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When Write is Wrong

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Abstract

A trio of girls attempt to have an education in a society where it is inappropriate for females to learn. Malaya is the group's leader, and is called into question (and later punished) when the town officials find evidence of their educational practices.

Keywords

Cultural prohibition of education, education for girls

Disciplines

Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Disability and Equity in Education | Education

Comments

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Professor Nadine Meyer

Creative Writing

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When Write is Wrong

“The c-cat ran a-w-way?” As her mouth formed each syllable, the words were tinged with hesitation and uncertainty. Yet, the moment her raspberry red lips touched, her cheeks started to flush and she began to smile. Malaya swallowed a breath of hope and received approving nods from the two girls standing alongside her. *This is right*, she sensed. It did not seem fair that she was not entitled to the same education that the boys received. This girl was determined to amount to something. She had to break the law for the sake of her very being.

Malaya closed her eyes briefly and mouthed a silent prayer. When she opened her eyes again, the two other girls dressed in black burkas from head to toe were practicing their own sentences sounding out each word syllable by syllable. Malaya peered down at her journal; her penmanship would be her defining quality if only she was able to showcase this talent. She grabbed her collection of wrinkled papers and held it close to her heart, cradling her work as if it was her favorite doll. She needed to protect it from the outside world, to keep it close, and to not let anyone touch her prized possession.

Lessons for the three girls were held once a week if given the opportunity, and they always occurred at night. These gatherings were scheduled just a few hours prior, so as not to draw attention to their comings and goings. A single mark of white chalk etched on the side of one of the drinking fountains in the town square would signal an assembly that evening. Discreteness was their number one priority. If they were caught, they would pretend that the contents in their hands were simply their treasured dollies. In truth, each page in these journals revealed their gradual advancement in literacy and knowledge, which was prohibited for females in Hailam. In place of learning, young girls were to complete household chores on a daily basis, and were to be summoned at their masters' call. Early on, females learned to be seen, not heard. Any form of education other

than knowing the rules in effect was considered a crime. Those caught and convicted never were seen again.

Malaya ended tonight's session with the recitation of a memorized psalm in order to practice her pronunciation. The girls had to hurry home because they were running late and curfew was in five minutes. They quickly gathered their loose scraps of paper and hid them under their burkas. No papers were to be left behind in the tent, because they would serve as evidence of their wrongdoing.

At random intervals, the girls filed out of the 8 by 8 foot makeshift tent. They never left in the same order, nor did they speak as they departed. The youngest one, just eleven years old, was the first to leave today. Amira always was the first girl to arrive at these meetings. Naturally quiet and gifted, she was already reading at a 4th grade level, since she had quietly "borrowed" her brother's materials. Malaya had begun these secret sessions, in part, after Amira became mute two years ago; a gang of six men had barged into Amira's home one night and had sliced off her mother's head for stealing bread and sweets from the bakery to feed her hungry family. That memory would never be erased from Amira's mind. Afterwards, she talked to no one. She dyed her hair a deep red, satisfied that no one ever would be able to detect her unspoken defiance. Obtaining an education helped Amira to fight back silently.

Three minutes later, Zakiyah exited. She was the eldest and the most mature in the group, as she had been taking care of her younger siblings since she was ten years old. Because her widowed father held a prominent position in the community, he felt it was necessary to remove himself from the responsibilities of caretaking and left this task to Zakiyah. Unfortunately, Zakiyah suffered from arthritis and was unable, at times, to provide adequate care for her siblings. The doctors had very little to offer her, as optimal medical treatment was reserved for males. Only on account of her father's efforts was she still moving about without a wheelchair. Because of her handicap, she was exempted from certain tasks and concentrated on preparing meals for the "watchers" during the day.

The last to leave was Malaya, the founder, and the rebel. Aesthetically, Malaya's features were the most stunning. Masked behind a burka, her long lashed ebony eyes scanned every situation as

thick black tresses flowed far below her slender shoulders. She had curves in all the right places and toned muscles that complemented her emotional strength. Malaya's father was the town's mentor for the male population. Late at night after Mr. Abad went to sleep, Malaya would wander into his office and shuffle through papers, searching for beginner books and worksheets to help her learn the written language. If he ever caught her prying, Mr. Abad had no recourse but to turn her in to the watchers; otherwise, his entire family would be disciplined.

As Malaya was finding her way back home that night, she heard an abrupt creak behind her. "STOP!" *Hold yourself together, Malaya.* She took a deep breath and slowly turned around with her arms held high in the air, praying that her papers were tucked tightly against her body. Before her stood one of the town's watchers who was responsible for enforcing the regulations and the proper conduct of every individual in Hailam. While the watcher was not a big person, he stood tall, dressed in uniform, rifle strapped across his chest, with his face set in a stoic expression. "Why are you out past curfew?" She knew that ending the meeting so close to curfew was a risky proposition, but she had never been stopped... until now.

