



Afghans
For Progressive
Thinking (APT)



CIVIL SOCIETY
PLATFORM

Cordaid



JUST
FUTURE

Creative Writing

BOOKLET

Through Their Pen:
Journals of 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

Journals

Written in quiet moments, these journal entries are a battle between hope and fear, where school doors are closed but the door of hope remains open; books have left the classroom but never the shelves of their rooms.

Between Borders and Barriers

On 2 December 2025, I finished a book I was really really engaged with. It has become my habit: when I finish a book I like, I write a short reflection on WhatsApp. This time I wrote about *The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea*, an eventful and turbulent novel by Axie Oh. In Korean legends, it is said that whenever the god of the sea shows his anger with violent storms and lightning, the “bride of the sea” must be sacrificed to calm him. Every year, when a storm hits the coast, people select a girl and offer her to him to prevent their own destruction.

The book is a fantastic story of love, family and sacrifice. Its poetic prose carries you into the world of myths, where gods breathe and a girl’s determination to create a new destiny captures your heart. For me, books like this are a kind of freedom. When I read, I can step outside the walls around me. Stories give me a small escape from restrictions, and they give me hope that other endings are possible.

After I posted my story, a friend called me. She told me a story from her mother, one she had heard many times. Near their village was a pond. Her mother said that, long ago, a dragon lived there and people had to offer it forty loaves of bread, a roasted lamb and a young girl every day. This custom continued for years until it was the turn of a poor family, a family that could not even afford bread and lamb. They placed their young daughter by the water as the sacrifice. The girl sat by the pond with her knees drawn up, eyes full of tears, waiting for the dragon to rise. Before the dragon emerged, a man identified in some narrations as Hazrat Ali arrived and asked her why she was crying.

The girl explained her story.. He said, “Do not worry. When the dragon comes out of the water, call me.” She did as he said. When the dragon rose from the pond, the man cut off its heads with his sword, and the people were freed from its evil.

My friend said: “I haven’t read the book you posted about, but you wrote that the will of a girl changes her destiny. Both of these stories are myths, but their worldviews are completely different. In the story of the Bride of the Sea, the woman herself is the agent of change. In the story of the Bride of the Dragon, people only wait for an external saviour.”

Her words stayed with me, especially as an Afghan woman. In Afghanistan, many women are still offered as sacrifices not to gods, but to restrictions. They are sacrificed to early marriage, to bans on education, to rules that keep them inside the house.

Often, our society teaches women to wait for someone else to save them: a leader, a foreign country, a “hero” who will come from outside. But many women dream of being their own saviour. They want to study, to work, to write, to choose their lives, even when every rule tells them not to.

The girl in *The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea* reminds me of Afghan women and girls who insist on writing their own destiny, despite fear and danger. Some join secret classes. Some study online at night. Some teach other girls in their homes. Like the bride of the sea, they walk into the storm, not because they are unafraid, but because they refuse to let others decide their fate.

Afghan women and girls cannot afford to wait forever for saviors who may never arrive. They are already fighting for their own destiny, quietly and bravely, in classrooms, in kitchens, behind closed doors and on hidden screens. Books give me the language to see them, and myself, not only as someone suffering in the storm but as someone moving inside it..

I still do not quite know how to write my real feelings. It is as if I am standing between two worlds:

the world of myths that we read,
and the world of women who still have a storm in their hearts

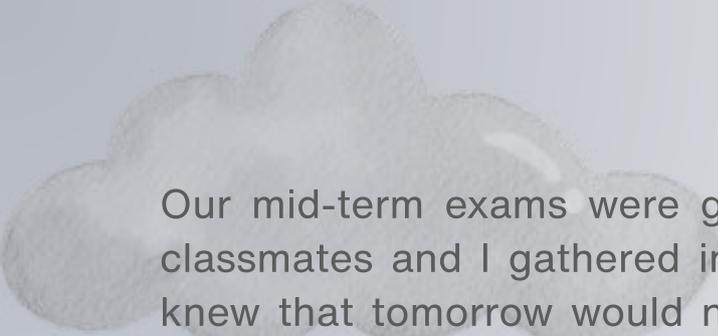
- Basira Mujadidi

My Memories are Saving a Seat for Me

2021 was the year I stepped into a completely new world. I still remember vividly the last normal day, well, at least we tried to act normal. We kept hearing bad news, and with each province falling I felt walls closing in, but we still had faith. I remember thinking it is going to be alright, hearing bad news is not something new for us, we go to school despite all the threats, we go to work despite the constant attacks that happen, and we live our lives despite how vague and unclear our futures are.

