

Fazal Sheikh

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I still remember the first time I saw Fazal Sheikh's photographs. It was at an exhibition at the Fondation Cartier-Bresson in Paris. I was totally astounded; his work affected me so deeply that these images, which seemed to capture the human soul and the world around us, ensnared me for ever. Once you've seen them, returning to reality is no easy matter: the agitation that results from confronting beauty alongside pessimism, or facing the indignation which the suffering of others causes in us, can leave us feeling confused and disoriented.

Fazal Sheikh snatches us away from everyday distractions in order to introduce us into the very heart of his own highly individual understanding of the world, in a vision created from intimate perceptions which make space for a spiritual dimension. It is a space not often found in contemporary art, which has lost its contemplative nature. His work is an opportunity to relive that wonderful human ability to connect with others and undergo intense experiences of solidarity. It makes room for both moral responsibility and rigorous execution, in other words, for honesty: that moral obligation imposed upon independent intellectuals who, in dialogue with their own consciences, both in solitude and in public, make use of the critical role of art, whilst art, in turn—through its own sincerity—plays an effective part in culture and society.

Sheikh has spent many years documenting marginalised communities. The refugee camps of East Africa and Afghanistan, or women in India condemned to ostracism are two sides of the same misfortune: poverty, underdevelopment, war, exploitation and the destruction of freedom. But figures no longer move us; we, the passive, complacent citizens of the Western world have become used to swallowing the statistics whole, without suffering from indigestion. And yet direct knowledge of individual suffering,

with which we can identify, still has the power to move us. But if we consider the impact of any violent death in our society, those figures cannot but overwhelm: half a million refugees in Kenya, two million Afghan refugees displaced for more than twenty years, six thousand women killed in India every year...

It is no easy matter for Fazal Sheikh, because his commitment with the societies and groups he works with goes far beyond the mere photographic theme; he establishes an intense relationship that continues even after each project has concluded and, more often than not, impels him to return to the scene again. What is the aim shared by these works that have become his life principles? The answer is the defence of human dignity, not as some abstract value, but as an ethical and intellectual decision to interpret and denounce, striving to understand the reality of a situation. That is why the people he portrays do not come across as the victims they are: what Sheikh is calling for is the respect that they have been denied.

His commitment to human rights is ongoing, as his work with the United Nations and non-governmental organisations reveals. He took another step with the International Human Rights Series, an initiative he designed in 2001 which has taken on diverse shapes— including books, films, catalogues and exhibitions—and is intended to attract the widest possible audience in Sheikh's attempt to draw international public attention to the complex issue of human rights violation. The first two projects, *A Camel for the Son* and *Ramadan Moon* (2001) respectively portray, firstly the situation of Somali refugee women in long-standing camps in the north of Kenya, and secondly their status as political asylum-seekers in the Netherlands. The third project involved the production of a DVD based on Sheikh's book *The Victor Weeps*, a study of communities of Afghan exiles in camps on

the northern border of Pakistan. Sheikh's books entitled *Moksha* (2005) and *Ladli* (2007), which examine prejudices and discrimination against women in traditional Indian society, recently provided the inspiration for *Beloved Daughters* (2008), a portfolio of thirty photographs distributed all over India to non-governmental organisations working for women's rights. The publications resulting from all his series have also been distributed free of charge via the network of human rights institutions, and to groups and non-governmental organisations of a humanitarian, political or cultural nature. Sheikh's work has been widely recognised in recent years; exhibitions have been mounted in London's Tate Modern, the Fondation Cartier-Bresson in Paris and the International Center of Photography in New York. He has won prizes like those recently awarded by the Fondation Cartier-Bresson, the Prix d'Arles, the Leica Medal of Excellence and the MacArthur Fellowship. This is, however, the first time Sheikh has presented his work in Spain.

