Literary Reading – Gender and Power: A Year Long
Thematic Focus
High School, 11th Grade

Project READI Curriculum Module
Technical Report CM #9

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READI Literature Team

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Project READI operated as a multi-institution collaboration among the Learning Sciences Research Institute, University of Illinois at Chicago; Northern Illinois University; Northwestern University; WestEd’s Strategic Literacy Initiative; and Inquirium, LLC. Project READI developed and researched interventions in collaboration with classroom teachers that were designed to improve reading comprehension through argumentation from multiple sources in literature, history, and the sciences appropriate for adolescent learners. Curriculum materials such as those in this module were developed based on enacted instruction and are intended as case examples of the READI approach to deep and meaningful disciplinary literacy and learning.

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**Objective of Module: Analysis of themes of gender and power in literary texts**

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<tr>
<th>Setting the Stage</th>
<th>Interpretive Practices</th>
<th>Argument Writing</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Introductory texts and activities for</td>
<td>• Critical Reading Journals: Ongoing log of textual evidence relating to theme</td>
<td>• Structured writing of interpretive arguments backed by textual evidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>• background knowledge of cultural historical context</td>
<td>• Group projects exploring inquiry questions and sharing results</td>
<td>• Interpretive claim</td>
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<td>• interpreting themes of gender and power</td>
<td>• Regular whole class discussions making and supporting interpretive claims</td>
<td>• Context of evidence</td>
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<td>• knowledge of genre conventions</td>
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<td>• Explanation of evidence</td>
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<td>• Connection to criteria</td>
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*This is the overarching module objective. All designed modules are guided by the six interrelated learning objective below.

**Literature Learning Objectives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Objective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Engage in close reading of literary texts to construct interpretations</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Synthesize within and across literary texts to construct generalizations about theme, characterization, structure, and language</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Construct claim-evidence relations based on evidence from texts, reader’s experiences, other texts, and literary constructs</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Establish criteria for judging interpretations of theme</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Develop structural and thematic interpretations derived from general knowledge of literary conventions and genre structures</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Demonstrate understanding that literary interpretation is based on an open dialogue between texts and readers</td>
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Sequence for 11th Grade Gender and Power Module

Cultural Data Sets & Gateway Activities
- Images, short vignette, and short story to introduce strategies for interpreting themes of and develop list of criteria for gender and power

Gateway Activities for Cultural-Historical Context
- Images and articles to introduce issues of gender and power specific to the cultural and historical context of the novel

Primary Text #1: A Thousand Splendid Suns
- Thematic inferences (gender, power, etc.)
- Attention to language and structure
- Building arguments
- Synthesizing across texts

Primary Text #2: The Handmaid’s Tale
- Thematic inferences (gender, power, dystopian themes, etc.)
- Attention to language and structure
- Building arguments
- Synthesizing across texts

Cultural Data Sets & Gateway Activities
- Video excerpt and short stories to introduce strategies for interpreting themes of and develop list of criteria for dystopian themes
Background Information
This module was implemented across an academic year in an 11th grade class. It focuses on the themes of gender and power, both relevant to the lives of older adolescents. The curriculum focused on two novels, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, both of which afford analysis of power and control in relations among characters and between the people and greater social and institutional forces. The power dynamics in both novels are explicitly governed by gender roles in the respective social and cultural contexts, the first in Afghanistan across 40 years and the second in a future dystopian society.

The instruction prior to *A Thousand Splendid Suns* included a series of activities and texts to develop criteria for gender and power and to practice analyzing shorter texts for these themes before tackling a whole novel. The instruction prior to *The Handmaid’s Tale* focused on developing an understanding of the genre of dystopian fiction, its characteristics and purpose.

Text Selection
Text selection emphasizes issues related to gender and power because the teacher deemed these important issues for students to explore and critically analyze in 11th grade and considering the demographics of the students.

Text sequence
First semester:
“New Hope for Afghanistan’s Women,” [Speech by Hillary Clinton, printed by *Time Magazine*, November 24, 2001] (Text 1.d)
*A Thousand Splendid Suns* [Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Penguin, 2007] (Text 1.g)
Second semester:
Hunger Games video clip
“Harrison Bergeron” [Vonnegut, Kurt. The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, 1961] (Text 2.a)
The Handmaid’s Tale [Atwood, Margaret. The Handmaid’s Tale. London: Vintage, 1985] (Text 2.c)

Guiding Questions for Module
• How do the themes of gender and power play out in relationships among characters in the text?
• How are those relationships impacted by macrocosmic forces in the cultural and historical context of the novel?
• How do symbols in the text help the reader to understand the change in characters’ lives and emotional states across the narrative?
• What messages is the author trying to convey about the world? How do you know?
• How does the author use language and structure of the text to communicate meaning?
• What parallels can you draw between the text and the real world?
• Why might the author choose to follow or not follow genre conventions? What might the author be trying to communicate?

First Few Weeks of Semester: Building background knowledge and interpretive skills

Objectives
• Students will read and discuss articles related to the cultural and historical context of the first novel, particularly related to gender and power in that context
• Students develop criteria for interpreting themes of gender and power in texts based on their experience of the world and on their analysis of accessible images and texts

Assessment
• Group discussions of understandings gleaned from articles on cultural historical context
• Collaboratively developed and publicly shared list of criteria for gender and power generated from readings and discussions
• Written argument paragraphs around gender and power in images and short texts

Guiding Questions
• What role do gender and power play in the lives of people living in Afghanistan?
• What are criteria for gender and power from your understanding of the world and life experience?
• What does this text indicate about gender and power?

Texts/Materials
• “New Hope for Afghanistan’s Women,” [Speech by Hillary Clinton, printed by *Time Magazine*, November 24, 2001] (Text 1.d)
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<th>DESIGN OF INSTRUCTION</th>
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<td><strong>Texts</strong></td>
<td><strong>Activities</strong></td>
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<td>Articles around gender and power in Afghanistan in the last 50 years (Texts 1.c, 1.d, 1.e, 1.f)</td>
<td><strong>Building Knowledge of Social, Political and Historical Context</strong>&lt;br&gt; If students are unfamiliar with the context of the novel (Afghanistan), they can read texts that characterize the social, political and historical context of Afghanistan during the last 40-50 years. Texts that deal with gender relations and power structures would be particularly helpful. Some examples of such sources are listed above. They can be read by separate groups of students and then combined in a jigsaw-type activity.</td>
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<td>Images and short texts in which gender and power are thematically salient</td>
<td><strong>Developing Criteria</strong>&lt;br&gt; Students can brainstorm a list of criteria from what they have experienced or observed as related to gender and power in their own lives (e.g., the ability to make decisions in the house, the ability to sexually attract, the ability to make and spend money). These criteria should be</td>
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kept as a public list in the classroom so they are easily accessible as students construct arguments of judgment around gender and power. The same criteria can be used to construct arguments of judgment with increasingly complex texts.

An American Girl in Italy

Students can then look at various images that depict people who may or may not be in power and for whom gender may play a role in that power. One example may be the photograph “An American Girl in Italy.” (See photograph below.)
This question of whether or not the woman in this image is in power can be discussed as a whole class or in smaller groups. Then the students can decide which evidence might be the most important to support their claims. Following that, an argument paragraph can be developed.

“Linoleum Roses” (Text 1.a)

Students can read this short vignette and discuss either as a whole class or in small groups the themes of power and gender. Again, it is important that the selection of evidence and criteria be discussed so that students can compose argument paragraphs. A sample of these paragraphs can be analyzed as a whole class as to build understanding of and strategies for developing argument structure.

“Desiree’s Baby” (Text 1.b)

This short story, which is more complex than any of the above texts, can be read and annotated by students individually. Then, it can be discussed as a whole class. Then students can select evidence and develop an argument paragraph in small groups. This can be followed by peer analysis of the argument paragraphs.
Remainder of the Semester: Reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

**Objectives**
- Students will read and annotate the novel for themes of gender and power
- Students will discuss and write arguments to support interpretive claims around gender and power in the novel
- Students will explore how symbols in the text help the reader to understand the change in characters’ lives and emotional states across the narrative

**Assessment**
- Critical Reading Journals as indicators of student thinking
- Whole class discussions around inquiry questions and interpretive claims
- Small group projects exploring inquiry questions
- Written argument paragraphs and essay around gender and power in the novel

**Guiding Questions**
- What role do gender and power play in the lives of the main character in the text?
- What do symbols in the text indicate about the change in the lives or emotional states of characters?
- What does this text indicate about gender and power?

**Texts/Materials**

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<td><strong>Texts</strong></td>
<td><strong>Activities</strong></td>
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</table>
| *A Thousand Splendid Suns* | Reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns*
  Preparing to read and reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns* took the entire first semester of the academic year. Students read the novel a few chapters at a time and keep a Critical Reading Journal with one column for textual evidence and one column for several sentences explaining the significance of the evidence. (See example below.) |

The Critical Reading journal supports students in critically analyzing the language of the text for evidence to support their interpretive claims. It
Keeping the critical reading journal will allow students to keep a record of textual evidence in order to construct and support interpretive claims. In addition, students can examine particular passages as a whole class to discuss their significance to the themes and overall messages of the novel. These types of activities as well as regular whole class and small group discussions can help students develop their own interpretations of the text and strategies for supporting those interpretations.

As a culminating project, students may write an essay examining the gender and power relations between any two of the characters in the novel. Their writing should be done in drafts with plenty of opportunity for feedback from peers and revisions.

