

## From A Passage to Africa

George Alagiah writes about his experiences as a television reporter during the war in Somalia, Africa in the 1990s. He won a special award for his report on the incidents described in this passage.

I saw a thousand hungry, lean, scared and betrayed faces as I criss-crossed Somalia between the end of 1991 and December 1992, but there is one I will never forget.

I was in a little hamlet just outside Gufgaduud, a village in the back of beyond, a place the aid agencies had yet to reach. In my notebook I had jotted down instructions on how to get there. 'Take the Badale Road for a few kilometres till the end of the tarmac, turn right on to a dirt track, stay on it for about forty-five minutes — Gufgaduud. Go another fifteen minutes approx. — like a ghost village.'

...

In the ghoulish manner of journalists on the hunt for the most striking pictures, my cameraman ... and I tramped from one hut to another. What might have appalled us when we'd started our trip just a few days before no longer impressed us much. The search for the shocking is like the craving for a drug: you require heavier and more frequent doses the longer you're at it. Pictures that stun the editors one day are written off as the same old stuff the next. This sounds callous, but it is just a fact of life. It's how we collect and compile the images that so move people in the comfort of their sitting rooms back home.

There was Amina Abdirahman, who had gone out that morning in search of wild, edible roots, leaving her two young girls lying on the dirt floor of their hut. They had been sick for days, and were reaching the final, enervating stages of terminal hunger. Habiba was ten years old and her sister, Ayaan, was nine. By the time Amina returned, she had only one daughter. Habiba had died. No rage, no whimpering, just a passing away — that simple, frictionless, motionless deliverance from a state of half-life to death itself. It was, as I said at the time in my dispatch, a vision of 'famine away from the headlines, a famine of quiet suffering and lonely death'.

There was the old woman who lay in her hut, abandoned by relations who were too weak to carry her on their journey to find food. It was the smell that drew me to her doorway: the smell of decaying flesh. Where her shinbone should have been there was a festering wound the size of my hand. She'd been shot in the leg as the retreating army of the deposed dictator ... took revenge on whoever it found in its way. The shattered leg had fused into the gentle V-shape of a boomerang. It was rotting; she was rotting. You could see it in her sick, yellow eyes and smell it in the putrid air she recycled with every struggling breath she took.

**Comment [i1]:** Suggests suffering, triad, they seem forgotten by the rest of the world

**Comment [i2]:** The repetition and constant use of 'I' indicates personal engagement, more intimate

**Comment [i3]:** This experience stands out, right at the end, and it's not because of the suffering as suggested through 'but'

**Comment [i4]:** Very short introductory paragraph, but, with long sentences which highlights the significance of the event. This is a complex idea / event that requires a thoughtful re-telling and exploration

**Comment [i5]:** Suggests isolation of the Somalian people

**Comment [i6]:** Evokes pathos through the demonstration of how abandoned and forgotten these people are

**Comment [i7]:** The use of long sentences, consisting of lists, further emphasizes the isolation of these people, - leading to pathos. In addition, it is as if the news crew are hunting for the worst image, where they could actually be helping these people — they are not being treated as humans but more as a story or a means to shock the viewers back home

**Comment [i8]:** 'ghost' suggests isolation and emptiness, could also imply soulless, both literally and figuratively, as there really aren't that many people in the village, these people also themselves lack souls.

**Comment [i9]:** Similar to the 'ghost village' — portraying emptiness

**Comment [i10]:** 'hunt' suggests how the views of the camera crew towards the Somalian people are animalistic (or at least something less than human), also, they never seem to be satisfied as they keep going until they find the 'most striking pictures'

**Comment [i11]:** Maybe, the fact that this time he referred to himself, as well as the camera man, could suggest how he feels guilty, hence, him admitting to it

**Comment [i12]:** They don't stop, mechanically moving on treating them as objects, interesting stories or perhaps animals without stopping to help them

**Comment [i13]:** Extreme conditions, it seems to be something you get used to, evokes pathos, as if suffering is normal

**Comment [i14]:** The camera men appear to be addicted to finding these shocking images of the people, instead of feeling the urge to help them they 'crave' finding images, portrays to the audience the shocking views of the camera men

**Comment [i15]:** Very heartless of them, they are used to such stories- they are the 'same old stuff'

**Comment [i16]:** Although it's cruel as suggested through 'callous' it is still considered a simple fact of life- something normal.

**Comment [i17]:** It's as if they have become immune to the faces, no one can connect with them

**Comment [i18]:** Again, animalistic, desperation, feeding her children nutrition, like a pig foraging for food

**Comment [i19]:** This situation is not something we can relate to, also portrays helplessness, as they know it is coming

**Comment [i20]:** Blunt, powerful, short sentence

**Comment [i21]:** Death is easy for them, it's almost better, ironic as mother goes in search of food and daughter dies from hunger, also the 'half- life' suggests they were never really alive

**Comment [iK22]:** Tragic, pathetic and isolated

**Comment [iK23]:** The unnatural v shape contrasts with the 'gentle' creating a gruesomely painful image

**Comment [iK24]:** Slow and painful process, not very human — suggesting both physical and mental decay- she doesn't want to live

And then there was the face I will never forget.

**Comment [IK25]:** Isolated line, 'face' repeated to signify the importance of it, structurally building up to create tension, and surprising, what could be worse?

My reaction to everyone else I met that day was a mixture of pity and revulsion. Yes, revulsion. The degeneration of the human body, sucked of its natural vitality by the twin evils of hunger and disease, is a disgusting thing. We never say so in our TV reports. It's a taboo that has yet to be breached. To be in a feeding centre is to hear and smell the excretion of fluids by people who are beyond controlling their bodily functions. To be in a feeding centre is surreptitiously\* to wipe your hands on the back of your trousers after you've held the clammy palm of a mother who has just cleaned vomit from her child's mouth.

