

Portraying Minorities

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The English adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is about how a single still image can be more effective in narrating a reality than a long descriptive text. However, do pictures really reflect realities? To answer this question, it is important to understand the function of photography as a tool for narrating stories and documenting the realities, and to know what the important elements of it are.

Frame

Renowned filmmaker and photographer Abbas Kiarostami once said, “I've often noticed that we are not able to look at what we have in front of us, unless it's inside a frame.” By acknowledging the importance of frame in photography, and the fact that what we can show is limited, we can realize the role of a photographer as the person who chooses what should be exposed from a reality and what should not be inside a frame. On other words, not only the subjects and the way they are placed in a frame are telling us a story that is worth a thousand words, but what is not inside a frame is also important and a photographer is consciously deciding about this. For example, when photographers go to a refugee camp and are tasked to take photos of the place and the refugees, they are actively choosing what part of the life and the environment to cover inside the frames and what not to cover.

Light

If a frame is like a canvas for a photographer, light would be the colours. In fact, coining the word “photography” is usually attributed to Sir John Herschel in 1839, is based on the Greek $\phi\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ (phōs), (genitive: phōtós) meaning “light”, and $\gamma\rho\alpha\phi\acute{\eta}$ (graphê), meaning “drawing, writing”, together meaning “drawing with light”. By noting that, we can realize how essential light is in photography and how the amount of it in a frame, can change the meaning that an image conveys. It is again the photographers who choose how much light their subjects should get when they are placed in a frame. The amount of light can guide the audience how to feel about an environment and it is important to know the role of a photographer in this process. The amount of light also has significant effect on the way colours are seen in a non-monochromic image.

Angle

Angle is what has been noted as an important element of describing a reality, not only in visual arts but also in literature. Thinking about the angle of a story is in fact analysing where the narrators are standing when they are describing a reality and acknowledging that their position has a role in the story. In photography, the distance between the lens of the camera and the subject, as well as whether the lens is placed higher or lower than the

subject when the picture is taken, is an important factor on how the audience would feel about the subject. When the subject of a portrait photograph is even slightly looking up to the camera, it gives the viewers the sense that the subject is in a weaker position. In other words, the angles suggest whether a subject is in a dominant or vulnerable position.

Portraying Refugees

Considering all the elements and factors that create an image, we can see the importance of the role of a photographer in a story. In every image, there is an unseen presence of the photographer where he or she is interacting with the subject and that would impact on how the audience will see the subject and feel something about it. In a country such as Malaysia, where there are a lot of sensitivity about the presence and the public image of foreigners and refugees, the portrayal of refugees in mainstream media directly affect the lives of this minority group. The dehumanization of refugees can be traced in the way media have portrayed them as a group of people who have no skills to contribute to the society and instead, they are in a lot of need that would take away the limited resources in the country. This misrepresentation of refugees where their human side is overshadowed by their legal status -and the financial situation caused by their legal status in the country- has in fact helped the xenophobic narrative that refugees are but a burden for the country.

When these deliberate misrepresentations of

refugees in media occur, it is inevitable to see that during a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the government, the media and the general public would hand in hand spread false information about this minority group that would worsen the hostility towards them.

Further Note on the 20/20 Photo Exhibition

In this last year I curated the 20/20 exhibition, available on the Living Refugee Archives, depicting life in Kuala Lumpur. This virtual exhibition is an intimate portrayal of life, people and landscapes. In our exhibition, you will see the photographs accompanied by lines of poetry. This literature offers a chance to hear the voices of people unheard. Words from famous authors, some of whom are refugees themselves, express the daily nuances of emotions that are often overlooked. However, these lines should not define the stories of the frames, rather be read as moments of emotion and experience to be felt by the viewer. This exhibition has been relaunched and is for sale with 60% percent of the proceeds will be used to support refugees who have lost their work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic measures. We are relaunching the project this time with a higher rate of donations to refugee families due to the increased severity of the current lockdown on the refugee communities. Unfortunately unlike the last lockdown, there has been less support in terms of food and other necessities distributions from the NGOs. Please follow [Living Refugee Archives](#) for further information.



Photo Credit: Amin Kamrani, [20/20 Exhibition](#)

Photo No 2: I watched the rain all evening

Taken In: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Hosted through collaboration between Amin Kamrani (photographer) and the Living Refugee Archives [20/20 Photos are available for purchase](#)

20 copies of 20 photographs taken in the year 2020

there's a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I'm too clever, I only let him out
at night sometimes
when everybody's asleep.
I say, I know that you're there,
so don't be
sad.
then I put him back,
but he's singing a little
in there, I haven't quite let him
die
and we sleep together like
that
with our
secret pact
and it's nice enough to
make a man
weep, but I don't
weep, do
you?

Charles Bukowski

Featured Portraits



In this following section I have chosen a number of portraits of refugees who I know, have worked with, eaten alongside and enjoyed life with and shared sorrows.





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In these portraits of refugee individuals, we have poets, writers, photographers, actors and directors.

Now Nazanin has been accused of escaping from home under police surveillance. Nobody knows what will happen to her in the future. Whereas the law does not assume as a crime escaping the girl from home, but there are numerous women who have been imprisoned because of saving their lives and escaping from family violence. Nazanin has not lost hope yet. In fact her action is a kind of struggle against social injustices women's rights in Afghanistan. Her fate has been so tragic so far. What is the solution that how Nazanin and girls like her not to get victims of tribal traditions and ignorance not any longer in Afghanistan?

Subtitles from [Parastoo's play on child marriage Screaming in Silence](#) for the scene below.



We have women's leaders, advocates, educators and activists. People who take charge and make change.









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All these people have rich and full lives, which are all ignored in the way refugees are portrayed in mainstream media. Therefore I attempted to challenge that misrepresentation of refugees with these portraits.





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These portraits are not individually captioned, but they can be seen together, simply as they are.





The nights are the questions.. passengers are the answers..
"Why can't music lead me?" Asked myself. "Music is a message not a messenger" answered the wind
The night is heavy.
Its weight is memories.
The night is an open land for thoughtful horses to run.
The night is starry, I am thinking of you.
The night is a flower that would blossom blue.

Photo of and Poem by Mwaffaq Al-Hajjar

A Syrian poet and qualified engineer, Mwaffaq is also the writer of [Poetic Entropy](#) and a chapter in the [Lockdown Chronicles](#)

