

Inaya - Kindness and Grace

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I slowly begin to unveil the cloth wrapping around my head, revealing my female identity - Aafreen. On the floor lies my red hijab, my culture, but also the oppression that carried behind it. I take a deep breath of the Iranian air that stings of heat and humidity, but also smells of freedom.

The Islamic Law states that women are required to wear a certain dress code, restricting the power and civil rights of women across numerous Islamic countries. My problem doesn't lie in the strict dress code, but rather, the government and its people whose ignorance blind their own duties and the rights of many women.

It's a Monday morning within the streets of Iran, with many on their knees and face performing their daily salat, while others rush to their workplace. Having already performed one of my daily prayer and personal ritual activities, I leisurely walk towards the news headquarters two blocks away from my home, due to my early awakening. During my stroll, I see a large group forming in the distance, blocking my route. Unable to reach my destination, I carefully pull out my pen and paper from my purse and observe from a distance, jotting down key points and fulfilling my duty as a news writer. Many hold signs with sharp but unreadable arabic script, while others hold signs with the text written in english; one of which, beg for the Iranian government to be fully democratic. An individual stands elevated from the ground with a megaphone on her right hand, presuming that she is the leader of the protest.

I rarely cover protests, as they tend to be bland with little to no action involved. However, the people within the mass piqued my interest. Many of the members seem to be of Islamic faith from the hijab worn, while others have white skin and sandy-blond hair, signifying their foreign descent. There were many women, and abnormally small group of men partaking within the protest. Although there is a bias between both genders, there is a noticeable multicultural aspect towards the group.

The elevated woman lifts her megaphone towards her lips and begins shouting in a tempo:
"Death to the dictator!"

The protesters soon follow. After a few minutes have passed, the protest begins to escalate and move towards the direction of my workplace, the news headquarters. The chanting increased in volume, to the extent of hearing the shake of my eardrum, and feeling the vibrations throughout my body.

As I stare at my messy notepad looking through my notes, I suddenly hear a violent scream followed by noise that seemed to be sounds of loud chattering - something you would hear in a loud hall. I directed my attention towards the protest once more, and there I find the group being dispersed by police, like ants scurrying away from a predator. Although I am meters away from the gathering, I can clearly hear the commotion. Many have turned their attention from the useless protesting, and now towards the police. The men in blue have forcefully beaten a woman and lay her on the concrete floor, where she serves as a lesson to stop revolting against Iran's political system. Although the police have injured a helpless woman on the streets, they had every right to dismantle the protest using any type of force that is non-lethal. They may have seen some protesters behaving in a certain way that may damage innocent civilians, thus removing the threat was rightful. The protesters leave in disbelief, while a small group of people aid the injured woman onto her feet.

I approach her in a formal manner, but two men prevent me from reaching her. They have noticed that I am working for the news agency, due to my navy blue suit and tie that chokes my belly. The injured woman gazes up towards me and smiles within my direction. She waves her hand to show that I may approach her, causing both of the men to regret their actions and move aside.

I sit down on the warm curb beside the Iranian woman. She smells of cheap perfume, and wear a tight, aquamarine hijab. She is concealed from the neck to below her knees, by a thin, but opaque blue dress. Her knees are up to her tight chest, and her arms are folded neatly in front of it, showing respect and kindness towards me. She sits straight up and says, "My name is Inaya. Please, I need your help. We have been oppressed by the government for decades - the women especially."

At this point, I knew that asking her questions would be beneficial to me and towards her cause. We both satisfy each other - I ask questions and receive answers for my article, while her ideas and cause is gaining attraction. Inaya wants the world to recognize that women are humans too, and should be able to choose their own decisions freely. Although hijab is part of their culture and religion, she feels that it shouldn't be mandatory, but rather a cosmetic or something to be worn on special occasions. Inaya also wants Iran to be a fully democratic country, rather than ruled by a leader, thus answering my question of her involvement within the anti-government protest.