Both the exhibition and this book are the first opportunity to see all of Sheikh's work so far together in the same place. Here, there are no ups and downs, no disappointments or unkept promises. What we find is a rigorous discourse which gains in stature with every step; every project which has attracted the author's attention or been the subject of his endeavours over a period of time maintains a link with the previous one, arising like a natural progression until it has borne fruit, until it has reached the state of resolution, the state of calm expressed throughout his work. Although he is equally involved in both, for Sheikh, an exhibition and a book are two different experiences which provide him with the ideal framework in which to strengthen the photographic process. At the exhibition, pictures carry more weight, in their attempt to confront the viewer with the visual image. In the book, the dramatic load is shared with text, and these two

dimensions mutually reinforce each other, creating a unit which transcends their separate power. Fazal Sheikh wants the people who visit his exhibitions or buy his books to do more than scratch the surface; the texts are therefore designed to underline the images, aiding understanding and providing a more personal look at those portrayed; that is also why the photos have both a title and a date. Sheikh includes texts or narratives, spoken in the first person, by the portrait sitters, perhaps out of a fear that, without this, we will be unable to see beyond the wounding beauty of his images, that we will take these out of context and turn them into lifeless objects exposed to arbitrary usage. The words ask us not merely to turn over the page; they remind us that—behind the beauty and emotion—there is also suffering. Sheikh draws the world's attention to these injustices whilst, at the same time, gathering the stories of those who suffer from them.

Through his photography, Sheikh enables us to share a life that is being lived. But through his texts, he turns his work into a wider dialogue in which his protagonists can take a part. By so doing, he closes the circle. He puts his subjects into direct contact with us. We become party to that moment of intimacy between them and the exposure time needed to take the photograph. It is no more than a few split seconds, but it takes on a biographical dimension that is connected to an entire lifetime. The lives of these people are the subject matter of his stories, but their meaning goes far beyond the events he narrates: it is linked to the identity of each person and to the culture to which he or she belongs. These are individual stories which, like a jigsaw puzzle, bring to life a whole community. Told simply and honestly, they help these people to discover the certainty of their existence by seeing their story acknowledged through some of the experiences that have marked them, establishing links with the world

and those around them. These simple but intense stories have been pared of anything superfluous in an attempt to reflect the truest, most intimate and intrinsic part of the lives to which they allude.

To embody his subject matter, Fazal Sheikh uses the portrait, a genre into which contemporary photographers are continually breathing new life. Sheikh opts for front views which are, in essence, a joint effort, taken with the cooperation of the sitters. He has gained their trust so that they lose the solemnity more typical of portrait rhetoric, presenting themselves as they really are. Like Evans, who never adopted the condescending attitude or morbid curiosity so often found in documentary photography, Sheikh remains outside. He imposes nothing on the viewer and introduces none of the sentimental or redeeming attributes that could detract from his work's authenticity. His sitters are shown in close proximity, resigned, immersed in the misfortunes they are forced to live, but without any display of suffering. The pictures have an absolute emotional intensity that fills up every centimetre of the paper, generating a unique density. The texts reinforce the images, the contrast between pain and beauty, and the serenity they evoke. For Fazal Sheikh is the artist, but his art has no pretensions. It is devoid of gesture, giving those portrayed the chance to speak in a polyphonic whole in which each whispers an individual pain that we can all but physically feel.

There is an extraordinary sequence of pictures taken by Sheikh in an Afghan refugee camp, in which some of the people photographed are, in turn, holding photos of a murdered son or brother. Their words are passionate, but the memory is frail: what is remembered is saved from the void, what is forgotten is abandoned. Such a photo is the link between Qurban Gul and her son [p. 129], the only

connection between death and survivors, in the same way that the picture taken by Fazal Sheikh links us to them in their feelings of emptiness and solitude. These pictures produce a melancholy tale—though by no means an epic—on uprooting, despair and death. When it is all over, the photograph remains, like a relic, preserving it through all eternity.

Sheikh's photographs do not depict blood or tears; who wants to have their miseries proclaimed? Moreover, such dramatism might make us turn our heads away and prevent us from discovering the facts. Some of the photos remind me of paintings of Baroque saints, rejoicing in their martyrdom, where nothing can perturb their impassive beatitude, their supreme humility. The photos of the dispossessed widows of Vrindavan, their sweet exhaustion and the delicately serene light in which they are depicted, leads my thoughts to the "soft whiteness" which St Teresa spoke of in her visions. After years of sacrifice and privation, she gave herself up to God, as these women give themselves up to Krishna.

In Sheikh's first projects, the community was of particular importance. Since then, he has focused increasingly on the individual and, as in the photographs of *Moksha*, on its margins—details of streets, animals, fog or objects—all elements that help us to see, to understand. Overall, they seem to form a kind of novel where there are no longer any characters, but where these have transferred their spirits to things. The pictures of Vrindavan remind me of those of Atget, who demonstrated that photography can talk about facts and yet communicate emotions; his pictures, like Sheikh's, are no mere descriptions, but the expression of the author's own personality. They do not search for the most beautiful views, but seek to capture the identity of their subject matter, made beautiful by its setting, because the author recognises the nuance that gives it its value.

