no return.

A day when I wished time could rewind back to the mornings I woke up for university, not for a wedding.

Leaving behind my university life routine felt like leaving a part of myself behind which I was not ready to let go of.

The moment I was leaving, my father hugged me tightly.

“It will always be your home.” He whispered. “No one can ever take your place in this house.”

His words wrapped around me like a shield, but even that comfort couldn't stop the truth; I was walking away from my home into an uncertain future with a white dress. Is this white dress the start of a happier life?

The wedding passed. The celebration ended. The next morning the house smelled loneliness. Everyone moved quietly around each other. However, the empty space I left behind was louder than any sound.

They were waiting to visit me again; in the afternoon, the phone rang, and for a moment, hope rushed into the room. Finally, my dad picked up the phone. His voice was full of warmth and anticipation. “Salam, Najeeb Jan! How are you? How is our Laila doing?” he asked, almost unable to contain his happiness.

He was smiling, as if everything was perfect, my mother stood close to him waiting to hear something about me; whether I had eaten, slept well or I had smiled.

Despite his kindness, Najeeb's tone suddenly shifted. His voice grew firm, edged with something the family had never heard from him before.

“Don't bring Nashtaye,” He said sharply. “Don't come to visit us, Laila will come soon to visit you.”

Baba's smile faded, he tried to recover and hide the disappointment rising in his chest.

“Oh.... Of course Najeeb jan. See you soon bakhair.” He replied softly, forcing warmth back into his voice.

My mother is still standing beside my dad with a quiet question in her eyes; “Why can't we see our daughter?”

The excitement was replaced by something heavier, confusion, and a slow forming fear that none of them wanted to name.

Deep down inside, they all felt that the invisible wall rising between them and me. A wall built not by miles or by marriage but by the word "Don't come."

Days passed, and still there was no news about Laila. Days kept coming.... and going.....

The house, once full of warmth and laughter, now felt like it was waiting for a voice, a face. Finally, after a week, the darkest day arrived.

The phone rang again.

My father rushed to answer. "Salam! Salam! How is La...?"

Dad's expression changed instantly, his hands began to shake, the phone slipping slightly from his grip. "No.... Laila"

Bachem, No! Why didn't you tell us? Why didn't you come home?" he said with a cracked voice.

No one knew what had been said yet, but they understood one thing: something terrible had happened.

Something that could never be undone.

"They said.... Laila is gone. They said.... She took her own life. They told us to come... Come and take her Jenaza." He said repeatedly with a broken voice as if it changes the truth that the wait is over and I am finally coming home with white dress. He could say nothing but to repeat the same words, as if grief steals every other word from him. Years passed, my mother still stands near my empty bed, touching my pillow as if it still held my warmth. My siblings would pause at the dining table, leaving my usual spot untouched, hoping I might walk through the door and join them.

For Laila, white dress was the start of a new life. She never thought it would have the same color as a shroud that would cover her. She entered marriage with the hope of being loved and respected, not knowing that her life would be taken from her in the name of "Honor". Somewhere, far away, Laila is in peace, leaving behind her family with the grief that will never fade.

Laila's story is a reminder for every girl who let the bridal dress turn into a shroud and for every family left with wounds that justice can never fully heal.

- Zohra Khwaja

The Author's True Story



On Girls' Day, a girl in the land of regrets broke down and became sad:

That day was Girls' Day and I was filled with a desire to create words for myself and the girls of my country and to congratulate them on this occasion. My family suddenly told me that I had to go to the certificate office. Their sincere insistence awakened my motivation and opened a window of hope in my heart. Although I knew despair would deprive me of my human rights just because I was a girl, hope was screaming in my eyes. My mother and I set off with starry eyes and hopeful hearts.

It is unlikely that anyone would know how excited I was to receive the certificate of my twelve years of hard work (the high school diploma) that most Afghan girls are denied. As soon as I got out of the car, I felt happy, how sad it is that a girl should be so excited just for receiving her twelfth grade diploma, which is her right. I remembered this poem:

“The world is thinking of the moon and Mars and Jupiter
We faced it with bad luck, with beards and turbans!”

