



Sociology

The Afghan Woman

Leveled Assessment ____/4

Name:

Section:

Score: ____/5

Directions: Read the article below about the Afghan Woman. A photo taken in 1985 that sparked interest worldwide in the situation in Afghanistan. Read the story of Sharbat Gula and then write a reaction after the article.

A Life Revealed

By Cathy Newman

National Geographic Magazine

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Her eyes have captivated the world since she appeared on our cover in 1985. Now we can tell her story.

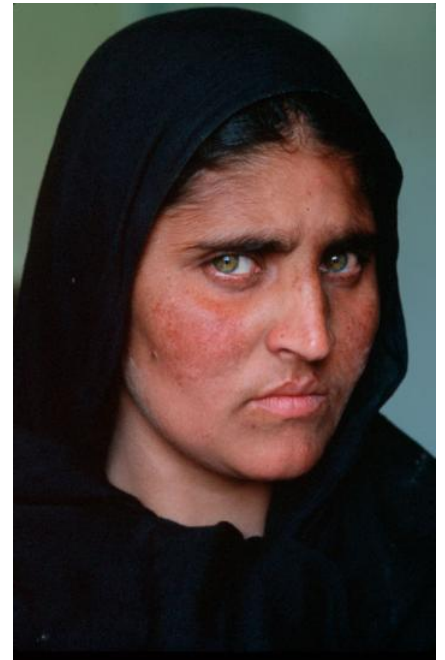
She remembers the moment. The photographer took her picture. She remembers her anger. The man was a stranger. She had never been photographed before. Until they met again 17 years later, she had not been photographed since.

The photographer remembers the moment too. The light was soft. The refugee camp in Pakistan was a sea of tents. Inside the school tent he noticed her first. Sensing her shyness, he approached her last. She told him he could take her picture. "I didn't think the photograph of the girl would be different from anything else I shot that day," he recalls of that morning in 1984 spent documenting the ordeal of Afghanistan's refugees.

The portrait by Steve McCurry turned out to be one of those images that sears the heart, and in June 1985 it ran on the cover of this magazine. Her eyes are sea green. They are haunted and haunting, and in them you can read the tragedy of a land drained by war. She became known around National Geographic as the "Afghan girl," and for 17 years no one knew her name.

In January a team from National Geographic Television & Film's EXPLORER brought McCurry to Pakistan to search for the girl with green eyes. They showed her picture around Nasir Bagh, the still standing refugee camp near Peshawar where the photograph had been made. A teacher from the school claimed to know her name. A young woman named Alam Bibi was located in a village nearby, but McCurry decided it wasn't her.

No, said a man who got wind of the search. He knew the girl in the picture. They had lived at the camp together as children. She had returned to Afghanistan years ago, he said, and now lived in the mountains near Tora Bora. He would go get her.



It took three days for her to arrive. Her village is a six-hour drive and three-hour hike across a border that swallows lives. When McCurry saw her walk into the room, he thought to himself: This is her.

Names have power, so let us speak of hers. Her name is Sharbat Gula, and she is Pashtun, that most warlike of Afghan tribes. It is said of the Pashtun that they are only at peace when they are at war, and her eyes—then and now—burn with ferocity. She is 28, perhaps 29, or even 30. No one, not even she, knows for sure. Stories shift like sand in a place where no records exist.

Time and hardship have erased her youth. Her skin looks like leather. The geometry of her jaw has softened. The eyes still glare; that has not softened. “She’s had a hard life,” said McCurry. “So many here share her story.” Consider the numbers. Twenty-three years of war, 1.5 million killed, 3.5 million refugees: This is the story of Afghanistan in the past quarter century.

Now, consider this photograph of a young girl with sea green eyes. Her eyes challenge ours. Most of all, they disturb. We cannot turn away.

“There is not one family that has not eaten the bitterness of war,” a young Afghan merchant said in the 1985 National Geographic story that appeared with Sharbat’s photograph on the cover. She was a child when her country was caught in the jaws of the Soviet invasion. A carpet of destruction smothered countless villages like hers. She was perhaps six when Soviet bombing killed her parents. By day the sky bled terror. At night the dead were buried. And always, the sound of planes, stabbing her with dread.

“We left Afghanistan because of the fighting,” said her brother, Kashar Khan, filling in the narrative of her life. He is a straight line of a man with a raptor face and piercing eyes. “The Russians were everywhere. They were killing people. We had no choice.”