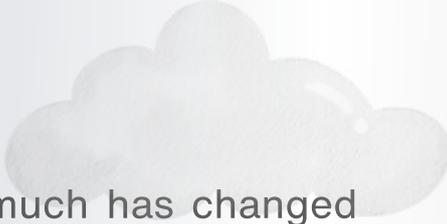
My mother prepared our breakfast like always, my father listening to news of more provinces falling under the control of the Taliban, and my siblings and I getting ready to go to school. I remember when my older sister told me and my brother with a worried face and a very serious tone that to be careful that day on the way to school and go and come back together. There was an invisible pressure that I could feel both at home and outside, the city was quieter than usual even though it was in the middle of summer, even the sky looked darker. The shops on our way to school were open, the shopkeepers were the same people I had seen countless times, but it felt like I was seeing a new side of everyone, a side of people filled with worry, anxiety, and doubt about the future. The shopkeeper of a small shop that my brother and I always bought from on our way to school still had his kind smile and face, but the usual calm was gone, in its place was this silence that filled the shop with gloom.

It felt like a thick layer of heaviness and dread was covering my city. One thing that really stood out to me that day was that as I was walking back to my home, even though there were many speeding cars, and people rushing in different directions, the city was strangely quiet. Realizing this filled me with a sense of fear and loss, I did not know what was going to happen, nobody knew and that is what made it even more scary. Everyone could just wait for the inevitable to come and nobody could do anything about it. I knew there was nothing I could do except hope for the best. I felt like the city knew what was going to happen, and the tall mountains surrounding it were watching.



Our mid-term exams were going on. After giving my exam, my classmates and I gathered in our classroom and talked. We just knew that tomorrow would not be the same and everything that we knew so far was going to be different tomorrow, and honestly, it was very scary. That day at school we laughed louder, talked more, bought and shared extra snacks, and played like nothing was about to change. I remember that day as one of the best days of my school years.

That day It felt like we were in a different world, where we didn't have so many problems, a world where we were just like any other kids having fun at school, a world where we could also just be worried about our results, or what to plan for our summer vacations, or where and who to visit. That day, I felt like the future is bright and exciting, and that we all would always have time for everything, for growing up together, for planning our next morning assembly, for planning to visit each other's houses in summer, or just for seeing each other again. Alas, today is very different from what we imagined. It has been years since I have talked to or even met my classmates. The girls in our class are forced to waste their lives away in the corners of the house. All the dreams, goals, and future have been stolen from them. A normal day today is very different from a normal day before that disastrous and dark day in August of 2021. What is even more heartbreaking is that the boys are also not safe from these impacts, with the fall of Afghanistan, the livelihood and jobs of many people were also ruined. I met one of my classmates one time, I asked him how he is and how are others from our class, and I learned that many of our classmates dropped out of school to work and provide for their families. That feeling of anger and helplessness that I felt can not be described by words, I wanted answers from anyone to give me the reason why. Why did so many things have to happen? Why can't we go to school? Why can't we grow up with ease of mind? And why do we have to bear the punishment of the things we have not done? The feeling from that day still lingers. It is not just nostalgia; it is much more.. .



I feel sad that so much time has passed, so much has changed that we could never go back to before August 2021, and even if they allow girls to go back to school, we were robbed of all of our childhood, time, and all the memories we would make together. I also feel happy, because those are the memories that will be with me forever, that once upon a time in a small classroom in Afghanistan, a group of friends built a tiny world of happiness in their memories where only their smiles, laughter, and stories exist

- Nargis



A Class of Fear and Hope, Like the Garden Planted in Secret

No secondary school, and no high school, just a class of fear and hope. The class is an English language class. Although many girls go there to learn English, they mostly learn how to overcome fear by using hope.