**Symbolism**

To introduce symbolism to students, two short texts were used: “Linoleum Roses,” a vignette, and “The Rose That Grew From Concrete,” a poem. Students annotate the texts for titles, repetition, and improbability/impossibility of literal meaning. Then students can discuss what in these texts might be symbolic and how they know. For example, if they determine that roses might be symbolic in each, they can think about their associations with roses, how the roses are portrayed in each text, and what they think the roses might represent in each text. Using these two texts in particular emphasizes the importance of context when determining symbolic meaning. It also encourages them to
meaning. The same image (roses) can mean very different things in different contexts.

Introducing Symbolism as the Interpretive Focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&quot;Linoleum Roses&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;The Rose that Grew from Concrete&quot;</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sandra Cisneros</td>
<td>Tupac Shakur</td>
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"She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake."

Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete? Proving nature’s law is wrong it learned to walk with out having feet. Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams, it learned to breathe fresh air. Long live the rose that grew from concrete when no one else ever cared.

While reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, students may notice or can be prompted to notice certain objects that may have symbolic value. For example, pebbles appear repeatedly toward the beginning of the novel as does snow throughout the novel. Both of these objects can be connected to changing events and characters in the novel.
First Few Weeks of 2nd Semester: Building knowledge of genre conventions

Objectives

• Students will watch video clips and read short literary texts of dystopian fiction
• Students will develop criteria for characterizing the genre of dystopian fiction and its purposes
• Students will develop criteria for characterizing dystopian protagonists

Assessment

• Group and whole class discussions making sense of dystopian texts
• Collaboratively developed and publicly shared list of criteria for dystopian fiction and dystopian protagonists
• Written argument paragraphs around presence or absence of dystopian protagonist in a short dystopian text

Guiding Questions

• What are the characteristics of dystopian fiction?
• What is the purpose of dystopian fiction?
• What are the characteristics of a dystopian protagonist?
• What does it mean that this dystopian text may not have a dystopian protagonist?

Texts/Materials

• Hunger Games video clip
• “Harrison Bergeron” [Vonnegut, Kurt. The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, 1961] (Text 2.a)
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<tr>
<th>DESIGN OF INSTRUCTION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Video clip and</td>
<td><strong>The Hunger Games</strong></td>
<td>Students are often quite familiar with dystopian fiction as it is ubiquitous in popular culture and movies (e.g., The Matrix, The Hunger Games). However, they may not have explicit knowledge of its characteristics and purposes as a genre, so texts and activities at the beginning of the second semester can be used to make this knowledge explicit, providing a basis for understanding the main novel, <em>The Handmaid’s Tale</em>.</td>
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<td>short works of</td>
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<td>dystopian fiction</td>
<td><strong>Harrison Bergeron</strong> (Text 2.a)</td>
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<td>Students can watch a video clip of the</td>
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<td><em>The Hunger Games</em> in order to start</td>
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<td>dystopian fiction, such as government</td>
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<td>control and the existence of a dystopian</td>
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<td>protagonist. The video can be followed</td>
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<td><strong>Harrison Bergeron</strong> (Text 2.a)</td>
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<td>Students can then read and annotate</td>
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<td>Harrison Bergeron for the elements of</td>
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<td>the genre that they discussed. The idea</td>
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<td>of the dystopian protagonist as someone</td>
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<td>who helps the people and goes against</td>
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<td>the government should start to become</td>
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<td>clear. Students can start to keep a list</td>
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<td>of criteria for determining the dystopian</td>
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<td>protagonist.</td>
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<td><strong>The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas</strong></td>
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<td>(Text 2.b)</td>
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<td>This story is more complex than either</td>
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<td>of the previous two texts. In particular,</td>
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<td>it is not clear whether or not there is</td>
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<td>a dystopian protagonist. Students can</td>
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<td>read and annotate the story and then</td>
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<td>discuss it in small groups. A culminating</td>
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<td>task might be to write a short argument</td>
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<td>essay arguing an interpretive claim</td>
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<td>about whether any of the characters</td>
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<td>functions as a dystopian protagonist.</td>
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Remainder of Second Semester: Reading *The Handmaid's Tale*

**Objectives**
- Students will read and annotate the novel for themes of government control, power, and gender
- Students will discuss and write arguments to support interpretive claims around government control, power, and gender
- Students will discuss structural features of the text and their effects

**Assessment**
- Critical Reading Journals as indicators of student thinking
- Whole class discussions around inquiry questions and interpretive claims
- Small group projects exploring inquiry questions
- Written argument paragraphs and essay around theme and structure in the novel

**Guiding Questions**
- What role do government control, gender, and power play in the lives of the main character in the text?
- Why does the author choose to not have a clear dystopian protagonist in the text?
- What is the author criticizing with the vision of dystopia presented in the text?
- Why does the author create a narrative that jumps back and forth in time?
- What is the purpose of the historical notes at the end of the text?

**Texts/Materials**

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<td><em>The Handmaid's Tale</em></td>
<td>Reading <em>The Handmaid's Tale</em></td>
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<td>Again, it is important that students keep a record of textual evidence and its significance in their critical reading journal. The themes in the novel include government control, the dangers of indifference, using religion as a means of control, and gender discrimination. Structural complexities include a narrative that shifts abruptly in time, characters who are not clearly defined by genre</td>
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<td>The focus in reading <em>The Handmaid’s Tale</em> shifts to analysis of macrocosmic powers in the dystopian society of the novel, especially as they intersect with gender. The world of the novel is one in which gender determines a</td>
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conventions (i.e., possible absence of a dystopian protagonist), epigraphs, and historical notes from far in the future at the end of the novel. The complexity of both the themes and structure may require more support from teacher-guided whole class discussions and appropriate external resources.

Finally, because students wrote an essay on a more defined topic during the first semester, they can be encouraged to write a longer essay at the end of the academic year on a topic of their choice around *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

| conventions (i.e., possible absence of a dystopian protagonist), epigraphs, and historical notes from far in the future at the end of the novel. The complexity of both the themes and structure may require more support from teacher-guided whole class discussions and appropriate external resources. Finally, because students wrote an essay on a more defined topic during the first semester, they can be encouraged to write a longer essay at the end of the academic year on a topic of their choice around *The Handmaid’s Tale*. | person’s role and opportunities in life, so the students’ work on understanding gender and power relations during the first semester are used in conjunction with their understanding of dystopian fiction as they read. |
“Linoleum Roses,” from The House on Mango Street, 
Sandra Cisneros (1984)

Sally got married like we knew she would, young and not ready but married just the same. She met a marshmallow salesman at a school bazaar, and she married him in another state where it's legal to get married before eighth grade. She has her husband and her house now, her pillowcases and her plates.

Sally says she like being married because now she gets to buy her own things when her husband gives her money. She is happy, except sometimes her husband gets angry and once he broke the door where his foot went through, though most days he is okay. Except he won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working.

She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake.
As the day was pleasant, Madame Valmondé drove over to L’Abri to see Désirée and the baby.

It made her laugh to think of Désirée with a baby. Why, it seemed but yesterday that Désirée was little more than a baby herself; when Monsieur in riding through the gateway of Valmondé had found her lying asleep in the shadow of the big stone pillar.

The little one awoke in his arms and began to cry for “Dada.” That was as much as she could do or say. Some people thought she might have strayed there of her own accord, for she was of the toddling age. The prevailing belief was that she had been purposely left by a party of Texans, whose canvas-covered wagon, late in the day, had crossed the ferry that Coton Maïs kept, just below the plantation. In time Madame Valmondé abandoned every speculation but the one that Désirée had been sent to her by a beneficent Providence to be the child of her affection, seeing that she was without child of the flesh. For the girl grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,—the idol of Valmondé.

It was no wonder, when she stood one day against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before, that Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her there, had fallen in love with her. That was the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. The wonder was that he had not loved her before; for he had known her since his father brought him home from Paris, a boy of eight, after his mother died there. The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles.

Monsieur Valmondé grew practical and wanted things well considered: that is, the girl’s obscure origin. Armand looked into her eyes and did not care. He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana? He ordered the corbeille from Paris, and contained himself with what patience he could until it arrived; then they were married.

Madame Valmondé had not seen Désirée and the baby for four weeks. When she reached L’Abri she shuddered at the first sight of it, as she always did. It was a sad looking place, which for many years had not known the gentle presence of a mistress, old Monsieur Aubigny having married and buried his wife in France, and she having loved her own land too well ever to leave it. The roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big, solemn oaks
grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall. Young Aubigny’s rule was a strict one, too, and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master’s easy-going and indulgent lifetime.

The young mother was recovering slowly, and lay full length, in her soft white muslins and laces, upon a couch. The baby was beside her, upon her arm, where he had fallen asleep, at her breast. The yellow nurse woman sat beside a window fanning herself.

Madame Valmondé bent her portly figure over Désirée and kissed her, holding her an instant tenderly in her arms. Then she turned to the child.

“This is not the baby!” she exclaimed, in startled tones. French was the language spoken at Valmondé in those days.

“I knew you would be astonished,” laughed Désirée, “at the way he has grown. The little cochon de lait! Look at his legs, mamma, and his hands and finger-nails,—real finger-nails. Zandrine had to cut them this morning Is n’t it true, Zandrine?”

The woman bowed her turbaned head majestically, “Mais si, Madame.”

“And the way he cries,” went on Désirée, “is deafening. Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche’s cabin.”

Madame Valmondé had never removed her eyes from the child. She lifted it and walked with it over to the window that was lightest. She scanned the baby narrowly, then looked as searchingly at Zandrine, whose face was turned to gaze across the fields.

“Yes, the child has grown, has changed;” said Madame Valmondé, slowly, as she replaced it beside its mother. “What does Armand say?”

Désirée’s face became suffused with a glow that was happiness itself.

