Writing in Afghanistan

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Nuristan, a remote region of Afghanistan hidden within the Hindu-Kush valley, was once a non-Islamic region known as “Kafiristan (Kāferestān), land of the non-Islamic and thus ‘heathen’ (kāfer), until its enforced Islamization in 1896 brought ‘light’ or ‘enlightenment,’ (nur), to the area.” Coincidentally, Nuristan, now under the control of the Taliban, has become one of the most devoutly Islamic regions of Afghanistan and one of the poorest as well with little to no infrastructure. The region suffers dramatically from lack of accessible health care services, poor education, and due to its remote location and hostile environment, outside resources such as those delivered by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are unable to assist either. As a result, the people of Nuristan had little to no contact with the outside world, other than military personnel, until late July and early August of 2010 when Dr. Karen Woo and nine other members of a medical team organized an expedition to provide basic medical services including “the distribution of eyeglasses and toothbrushes, pain relief and prenatal care to remotest villages they reached on foot.” Weeks later, nine of the ten members, including Dr. Woo, would be killed as they ventured home, shot outside their caravan as they stopped for lunch in the hills of a region once known as “the land of the unbelievers.”

A thirty-six year old surgeon from England at the time of her death, Dr. Woo spent close to two years in Afghanistan working as a doctor and as a member of the organization Bridge Afghanistan, a coalition of doctors, journalists, and writers who “help support those in greatest need by attracting aid from different parts of the world including within Afghanistan itself.” During her time in Afghanistan, Dr. Woo also worked on producing a film which documented the lives of Afghan and non-Afghan women imprisoned in Kabul for various crimes without habeas corpus. While investigating her life further in periodicals and editorials, I also discovered that Dr. Woo documented her own life in Afghanistan via a blog account. Written from December of 2009 to July 2010, these blogs served as a guide back into her life as I searched for meaning beneath the remnants and wreckage of both a country and a war I had only read about in newspapers and witnessed in pictures of crumbling buildings and bloodied bodies online.

Before reading her blogs, however, I made the assumption that for the most part, they would consist of medical related experiences with tidbits of observations about the war, the culture, and the soldiers stationed in Afghanistan. Yet as I made my way through her entries I found that this was not the case. Rather, these blogs rarely dealt with the specifics of her time working as a surgeon in Kabul, focusing on her personal thoughts and feelings which stemmed from observations of the people and places she encountered in the middle east and back home in Europe. Soon it began to appear that these blogs served as a medium for Dr. Woo to situate herself within the milieu of the new environment she found herself navigating both physically and mentally, alone as a foreigner and as a woman. The blog served as a bridge between two worlds, western and middle eastern, past and present, herself and the reader, linking the two yet simultaneously forging something new in the space between. Dr. Woo’s writing served as a way for her to further explore herself, as well as the hidden meanings within the hotels, storefronts, apartments, and operating room tables in the new worlds she occupied. Yet as the blog exists in the realm of the public, these multiple worlds collide and engage in an active dialogue catalyzed not only by the author but by the readership, forcing Dr. Woo to push further, deeper, and clearer into her own identity and mission abroad. In Afghanistan, alongside the reader, writing served as a tool, like a surgeons scalpel, allowing her to literally see more of who she was, where she was, and perhaps, why.

Dr. Karen Explores Healthcare In Afghanistan is the official title to Dr. Woo’s blog account. Her log begins in Dubai with an entry simply called “London-Dubai-Kabul” dated Friday, December 11th, 2009. Within this entry we find Dr. Woo adrift in the city, her hotel, and a water-park as she awaits her departure to Afghanistan. One intriguing moment in particular begins as she awakens from a nightmare in her
hotel, only to encounter the sights and sounds of a city much more foreign than a dream:

I wandered about the hotel in a daze for a few hours before they found me somewhere to go, a pretty room but with no electricity; I couldn't switch down the aircon or dry my hair, but after a massive hot bath at least I was clean and could get into bed for a couple of hours. I fell into one of those deep and confusing dream states, I was having a nightmare, in this one an evil man was killing lots of people, torturing them, dragging them around the town. I was woken by Crispian ringing me, usually I am instantly alert but it took ages to pull myself from the syrup of my awful dream and I could barely speak. It's a strange thing that one can be surrounded by so called luxury - fine linen, soft pillows, a totally controlled environment and yet none of it feels real. There's no earth in dubai, no true oxygen, and the trees are not free, by the roadside I saw that they'd painted the brown trunks green in order that they match the colour of the hedges behind them, I felt sick. I drove around in a taxi, divorced from the concrete environment, knowing all the while that the taxi driver probably resented me as yet another white colonial face, money in my pocket and an attitude to match. Though I don't have an attitude and I am wracked with guilt as I go about my 'luxury' life there.

