

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 [S1]: Already presented with a history of violence

Comment [S2]: Emphasizes 'betrayed'. They were left behind by people who had failed to protect them from horrors. We let them down by not helping.

Comment [S3]: Polysyndeton. Never-ending cycle of suffering. Emotive words used. Impression of people crowding together out of sight. Pain is alluded to.

Comment [S4]: Draws reader in. One person stands out amongst 'thousands'

Comment [S5]: Far away from the newspapers and knowledge. As if they were stuffed away dismissively

Comment [S6]: Isolation is accentuated. An inexplicable loneliness evokes pathos. However note that the author's need for the worst images to publish is the only reason he comes here

Comment [S7]: The village too has lost its soul. No life and freedom. The villagers lack a will to live. Impression that although they are still alive, they are empty shells, apathetic. Silent shadow imprints that will eventually fade away and be forgotten.

Comment [S8]: Similar to the villagers the news industry would so readily dismiss. Heartless and feeding off the despair of other humans- cold

Comment [S9]: Doesn't care for their suffering and pain. Only wants the pictures whereas the context remains ignored. Background.

Comment [S10]: Jaded. Depicts the apathetic news industry's only aim to gain emotional stories without receiving the emotional impact themselves. Ignorant + mechanical

Comment [S11]: Desensitized to suffering. Greed: what they already have is not enough. They have seen too much of it thus are immune to it. Suggests that they are addicted to finding the worst pictures, experiences have hardened them.

Comment [S12]: Dismissive attitude is shocking to the reader. Although it subtly implies that this is also our attitude towards the Somalis- accusing us.

Comment [S13]: Contrast between the different worlds. We will never get to intimately immerse ourselves in the Somali lifestyle. We take our comfort for granted and soon forget the fleeting images the news industry churns out. Reminds us of our ignorance and superficiality.

Comment [S14]: Poverty and desperation. Ironic- she goes in search of food but her daughter dies of hunger. These people have to be content with their meager share- injustice

Comment [S15]: Chance to have a normal childhood has been stolen from them. Loss of freedom and innocence. Destruction of her vivacity and vitality.

Comment [S16]: Sense that she is relieved to pass away. Now she is free from earthly bonds, sadness, despair and suffering. Looks forward to death as it is what rescues her. Shocks reader as conditions are reversed: Death is better than Life

Comment [S17]: The world does not care for her death.

Comment [S18]: Represents mutilation of her soul by experiences. Provokes emotional response

Comment [S19]: Repetition of rotting emphasizes her struggle for survival. Her dirtiness and pitiful state is striking. Hopelessness is accentuated and sense that she isn't quite human anymore

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 shriveled 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 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?**

Comment [S20]: Honesty. Revealing what everyone knows but no one admits. We feel guilty at his subtle accusation as we should have been sympathetic not revolted.

Comment [S21]: It is not a visible and tangible enemy. The fact that it is inner as well makes it more frightening.

Comment [S22]: IT is deemed as too disgraceful. Maybe by avoiding the issue they can pretend it doesn't exist

Comment [S23]: Pitiful impression as they have lost their dignity. Survival instinct dominates and this makes them more animalistic

Comment [S24]: We fell guilt at our behavior. However, social rules and stereotypes still influences us. Alagiah doesn't want to dirty himself.. Distance-shying away thus we can relate to him and are uncertain of his connection to the Somalis

Comment [S25]: Tragic. We could bear it if they were mere animals, but because they are humans this image of 'utter despair' is horrifying as we feel connected to them somehow through the author.

Comment [S26]: Her embarrassment is surprising. Even though it is not necessary she wants to reassure herself of her humanity, sanity and identity. Keeping in contact with what they used to be.

Comment [S27]: Modal verb. He cannot avoid his fate.

Comment [S28]: Futile hopes. Evokes pathos as it contrasts with what we know will happen. A proud people has been reduced to a pitiful state yet still manages to dredge up some dignity, a superficial imitation of earlier times. Their determination to remain humane deserves praise.

Comment [S29]: Transient and ephemeral moment. The small moment has a big effect on him as it inspires him to pursue answers

Comment [S30]: Animalistic impression

Comment [S31]: Repetition suggests his preoccupation with the simple gesture. HE needs to define it and because of its unpredictability it becomes more memorable. Highlights contrast between two worlds.

Comment [S32]: Usually we associate smiling with happiness this unexpected smile makes the people seem more mysterious and more extraordinary than the media portrays them to be.

Comment [S33]: Its uniqueness makes it impossible to put into words. It transcends normal emotions and it changes the author . Suddenly he becomes the subject –development.

Comment [S34]: Short sentences emphasize a clarity the author has now gained. His understanding is a contrast to earlier on. Resolution of a problem.

Comment [S35]: Apologizing for being revealed amidst poverty and despair. He was an honorable man and wants to hang on to that belief and memory. Tries to ignore personal issues as he only cares about the image he presents. A realization for readers, these people are still human and some are better than we are.

Comment [S36]: Unusual, the man has no reason to smile. Reminds the author that there are others still suffering in abandonment.

Comment [S37]: Scientific approach. They are being watched by us yet now there is a reversal of roles. The agreement has been broken and the author is grateful for it.

Comment [S38]: Concept of unity. Implies that there is nothing separating us at all. Each story of suffering must be given the same importance, urgency and commitment. We should learn humility as Alagiah points out that we are not anymore 'human' than the poverty stricken Somalis

Comment [S39]: We can come in and out of their world but they cannot. However, there remains a universality about this statement that everyone is equal despite our contrasts.

Comment [S40]: Poses to the reader a question. We should reevaluate our views of the poor and be as ashamed and embarrassed as Alagiah when we find out that we are not superior to others. In some ways they are stronger than us and enduring, they still retain dignity which we may have lost already should our roles be reversed.

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.

George Alagiah

**revulsion*: disgust

**surreptitiously*: secretly

**inured*: hardened

Genre: Autobiography (extract)

Audience: General adult

Purpose:

- Evoke pathos for Somalis
 - Isolated
 - Resignation
 - Suffering
 - Powerlessness
 - Harsh conditions in the village- atmosphere of death, decay and abandonment
 - Violence
- Recounting the impact the experience has had on him
 - Initially revulsion, pity and disgust
 - Later he re-evaluates and questions his beliefs
 - Connection between Alagiah and the villagers- unity
- Reveals how the news industry/news crew really work:
 - View people as subjects
 - No real connection between the two parties
 - Trying to hunt for the most shocking images to captivate readers

Comment [S41]: 'I' is repeated. Determination. The experience has been imprinted into his mind.

Comment [S42]: Short paragraph accentuates the effect on the reader. The author is inspired to share his memories and humanity of the Somalis. His approach is revolutionary in the apathetic media world. Yet, he is not striving to evoke pathos for the people but to encourage us to help them out of goodwill not out of pity. This recount is his part in the process and the reader develops with him.

Comment [S43]: A universal story. The man symbolizes every story of ignored suffering in the world. The reader will never get a chance to know and see him although he has given us change and a chance to help others.

Comment [S44]: Profound experience. It went against everything he was taught and believed in. Changes his mission and purpose in life to helping these people instead of just reporting on them.

Comment [S45]: Touching gesture. He still remembers the moment though others would have already moved on. He is thanking the man and giving him the respect he deserves. He made the author realize the humanity of his subjects. Unlike endings of other news articles. Stands out.

- Makes us question the difference between us and the Somalis

- We are the same as the Somali people- concept of unity explored
- They aren't objects of pity: they are people too
- Evoking a sense of guilt- we have been viewing them as sub-human & undignified