“Oh, Armand is the proudest father in the parish, I believe, chiefly because it is a boy, to bear his name; though he says not,—that he would have loved a girl as well. But I know it is n’t true I know he says that to please me. And mamma,” she added, drawing Madame Valmondé’s head down to her, and speaking in a whisper, “he has n’t punished one of them—not one of them—since baby is born. Even Négrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work—he only laughed, and said Négrillon was a great scamp. Oh, mamma, I’m so happy; it frightens me.”
What Désirée said was true. Marriage, and later the birth of his son had softened Armand Aubigny’s imperious and exacting nature greatly. This was what made the gentle Désirée so happy, for she loved him desperately. When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God. But Armand’s dark, handsome face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with her.

When the baby was about three months old, Désirée awoke one day to the conviction that there was something in the air menacing her peace. It was at first too subtle to grasp. It had only been a disquieting suggestion; an air of mystery among the blacks; unexpected visits from far-off neighbors who could hardly account for their coming. Then a strange, an awful change in her husband’s manner, which she dared not ask him to explain. When he spoke to her, it was with averted eyes, from which the old love-light seemed to have gone out. He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves. Désirée was miserable enough to die.

She sat in her room, one hot afternoon, in her peignoir, listlessly drawing through her fingers the strands of her long, silky brown hair that hung about her shoulders. The baby, half naked, lay asleep upon her own great mahogany bed, that was like a sumptuous throne, with its satin-lined half-canopy. One of La Blanche’s little quadroon boys—half naked too—stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Désirée’s eyes had been fixed absentely and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her. She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. “Ah!” It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face.

She tried to speak to the little quadroon boy; but no sound would come, at first. When he heard his name uttered, he looked up, and his mistress was pointing to the door. He laid aside the great, soft fan, and obediently stole away, over the polished floor, on his bare tiptoes.

She stayed motionless, with gaze riveted upon her child, and her face the picture of fright. Presently her husband entered the room, and without noticing her, went to a table and began to search among some papers which covered it.

“Armand,” she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, if he was human. But he did not notice. “Armand,” she said again Then she rose and tottered towards him. “Armand,” she panted once more, clutching his arm, “look at our child. What does it mean? tell me.”

He coldly but gently loosened her fingers from about his arm and thrust the hand away from him. “Tell me what it means!” she cried despairingly.
“It means,” he answered lightly, “that the child is not white; it means that you are not white.”

A quick conception of all that this accusation meant for her nerved her with unwonted courage to deny it. “It is a lie; it is not true, I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair,” seizing his wrist. “Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand,” she laughed hysterically.

“As white as La Blanche’s,” he returned cruelly; and went away leaving her alone with their child.

When she could hold a pen in her hand, she sent a despairing letter to Madame Valmondé.

“My mother, they tell me I am not white. Armand has told me I am not white. For God’s sake tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true. I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live.”

The answer that came was as brief:

“My own Désirée: Come home to Valmondé; back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child.”

When the letter reached Désirée she went with it to her husband’s study, and laid it open upon the desk before which he sat. She was like a stone image: silent, white, motionless after she placed it there.

In silence he ran his cold eyes over the written words. He said nothing. “Shall I go, Armand?” she asked in tones sharp with agonized suspense.

“Yes, go.”

“Do you want me to go?”

“Yes, I want you to go.”

He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife’s soul. Moreover he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name.
She turned away like one stunned by a blow, and walked slowly towards the door, hoping he would call her back.

“Good-by, Armand,” she moaned.

He did not answer her. That was his last blow at fate.

Désirée went in search of her child. Zandrine was pacing the sombre gallery with it.

She took the little one from the nurse’s arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away, under the live-oak branches.

It was an October afternoon; the sun was just sinking. Out in the still fields the negroes were picking cotton.

Désirée had not changed the thin white garment nor the slippers which she wore. Her hair was uncovered and the sun’s rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmondé. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds.

She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again.

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Some weeks later there was a curious scene enacted at L’Abri. In the centre of the smoothly swept back yard was a great bonfire. Armand Aubigny sat in the wide hallway that commanded a view of the spectacle; and it was he who dealt out to a half dozen negroes the material which kept this fire ablaze.

A graceful cradle of willow, with all its dainty furbishings, was laid upon the pyre, which had already been fed with the richness of a priceless layette. Then there were silk gowns, and velvet and satin ones added to these; laces, too, and embroideries; bonnets and gloves; for the corbeille had been of rare quality.

The last thing to go was a tiny bundle of letters; innocent little scribblings that Désirée had sent to him during the days of their espousal. There was the remnant of one back in the drawer from which he took them. But it was not Désirée’s; it was part of an old letter from his mother to his father. He read it. She was thanking God for the blessing of her husband’s love:—
“But, above all,” she wrote, “night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery.”

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Kate Chopin wrote “Désirée’s Baby” on November 24, 1892. It was published in Vogue (the same magazine that is sold today) on January 14, 1893, the first of nineteen Kate Chopin stories that Vogue published. It was reprinted in Chopin’s collection of stories, Bayou Folk, in 1894.
Afghan Girls, Scarred by Acid, Defy Terror, Embracing School

By DEXTER FILKINS JAN. 13, 2009

Shamsia Husseini, right, was among 15 girls and women in Kandahar, Afghanistan, who were splashed with acid in November. Credit Danfung Dennis for The New York Times

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — One morning two months ago, Shamsia Husseini and her sister were walking through the muddy streets to the local girls school when a man pulled alongside them on a motorcycle and posed what seemed like an ordinary question.

“Are you going to school?”

Then the man pulled Shamsia’s burqa from her head and sprayed her face with burning acid. Scars, jagged and discolored, now spread across Shamsia’s eyelids and most of her left cheek. These days, her vision goes blurry, making it hard for her to read.
But if the acid attack against Shamsia and 14 others — students and teachers — was meant to terrorize the girls into staying home, it appears to have completely failed.

Today, nearly all of the wounded girls are back at the Mirwais School for Girls, including even Shamsia, whose face was so badly burned that she had to be sent abroad for treatment. Perhaps even more remarkable, nearly every other female student in this deeply conservative community has returned as well — about 1,300 in all.

“My parents told me to keep coming to school even if I am killed,” said Shamsia, 17, in a moment after class. Shamsia’s mother, like nearly all of the adult women in the area, is unable to read or write. “The people who did this to me don’t want women to be educated. They want us to be stupid things.”

In the five years since the Mirwais School for Girls was built here by the Japanese government, it appears to have set off something of a social revolution. Even as the Taliban tighten their noose around Kandahar, the girls flock to the school each morning. Many of them walk more than two miles from their mud-brick houses up in the hills.

The girls burst through the school’s walled compound, many of them flinging off head-to-toe garments, bounding, cheering and laughing in ways that are inconceivable outside — for girls and women of any age. Mirwais has no regular electricity, no running water, no paved streets. Women are rarely seen, and only then while clad in burqas that make their bodies shapeless and their faces invisible.

And so it was especially chilling on Nov. 12, when three pairs of men on motorcycles began circling the school. One of the teams used a spray bottle, another a squirt gun, another a jar. They hit 11 girls and 4 teachers in all; 6 went to the hospital. Shamsia fared the worst.

The attacks appeared to be the work of the Taliban, the fundamentalist movement that is battling the government and the American-led coalition. Banning girls from school was one of the most notorious symbols of the Taliban’s rule before they were ousted from power in November 2001.

Building new schools and ensuring that children — and especially girls — attend has been one of the main objectives of the government and the nations that have contributed to Afghanistan’s reconstruction. Some of the students at the Mirwais school are in their late teens and early 20s, attending school for the first time. Yet at the same time, in the guerrilla war that has unfolded across southern and eastern Afghanistan, the Taliban have made schools one of their special targets.
But exactly who was behind the acid attack is a mystery. The Taliban denied any part in it. The police arrested eight men and, shortly after that, the Ministry of Interior released a video showing two men confessing. One of them said he had been paid by an officer with the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, the Pakistani intelligence agency, to carry out the attack.

But at a news conference last week, Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, said there was no such Pakistani involvement.

One thing is certain: in the months before the attack, the Taliban had moved into the Mirwais area and the rest of Kandahar’s outskirts. As they did, posters began appearing in local mosques.

“Don’t Let Your Daughters Go to School,” one of them said.

In the days after the attack, the Mirwais School for Girls stood empty; none of the parents would let their daughters venture outside. That is when the headmaster, Mahmood Qadari, got to work.

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After four days of staring at empty classrooms, Mr. Qadari called a meeting of the parents. Hundreds came to the school — fathers and mothers — and Mr. Qadari implored them to let their daughters return. After two weeks, a few returned.

So, Mr. Qadari, whose three daughters live abroad, including one in Virginia, enlisted the support of the local government. The governor promised more police officers, a footbridge across a busy nearby road and, most important, a bus. Mr. Qadari called another meeting and told the parents that there was no longer any reason to hold their daughters back.

“I told them, if you don’t send your daughters to school, then the enemy wins,” Mr. Qadari said. “I told them not to give in to darkness. Education is the way to improve our society.”

The adults of Mirwais did not need much persuading. Neither the bus nor the police nor the bridge has materialized, but the girls started showing up anyway. Only a couple of dozen girls regularly miss school now; three of them are girls who had been injured in the attack.

“I don’t want the girls sitting around and wasting their lives,” said Ghulam Sekhi, an uncle of Shamsia and her sister, Atifa, age 14, who was also burned.
For all the uncertainty outside its walls, the Mirwais school brims with life. Its 40 classrooms are so full that classes are held in four tents, donated by Unicef, in the courtyard. The Afghan Ministry of Education is building a permanent building as well.

