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'Images of Afghanistan, When the Taliban Ruled'

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*Kabul, one month before Taliban conquest of the city, Afghanistan, 1996*

Since last fall the American public has had something of a crash course on Afghanistan. By now most of us know at least the main outlines of its recent history, and is aware that events in that country over several decades make up a human tragedy that has cut both widely and deeply.

Many intrepid photographers and photojournalists are responsible for providing what we now know about Afghanistan. But one whose pictures are on view at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at the State University of New Jersey, at Rutgers, began his work before the recent wave of interest in that country.

The show, "The Victor Weeps: Photographs by Fazal Sheikh of Afghan Refugees, 1996-98," displays the pictures of Mr. Sheikh, the son of a Kenyan father and an American mother, who was born in 1965, grew up in New York and graduated from Princeton University.

In 1996, Mr. Sheikh went to Afghanistan just after the Taliban had taken power. The results of his photographic investigations were seen in "The Victor Weeps," a book published by Scalo in 1998, the year he completed the last of several trips to Afghanistan.

Although the show includes several panoramic pictures of Kabul mostly in ruins, as it looked when the Taliban took over, most of the show is composed of rich black-and-white photographs of people. Many are close-ups. Some subjects -- men and women, young and old --

have sharp recollections of particular, horrifying, even sadistic events of war that are printed in text below their pictures.

The main foe, still fresh in the memory of Mr. Sheikh's subjects, is the Communists, who fought with invading troops from the Soviet Union in the 1970's. The title "The Victor Weeps" alludes to the fact that although the Communists were defeated and the Soviets expelled, the human toll was so great that there was mourning rather than celebration.

Mr. Sheikh has balanced the pictures and stories of bleakness and tragedy with more optimistic images. A grid-like arrangement of 21 photographs with the descriptive title "Afghan Children Born in Exile" is a reminder that life and the life cycle go on, and that people who so often make up nameless statistics are particular personalities. In these pictures of children, Mr. Sheikh has captured across the board a clear-eyed hopefulness. Only one child is crying, and it is a baby.

One aspect of human rights in Afghanistan that has piqued wide interest in the United States is the treatment of women. At first glance, "Abdul Shakour's Eldest Wife, Najiba" would not seem to be someone who could speak about enlightened attitudes. Wearing an enveloping *burka*, she is mainly identified as someone's wife. But her printed statement reads; "Our prized possessions are pens and books."

Mr. Sheikh presents two other photographs that tacitly address the way women are regarded in Afghanistan. In "Sisters, Sima and Shahima," these young girls are photographed in what seems like opulence even though it is mainly the floral prints on their dresses and on the wall covering that provides the sensation of luxury.

The other picture features a toddler identified as "Shahria." She is outdoors on a striped blanket, playing with a couple of flowers; the photograph includes part of the leafy tree that shades her. This is as close to idealism as the exhibition comes.

The largest photographs contain hints of tales apart from the usual war stories. "Dr. Jan's Son and Friend" shows two young men standing and facing each other against the background of a mud wall. One man holds the other's hand tightly by a couple of fingers.

The humanistic promise of this picture is not fully evident until the viewer comes upon "Osman and Farid, Blind 'Qari' Brothers." The wall text explains that *qari* means "one who knows the Koran by heart." These boys, while standing close, face away from each other.

One of Mr. Sheikh's most frequent devices is the photograph within a photograph. People whom he interviews and photographs present a picture of someone they have lost, and these images become seamlessly collaged in Mr. Sheikh's compositions. This is an effective narrative technique because it corresponds to the subjects' dreams that they relate at the same time that they describe atrocities. The loved ones appear radiant in dreams and offer at least a moment's consolation.

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