

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

Comment [p1]: I is used to make it seem personal and intimate, autobiographical. Note it is foregrounded to stress the importance of the personal right from the start

Comment [p2]: The triad is used here to emphasize the sense of them being isolated, forgotten and abandoned.

Comment [p3]: The 'but' emphasizes that it is an important journey, not just an ordinary one. Structurally, with this coming at the end of the paragraph, this also intrigues the reader as we are left wondering what the journey was and what was so significant about it.

Comment [p4]: It is a life changing journey, important experience, it stands out.

Comment [p5]: This evokes pathos as it emphasizes the abandonment and the fact that these people are alone, left behind by the rest of the world.

Comment [p6]: Again, evokes pathos as it accentuates how abandoned the people are. The word "ghost" helps paint a picture of how they have been abandoned or forgotten by the rest of the world. It may also reflect their state of near-death or the half-life that they have been living

Comment [p7]: The word "ghoulish" signifies how they are feeding off despair in an almost repulsive manner (ghouls eat dead human flesh) and how the journalists are trying to find the most interesting story and being completely apathetic to the situation and the people (subjects).

Comment [p8]: Makes it seem as though the reporters and news telecast agencies are predators and are out to "hunt" for prey which are the subjects of the telecast.

Comment [p9]: Again, emphasizes how the news telecast team are unmoved by their subjects. The word "tramped" makes it seem harsh and makes the manner that they carry out their work seem heartless and unsympathetic.

Comment [p10]: Shows how the news industry are just trying to get the most "striking pictures" and trying to make people at home feel shocked.

Comment [p11]: Compares it to drugs which shows that the search for a more shocking picture is almost addictive – something destructive perhaps, or a need carried out in the heat of the moment without a full realisation of the consequences ... also like drugs perhaps the brief 'high' of finding the perfectly shocking image is quickly replaced by the need to do it again

Comment [p12]: Accentuates how these journalists are heartless and only care about producing a report.

Comment [p13]: Evokes pathos as the woman is out to find "edible roots" which isn't even proper food and it is their only source of food. There is something bestial / desperate about this

Comment [p14]: Again the conditions that they are in further evokes sympathy from the readers.

Comment [p15]: Evokes pathos as it shows that suffering as been prolonged for a long time, it is continuous.

Comment [p16]: Evokes pathos because "terminal" suggests helplessness.

Comment [p17]: This intensifies the pathos as the death of her daughter is described very calmly and without drama which shows that losing a life is so common and so normal that people don't cry or mourn about it.

Comment [p18]: The word just emphasizes how the "passing away" is so common in this part of the world that it's no longer a dramatic event.

Comment [p19]: "Half-life" shows that the conditions these people are living in before death is extremely horrible that it is not considered to be "life".

Comment [p20]: This again evokes pathos as a suffering and lonely death is a cruel and painful way to pass on.

Comment [p21]: Vivid imagery is created here to further evoke pathos.

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.

And then there was the face I will never forget.

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. 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.**

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.

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.

Normally injured* 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

Comment [p22]: This accentuates the sense of pathos as it shows the unbearable pain this women had to suffer with clear, vivid imagery being painted. The idea that human flesh can be rotting while the person is still alive is a particularly gruesome and shocking image – an impact intensified by the calm connotations of 'fused' and 'gentle' ... words which also suggest a mild acceptance

Comment [p23]: A line by itself shows how significant this "Face" is. It is a life changing moment, a moment that he will remember forever. The "face" is later repeated which shows it's significance.

Comment [p24]: Pity is the obvious emotion, reaction to the situation however "revulsion" is taboo, we are not supposed to feel revolted by these situations as it makes us inhumane. However, Alagiah's insistence that this is what he feels gives this account a ring of noble truth – as if he will be honest with us even if what he is telling us does not paint him in a positive light

Comment [p25]: Repeated to show importance.