The past several days at the school have been given over to examinations. In one classroom, a geography class, a teacher posed a series of questions while her students listened and wrote their answers on paper.

“What is the capital of Brazil?” the teacher, named Arja, asked, walking back and forth.

“Now, what are its major cities?”

“By how many times is America larger than Afghanistan?”

At a desk in the front row, Shamsia, the girl with the burned face, pondered the questions while cupping a hand over her largest scar. She squinted down at the paper, rubbed her eyes, wrote something down.

Doctors have told Shamsia that her face may need plastic surgery if there is to be any chance of the scars disappearing. It is a distant dream: Shamsia’s village does not even have regular electricity, and her father is disabled.

After class, Shamsia blended in with the other girls, standing around, laughing and joking. She seemed un-self-conscious about her disfigurement, until she began to recount her ordeal.

“The people who did this,” she said, “do not feel the pain of others.”

A version of this article appears in print on , on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Afghan Girls, Scarred by Acid, Defy Terror, Embracing School.
New Hope For Afghanistan's Women
By Hillary Clinton Saturday, Nov. 24, 2001

"Afghan women have lost lives, family members, basic human rights, human dignity and the right to be respected. Soon they might lose something that destroys humanity. They might lose hope."

Those were the words of Belquis Ahmadi, a young lawyer from Afghanistan. I had invited her to a White House Human Rights Day celebration in 1999, and I am reminded what she said that day as I watch women in Afghanistan begin to emerge from the oppression of the Taliban. Some are choosing to remove the burkas they had been required to wear in public. Some are becoming journalists again, their voices heard on radio, their faces seen on television.

Thanks to the courage and bravery of America's military and our allies, hope is being restored to many women and families in much of Afghanistan. As we continue the hard work of rooting out the vestiges of Taliban control and al-Qaeda terrorism, we must begin the hard work of nurturing that newfound hope and planting the seeds of a governing system that will respect human rights and allow all the people of that nation to dream of a better life for their children—girls and boys alike.

President and Mrs. Bush have properly highlighted the mistreatment of Afghan women by the Taliban and insist that women play a role in Afghanistan's future. We can help in Congress by completing our work on legislation to provide educational and health care assistance to Afghan women and children and promote the training of women to aid in the development of democracy and a civil society.

Critics—some domestic, some in the Islamic world—say that America has no right to impose its values on Afghan society. They argue that to promote equal rights for women and a role for women in Afghan government and society amounts to cultural imperialism, destined to arouse the animosity of Muslims throughout the region.

I believe such criticism fails on at least two counts. One, it does not recognize that we, as liberators, have an interest in what follows the Taliban in Afghanistan. We cannot simply drop our bombs and depart with our best wishes, lest we find ourselves returning some years down the road to root out another terrorist regime.

Second, the argument that supporting the rights of women will insult the Muslim world is demeaning to women and to Muslims. Women's rights are human rights. They are not simply American, or western customs. They are universal values which we have a responsibility to promote throughout the world, and especially in a place like Afghanistan.
It is not only the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do. A post-Taliban Afghanistan where women's rights are respected is much less likely to harbor terrorists in the future. Why? Because a society that values all its members, including women, is also likely to put a higher premium on life, opportunity and freedom—values that run directly counter to the evil designs of the Osama bin Laden's of the world.

There is an immoral link between the way women were treated by the oppressive Taliban in Afghanistan and the hateful actions of the al-Qaeda terrorists. Under the Taliban, women in Afghanistan were forbidden to attend schools, to access health care, to work and even to appear in public unless hidden behind the head-to-toe burqas. Long before the Taliban was at war with the civilized world, they were at war with half their population.

The mistreatment of women in Afghanistan was like an early warning signal of the kind of terrorism that culminated in the attacks of September 11. Similarly, the proper treatment of women in post-Taliban Afghanistan can be a harbinger of a more peaceful, prosperous and democratic future for that war-torn nation.

But how, some might say, can women emerge from behind the burqas to positions of leadership in Afghan society so quickly? One reason is that pre-Taliban Afghanistan was a place where women did play an important role: before 1996, for example, nearly half the doctors, university students and teachers in Kabul were women.

Afghan women who fled the Taliban are, in fact, the best advocates for a resurgence of women's rights in their nation, and that is why my colleagues and I have invited some of them to speak at a November 29th forum on Capitol Hill.

They will make clear that, with support from the international community, there is little doubt that the power of women can be quickly unleashed to the benefit of all the people in Afghanistan. That is not to say women will become "westernized," or abandon important religious or cultural principles. The restoration of women's rights includes the right of free choice. The freedom to wear a burqa if one desires—not to be forced to under pain of death. The freedom to become a doctor, or a homemaker. The freedom to worship in the manner of one's choosing.

By empowering women with the freedom to choose their own future, we can help Afghanistan become a symbol for people elsewhere who have yet to share in the opportunities provided when human rights include women's rights. In that way, America can do more than rid the world of an international terrorist network. It can promote the kind of values that will act like antibodies against the virus of evil that exists in too many hearts around the planet.
We can start by including women in the rebuilding process in Afghanistan. And just as the Clinton Administration withheld recognition of the Taliban government and condemned its treatment of women, we must not recognize any successor government until women have the right to determine what role they will play in 21st century Afghanistan.

In so doing, we can ensure that the measure of hope we've been able to secure for the women and children of that nation will not be lost in the difficult days that lie ahead.
Afghan Boys Are Prized, So Girls Live the Part

By JENNY NORDBERG SEPT. 20, 2010

Mehran Rafaat, 6, left, and her twin sisters, Benafsha, center and Beheshta, near their home in Badghis Province, Afghanistan. Credit Adam Ferguson for The New York Times
KABUL, Afghanistan — Six-year-old Mehran Rafaat is like many girls her age. She likes to be the center of attention. She is often frustrated when things do not go her way. Like her three older sisters, she is eager to discover the world outside the family’s apartment in their middle-class neighborhood of Kabul.

But when their mother, Azita Rafaat, a member of Parliament, dresses the children for school in the morning, there is one important difference. Mehran’s sisters put on black dresses and head scarves, tied tightly over their ponytails. For Mehran, it’s green pants, a white shirt and a necktie, then a pat from her mother over her spiky, short black hair. After that, her daughter is out the door — as an Afghan boy.

There are no statistics about how many Afghan girls masquerade as boys. But when asked, Afghans of several generations can often tell a story of a female relative, friend, neighbor or co-worker who grew up disguised as a boy. To those who know, these children are often referred to as neither “daughter” nor “son” in conversation, but as “bacha posh,” which literally means “dressed up as a boy” in Dari.

Through dozens of interviews conducted over several months, where many people wanted to remain anonymous or to use only first names for fear of exposing their families, it was possible to trace a practice that has remained mostly obscured to outsiders. Yet it cuts across class, education, ethnicity and geography, and has endured even through Afghanistan’s many wars and governments.

Afghan families have many reasons for pretending their girls are boys, including economic need, social pressure to have sons, and in some cases, a superstition that doing so can lead to the birth of a real boy. Lacking a son, the parents decide to make one up, usually by cutting the hair of a daughter and dressing her in typical Afghan men’s clothing. There are no specific legal or religious proscriptions against the practice. In most cases, a return to womanhood takes place when the child enters puberty. The parents almost always make that decision.

In a land where sons are more highly valued, since in the tribal culture usually only they can inherit the father’s wealth and pass down a name, families without boys are the objects of pity and contempt. Even a made-up son increases the family’s standing, at least for a few years. A bacha posh can also more easily receive an education, work outside the home, even escort her sisters in public, allowing freedoms that are unheard of for girls in a society that strictly segregates men and women.

But for some, the change can be disorienting as well as liberating, stranding the women in a limbo between the sexes. Shukria Siddiqui, raised as a boy but then abruptly plunged into an arranged marriage, struggled to adapt, tripping over the confining burqa and straining to talk to other women.
The practice may stretch back centuries. Nancy Dupree, an 83-year-old American who has spent most of her life as a historian working in Afghanistan, said she had not heard of the phenomenon, but recalled a photograph from the early 1900s belonging to the private collection of a member of the Afghan royal family.

It featured women dressed in men’s clothing standing guard at King Habibullah’s harem. The reason: the harem’s women could not be protected by men, who might pose a threat to the women, but they could not be watched over by women either.

“Segregation calls for creativity,” Mrs. Dupree said. “These people have the most amazing coping ability.”

It is a commonly held belief among less educated Afghans that the mother can determine the sex of her unborn child, so she is blamed if she gives birth to a daughter. Several Afghan doctors and health care workers from around the country said that they had witnessed the despair of women when they gave birth to daughters, and that the pressure to produce a son fueled the practice.

“Yes, this is not normal for you,” Mrs. Rafaat said in sometimes imperfect English, during one of many interviews over several weeks. “And I know it’s very hard for you to believe why one mother is doing these things to their youngest daughter. But I want to say for you, that some things are happening in Afghanistan that are really not imaginable for you as a Western people.”

**Pressure to Have a Boy**

From that fateful day she first became a mother — Feb. 7, 1999 — Mrs. Rafaat knew she had failed, she said, but she was too exhausted to speak, shivering on the cold floor of the family’s small house in Badghis Province.

She had just given birth — twice — to Mehran’s older sisters, Benafsha and Beheshta. The first twin had been born after almost 72 hours of labor, one month prematurely. The girl weighed only 2.6 pounds and was not breathing at first. Her sister arrived 10 minutes later. She, too, was unconscious.

When her mother-in-law began to cry, Mrs. Rafaat knew it was not from fear whether her infant granddaughters would survive. The old woman was disappointed. “Why,” she cried, according to Mrs. Rafaat, “are we getting more girls in the family?”