Fazal Sheikh does not himself practise any religion, and yet a spiritual dimension pervades his photographs. Despite substantial differences in the ideologies and cultures of the subjects he portrays, most of them do profess a faith. How else could these people survive, without a spirituality to transcend the impoverishment and humiliation of their existence? With one's sights set on Paradise, one's hopes pinned on a better and fairer world, it becomes possible to live in India or Afghanistan; and it is mystical ecstasy that can lead the Mujahedin to a life of death and destruction.

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A hundred years ago, other photographers saw the depiction of human drama as one of the roles of their art. Documentary photography arose from the fight for civil rights and the development of the welfare state. Jacob Riis used photographic images to denounce to the public authorities the conditions in which immigrants lived. As far back as 1890, he published a book with the revealing title *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. But Sheikh looks more in the direction of Lewis Hine, a trained sociologist who might be considered the founder of the genre. Hine saw photographs as social documents, testimonies designed to prick consciences and to prove that things had to change. His work was a historical landmark in turning reformist documentary into a form of artistic and political denunciation, as shown by the unaffected humanism of his pictures of Ellis Island, through which European immigrants entered New York in the early 20th century. This reformist photographic documentary, promoted by the State, culminated in the Thirties with the Farm Security Administration project, created to promote the agricultural economy of America's south-eastern states after

the Great Depression. Roy Stryker, who had the task of documenting its progress and convincingly exposing rural poverty, called on some of America's greatest contemporary photographers to help him in the task. These included Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn and Russell Lee. The project grew from a document of Depression hardship into an ambitious examination of American life. Despite their tough living conditions, the people were portrayed with both sympathy and dignity. The same humanism would also triumph in illustrated magazines in the years to come. The term "documentary photography," coined by Evans, was added to the dictionary of photography not so much as an artistic style, but more as an instrument of social reform.

Several decades earlier, Atget had already introduced a divide between photography as a document and authorial documentalism. An image creator who worked with material that others ignored, the French photographer was more humble in his intentions and not what we would call a portrait photographer. But whereas Atget documented his city poetically, August Sander did so objectively with German society of his day, creating an extraordinary social and human document, a translucently documentary work. His capacity to penetrate deep inside the private sphere enabled his images to reveal, in their own right, the story his subject was living, making any comment unnecessary.

We have returned to the original sources, to the artists who continue to exert a powerful influence on contemporary photography by creating a realism devoid of sentimentalism, which looks instead for a clear, dispassionate vision. All have left their mark on us, making us aware of a new way of understanding the world. The influence of both Evans and Sander was revealed in a major exhibition held at the Tate Modern and the Museum Ludwig a few years ago, which included Fazal Sheikh among the selected artists: *Cruel &*

Tender looked at a way of understanding photography that remained within the limits of the medium and placed the emphasis on pure description.

Yet although gazing directly through the lens and offering description in its purest form are guiding principles that link many artists in this tradition, they are not the most widespread approach to contemporary photography. Today, a more emphatic and visual style tends to keep its distance from reality. At times, the focus of attention is on narrative photography, dealing with topical issues like identity, solitude, the passage of time, the individual and his environment. Sheikh's interest is in human dramas that are little known. He is particularly attracted to those that enjoy no representation or consideration, and have no opportunity to express their opinions; hence the significance of his work. At the same time, he clearly moves away from more traditional photojournalism, which defines an idea and argues its case so well that the viewer cannot help but reach the same conclusions. Sheikh hides nothing, but leaves his photographs—and therefore his viewers—greater freedom. This is one of the aspects from which his work draws its strength and which gives it its veracity: he does not magnify human pain or force the observer to arrive at specific conclusions; there is always room for reflection.

Fazal Sheikh does not define. He shows and asks: he offers a conversation. He seeks to render reality visible, to stab our consciences and, where possible, to improve the futures of the people he portrays. His work is an exercise in the recovery of humanity's collective memory, the evocation of the experience of exile and suffering. It is a verbal story told with images which actively rebels against those who try to turn over the page and forget.