Every day many girls attend the hidden English class with two things in their heart, fear and hope. Fear of restrictions and hope of tomorrow. I am one of the students there. I remember a Tuesday in winter at 2:22 pm that how fear spread in the classroom and when we heard government inspectors come to inspect. I remember how our English teacher, Sir Farzan, escaped out of the window of the class. I remember how all the girls hid their books behind the curtain. I remember how we closed the doors as if there was no one inside. Yes, I remember the nervous faces. But I also remember that how all the girls continued attending the class the next day, there was fear in their hearts, but more hope made them step in the class and continue holding books. All the students and teacher came in the class again, we all promised to never let fear stop us. And yes, I remember how the hope lights up the class like a candle when the fear is spreading shadow and makes the class dark.

I think too much about the class. The lessons of the class have not been just for that moment, they are the lessons that make me continue moving through my life. They are the lessons of deep parts of life. It has taught me to never take the hope out of my heart. It has taught me that, when you are asked to be silent, become poetry, when your pen is burned, write with its charcoal. When your notebook is taken away from you, write your dreams on the wall. But never take hope out of your heart. Sometimes I worry a lot that if someone knows about our class, what if they close it? What will happen to us? What will happen to our teachers? But the lessons are etched in my mind and nothing can erase it. I know that life is a book full of surprises, some of the pages are pleasant and some unpleasant. Our class of fear and hope is a clear example of it.

if 10 years ago someone told me that one day it would arrive that I should pay the price for being a girl, I would have never believed. Or if they told me that one day they will arrive that teaching becomes a sin for a teacher, or if they told me learning will become a sin for a girl, I would never believe it. Now, I am looking for the next surprise of life, but this time the pleasant one.

For me, the class of fear and hope is like a garden that we are planting in secret and irrigating it with hope. It is still continuing.

Hope for the brighter tomorrow

- Zahra Abbasi



A Thousand Years Distance

To the future!

It is 2:22 p.m. on December 9, 3025. I am Sophie, a literature student at the University of Oxford. While researching for my first-semester project in Oxford's oldest library, I discovered a bundle of handwritten papers inside an old book. The handwriting immediately caught my attention. It was a girl, from a long long time ago. It was written:

It is 2:22 pm of Dec 9 a cloudy but not cold day in 2025 in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, Asia, a 19 years old Afghan girl is sitting on her desk in the balcony, listening to a piece of piano from 17th century named Passacaglia, which she always dreamed of learning, drinking tea, a usual habit among Afghans, and wearing dark colored warm clothes. She puts a hat on her head while her long dark brown hairs are being moved by the soft wind of December. In that moment, she feels calm, almost at peace, yet a quiet loneliness lingers, as if the music is speaking only to her.

The environment was heart-touching. The blowing pages of the books, the steam rising from her tea, and the distant voices of birds made the moment beautiful. She had learned from movies how to look at everything with the eyes of an artist, to seek beauty in small details and capture them with her phone camera as memorable moments.

While doing all those things, she was working on her journal writing assignment. She rested her head on her left elbow, lying on her notebook as she wrote about her life journey. Suddenly, all her memories began passing one by one before her eyes, from the very first day her brother took her to school, to the day she was forced to wear the full hijab. Then came the day the Taliban threw her out of class. Her dreams burned. They stole her most basic human right, simply because she and her classmates were female.

She remembered how she was feeling lost after the ban of education. Home felt like prison and she was the prisoner, since she never liked to visit relatives, and outside she had nowhere else to go.