Mrs. Rafaat had grown up in Kabul, where she was a top student, speaking six languages and nurturing high-flying dreams of becoming a doctor. But once her father forced her to become the second wife of her first cousin, she had to submit to being an illiterate farmer’s wife, in a rural house without running water and electricity, where the widowed mother-in-law ruled, and where she was expected to help care for the cows, sheep and chickens. She did not do well.
Conflicts with her mother-in-law began immediately, as the new Mrs. Rafaat insisted on better hygiene and more contact with the men in the house. She also asked her mother-in-law to stop beating her husband’s first wife with her walking stick. When Mrs. Rafaat finally snapped the stick in protest, the older woman demanded that her son, Ezatullah, control his new wife.

He did so with a wooden stick or a metal wire. “On the body, on the face,” she recalled. “I tried to stop him. I asked him to stop. Sometimes I didn’t.”

Soon, she was pregnant. The family treated her slightly better as she grew bigger. “They were hoping for a son this time,” she explained. Ezatullah Rafaat’s first wife had given birth to two daughters, one of whom had died as an infant, and she could no longer conceive. Azita Rafaat delivered two daughters, double the disappointment.

Mrs. Rafaat faced constant pressure to try again, and she did, through two more pregnancies, when she had two more daughters — Mehrangis, now 9, and finally Mehran, the 6-year-old.

Asked if she ever considered leaving her husband, she reacted with complete surprise.

“I thought of dying,” she said. “But I never thought of divorce. If I had separated from my husband, I would have lost my children, and they would have had no rights. I am not one to quit.”

Today, she is in a position of power, at least on paper. She is one of 68 women in Afghanistan’s 249-member Parliament, representing Badghis Province. Her husband is unemployed and spends most of his time at home. “He is my house husband,” she joked.

By persuading him to move away from her mother-in-law and by offering to contribute to the family income, she laid the groundwork for her political life. Three years into their marriage, after the fall of the Taliban in 2002, she began volunteering as a health worker for various nongovernmental organizations. Today she makes $2,000 a month as a member of Parliament.

As a politician, she works to improve women’s rights and the rule of law. She ran for re-election on Sept. 18, and, based on a preliminary vote count, is optimistic about securing another term. But she could run only with her husband’s explicit permission, and the second time around, he was not easily persuaded.

He wanted to try again for a son. It would be difficult to combine pregnancy and another child with her work, she said — and she knew she might have another girl in any case.
But the pressure to have a son extended beyond her husband. It was the only subject her constituents could talk about when they came to the house, she said.

“When you don’t have a son in Afghanistan,” she explained, “it’s like a big missing in your life. Like you lost the most important point of your life. Everybody feels sad for you.”

As a politician, she was also expected to be a good wife and a mother; instead she looked like a failed woman to her constituents. The gossip spread back to her province, and her husband was also questioned and embarrassed, she said.

In an effort to preserve her job and placate her husband, as well as fending off the threat of his getting a third wife, she proposed to her husband that they make their youngest daughter look like a son.

“People came into our home feeling pity for us that we don’t have a son,” she recalled reasoning. “And the girls — we can’t send them outside. And if we changed Mehran to a boy we would get more space and freedom in society for her. And we can send her outside for shopping and to help the father.”

No Hesitation

Together, they spoke to their youngest daughter, she said. They made it an alluring proposition: “Do you want to look like a boy and dress like a boy, and do more fun things like boys do, like bicycling, soccer and cricket? And would you like to be like your father?” Mehran did not hesitate to say yes.

That afternoon, her father took her to the barbershop, where her hair was cut short. They continued to the bazaar, where she got new clothing. Her first outfit was “something like a cowboy dress,” Mrs. Rafaat said, meaning a pair of blue jeans and a red denim shirt with “superstar” printed on the back.

She even got a new name — originally called Manoush, her name was tweaked to the more boyish-sounding Mehran.

Mehran’s return to school — in a pair of pants and without her pigtails — went by without much reaction by her fellow students. She still napped in the afternoons with the girls, and changed into her sleepwear in a separate room from the boys. Some of her classmates still called her Manoush, while others called her Mehran. But she would always introduce herself as a boy to newcomers.
Khatera Momand, the headmistress, with less than a year in her job, said she had always presumed Mehran was a boy, until she helped change her into sleeping clothes one afternoon. “It was quite a surprise for me,” she said.

But once Mrs. Rafaat called the school and explained that the family had only daughters, Miss Momand understood perfectly. She used to have a girlfriend at the teacher’s academy who dressed as a boy.

Today, the family’s relatives and colleagues all know Mehran’s real gender, but the appearance of a son before guests and acquaintances is just enough to keep the family functioning, Mrs. Rafaat said. At least for now.

Mr. Rafaat said he felt closer to Mehran than to his other children, and thought of her as a son. “I am very happy,” he said. “When people now ask me, I say yes and they see that I have a son. So people are quiet, and I am quiet.”

**Economic Necessity**

Mehran’s case is not altogether rare.

Ten-year old Miina goes to school for two hours each morning, in a dress and a head scarf, but returns about 9 a.m. to her home in one of Kabul’s poorest neighborhoods to change into boys’ clothing. She then goes to work as Abdul Mateen, a shop assistant in a small grocery store nearby.

Every day, she brings home the equivalent of about $1.30 to help support her Pashtun family of eight sisters, as well as their 40-year-old mother, Nasima.

Miina’s father, an unemployed mason, is often away. When he does get temporary work, Nasima said, he spends most of his pay on drugs.

Miina’s change is a practical necessity, her mother said, a way for the entire family to survive. The idea came from the shopkeeper, a friend of the family, Nasima said: “He advised us to do it, and said she can bring bread for your home.”

She could never work in the store as a girl, just as her mother could not. Neither her husband nor the neighbors would look kindly on it. “It would be impossible,” Nasima said. “It’s our tradition that girls don’t work like this.”

Photo
Azita Rafaat, Mehran’s mother, with her daughter, Benafsha, 11, at their home. Mrs. Rafaat, a member of the Afghan Parliament, had also posed as a boy when she was a young girl. Credit Adam Ferguson for The New York Times
Miina is very shy, but she admitted to a yearning to look like a girl. She still likes to borrow her sister’s clothing when she is home. She is also nervous that she will be found out if one of her classmates recognizes her at the store. “Every day she complains,” said her mother. “I’m not comfortable around the boys in the store,” she says. “I am a girl.”

Her mother has tried to comfort her by explaining that it will be only for a few years. After all, there are others to take her place. “After Miina gets too old, the second younger sister will be a boy,” her mother said, “and then the third.”

**Refusing to Go Back**

For most such girls, boyhood has an inevitable end. After being raised as a boy, with whatever privileges or burdens it may entail, they switch back once they become teenagers. When their bodies begin to change and they approach marrying age, parents consider it too risky for them to be around boys anymore.

When Zahra, 15, opens the door to the family’s second-floor apartment in an upscale neighborhood of Kabul, she is dressed in a black suit with boxy shoulders and wide-legged pants. Her face has soft features, but she does not smile, or look down, as most Afghan girls do.

She said she had been dressing and acting like a boy for as long as she could remember. If it were up to her, she would never go back. “Nothing in me feels like a girl,” she said with a shrug.

Her mother, Laila, said she had tried to suggest a change toward a more feminine look several times, but Zahra has refused. “For always, I want to be a boy and a boy and a boy,” she said with emphasis.

Zahra attends a girls’ school in the mornings, wearing her suit and a head scarf. As soon as she is out on the steps after class, she tucks her scarf into her backpack, and continues her day as a young man. She plays football and cricket, and rides a bike. She used to practice tae kwon do, in a group of boys where only the teacher knew she was not one of them.

Most of the neighbors know of her change, but otherwise, she is taken for a young man wherever she goes, her mother said. Her father, a pilot in the Afghan military, was supportive. “It’s a privilege for me, that she is in boys’ clothing,” he said. “It’s a help for me, with the shopping. And she can go in and out of the house without a problem.”

Both parents insisted it was Zahra’s own choice to look like a boy. “I liked it, since we didn’t have a boy,” her mother said, but added, “Now, we don’t really know.”
Zahra, who plans on becoming a journalist, and possibly a politician after that, offered her own reasons for not wanting to be an Afghan woman. They are looked down upon and harassed, she said.

“People use bad words for girls,” she said. “They scream at them on the streets. When I see that, I don’t want to be a girl. When I am a boy, they don’t speak to me like that.”

Zahra said she had never run into any trouble when posing as a young man, although she was occasionally challenged about her gender. “I’ve been in fights with boys,” she said. “If they tell me two bad words, I will tell them three. If they slap me once, I will slap them twice.”

Time to ‘Change Back’

For Shukria Siddiqui, the masquerade went too far, for too long.

Today, she is 36, a married mother of three, and works as an anesthesiology nurse at a Kabul hospital. Short and heavily built, wearing medical scrubs, she took a break from attending to a patient who had just had surgery on a broken leg.

She remembered the day her aunt brought her a floor-length skirt and told her the time had come to “change back.” The reason soon became clear: she was getting married. Her parents had picked out a husband whom she had never met.

At that time, Shukur, as she called herself, was a 20-year old man, to herself and most people around her. She walked around with a knife in her back pocket. She wore jeans and a leather jacket.

She was speechless — she had never thought of getting married.

Mrs. Siddiqui had grown up as a boy companion to her older brother, in a family of seven girls and one boy. “I wanted to be like him and to be his friend,” she said. “I wanted to look like him. We slept in the same bed. We prayed together. We had the same habits.”