I entered the building with my application in hand and a heart full of hope.

After finding the director's office, I paused for a moment, took a deep breath, tapped the door gently, and entered the room.

It is pathetic!

I spoke politely to the chairman, but he did not respond. I presented my petition, but he laughed loudly on his mobile phone. That voice destroyed my spirit. My words were not taken into account because I am an Afghan girl, and my presence in government offices is considered a crime. I wondered why a boy in the same room faced reprimand for a trivial mistake. Because he was a Hazara, persecuted for his ethnicity. I said to myself:

"How sad that we are strangers in our own homeland, brother! I am for the crime of being a girl, and you for religious and ethnic reasons!"

I tried to talk to the director several times, but he scolded me and said it was impossible for me to get my diploma. Then I realized more than ever how difficult it was to be a girl in Afghanistan. I sighed and called out to God. It was difficult to bear the atmosphere of that room. So I quickly left, so that he wouldn't rejoice at my defeat.

I turned back and the same path I had walked with pride had become hateful to me. My smiles had faded. I quickly got to the car and looked at my mother. Eyes tell the truth more than words, and my mother understood the depth of my gaze.

That silence hurt my heart even more. I whispered under my breath:
The Taliban era is an unbearable era!

An era when our laughter turns to sadness. An era that has cut off my wings with violence; not only me, but thousands of girls of my country are caught in a fate of ignorance.

My good God! Can you intervene and erase this darkness from my country? Why did walking in the university courtyard become a dream? Why do we always have to pay the price for sins we did not commit because we are girls?

I know that patience is the cure. I know that I should hold my head high and not surrender. However, sometimes I come to the conclusion that our sorrow has become prolonged.

I think this poem was definitely written in our description:

«They should give us another life after death
We have spent this life only with hope!»

This is not just my story. Thousands of girls have cried silently for deprivation, for being kept away from education, for their shattered dreams. Many suffer from depression and even commit suicide.

It is not easy for me to write these words, but I want the world to know what happened to us. I swear by the power of my pen, one day with my success I will become a strong slap in the face of those who stood in my way. This is the promise of an Afghan girl, a wounded bird.

It is sad that I feel alienated from society, because I am a girl. My soul is hurt when I have no choice but to remain silent.

I am disgusted by the Taliban who make me take
refuge only in the corner of my room.

I had written this poem before, but I whispered
to myself:

“You, Talib!

If today I am immersed in suffering

Never think that I have become weak!

I swear to God that from the oppression of
this era

My head will never bow and surrender!

You, reckless tyrant!

Know that I will shame you to the
heavens with my pen and writing.

I do not want to hold a gun in my hand
like you.

Remember this:

That with the dance of my pen

I will destroy your power!”

- Nazi Maysam



The Unbroken Dreams of Aylen

The neighborhood Aylen lived in Afghanistan was quiet, but she was not. She had good dreams in her heart; dreams bigger than the dusty streets she was on daily. She pictured herself in offices, owning a business, traveling all over. It happened to her when she was in 10th grade, and she was excited to learn something.

One afternoon, coming home from school, she was prepared to take a course. Her mother prevented her at the door. "Not today," she said softly. "Important guests are coming." She thought guests were coming for tea, but instead they came to take her future. As a fifteen-year-old, she had marriage too far away to think of, as something that she had just seen in wedding parties and music and henna and dancing. She never felt the reality of her life. But suddenly, it was waiting for her at the door.

Her family began arranging the marriage without consulting her on the matter. Which hall to rent? What house would she live in? What would she wear? She was invisible to the life she lived. But Aylen was not one like other people. This was the first girl in her family who was insistent on acquiring an education. To her, the concept of a fifteen-year-old marriage seemed a death, rather than a birth. And one day she could no longer remain silent. She found all the strength she could with trembling hands and confronted her family.