Shepherded by their grandmother, he and his four sisters walked to Pakistan. For a week they moved through mountains covered in snow, begging for blankets to keep warm.

“You never knew when the planes would come,” he recalled. “We hid in caves.”

The journey that began with the loss of their parents and a trek across mountains by foot ended in a refugee camp tent living with strangers.

Evidence of the Afghan Girl

“Rural people like Sharbat find it difficult to live in the cramped surroundings of a refugee camp,” explained Rahimullah Yusufzai, a respected Pakistani journalist who acted as interpreter for McCurry and the television crew. “There is no privacy. You live at the mercy of other people.” More than that, you live at the mercy of the politics of other countries. “The Russian invasion destroyed our lives,” her brother said.

It is the ongoing tragedy of Afghanistan. Invasion. Resistance. Invasion. Will it ever end? “Each change of government brings hope,” said Yusufzai. “Each time, the Afghan people have found themselves betrayed by their leaders and by outsiders professing to be their friends and saviors.”

In the mid-1990s, during a lull in the fighting, Sharbat Gula went home to her village in the foothills of mountains veiled by snow. To live in this earthen-colored village at the end of a thread of path means to scratch out an existence, nothing more. There are terraces planted with corn, wheat, and rice, some walnut trees, a stream that spills down the mountain (except in times of drought), but no school, clinic, roads, or running water.

Here is the bare outline of her day. She rises before sunrise and prays. She fetches water from the stream. She cooks, cleans, does laundry. She cares for her children; they are the center of her life. Robina is 13. Zahida is three. Alia, the baby, is one. A fourth daughter died in infancy. Sharbat has never known a happy day, her brother says, except perhaps the day of her marriage.

Her husband, Rahmat Gul, is slight in build, with a smile like the gleam of a lantern at dusk. She remembers being married at 13. No, he says, she was 16. The match was arranged.

Sharbat Gula does not know her exact age, but she is likely 28, 29, or 30. In the mid-1990s, during a lull in the fighting that has rocked Afghanistan for most of her life, she returned to her village. Hers has been a hand-to-mouth existence. She had not been photographed since Steve McCurry made her portrait in 1984, and she only agreed to be photographed again—to appear unveiled, without her burka—because her husband told her it would be proper. She is a private woman, uncomfortable with the attention of strangers. A devout Muslim, she attributes her survival to the “will of God.”

He lives in Peshawar (there are few jobs in Afghanistan) and works in a bakery. He bears the burden of medical bills; the dollar a day he earns vanishes like smoke. Her asthma, which cannot tolerate the heat and pollution of Peshawar in summer, limits her time in the city and with her husband to the winter. The rest of the year she lives in the mountains.

At the age of 13, Yusufzai, the journalist, explained, she would have gone into purdah, the secluded existence followed by many Islamic women once they reach puberty.

“Women vanish from the public eye,” he said. In the street she wears a plum-colored burka, which walls her off from the world and from the eyes of any man other than her husband. “It is a beautiful thing to wear, not a curse,” she says.

Faced by questions, she retreats into the black shawl wrapped around her face, as if by doing so she might will herself to evaporate. The eyes flash anger. It is not her custom to subject herself to the questions of strangers.

Had she ever felt safe?

“No. But life under the Taliban was better. At least there was peace and order.”

Had she ever seen the photograph of herself as a girl?

“No.”

She can write her name, but cannot read. She harbors the hope of education for her children. “I want my daughters to have skills,” she said. “I wanted to finish school but could not. I was sorry when I had to leave.”

Education, it is said, is the light in the eye. There is no such light for her. It is possibly too late for her 13-year-old daughter as well, Sharbat Gula said. The two younger daughters still have a chance.

The reunion between the woman with green eyes and the photographer was quiet. On the subject of married women, cultural tradition is strict. She must not look—and certainly must not smile—at a man who is not her husband. She did not smile at McCurry. Her expression, he said, was flat. She cannot understand how her picture has touched so many. She does not know the power of those eyes.

Such knife-thin odds. That she would be alive. That she could be found. That she could endure such loss. Surely, in the face of such bitterness the spirit could atrophy. How, she was asked, had she survived?

The answer came wrapped in unshakable certitude.

“It was,” said Sharbat Gula, “the will of God.”

Thought Question:

Directions: In the space below write your reaction to the article above dealing with Sharbat Gula. How has her life been shaped by her situation, and how might it have been different?