Her parents did not object, since their other children were girls, and it seemed like a good idea for the oldest son to have a brother. But Mrs. Siddiqui remained in her male disguise well beyond puberty, which came late.

She said she was already 16 when her body began to change. “But I really had nothing then either,” she said, with a gesture toward her flat chest.
Like many other Afghan girls, she was surprised the first time she menstruated, and worried she might be ill. Her mother offered no explanation, since such topics were deemed inappropriate to discuss. Mrs. Siddiqui said she never had romantic fantasies about boys—or of girls, either.

Her appearance as a man approaching adulthood was not questioned, she said. But it frequently got others into trouble, like the time she escorted a girlfriend home who had fallen ill. Later, she learned that the friend had been beaten by her parents after word spread through the neighborhood that their daughter was seen holding hands with a boy.

‘My Best Time’

Having grown up in Kabul in a middle-class family, her parents allowed her to be educated through college, where she attended nursing school. She took on her future and professional life with certainty and confidence, presuming she would never be constricted by any of the rules that applied to women in Afghanistan.

Her family, however, had made their decision: she was to marry the owner of a small construction company. She never considered going against them, or running away. “It was my family’s desire, and we obey our families,” she said. “It’s our culture.”

A forced marriage is difficult for anyone, but Mrs. Siddiqui was particularly ill equipped. She had never cooked a meal in her life, and she kept tripping over the burqa she was soon required to wear.

She had no idea how to act in the world of women. “I had to learn how to sit with women, how to talk, how to behave,” she said. For years, she was unable to socialize with other women and uncomfortable even greeting them.

“When you change back, it’s like you are born again, and you have to learn everything from the beginning,” she explained. “You get a whole new life. Again.”

Mrs. Siddiqui said she was lucky her husband turned out to be a good one. She had asked his permission to be interviewed and he agreed. He was understanding of her past, she said. He tolerated her cooking. Sometimes, he even encouraged her to wear trousers at home, she said. He knows it cheers her up.

In a brief period of marital trouble, he once attempted to beat her, but after she hit him back, it never happened again. She wants to look like a woman now, she said, and for her children to have a mother.
Still, not a day goes by when she does not think back to “my best time,” as she called it. Asked if she wished she had been born a man, she silently nods.

But she also wishes her upbringing had been different. “For me, it would have been better to grow up as a girl,” she said, “since I had to become a woman in the end.”

**Like Mother, Like a Son**

It is a typically busy day in the Rafaat household. Azita Rafaat is in the bathroom, struggling to put her head scarf in place, preparing for a photographer who has arrived at the house to take her new campaign photos.

The children move restlessly between Tom and Jerry cartoons on the television and a computer game on their mother’s laptop. Benafsha, 11, and Mehrangis, 9, wear identical pink tights and a ruffled skirt. They go first on the computer. Mehran, the 6-year-old, waits her turn, pointing and shooting a toy gun at each of the guests.

She wears a bandage over her right earlobe, where she tried to pierce herself with one of her mother’s earrings a day earlier, wanting to look like her favorite Bollywood action hero: Salman Khan, a man who wears one gold earring.

Then Mehran decided she had waited long enough to play on the computer, stomping her feet and waving her arms, and finally slapping Benafsha in the face.

“He is very naughty,” Mrs. Rafaat said in English with a sigh, of Mehran, mixing up the gender-specific pronoun, which does not exist in Dari. “My daughter adopted all the boys’ traits very soon. You’ve seen her — the attitude, the talking — she has nothing of a girl in her.”

The Rafaats have not yet made a decision when Mehran will be switched back to a girl, but Mrs. Rafaat said she hoped it need not happen for another five or six years.

“I will need to slowly, slowly start to tell her about what she is and that she needs to be careful as she grows up,” she said. “I think about this every day — what’s happening to Mehran.”

Challenged about how it might affect her daughter, she abruptly revealed something from her own past: “Should I share something for you, honestly? For some years I also been a boy.”
As the first child of her family, Mrs. Rafaat assisted her father in his small food shop, beginning when she was 10, for four years. She was tall and athletic and saw only potential when her parents presented the idea — she would be able to move around more freely.

She went to a girls’ school in the mornings, but worked at the store on afternoons and evenings, running errands in pants and a baseball hat, she said.

Returning to wearing dresses and being confined was not so much difficult as irritating, and a little disappointing, she said. But overall, she is certain that the experience contributed to the resolve that brought her to Parliament.

“I think it made me more energetic,” she said. “It made me more strong.” She also believed her time as a boy made it easier for her to relate to and communicate with men.

Mrs. Rafaat said she hoped the effects on Mehran’s psyche and personality would be an advantage, rather than a limitation.

She noted that speaking out may draw criticism from others, but argued that it was important to reveal a practice most women in her country wished did not have to exist. “This is the reality of Afghanistan,” she said.

As a woman and as a politician, she said it worried her that despite great efforts and investments from the outside world to help Afghan women, she has seen very little change, and an unwillingness to focus on what matters.

“They think it’s all about the burqa,” she said. “I’m ready to wear two burqas if my government can provide security and a rule of law. That’s O.K. with me. If that’s the only freedom I have to give up, I’m ready.”

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Afghan Women and the Return of the Taliban

As the U.S. searches for a way out of Afghanistan, some policymakers suggest negotiating with the Taliban. But that would spell disaster for half the country's population: Afghan women

By Aryn Baker/Kabul Monday, Aug. 09, 2010

The parliamentarian Fawzia Koofi says Afghan women cannot be "the sacrifice by which peace is achieved"

The Taliban pounded on the door just before midnight, demanding that Aisha, 18, be punished for running away from her husband's house. They dragged her to a mountain clearing near her village in the southern Afghan province of Uruzgan, ignoring her protests that her in-laws had been abusive, that she had no choice but to escape. Shivering in the cold air and blinded by the flashlights trained on her by her husband's family, she faced her spouse and accuser. Her in-laws treated her like a slave, Aisha pleaded. They beat her. If she hadn't run away, she would have died. Her judge, a local Taliban commander, was unmoved. Later, he would tell Aisha's uncle that she had to be made an example of lest other girls in the village try to do the same thing. The commander gave his verdict, and men moved in to deliver the punishment. Aisha's brother-in-law held her down while her husband pulled out a knife. First he sliced off...
her ears. Then he started on her nose. Aisha passed out from the pain but awoke soon after, choking on her own blood. The men had left her on the mountainside to die.

This didn't happen 10 years ago, when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. It happened last year. Now hidden in a secret women's shelter in the relative safety of Kabul, where she was taken after receiving care from U.S. forces, Aisha recounts her tale in a monotone, her eyes flat and distant. She listens obsessively to the news on a small radio that she keeps by her side. Talk that the Afghan government is considering some kind of political accommodation with the Taliban is the only thing that elicits an emotional response. "They are the people that did this to me," she says, touching the jagged bridge of scarred flesh and bone that frames the gaping hole in an otherwise beautiful face. "How can we reconcile with them?"

That is exactly what the Afghan government plans to do. In June, President Hamid Karzai established a peace council tasked with exploring negotiations with Afghanistan's "upset brothers," as he calls the Taliban. A month later, Tom Malinowski, the Washington advocacy director for Human Rights Watch, a New York — based NGO, flew to Kabul seeking assurances that human rights would be protected in the course of negotiations. During their conversation, Karzai mused on the cost of the conflict in human lives and wondered aloud if he had any right to talk about human rights when so many were dying. "He essentially asked me," says Malinowski, "What is more important, protecting the right of a girl to go to school or saving her life?" How Karzai and his international allies answer that question will have far-reaching consequences. Aisha has no doubt. "The Taliban are not good people," she says. "If they come back, the situation will be worse for everyone." But for others, the rights of Afghan women are only one aspect of a complex situation. How that situation will eventually be ordered remains unclear.

As the war in Afghanistan enters its ninth year, the need for an exit strategy weighs on the minds of U.S. policymakers. The publication of some 90,000 documents on the war by the freedom-of-information activists at WikiLeaks — working with the New York Times, the Guardian in London and the German newsmagazine Der Spiegel — has intensified international debate. Though the documents mainly consist of low-level intelligence reports, taken together they reveal a war in which a shadowy insurgency shows determined resilience; where fighting that enemy often claims the lives of innocent civilians; and where supposed allies, like Pakistan's security services, are suspected of playing a deadly double game. Allegations of fraud and corruption in the Afghan government have exasperated Congress, as has evidence that the billions of dollars spent training and equipping the Afghan security forces have so far achieved little. In May, the U.S. death toll passed 1,000. As frustrations mount over a war that even top U.S. commanders think is not susceptible to a purely military solution, demands intensify for a political way out of the quagmire.

Such an outcome, it is assumed, would involve a reconciliation with the Taliban or, at the very least, some elements within its fold. But without safeguards, that would pose significant risks to the very women U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton promised in May not to abandon. "We will stand with you always," she said to female members of Karzai's delegation in Washington. Afghan women
are not convinced. They fear that in the quest for a quick peace, their progress may be sidelined. "Women's rights must not be the sacrifice by which peace is achieved," says Fawzia Koofi, the former Deputy Speaker of Afghanistan's parliament.

Yet that may be where negotiations are heading. In December, President Obama set a July 2011 deadline for the beginning of a drawdown of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. That has made Taliban leaders feel they have the upper hand. In negotiations, the Taliban will be advocating a version of an Afghan state in line with their own conservative views, particularly on the issue of women's rights, which they deem a Western concept that contravenes Islamic teaching. Already there is a growing acceptance that some concessions to the Taliban are inevitable if there is to be genuine reconciliation. "You have to be realistic," says a senior Western diplomat in Kabul, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "We are not going to be sending troops and spending money forever. There will have to be a compromise, and sacrifices will have to be made." Which sounds understandable. But who, precisely, will be asked to make the sacrifice?