Her hands shaking and her heart racing "I don't want this," she said. "I want to keep studying. I'm only fifteen. I have never even considered marriage. And this cousin, he is like my brother. I can't accept this." Her speech was not childish.

Her parents took away from school. Her year in 10th grade was gone. Word went around in the family, "She ought to love somebody else." She was confined in one room and not permitted to go out for one month. She was subjected to inexhaustible pressure, scolding, and even violence from her father, uncle, and aunt.



They attempted to encase her dreams but they were not aware of one thing; her dreams were not small. They were alive. And they were burning too bright to be extinguished.

She was not going to live her life as a wife waiting too long. She adored her mother, yet she was not desiring the same life, a life of waiting and making sacrifices. She pictured a country such as Turkey as her escape to freedom. Her family eventually realized the power in her eyes. They had to admit that she preferred to break rather than surrender and she was reluctantly allowed to go back to school. She needed to begin anew, enter 11th grade, with cold glares and numerous difficulties. But she kept going.

The 12th grade was like winning the battle. University was next. Then in 2021, again, all was different. Afghanistan collapsed in the hands of the Taliban. The entire country seemed to be in a cage. Rules, fear, and silence were the bars.

Her mother had been telling her stories since she was much younger, girls kicked out of school, taken against their will into marriage, an entire generation deprived of their future. She had never imagined that she would ever see through the nightmare. Imagine all the scary oral stories you had heard once, suddenly turn into a physical monster, threatening your freedom and life.

But she stuck to her education. She was able to receive her 12th grade certificate, something she could touch. Her father pressured her to pursue medicine in a private university. It was not her dream, but she liked him and complied. Shortly afterwards, the Taliban closed down female universities. Again, she refused to give up. Being at home was like dying inside. And so, she made a risky and terrifying choice. She abandoned her province and transferred to Kabul. Alone.

This time, however, Kabul wasn't that old, happy, and vibrant city where people in the provinces were hoping to see. Aylen suddenly found herself among strangers, attending a midwifery school, crying all nights, unsure of her decision and fear of the situation. She began to learn English again, just to keep herself down to earth. Every single word that she remembered was a small victory that she was still creating her own future.

These were not her last dreams but stepping stones.

Unlike other girls who were preoccupied with clothes and going out, Aylene was preoccupied with knowledge and being independent and surviving.

She had applied to any place she believed she could study. The majority of them were denied due to limitations on Afghan girls. Despite the pain, she continued. At last, she got a yes: she was accepted at the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF). This time she was required to take the TOEFL as yet another step toward studying business in a foreign country. This was a victory far from imaginations by many. It made Aylene believe the power of her dreams again. It wasn't just a simple YES from a university, it was a strong NO to all the barriers faced by girls in the country, specifically forced marriages.

She had won battles which others thought they could not. But indoors she experienced something that she could not describe. It is sad but true; no one understands your pains unless they go through them firsthand. But now Aylene has realized one great truth: never give up. And never let any say to you that marriage is the end. It is not the entire narrative of life but only a part of it. Today, she fantasizes about taking up business in Canada. She is striving, developing her faith, and getting ready for that next big step. In the future, she dreams that she would be able to stand in Canada as a student, and then even stronger. And once there, she would like to become a guiding light to other Afghan girls, evidence that despite the darkest hours, a strong spirit can always get up and make her own heaven.