The academic places she loved were all closed for girls now. Later in the summer, She lost her best friend--or the girl she had thought was her best friend. She disappeared with some parting words that made no sense. She carried the pain of losing a friend and losing school all at once. She felt she could never tell anyone again.. She carried the pain of losing a friend at the same time she lost school and she was afraid that she could never trust anyone to be friends with. Now, when she remembers all those hard days, she can see how much she has changed. She learned to forgive people and leave them behind to find peace. Forgiving does not mean loving them again, nor does it mean hating them. It means letting go, having no feeling toward them, and moving forward. As long as we hold onto hate or refuse to forgive, we cannot be calm or relaxed. Forgiving is not forgetting; it is freeing yourself. Now she is finding herself. She has become stronger, taller, more open-minded, and she has found new, true friends. Now she no longer sees challenges as problems but as chances to learn, improve, help, and grow stronger. She feels blessed for everything she has, because this life she is living might be the best she could ever live. Yet even in her own joy, she still carries hope for Afghan girls; hope that they all will find freedom, education, and strength. She thinks that if she had never faced these challenges, she might never have become the person she is becoming now. She tore off the papers she had written and hid them between the books she was holding, keeping them safe only for herself. Yet deep inside, she hoped that one day, if someone read that book in the future, they might find the papers and understand her story. I read this piece of paper from a thousand years ago, and it inspired me. She was strong and unstoppable. The way she lived feels so poetic, and I hope it will inspire everyone who reads it. I write to the future so her voice can travel beyond today, carrying her struggles and her dreams, just as she hoped someone in the future might read them, to show that it doesn't matter where you are, how you live, or how many problems you face. Indeed there are always bright days after dark days. In the last words I wish I could know her name....

- Muslima Hemmat

The Day the Leaf Became a Universe

Tomorrow was Tuesday, and I had science class.

Yes, science.

I couldn't contain my excitement. The butterflies in my stomach had turned into birds, beating their wings wildly. I had every right to be excited, why wouldn't I be? because for several weeks my curiosity had been trapped inside books, waiting for a way out. For several weeks, we had only read about the unseen world of science, but tomorrow we would finally see it.

Something extraordinary was coming to our school. For the first time, science was no longer just words on a page. It arrived in our classroom, carried inside a small gray box called a microscope.

Microscope, I repeated three times...

As if I were testing the word, listening to how it sounded, making sure it was real.

Donated by UNICEF. I had seen the blue logo everywhere; sometimes girls carried backpacks with it, or the pencils we used for notes had the same blue color. The microscope was the first piece of technology our school had ever known. To me, it felt unreal, like a scene from science fiction, as if Professor Proton himself with his magical device had stepped out of a television screen and into our dusty school.

That night, I stood in my room, staring at my school uniform. I picked it up from the chair and smoothed the sleeves.

"Mom," I asked, stepping closer, "can I wear this now?"

She looked at the uniform, then at me, and sighed.

"No," she said. "You can't wear it tonight."

"But tomorrow is science class," I said, full of hope.

She shook her head, trying not to smile. "I'll wake you up early. Now put it away."

I hugged the uniform once, then folded it carefully, as if tomorrow itself might disappear if I let go.

Then, in a childish voice, I asked, "What if you don't wake up early?"

She didn't answer. She just looked at me with an annoyed smile, pretending to be angry.

She was a little irritated. Who wouldn't be, after being asked the same question fourteen times, maybe more.

I had spent days imagining what it would feel like to see the tiny vascular system of a leaf. Waiting was unavoidable. What if someone breaks the microscope tonight? What if someone steals it... I worried. Then I corrected myself just as quickly. No, don't be ridiculous, Nilab. Mrs. Sadat would never allow that. She locks the library. Still, the fear stayed with me, not letting me sit down or feel comfortable.

Tuesday morning, 5:30 a.m. I woke before the sun. It was sort of twilight. The air was cold, but excitement carried me forward, making my heart warm. I prayed. I prayed quietly, asking God to protect the device and allow me to see through the lens. I rushed out so fast I didn't hear my mother calling me back for her sweet halwa or my father laughing at my impatience. Somehow, I made it to our dusty school library.

And there it was.

The microscope sat on the table, gray and white, the base scratched. I didn't care. To me, it looked like a portal to another world, where tiny, shiny things carried a curious life.

"How does this device make tiny veins appear so large?" I asked.

"Hold your horses, Nilab," Mrs. Sadat said, smiling. "You will see."

She placed a thin glass slide on the stage and gently laid a small leaf on it. Her focus was so intense it felt like surgery.

"Go for it," she said.

"Me?" I asked.

"Yes. You."

I was too short to reach the table, so I lifted myself onto my toes. When I lowered my eye to the lens, the world disappeared.