Stepping Out
When the U.S. and its allies went to war in Afghanistan in 2001 with the aim of removing the safe haven that the Taliban had provided for al-Qaeda, it was widely hoped that the women of the country would be liberated from a regime that denied them education and jobs, forced them indoors and violently punished them for infractions of a strict interpretation of Islamic law. Under the Taliban, who ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, women accused of adultery were stoned to death; those who flashed a bare ankle from under the shroud of a burqa were whipped. Koofi remembers being beaten on the street for forgetting to remove the polish from her nails after her wedding. "We were not even allowed to laugh out loud," she says.

It wasn't always so. Kabul 40 years ago was considered the playground of Central Asia, a city where girls wore jeans to the university and fashionable women went to parties sporting Chanel miniskirts. These days the streets of Kabul once again echo with the laughter of girls on their way to school, dressed in uniforms of black coats and white headscarves. Women have rejoined the workforce and can sign up for the police and the army. Article 83 of the constitution mandates that at least 25% of parliamentary seats go to female representatives.

During Taliban times, women's voices were banned from the radio, and TV was forbidden, but last month a female anchor interviewed a former Taliban leader on a national broadcast. Under the Taliban, Robina Muqimyar Jalalai, one of Afghanistan's first two female Olympic athletes, spent her girlhood locked behind the walls of her family compound. Now she is running for parliament and wants a sports ministry created, which she hopes to lead. "We have women boxers and women footballers," she says. "I go running in the stadium where the Taliban used to play football with women's heads." But Muqimyar says she will never take these changes for granted. "If the Taliban come back, I will lose everything that I have gained over the past nine years."
It would be easy to dismiss such fears as premature. The Taliban leadership has not yet shown any inclination to reconcile with Karzai's government. But a program to reintegrate into society so-called 10-dollar Talibs — low-level insurgents who fight for cash or over local grievances — is already in place. Koofi worries that such accommodations may be the first step down a slippery slope. Reintegrating low-level Taliban could mean that men like those who ordered and carried out Aisha's punishment would be eligible for the training and employment opportunities paid for by international donors — without having to account for their actions. "The government of Afghanistan needs to make it clear, not just by speaking but by action and policy, that women's rights will be guaranteed," says Koofi. "If they don't, if they continue giving political bribes to Taliban, we will lose everything."

Clinging to the Constitution
Both the U.S. administration and Karzai's government say such worries are overblown. Afghanistan's constitution, they insist — which promotes gender equality and provides for girls' education — is not up for negotiation. In Kabul on July 20, Clinton said that the red lines are clear. "Any reconciliation process ... must require that anyone who wishes to rejoin society and the political system must lay down their weapons and end violence, renounce al-Qaeda and be committed to the constitution and laws of Afghanistan, which guarantee the rights of women."

Afghan women cling to such promises like a talisman. But ambiguities abound. Article 3 of the constitution, for example, holds that no law may contravene the principles of Shari'a, or Islamic law. What constitutes Shari'a, however, has never been defined, so a change in the political climate of the country could mean a radical reinterpretation of women's rights. Karzai has already invited Taliban to run for parliament. None have done so, but if they ever do, they may find some like-minded colleagues already there. Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal, the Minister of Economy and leader of the ideologically conservative Hizb-i-Islami faction, for example, holds that women and men shouldn't go to university together. Like the Taliban, he believes that women should not be allowed to leave the home unaccompanied by a male relative. "That is in accordance with Islam. And what we want for Afghanistan is Islamic rights, not Western rights," Arghandiwal says.

Traditional ways, however, do little for women. Aisha's family did nothing to protect her from the Taliban. That might have been out of fear, but more likely it was out of shame. A girl who runs away is automatically considered a prostitute in deeply traditional societies, and families that allow them back home would be subject to widespread ridicule. A few months after Aisha arrived at the shelter, her father tried to bring her home with promises that he would find her a new husband. Aisha refused to leave. In rural areas, a family that finds itself shamed by a daughter sometimes sells her into slavery, or worse, subjects her to a so-called honor killing — murder under the guise of saving the family's name.

Parliamentarian Sabrina Saqib fears that if the Taliban were welcomed back into the fold, those who oppress women would get a free ride. "I am worried that the day that the so-called moderate Taliban can sit in parliament, we will lose our rights," she says. "Because it
is not just Taliban that are against women's rights; there are many men who are against them as well." Last summer, Saqib voted against a bill that authorized husbands in Shi'ite families to withhold money and food from wives who refuse to provide sex, limited inheritance and custody of children in the case of divorce and denied women freedom of movement without permission from their families. The law passed, and that 25% quota of women in parliament couldn't stop it. Saqib estimates that less than a dozen of the 68 female parliamentarians support women's rights. The rest — proxies for conservative men who boosted them into power — aren't interested.

Despite her frustrations with her parliamentary colleagues, Saqib is a firm supporter of the constitutional quota. "In a society dominated by culture and traditions," she says, "we need some time for women to prove that they can do things." If the constitution were revised as part of a negotiation with the Taliban, she says, the article mandating the parliamentary quota "would be the first to go." Arghandiwal, the Economy Minister, would love to see the back of it. "Throughout history, constitutions have changed, so we have to be flexible on this," he says. The quota for women, he claims, "makes them lazy."

**Threats in the Night**

For many women, debates over the constitution are an abstract irrelevance. What matters is that mounting insecurity is eroding the few gains they have made. Taliban night letters — chilling missives delivered under the cover of darkness — threaten women in the south of the country, a Taliban stronghold, who dare to work. "We warn you to leave your job as a teacher as soon as possible otherwise we will cut the heads off your children and shall set fire to your daughter," reads one. "We will kill you in such a harsh way that no woman has so far been killed in that manner," says another. Both letters, which were obtained by Human Rights Watch, are printed on paper bearing the crossed swords and Koran insignia of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the name of the former Taliban government. Elsewhere, girls' schools have been burned down and students have had acid thrown in their faces. In May, mounting violence in the west of the country prompted the religious council of Herat province to issue an edict forbidding women to leave their homes without a male relative. The northern province of Badakhshan quickly followed suit, and other councils are considering doing the same.

The edicts are usually justified as a means of protecting women from the insurgency, but Koofi, the member of parliament, says there is a better way of doing that: improved governance and security. That will not just protect women but also strengthen the Afghan government's hand in the course of negotiations. "We need to marginalize the Taliban by focusing on good governance," she says, fearing that a quick deal would bring only a temporary lull in the violence — enough to permit the international coalition a face-saving withdrawal but not much more than that. Afghanistan's women recognize that dialogue with the Taliban is essential to any long-term solution, but they don't want those talks to be hurried. They want a seat at the table, and they worry that Afghanistan's friends overseas are tiring of its dysfunctional ways. "I think it is possible to make things better if the international community supports good governance," says Koofi, "but they are too focused on an exit strategy. They want a quick solution."
For Afghanistan's women, an early withdrawal of international forces could be disastrous. An Afghan refugee who grew up in Canada, Mozhdah Jamalzadah recently returned home to launch an Oprah-style talk show, which has become wildly popular. Jamalzadah has been able to subtly introduce questions of women's rights into the program without provoking the ire of religious conservatives. "If I go into it directly," she says, "there will be a backlash. But if I talk about abuse, which is against the Koran, and then talk about divorce, which is permitted, I am educating both men and women, and hopefully no one notices." Jamalzadah says her audience is increasingly receptive to her message, but she knows that in a deeply traditional society, it will take time to percolate. If the government becomes any more conservative because of an accommodation with the Taliban, she says, "my program will be the first to go."

That would be Afghanistan's loss. Jamalzadah's TV show is an education for the whole nation, albeit sometimes in unexpected ways. On a recent episode, a male guest told a joke about a foreign human rights team in Afghanistan. In the cities, the team noticed that women walked six paces behind their husbands. But in rural Helmand, where the Taliban is strongest, they saw a woman six steps ahead. The foreigners rushed to congratulate the husband on his enlightenment — only to be told that he stuck his wife in front because they were walking through a minefield.

As the audience roared with laughter, Jamalzadah reflected that it may take about 10 to 15 years before Afghan women can truly walk alongside men. But once they do, she believes, all Afghans will benefit. "When we talk about women's rights," Jamalzadah says, "we are talking about things that are important to men as well — men who want to see Afghanistan move forward. If you sacrifice women to make peace, you are also sacrificing the men who support them and abandoning the country to the fundamentalists that caused all the problems in the first place."
First Semester – Novel

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
“A brave, honorable, big-hearted book.”
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A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS
A NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF
THE KITE RUNNER

KHALED HOSSEINI
HARRISON BERGERON by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. April for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was in that clammy month that the H-G men took George and Hazel Bergeron's fourteen-year-old son, Harrison, away.

It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard. Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter. Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears on Hazel's cheeks, but she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about.

On the television screen were ballerinas.

A buzzer sounded in George's head. His thoughts fled in panic, like bandits from a burglar alarm.

"That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did," said Hazel.

"Huh" said George.

"That dance—it was nice," said Hazel.

"Yup," said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They
weren't really very good-no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in. George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

George winced. So did two out of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel saw him wince. Having no mental handicap herself, she had to ask George what the latest sound had been.

"Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer, " said George.

"I'd think it would be real interesting, hearing all the different sounds, " said Hazel a little envious. "All the things they think up."

"Ur'n, " said George.