- Fatima Rafif

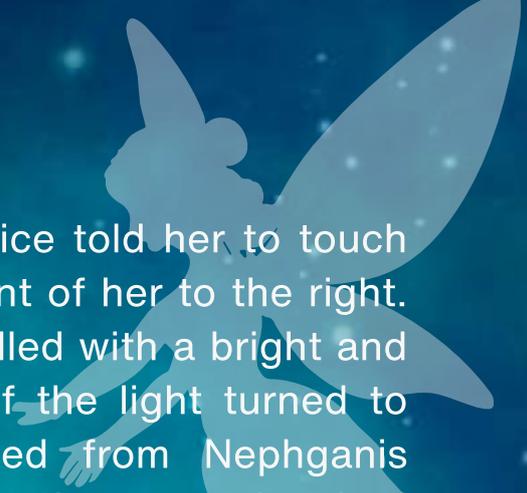
Daughters of the Dark Planet (Nefrin Shekan)

Nephganis was a dark, distant, and isolated planet where everyone believed that girls were born without superpower and should never be regarded as equal to boys. It was the only planet in the galaxy where girls were born without magical abilities. While girls had a pleasant life and lived happily on the other planets, life was very unfair and restricted for girls on this planet: they couldn't easily appear in the public, because people believed their presence would negatively influence their abilities. Girls spent days and nights inside the home, praying for a miracle to happen and change their fate.

Nephrisha, who was a curious and brave girl, was never satisfied with the situation on her planet. She was the first to discover that something was wrong, something hidden behind the girl's situation. Even when she was only three years old, with a heart full of sadness and frustration from the unfair world, she would talk to her cat, Jeon, asking, "Why should girls be deprived of having magical power, something so normal on other planets? Why is the world so unfair to us?"

As years passed, Nephrisha became more confident and determined to find a solution for all the girls' struggles and grew more curious. Despite all the restrictions on the girl's presence in the city, she would secretly go to a dark, distant, and peaceful forest, where she enjoyed looking at the birds freely flying in the sky and the comforting sound of the water when flowing in the river that gave her a feeling of independence and peace .

One day, while climbing a tree and talking to jeon, she heard a calm and gentle voice coming from inside the tree. She was shocked and scared of being discovered by the evil spirits: so she decided to immediately run away from the forest. However, as she was walking away, the voice was becoming more loud. She heard a voice repeatedly saying, "you are the chosen one." Ultimately, she decided to follow the voice regardless of the fear in her heart. As she followed the voice, she reached a hidden path: it was a dark, mysterious, and scary place.



When she entered that hidden path, the voice told her to touch and turn the stone which was located in front of her to the right. Surprisingly, that dark place was suddenly filled with a bright and shining light and gradually that splashes of the light turned to people who had been trapped and exiled from Nephganis thousands of years ago. These people knew the secret but had been isolated and kept away by the evil spirits to prevent them from revealing the truth, the truth that had caused generations of girls to suffer.

One of them, who was believed to be the former leader of Nephganis, told her the secret:

“Thousands of years ago, Nephganis was a beautiful and wonderful planet. But it was seized by a group of evil spirits who could only survive in a place where girls were powerless. Because girl’s magic is the only force strong enough to destroy them. So they cursed the girls on this planet and kept the secret hidden for centuries .”

Nephrisha, the girl who had never accepted being an angel without wings, was given a golden key to open the hidden door where the roots of the curse were sealed. She found the hidden door and broke the curse.

After that moment, all the girls on that planet regained their power, and life once again became colourful and exciting on Nephganis. Girls used their power to help poor and weak people on their planet, taught little girls to use their power, and people narrated Nephrisha’s bravery to their daughters.

Nephganis is taken from :

Neptune + Afghanistan

Nephrisha is taken from the Persian word, Nefrin Shekan.

Jeon, the cat, is taken from my idol name Jeon Jungkook.

- Sabah Momini

Conclusion:

The fiction in the booklet at hand is constructed through imagination, based on the realities Afghan girls seek to resist. These short stories are narratives of a desirable future imagined by Afghan girls, one they hope will be an alternative to what they are currently experiencing. These imaginations do not deny reality; rather, they reflect the real status Afghan women deserve to live, a life with dignity and freedom.

Following its commitment to supporting Afghan girls, especially during a period when they are vulnerable due to limited access to safe environments, APT provides space for creative writing, such as fiction, to be used as a method of advocacy, not only for themselves, but also for their loved ones and their beloved homeland.