The horror of the dream resonates and sustains an interpretation of the people and places Dr. Woo encounters riding in the taxi. The physical world, “divorced from the concrete environment,” loses meaning and value as the trees themselves become painted and false. Reality itself becomes suspect. The familiar transforms into something fake, as seen even in the hotel where “fine pillows, soft linen” are rejected as inauthentic, just as the air and the ground and eventually, Dr. Woo’s own image of herself as well. The world unravels and the image of herself begins to fragment within the kaleidoscopic middle eastern landscape of Dubai. And as her “white colonial face” appears in the rear view mirror of the taxi like a mirage, Dr. Woo confronts how quickly her identity has shifted simply by entering this new world.

In the entry titled “Biting creature turns girl into boy...” dated shortly after on Sunday, December 20th, 2009, the reader finds Dr. Woo situating herself now in Afghanistan, adapting to both the clothes and the people there. Here, Dr. Woo crafts a more distinct dialogue between both herself and the reader, actively altering her relationship between the two. Specifically, as Dr. Woo begins to engage with the reader directly, she also begins to analyze herself more deeply. The blog then becomes shaped not only by what she has to say, but by the fact that she is conscious of there being someone, somewhere reading her words:

I’m here in the office, I’ve lost track of what day it is and I’m waiting for my first patient to arrive. I’m pretty sure it is Monday. I’m now slowly morphing out of my London life, no sexy dresses and high heels here: I find myself blending in with the blokes. I’ve got my 5.11 tactical trousers on (they had to have them tailored for me, so I’m now wearing a pair of mens trousers but with short legs) lets just say they’re a bit long in the crotch and therefore look a bit like clown pants - v glam. Anyway, it doesn't really matter here and pseudomilitary clothing is considered normal. So the butch side of me is getting way out of control :)

At the beginning of her entry, Dr. Woo contextualizes herself within a place and a (rather ambiguous) time, indirectly acknowledging the presence of a reader. Dr. Woo then addresses how her image has begun to “morph” by virtue of her new, more masculine attire, and how it brings out a different “side” of her. At the end of this paragraph, Dr. Woo again acknowledges the reader, however this time via the colon-parenthesis smile she inserts at the end of the sentence. Seemingly insignificant, this symbol serves as another reminder to both her and the reader that there is an exchange, or dialogue, if you will, taking place. Dr. Woo not only consults her own thoughts about her changing appearance, but her perception of the reader’s interpretation of her becoming “butch” as well. This symbol thus serves as a tool for Dr. Woo to seemingly reach across time and space, actively bridge a gap between herself, her thoughts, and the imaginary reader that suddenly becomes real.
The acknowledgement of the readers’ “presence” directly alters Dr. Woo’s focus a few sentences later as her discussion about clothing slips into a memory from the night before:

As I lay in bed last night, the generator had stopped and the power was off - I’d just been wandering the house with my head torch on, and now I was wondering about fate and why it seems that one is made for particular things. Happiness or satisfaction in life seems partly to do with whether you can match what you were made for with where you end up. All the advice, well meaning or not, from family, friends, teachers and work colleagues doesn’t make a bit of difference if they don’t know you. They can tell you what they might want for you, what they project upon you, or what might be beneficial for them, but it takes a very wise person to see what it is that you need, to be able to say that what might really suit you may be quite different from what everyone else expects. Oh, and don’t worry, I’m not about to come out of the closet, if that’s what you’re thinking ;)

Again, Dr. Woo contextualizes and allows for the reader to re-imagine the night she wandered around her house in the dark thinking about fate. Just as she confided in the reader earlier about her changing physical image, Dr. Woo confides in the reader that “it takes a very wise person to see what it is that you need.” Similar to the passage written in Dubai, the same theme of perception recurs and directs Dr. Woo’s discussion as she interprets the image of her herself and how others, characterized here as “family, friends, teachers and work colleagues,” witness or interpret that image as well. The spectra created by all of these different perceptions, including that of the readers, drives a metamorphosis of thought and directs the course of her discussion from that of her changing physical appearance to a more philosophical evaluation on identity, on “seeing” yourself truthfully. The screen becomes her mirror, and the words her reflection seen by not only herself, but by those beyond the plasma, imagined yet real, like you and I, reading her world and evaluating the images and thoughts created.