"I-I, was fascinated by the stars, sir. I am sorry. It will not happen again," mumbled Malaya. She did not dare cast her gaze away from the man even though she felt her journal starting to slip down her body. *Please God.*

"The stars?! You stupid girl; go home now. And if I see you wandering out here again, I'll have you thrown into *the Room.*" The edges of his mouth curled into an intimidating grin, revealing a dentist's nightmare. Malaya nodded and turned around cautiously, taking care to ensure that the journal did not drop. She was well out of his sight before she grabbed the diary. By the time she arrived home fifteen minutes later, her mother was fast asleep, the lights were off, and all was quiet. If only her home could provide the safety she required. If only that peace could last a lifetime, she would be safe from all evil.

“Laya, Laya, wake up!” Her mother’s face came into focus as Malaya forced open her eyes. “Quickly, the watchers have sounded the speakers!” *Oh no*. The speakers signaled trouble, but more importantly, they signaled punishment. When the speakers sounded, the people were to report to their assigned area. Malaya quickly dressed and walked outside to join the line of townspeople heading east in the street. As she kept walking, Malaya’s stomach started quivering like it never had before. She tried to wish away her discomfort, but as they slowed, the surroundings seemed to eat at her. She knew exactly where they were going. She did not have to wait for her mom’s instruction to stop because she knew this place even better than her own home. Congregating before her were ten watchers positioned in front of that makeshift tent she had left several hours before.

As she peered through the crowd, Malaya noticed that same man who had approached her on the walk home now held a single piece of paper in his hand. She could not make out the words, but she could see that it was purple writing—her purple writing. *No. It was not possible*. She never left a trace...

“Ladies and Gentlemen, please bow before us.” The people kneeled in silence, counting a full five seconds before standing. “It appears that we have some additional learning taking place right behind me in this filthy tent. Does anyone have any information to offer? Or shall I continue with my suppositions?”

Silence.

Malaya cautiously searched for Amira and Zakiyah. To the left she spotted Amira, pale and fragile, her body leaning against her older brother. Before Malaya could produce a reaction, Amira tentatively shook her head, acknowledging their pact of secrecy. Amira’s eyes then drifted past Malaya, and Malaya followed the direction of those hazel green eyes that finally rested upon Zakiyah standing next to her father. At first glance, Malaya was unable to read Zakiyah’s expression. She appeared calm, but then Malaya thought she saw a tear slipping down her cheek. A tear that could only mean one thing: betrayal.

In that instant, Malaya knew that the burka covering her body would not protect her. Her disobedience could not be hidden. She felt the presence of two persons beside her and closed her

eyes as hands fastened around her upper arm tightly squeezing the skin. Her mother gasped and cried out, “Not my baby! Not my baby!” But it was to no avail.

Malaya felt herself being pushed past people who had separated like the Red Sea with no questions asked. Once again, she was subjected to the uniformed man, who thrust the paper into her hands. “These are some nice stars, huh?” That same wicked grin broadened across his cold countenance.

Zakiyah’s father now stepped forward and when he finally looked at Malaya, he showed no recognition, no concern. All those times Malaya came to his home for dinner and shared in conversation with the family were long forgotten. Malaya looked back at Zakiyah who mouthed ‘I’m sorry’ while fighting back a reservoir of tears. Malaya’s gaze then shifted to her mother who was looking down at the ground, forming what seemed to be Malaya’s initials in the dirt with her foot.

Zakiyah’s dad did not ask for an explanation. He simply inquired, “How many more girls are dishonoring their role in this community?” She couldn’t. She wouldn’t.

“Sir, it was just me. I have been coming here to practice writing and to learn how to read. Nobody else has disrespected you, I promise.” It hurt her to tell a lie. It hurt her so much that she had to pinch her leg while she lied through her teeth.

“Please recite R&R Number 5.” Hailam’s Rules and Regulations were numbered 1-25 and, of course, the majority of these rules addressed restrictions for females.

“Education in any form, through literature, classes, reading, or writing, is strictly prohibited for women in the town of Hailam. Failure to adhere to these commands will result in castigation as deemed appropriate by the watchers,” Malaya mindlessly repeated.

Zakiyah’s father reached for an object from his pocket, ignited the lighter, and flung it far into the tent. No one dared move as they watched each flap flare, sear to a dark brown, and melt away into nothingness. The overpowering stench of disobedience filled the air as grey smoke circled into the blackened sky.

“Follow me now.” Without facing the crowd, Malaya kept her eyes forward and watched as the rifle belonging to Zakiyah’s dad bounced up and down on his back, praying it would remain

there. *Laya, Laya, Laya. I will not apologize for my love of learning. I will not regret wanting more. I hope I have inspired other girls to dream, to dream big. Never settle for less!* Malaya drew in a deep breath, and a deeper satisfaction flooded her being.