Haunting Yet Haunted: A Visual Analysis of the Afghan Girl

The June 1985 cover of National Geographic depicted a young Afghan girl with beautifully haunting green eyes during a time when turmoil rocked the Middle East. During the 1980s, Afghanistan was in a constant state of chaos. In April 1978, an Afghan coup brought a Marxist regime to power in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. A little over a year later, on Christmas Eve December 1979, Soviet troops began the invasion of Afghanistan (Denker). With this invasion came the deaths of thousands of Afghan civilians. It caused entire villages and their crops to be destroyed, leaving nothing for people still living to survive on (Denker). Throughout the war-torn country, people were forced to move out of their homes and seek refuge in Pakistan. The Afghans traveled at night because it was too dangerous to be outside during the day. They lived in constant fear of Soviet bombs; they could find no rest.

When National Geographic photographer Steve McCurry and author Debra Denker arrived in Afghanistan in the early summer of 1984, they were given a tour of Afghanistan’s “war-torn frontier.” During their stay, they came across many refugee camps scattered along the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. One particular refugee camp harbored a twelve or thirteen year old girl—later known to the world as “the Afghan Girl”—whose eyes were destined to become the symbol of the Muslim world.

After a Soviet bombing killed Sharbat Gula’s parents when she was six, her grandmother led her and her siblings on foot to a refugee camp in Pakistan during the dead of winter. They hid in caves during the day and begged for spare blankets for some respite from the harsh winter cold (Newman). Gula had been living in this particular refugee camp for about seven years before National Geographic made its appearance. McCurry was mesmerized by Gula’s bright eyes, despite her haggard appearance. It took
him days of coaxing to finally convince the shy, wary Gula to allow him to take her photograph.

According to Muslim tradition, a woman cannot tell a stranger her name or look him in the eye, making it difficult to find photographs of women during this time. Gula, however, looked straight into the camera, showing her blatant defiance.

McCurry took pains to ensure that the viewer could see the innocence and youth that Gula managed to salvage from her meager childhood even though she had already lived a hard life by the time her picture was taken. This is evidenced by her untrusting, watchful, and vigilant eyes. McCurry set up the picture to be taken with a green building as the backdrop. Coincidentally yet fortuitously, the green of the backdrop almost perfectly matches the outlying green of Gula’s eyes. The effect of the background combined with the contrasting red burka, compliments Gula’s green eyes, making them pop, causing the viewer to be drawn immediately to her piercing stare. Lacking the props that photographers have readily available in the Western world, McCurry uses Gula’s own tattered and burned red burqa to frame her face, drawing even more attention to her face and eyes. Adding to the overall effect, McCurry chose to take the picture in a soft, low light area, which makes Gula’s eyes seem even brighter, more vibrant, and vivacious than before. However, the wrinkles and burns on the burka that McCurry tries to hide belie that difficult life that Gula has lived.

When analyzing the picture, Gula does not seem like a typical thirteen-year-old-girl; the fear in her eyes offsets the youth of her face. She has seen more in her thirteen years of life than most people will in their lifetimes. However, the fear manifested in her eyes is still laced with defiance. Gula is part of the Pashtun tribe, one of the most fierce, warlike Afghan tribes. According to National Geographic, “[the
Pashtun are only at peace when they are at war” (Newman). This explains why the eyes of a thirteen-year-old girl, so wrought with fear and anger, also express quiet defiance and inner strength. However, one can only handle so much war and strife as proven by the subsequent photograph of Gula. The second photograph suggests that in the end, life wins.

Seventeen years after the 1985 cover of National Geographic became famous, McCurry, along with National Geographic Television and Film EXPLORER, returned to Afghanistan to find out what had happened to Gula in the years since the original picture was taken. Armed with only the photograph of the young Gula, McCurry scoured Afghanistan and Pakistan in search of “the Afghan Girl.” He eventually returned to the site of the original picture, only to find that the refugee camp where he took the photograph had been destroyed (Braun). Undeterred, McCurry continued his search in the Middle East. He had many false leads before a tip eventually led him to Gula’s brother. Although he was suspicious at first, after seeing his matching eyes, McCurry could not deny that Kashar Khan was in fact Gula’s brother. Gula’s brother helped McCurry gain permission from Gula’s husband in order to interview her, and set it up (Braun). After seventeen years, the world was about to learn what had become of her.

At the time of the second interview and photograph, Gula was between 28 and 30 years old although no one, not even she, was positive. About three years after the original photograph was taken, Gula married Rahmat Gul in a marriage that had been arranged since an early age (Newman). She had already given birth to four daughters but her most recent had died in infancy. Although her husband worked in a bakery, the majority of his money went into a fund that pays for the medical bills accumulated over the years for Gula’s asthma. According to her brother, Gula had not known many happy
days. (Newman). This sentiment manifests itself in the second photograph, in which McCurry highlights Gula’s life-worn face.

In the second photo, McCurry could do nothing to mask the fact that Gula had succumbed to her life circumstances; her eyes are lifeless. McCurry capitalizes on this by focusing on dark colors. Although her face still stands out, Gula appears to blend in and become one with the background because her burqa and the background are so similar in hue. The background, which is slightly darker than Gula’s already dark purple burqa, makes her eyes seem even duller and darker than they actually are. In addition, unlike the first picture, Gula’s burqa falls straight down. It hangs limp with no character or life of its own which serves to enhance the idea that Gula has resigned herself to life that she currently leads. The dark colors also serve to make her appear older and more refined whereas the red burqa in the first picture reminds the viewer that Gula is in fact still a child. The contrast between the before and after photos is so striking, not only because of the vast difference in appearance after such a short period, but also because we were rooting for her future and she lost.

In the second picture, Gula’s eyes seem faded and dull, especially compared to her eyes in the first picture. The fire that shone so brightly in the first photograph has almost completely burned out, replaced by somber resignation as if she has accepted her fate in life. The life and future that the viewer sees for Gula in the former photograph has disappeared in the latter. We no longer believe that her inner child is still lurking somewhere behind the hard, worn-down façade.

Neither McCurry nor Gula knew that the photo of the unsmiling face of the unidentified young Afghan girl with the beautifully haunting, green eyes would eventually become famous. The photograph
that graced the June 1985 cover of *National Geographic* quickly changed from a simple, impulsive picture in a refugee camp of Pakistan to becoming one of the most discussed and most inspiring images in the world. Gula’s piercing glare, both breathtakingly beautiful yet heartbreakingly haunting, captivated and challenged the world. Her scrutiny, combined with her aura of youthful innocence yet inner strength, worked together to create an image of resilience. The young Pashtun girl who survived the hardships of life in Afghanistan during the war with the USSR has become a symbol of strength and beauty that will be forever remembered as the girl the world loved but did not know. These two photographs, the first symbolic of strength and resilience, the second of reality, are perfect metaphors of life. No matter how hard we try to avoid it, the hand we are dealt is the hand we must play, and sometimes it is a losing hand.

These images embody not only defiance, resilience, and beauty but also the tragedy that befalls people living in war-ravaged regions. They are a visual representation that life is not always easy. Despite that, the striking eyes of Sharbat Gula in the photograph taken by McCurry in 1984, captivated the hearts of millions across the world and inspired the world to aid the refugee effort in Afghanistan.
Works Cited