Toward the end of this same entry, one again experiences Dr. Woo bridging that gap between herself and another world when she states: “what might really suit you may be quite different from what everyone else expects. Oh, and don’t worry, I’m not about to come out of the closet, if that’s what you’re thinking ;).” In this passage Dr. Woo catches a different, unintended interpretation of what she has said, i.e. that she is homosexual, and playfully responds, punctuating again with a smile. Yet by using the personal pronoun “you’re” Dr. Woo decides to directly speak to the reader as if they are there, in real time, communicating with her in silence as she writes. Within the format of the blog, not only does the presence of a reader influence Dr. Woo’s own assessment of her writing, but acts as a catalyst for her to confront the images or reflections she sees of herself. For as the author recognizes the reader after the statement “what might really suit you may be quite different from what everyone else expects” one can argue that Dr. Woo communicates her conclusion on “fate” because she assumes someone is there listening, feeling, and engaging with more than just the words on the screen all along.

Thus, in a very real way, the reader actively contributes to Dr. Woo’s assessment and evaluation of her own identity. Just as a patient allows a doctor to “heal,” the presence of a reader permits the writer to explore both herself and her actions and to bridge the two, leading to the affirmation made at the end of this same entry:

At the Afghan Military Hospital I spotted one of the American’s arriving in a burkha, all that was visible were her tan desert combat boots poking out of the bottom. I look forward to a time where Afghan fashion is truly resurgent, there are some amazing fabrics, beautiful designs but very rarely do we get to see them displayed and worn in all their glory. Pride and bearing are strong parts of being Afghan, it’s one of the things that you notice about the men, they are masculine even when cycling a bike, a heavy blanket casually draped around them. They do not wear track suits for leisure and they are not fat and lazy. The women too have presence but for many it’s a confused presence; they are not themselves sure what their profile should be outside the home (or at least where I encounter them) and it hurts me that they are often so subservient and silent, as if they are safer if no one
notices them [...] So for now, I’ll continue to cause a stir by putting on my makeup in my combats whilst sitting at the ops room table; waterproof mascara is a must for any hostile environment.

In this final paragraph Dr. Woo, for a moment, comes to terms with herself. There is a movement away from a preoccupation with what people think as a call to action is made when she emphatically states “So for now, I’ll continue to cause a stir by putting on my makeup in my combats whilst sitting at the ops room table.” Through writing and working her way through her blog, Dr. Woo re-experiences and revisits what she has seen and what she has felt. The questions too return, as do the dreams and thoughts from nights before as Dr. Woo begins to put the pieces together of her own life while trying to assemble the lives of others from the operating room table to the women in the bazaars, hidden behind their own veils. In doing so, Dr. Woo morphs into something androgynous, with multiple roles and multiple eyes, pushing for new meaning and a new identity within the words, beyond this “hostile environment” yet necessarily a product of it, too.

Perhaps, then, this is one of the many reasons Dr. Woo worked and lived and wrote in Afghanistan for it made her think and act different, engaging with herself and others in dangerous yet more meaningful and profound ways. In the final paragraph of an entry posted just a month prior to her death, dated July 11th, 2010, Dr. Woo captures this ideal again as she compares and contrasts English and Afghan cultures:

This is a very different place from England though and family and the social hierarchy are strong. The upsides are the generosity, the subtleties like the terrible driving but the lack of road rage, the lack of food, space and money, but the offer to share nonetheless. The downsides are the rigidity of the system, the safety in conformity and therefore the lack of courage to break the mould by being an individual. It’s difficult to explain but to step outside of normal behaviour here results in rapid condemnation either because people believe it is ‘dangerous’ or have to be seen to be saying that they believe it to be dangerous. Either way, the downside is that attitudes change very slowly.

As Dr. Woo attempts to consolidate the discrepancies which separate the two cultures, we see her pinpoint one aspect she finds especially damaging, “the lack of courage to break the mould by being an individual.” Beliefs and customs and even ones identity are all things that Dr. Woo refused to accept as given. The danger which Dr. Woo outlines here is not dying, but staying silent, by finding “safety in conformity” and simply accepting the world and your life as it is. This passage then highlights the true mission in which Dr. Woo set out on and in many ways completed: to displace conformity in order to fully understand and appreciate both herself and those around her, creating change in the process. By writing in Afghanistan and publicly engaging in a dialogue about her experiences, her mission was able to fully evolve and reach those of a different place, of a different time, listening again now to the words left behind, and witnessing how one broke that mould and gave their life to do so.

REFERENCES