Comment [p26]: Again shows that the reporters are just doing their job when reporting these stories and try to evoke pathos from readers and not actually sympathizing with the subjects.

Comment [p27]: Evoking pathos

Comment [p28]: Complete giving up, contrast to 'dignity'

Comment [p29]: Holding on to the shreds of dignity that they are left with.

Comment [p30]: Feels shame. Emphasizes the degree of pity evoked - old, diseased, dying exhausted, worn-out, used up, drying up of life.

Comment [p31]: Modal verb, very certain that it will happen – despite his desire to return to work and the hunger for dignity he 'will' die – this contrast evokes a sense of the tragic (or perhaps heroic?)

Comment [p32]: Believes that he will live - tragic

Comment [p33]: The sudden change of focus suggests the importance of this face.

Comment [p34]: The repetition reinforces this sense of importance

Comment [p35]: Transient– does not last long. Small moment but big effect.

Comment [p36]: Repetition of smile – unexpected reaction – can't quite define that smile.

Comment [p37]: Questions himself – shows that he is literally unsure.

Comment [p38]: The word me shows that he has become the subject.

Comment [p39]: Shows impact on him – at a loss of words but by repeating its impact he is trying to convey his emotions. Repeated structure shows that something significant has happened, although Alagiah can't quite put his finger on what exactly it is

Comment [p40]: Short sentence, understanding. Realization - clarity of place - climatic - fast pace suggests it is overwhelming.

Comment [p41]: He is confident and certain about it.

Comment [p42]: Back to longer sentence, explaining his moment of realization. This contrasts to the fast paced paragraph before.

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.

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.

Genre: Autobiography

Audience: Adults

Purpose:

1. Evoke pathos for the Somalian people – they are isolated, abandoned, in pain, resigned, robbed of their dignity and powerless.
2. Reveals how T.V crews hunt for shocking images and view people as just 'subjects': this is just a job
3. Recounts a life changing moment: at first he feels pity for these people (which is the obvious and expected emotion) then disgust (which is more interestingly taboo) ... but the smile makes him re-evaluate this and question himself – he should be embarrassed by the wealth and comfort he lives in compared to the lives that the Somalians are living

Comment [p43]: Different from us: suggests experiments – scientific, cold, distanced, dispassionate. T.V. allows the journalists (and us) to dip into this horrific world from the safety of our own - like an experiment where we can study something in safely controlled conditions.

Comment [p44]: Metaphor emphasizes power of this moment.

Comment [p45]: Emphasizes that this smile represents something universal – a similarity that connects all human beings and breaks down the observer / subject – reporter / victim – viewer / viewed distinction and makes him (and therefore us) realise that we are all the same ... this ultimately makes him realise the immorality of his previous attempts to just hunt for the most shocking picture and instead (by the end of the article) he feels motivated to write something that will in some way do justice to these people by revealing the common humanity we all share and thus by no longer treating them as just subjects but people instead – hence this story

Comment [p46]: Despite the similarity and basic human connection there is a huge difference between us and them as revealed by the separation between the two metaphorical world.

Comment [p47]: He is determined to share the story and his experience, share the inspiration

Comment [p48]: Shows a lasting effect.

Comment [p49]: Possibly this reinforces the lack of a human connection between reporter and subject or perhaps, it shows that the name of this person is less important than the effect he has had. Perhaps the namelessness also suggests that this could be true of all Somalians – they are all 'real people' like this man was. Ultimately, though, the absence of the name creates a poignancy to the end of the article (especially as we assume the man is probably dead) reinforcing the power of the piece.

Comment [p50]: Universal story, all the people are suffering.

Comment [p51]: Unusual ending, which contrasts with the reporter / subject distinction described earlier. The informal phrase suggests a closeness between the two and reinforces Alagiah's gratitude – both of these effects reveal that the nameless man really had a powerful impact on the reporter. This also makes it clear the contrast between news reports and the autobiographical nature of this extract.