As our conversation comes to a close, we wave each other our farewell and proceed to each our own destination. With the protest active within only a few minutes, I managed to write an entire article that gathered much attention throughout social media.

Days after this incident, little did I know that Inaya would serve as the idol for anti-government protests. Her involvement with the police has caused many Iranians to recognize her as a sign of bravery. She was willing to place her own body on the line, to get her message across the country. Large gatherings are now taking place in many cities within Iran, to the extent of capturing the eyes of foreigners and even leaders.

It is now late November. The protests haven't settled, nor have the numbers increased, but the amount of people outside of Iran are now recognizing the voices of Iranian citizens. Social media is now filling with the opinions of many foreigners on this matter. New trends have begun that pertains to the breach of rights of the people within Iran, and the lack of respect and action from the government.

I still keep in touch with Inaya, tightening our relationship. She works as a housewife, caring for her husband and two daughters. Surprisingly, the husband also agrees with Inaya's ideas, but not to the same extremity of partaking within anti-government protests. Inaya would always tell me how her husband would be reluctant of going against the government, due to the stories of citizen's patriotic feelings blinding them and "destroying" those who rebel against Iran's leader. I too am somewhat scared to put myself in Inaya's shoes. My beliefs are not strong enough to throw my own life away and be martyred. But slowly, Inaya has changed my feelings and ideas, like dark food colouring dissolving in water.

By the beginning of December, Inaya invited me to participate within one of the protests she's leading. I stand at the same place where Inaya was beaten by the Iranian police - an image I cannot unsee. There, I was greeted by many women of Islamic faith. All were wearing bright coloured hijabs, some young and some old. Inaya finally enters and initiates the beginning of the protest. Minutes have passed, and I have yet to see any interesting actions for my article.

All of a sudden, my body shivers in cold and my vision goes blank. My mind flashes through frightening images, with Inaya's dead body capturing my attention. It was as if a movie reel played within my head. A flash of light awoke me, only to find myself in the middle of the crowd with Inaya marching in front of me.

In the corner of my eye, I see Iranian citizens sitting on the curb, staring at Inaya. I assume they were just captured by her beauty, but her actions proved me wrong. Inaya was slowly unravelling her tight headscarf and dropped it on the floor. Before she was able to shout and promote her thoughts, the men by the curb attacked her. They beat her with all of the force they had, while the other protesters scurried off. Inaya's head is covered in her crimson red vital fluid, creating small streams of blood between her eyes and on the side of her cut cheek. Her jaw flings open and close from each punch she takes from the savage men. It is well known that although many Iranians are rebellious against the leader, many of them follow their religion to the core, and are willing to attack any of those who go against their religion.

Screams of horror fill my backside, followed by hundreds of footsteps created by the horrified protesters. I stay in silence, watching this gruesome scene unravel without any thoughts or emotions. Although I was closest to her, I am not brave enough. The same two men from months ago appear in front of me, helping Inaya to safety and brawling the men off of the helpless woman.

The streets are now ruptured in chaos, for Inaya is inevitably pronounced dead. I am still at the site where I have experienced this traumatizing scene and stare at her dead body being placed within the back of the ambulance. These all happened within minutes of the initial attack, causing my mind to be unable to comprehend what has happened.

I am hit in the chest with overwhelming emotions and drop to the floor. I slowly crawl towards Inaya's blood spilled on the asphalt road, and begin to unravel my crimson hijab. I dip the thin scarf into her blood, and cry furthermore. My body felt like it was hit by a tremendous force in the liver, making me unable to breathe and curl up into a fetal position.

Although I removed my headscarf, all of those who were at the scene fled within minutes, leaving me to grieve in her place. I used all of my will power to fulfill a fraction of Inaya's wish - to be able to see women on the streets free.

Years have passed since Inaya's death, and I have taken her place in leading anti-government protests. It is ritual for me to remove my same blood-stained hijab off of my head, and lay it on the floor to signify my freedom as a woman. My job as a news writer has become non-existent after Inaya's death, as I was unable to work under the stress amounting from the loss of her.