A simple leaf became a universe. Veins turned into bridges. Cells formed cities. Everything was delicate, fragile, and astonishing. I was afraid to blink, afraid it would vanish. It didn't. I forgot the smell of the library. I didn't hear my teacher asking me to step aside. I was completely absorbed.

That small leaf became more than a specimen. It became a mentor. It guided me onto a path that began in a dusty library with a donated microscope. That spark carried me toward medicine, toward becoming a doctor—someone who heals, who brings hope. Later, my school was taken away. The microscope was taken from my hands. The university and its classrooms were taken too. But how could anyone take a spark that lives in the soul?

I will remember that moment forever, the moment I found mine. The microscope is no longer in my hands. It lives in my soul, like a lantern. Even in darkness, it teaches me how to see. Darkness did not blind me; it sharpened my vision. Even in silence, it reminds me why I began.

Some discoveries change what you see.

Others change who you become. Even though the microscope was stolen, it lives in Nilab's soul, a lantern that lights her path and keeps her curiosity alive.

- Nilab Mohammadi

If Life Were Fair, I'd Hold My Future in My Hands

Today is my birthday, but it doesn't feel like a celebration. It feels like a reminder—a reminder of every door that closed in my face, every path that suddenly disappeared, every dream that life stole from me. Sometimes I sit and think ... If I was born somewhere else, if the world was kinder, if life was fair, where would I be right now? Maybe I would be studying in a peaceful place. Maybe I would be working on my dreams. Maybe I would be a different person, a lighter person, not someone carrying the weight of a thousand disappointments. But I was born in Afghanistan, and destiny chose a harder road for me.

I grew up in a country full of limits: limits on movement, limits on dreaming, limits on happiness, even limits on breathing freely. Life keeps telling me what I cannot do instead of what I can. I watch others move forward while I stay stuck, not because I am weak, but because the world around me never gave me a real chance.

One of the cruelties I witness every day in Afghanistan is how girls are judged simply for wanting education. A desire to learn is treated like a crime. Girls are blamed, shamed, and silenced just because they dream of a classroom, a book, a future. I've seen people talk about us as if we are asking for too much, when all we want is the right to learn.

There were many limits in my own life too. I couldn't join educational programs or international opportunities because girls were not allowed to participate. Doors were closed on me before I could even knock, but not because I lacked talent or motivation, only because I am a girl in Afghanistan.

So many dreams were stolen from me—the dream of studying freely, the dream of building a career without fear, the dream of traveling, exploring the world and growing without restrictions.

And the pain... the pain of seeing what I could have been. The pain of watching life break people's hopes like they are nothing. The pain of knowing that in the world some people's dreams matter and others do not. That pain eats me from the inside.

Sometimes I feel like I'm living inside a storm.

The world is unstable. These sudden incidents, constant fear, and never-ending uncertainty exhaust me. One moment everything is fine, the next moment everything falls apart. People change, life changes, and the world becomes colder every year.

The worst part is the inhumanity that people show so easily. Their hearts have become stone. People hurt each other without thinking, judge without knowing, and destroy without caring.

If this world had a little more kindness, if fate were a little softer, maybe today, on my birthday I could celebrate. Maybe my heart would be light instead of full of scars.

Tonight, as the world gets quiet, I feel all the pain I keep inside, not just my own pain but the pain of every dream that died too early, every opportunity stolen, and every moment I wanted to rise but life pushed me back down.

Still, I'm here...

broken, but here...

tired but here...

scared but here.

But even in this darkness I'm still fighting. I'm still breathing. And maybe just maybe surviving in a world like this is its own kind of victory.

- Maroofa Mohammadi



Conclusion:

The journal entries in the booklet at hand are the result of continuous efforts for survival, written with heavy hearts and in quiet moments. These writings reflect the inner strength and resilience of Afghan girls who have been struggling amid darkness, fear, and an uncertain future. This platform, provided by Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT), has played its role in creating opportunities for Afghan girls to transform their personal and private moments of struggle into meaningful narratives for others to read. Through this effort, once more, APT indicates that Afghan women's voices matter: each voice must be heard, each story must be read, and Afghan girls still have a safe platform to rely on, even in times of disappointment.