"Only, if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?" said Hazel. Hazel, as a matter of fact, bore a strong resemblance to the Handicapper General, a woman named Diana Moon Glampers. "If I was Diana Moon Glampers, " said Hazel, "I'd have chimes on Sunday- just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion . "

"I could think, if it was just chimes," said George.

"Well-maybe make 'em real loud," said Hazel. "I think I'd make a good Handicapper General."

"Good as anybody else," said George.

"Who knows better then I do what normal is?" said Hazel.

"Right," said George. He began to think glimmeringly about his abnormal son who was now in jail, about Harrison, but a twenty-one-gun salute in his head stopped that.
"Boy!" said Hazel, "that was a doozy, wasn't it?"

It was such a doozy that George was white and trembling, and tears stood on the rims of his red eyes. Two of the eight ballerinas had collapsed to the studio floor, were holding their temples.

"All of a sudden you look so tired," said Hazel. "Why don't you stretch out on the sofa, so's you can rest your handicap bag on the pillows, honeybunch." She was referring to the forty-seven pounds of birdshot in a canvas bag, which was padlocked around George's neck. "Go on and rest the bag for a little while," she said. "I don't care if you're not equal to me for a while."

George weighed the bag with his hands. "I don't mind it," he said. "I don't notice it any more. It's just a part of me."

"You been so tired lately—kind of wore out," said Hazel. "If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag, and just take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few."

"Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out," said George. "I don't call that a bargain."

"If you could just take a few out when you came home from work," said Hazel. "I mean—you don't compete with anybody around here. You just set around."

"If I tried to get away with it," said George, "then other people 'd get away with it—and pretty soon we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"I'd hate it," said Hazel.

"There you are," said George. The minute people start cheating on laws, what do you think happens to society?"

If Hazel hadn't been able to come up with an answer to this question, George couldn't have supplied one. A siren was going off in his head.
"Reckon it'd fall all apart," said Hazel.

"What would?" said George blankly.

"Society," said Hazel uncertainly. "Wasn't that what you just said?"

"Who knows?" said George.

The television program was suddenly interrupted for a news bulletin. It wasn't clear at first as to what the bulletin was about, since the announcer, like all announcers, had a serious speech impediment. For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the announcer tried to say, "Ladies and Gentlemen."

He finally gave up, handed the bulletin to a ballerina to read.

"That's all right-" Hazel said of the announcer, "he tried. That's the big thing. He tried to do the best he could with what God gave him. He should get a nice raise for trying so hard."

"Ladies and Gentlemen," said the ballerina, reading the bulletin. She must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous. And it was easy to see that she was the strongest and most graceful of all the dancers, for her handicap bags were as big as those worn by two-hundred pound men.

And she had to apologize at once for her voice, which was a very unfair voice for a woman to use. Her voice was a warm, luminous, timeless melody. "Excuse me-" she said, and she began again, making her voice absolutely uncompetitive.

"Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen," she said in a grackle squawk, "has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous."

A police photograph of Harrison Bergeron was flashed on the screen—upside down, then sideways, upside down again, then right side up. The picture showed the full length of Harrison against a background calibrated in feet and inches. He was exactly seven feet tall.
The rest of Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware. Nobody had ever born heavier handicaps. He had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up. Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides.

Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds.

And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.

"If you see this boy," said the ballerina, "do not - I repeat, do not - try to reason with him."

There was the shriek of a door being torn from its hinges.

Screams and barking cries of consternation came from the television set. The photograph of Harrison Bergeron on the screen jumped again and again, as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake.

George Bergeron correctly identified the earthquake, and well he might have - for many was the time his own home had danced to the same crashing tune. "My God-" said George, "that must be Harrison!"

The realization was blasted from his mind instantly by the sound of an automobile collision in his head.

When George could open his eyes again, the photograph of Harrison was gone. A living, breathing Harrison filled the screen.

Clanking, clownish, and huge, Harrison stood - in the center of the studio. The knob of the uprooted studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas, technicians, musicians, and announcers cowered on their knees before him,
expecting to die.

"I am the Emperor!" cried Harrison. "Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!" He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

"Even as I stand here" he bellowed, "crippled, hobbled, sickened - I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I can become!"

Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper, tore straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds.

Harrison's scrap-iron handicaps crashed to the floor.

Harrison thrust his thumbs under the bar of the padlock that secured his head harness. The bar snapped like celery. Harrison smashed his headphones and spectacles against the wall.

He flung away his rubber-ball nose, revealed a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder.

"I shall now select my Empress!" he said, looking down on the cowering people. "Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne!"

A moment passed, and then a ballerina arose, swaying like a willow.

Harrison plucked the mental handicap from her ear, snapped off her physical handicaps with marvelous delicacy. Last of all he removed her mask.

She was blindingly beautiful.

"Now-" said Harrison, taking her hand, "shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance? Music!" he commanded.

The musicians scrambled back into their chairs, and Harrison stripped them of their handicaps, too. "Play your best," he told them, "and I'll make you
barons and dukes and earls."

The music began. It was normal at first—cheap, silly, false. But Harrison snatched two musicians from their chairs, waved them like batons as he sang the music as he wanted it played. He slammed them back into their chairs.

The music began again and was much improved.

Harrison and his Empress merely listened to the music for a while—listened gravely, as though synchronizing their heartbeats with it.

They shifted their weights to their toes.

Harrison placed his big hands on the girls tiny waist, letting her sense the weightlessness that would soon be hers.

And then, in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang!

Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well.

They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun.

They leaped like deer on the moon.

The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it.

It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling. They kissed it.

And then, neutralizing gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time.

It was then that Diana Moon Clampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.

Diana Moon Clampers loaded the gun again. She aimed it at the musicians and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on.
It was then that the Bergerons' television tube burned out.

Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George. But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.

George came back in with the beer, paused while a handicap signal shook him up. And then he sat down again. "You been crying" he said to Hazel.

"Yup," she said.

"What about?" he said.

"I forget," she said. "Something real sad on television."

"What was it?" he said.

"It's all kind of mixed up in my mind," said Hazel.

"Forget sad things," said George.

"I always do," said Hazel.

"That's my girl," said George. He winced. There was the sound of a rivetting gun in his head.

"Gee — I could tell that one was a doozy," said Hazel.

"You can say that again," said George.

"Gee—" said Hazel, "I could tell that one was a doozy."

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The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas

From The Wind's Twelve Quarters: Short Stories
by Ursula Le Guin

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats in harbor sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved. Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and grey, grave master workmen, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance. Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows' crossing flights, over the music and the singing. All the processions wound towards the north side of the city, where on the great water-meadow called the Green' Fields boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mud-stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race. The horses wore no gear at all but a halter without bit. Their manes were braided with streamers of silver, gold, and green. They flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another; they were vastly excited, the horse being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own. Far off to the north and west the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay. The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky. There was just enough wind to make the banners that marked the racecourse snap and flutter now and then. In the silence of the broad green meadows one could hear the music winding through the city streets, farther and nearer and ever approaching, a cheerful faint sweetness of the air that from time to time trembled and gathered together and broke out into the great joyous clanging of the bells.

Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas?

They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. But we do not say the words of cheer much any more. All smiles have become archaic. Given a description such as this one tends to make certain assumptions. Given a description such as this one tends to look next for the King, mounted on a splendid stallion and surrounded by his noble knights, or perhaps in a golden litter borne by great-muscled slaves. But there was no king. They did not use swords, or keep slaves. They were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. If it hurts, repeat it. But to praise despair is to condemn delight, to embrace violence is to lose hold of
everything else. We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy. How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naive and happy children – though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle! but I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you.

Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle category, however – that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury, exuberance, etc. -- they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it. I incline to think that people from towns up and down the coast have been coming in to Omelas during the last days before the Festival on very fast little trains and double-decked trams, and that the train station of Omelas is actually the handsomest building in town, though plainer than the magnificent Farmers' Market. But even granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man or woman, lover or stranger who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood, although that was my first idea. But really it would be better not to have any temples in Omelas – at least, not manned temples. Religion yes, clergy no. Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about, offering themselves like divine souffles to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh. Let them join the processions. Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the glory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and (a not unimportant point) let the offspring of these delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt. But what else should there be? I thought at first there were no drugs, but that is puritanical. For those who like it, the faint insistent sweetness of drooz may perfume the ways of the city, drooz which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor, and wonderful visions at last of the very arcana and inmost secrets of the Universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond all belief; and it is not habit-forming. For more modest tastes I think there ought to be beer. What else, what else belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely, the celebration of courage. But as we did without clergy, let us do without soldiers. The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right kind of joy; it will not do; it is fearful and it is trivial. A boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer; this is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life. I really don't think many of them need to take drooz.

Most of the processions have reached the Green Fields by now. A marvelous smell of cooking goes forth from the red and
blue tents of the provisioners. The faces of small children are amiably sticky; in the benign grey beard of a man a couple of crumbs of rich pastry are entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the starting line of the course. An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket, and tall young men, wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd, alone, playing on a wooden flute. People pause to listen, and they smile, but they do not speak to him, for he never ceases playing and never sees them, his dark eyes wholly rapt in the sweet, thin magic of the tune.

He finishes, and slowly lowers his hands holding the wooden flute.

As if that little private silence were the signal, all at once a trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing. The horses rear on their slender legs, and some of them neigh in answer. Sober-faced, the young riders stroke the horses' necks and soothe them, whispering, "Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope. . . ." They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits haunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes — the child has no understanding of time or interval — sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.
They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weather of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

This is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of understanding; and most of those who come to see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back, to see the child. No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed.

The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there snivelling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer.

Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible.

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go
home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.
Second Semester - Novel