**Comment [IK26]:** Wouldn't usually admit to feeling this way, but sharing his honest feelings with us (its the truth that everyone knows but no one admits or accepts) suggests a candor or honesty to this piece which makes it engaging as we are intrigued to see this man admit something which would usually be deemed unacceptable ... Alagiah seems to be sharing unpleasant truths with us and we find his frankness appealing and the bluntness with which he relates these facts makes this insight into human nature (and human suffering) all the more shocking

**Comment [IK27]:** A loss of humanity

**Comment [IK28]:** Something embarrassingly dehumanizing about this kind of loss of dignity

There's pity, too, because even in this state of utter despair, they aspire to a dignity that is almost impossible to achieve. An old woman will cover her shrivelled body with a soiled cloth as your gaze turns towards her. Or the old and dying man who keeps his hoe next to the mat with which, one day soon, they will shroud his corpse, as if he means to go out and till the soil once all this is over.

**Comment [IK29]:** Completely given up

**Comment [IK30]:** Trying to hold on to dignity - tragic

**Comment [IK31]:** Sense of decaying, weakness, diseased, dying, worn out, exhausted, used up/drying up life

**Comment [IK32]:** Ashamed of herself, hence covers up herself, where actually we should be ashamed of ourselves

**Comment [IK33]:** Modal verbs; going to happen for sure

**Comment [IK34]:** Dead, lifeless

**Comment [IK35]:** Believes that he will live – there is a tragic irony here

**Comment [IK36]:** 'face' repeated

**Comment [IK37]:** Transient, ephemeral, doesn't last long, small moment but it seems to have had a lasting impact – this intrigues the reader as we wonder how such a small event can have had such a powerful effect on this man who has seen so much human suffering that he is not easily affected by human suffering

**Comment [IK38]:** He cant define the smile – which suggests there is something powerful about it – in fact it is the very fact that it is so out of place that enables it to affect Alagiah so much: the suffering he is used to, the smile he is not. The mystery surrounding the smile also further intrigues the reader

**Comment [IK39]:** The repeated structure and repeated 'me' shows how now he's the subject and the impact on him- cant quite explain

**Comment [IK40]:** Pity and revulsion were his original feelings, now cant be described in words just 'beyond'- more deep and true

**Comment [IK41]:** Short- all suddenly come in to place – suggesting a moment of realisation or an epiphany for Alagiah

**Comment [IK42]:** A more confident and certain tone

**Comment [IK43]:** Realization, whole paragraph has short sentences emphasized the clarity of his realization, climatic, fast-pace- its all overwhelming

**Comment [IK44]:** Long sentences at beginning- explaining his realization

I saw that face for only a few seconds, a fleeting meeting of eyes before the face turned away, as its owner retreated into the darkness of another hut. In those brief moments there had been a smile, not from me, but from the face. It was not a smile of greeting, it was not a smile of joy – how could it be? – but it was a smile nonetheless. It touched me in a way I could not explain. It moved me in a way that went beyond pity or revulsion.

**Comment [IK45]:** Metaphor showing the power of this movement

What was it about that smile? I had to find out. I urged my translator to ask the man why he had smiled. He came back with an answer. 'It's just that he was embarrassed to be found in this condition,' the translator explained. And then it clicked. That's what the smile had been about. It was the feeble smile that goes with apology, the kind of smile you might give if you felt you had done something wrong.

**Comment [IK46]:** Question - makes us think about the vast difference between our lives and the lives of the Somalians and evokes guilt that some people can be suffering so much while we live comfortable lives

Normally inured to stories of suffering, accustomed to the evidence of deprivation, I was unsettled by this one smile in a way I had never been before. There is an unwritten code between the journalist and his subjects in these situations. The journalist observes, the subject is observed. The journalist is active, the subject is passive. But this smile had turned the tables on that tacit agreement. Without uttering a single word, the man had posed a question that cut to the heart of the relationship between me and him, between us and them, between the rich world and the poor world. If he was embarrassed to be found weakened by hunger and ground down by conflict, how should I feel to be standing there so strong and confident?

I resolved there and then that I would write the story of Gufgaduud with all the power and purpose I could muster. It seemed at the time, and still does, the only adequate answer a reporter can give to the man's question.

**Comment [IK47]:** Foregrounded instead of the story itself, as usual – this reveals that this is not so much a recount of the events going on in Somalia but rather a story about Alagiah and his moment of realisation

**Comment [IK48]:** Paragraph=short, now that he's realized, with a more determined tone to share this inspiration, conviction and development

I have one regret about that brief encounter in Gufgaduud. Having searched through my notes and studied the dispatch that the BBC broadcast, I see that I never found out what the man's name was. Yet meeting him was a seminal moment in the gradual collection of experiences we call context. Facts and figures are the easy part of journalism. Knowing where they sit in the great scheme of things is much harder. So, my nameless friend, if you are still alive, I owe you one.

**Comment [IK49]:** Powerful and different/unusual ending with a tone of appreciation, sympathy and gratitude, the name isn't important the message is

### Organising principles:

Evoking pathos for the Somali people: - isolated, suffering, resignation, powerlessness

Reveals how news crews normally work, view people as subjects, no real connection, try to shock audience

At the end he makes us question the difference between our lives and their lives; we are like the Somalian people, they are not just objects of pity, but people too – and the fact that we are able to treat them as objects or animals makes us feel guilty ... as does the realisation that we don't really deserve to have the comfortable lives that we do when there is such suffering in the world