

Softening the Steel in
My Spine

by

Laila Ghaffar

I feel angry all the time. My aunt once told me that adversity puts the steel in your spine. I always thought that meant that over time I would become serene and impervious to pain. But I was wrong. My anger is a smouldering steel rod lodged firmly inside me. It pins me down to the ground. For months the world has been watching aghast as Israel commits a bloodcurdling genocide in Gaza. Yesterday, I turned on the television and I saw a woman fall to the ground as she was told the news of her child's death. He was killed in an Israeli air strike, and she was denied the right to hold her dead child. Today, at a London street fair surrounded by candy-floss, candied apples and ferris wheels, I had a fight with a political candidate standing to be the member of parliament in my neighbourhood. He told me that genocide in Gaza was too complicated to debate, and that I did not understand world politics. I could not summon the will to continue the fight. Instead, I could feel the red hot steel rod burn my insides. I wanted to curl up on the ground and let the pain rage through my body. This is not an essay about perseverance or courage. Crucial as these are to our existence, this essay is about imagining ways to continue living beyond resistance. How do we continue to approach life, as something soft and precious, with steel in our spines?

A Canvas for Truth

I will always be impressed and mortified by Pakistan's hypocrisy. To condemn Israel for the inhumanity against Palestinians - *members of our Muslim*

ummah! - at the same time as mercilessly rounding up and deporting Pakistan born Afghans by the millions. Is this solidarity? Recently, I came across photographs of Afghan 'war carpets' online. They are traditional carpets woven by Afghan women in symmetrical patterns typically associated with Islamic art. But rather than the traditional imagery of flowers, trees or birds, these carpets depict tanks and snipers and bombs. They narrate the story of Afghanistan over the last four decades, including key events such as the defeat of the Soviets at the hands of the Afghan guerillas or the disastrous consequences in the aftermath of 9/11. Carpets are curious canvases for resistance because they are not intended to enter the public realm. They are intended for our most private and intimate space: the home. So why then, do Afghan women living in refugee camps in Pakistan bother with such a pursuit? What would drive anybody to choose to depict such horror without the express intention of condemning the violence to the wider world? What use are these war carpets, if not as expressions of resistance?

Brian Spooner, a professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania claims it is difficult to know whether these carpets are 'pro-war art, protest art or simply a money-making answer to a new consumer demand'. But what if Afghan women's reasons for making these carpets fall out of these categories? The very act of making art is to thread yourself in the ever unfolding and expanding tapestry of human life. When your existence is denied by states and

leaders and governing bodies, the only avenues for self-realisation are those of human expression.

When I look at these carpets, I do not see protest art, I see a deeply intimate piece of archival history. Time and time again, Afghan women have been stripped of their agency, portrayed as helpless and begging to be liberated. These war carpets transform Afghan women from victims to active participants in recording their country's cultural, political and social landscape. Afghan women are resilient, but the act of carpet weaving does not stand in protest to the merciless acts that USA, Britain or Pakistan have committed against Afghanistan. Instead, these carpets turn inward and speak directly to Afghans themselves; they stand as testament to what they have witnessed. The carpets are a mirror that Afghan craftswomen may hold up to their own country and people as if to say: *This is our history, this is now part of who we are.* To understand and negotiate with the past through the medium of indigenous craft is a powerful method of recognition. These war carpets are testament to a fundamental tenet of human life: however painful it may be, freedom is always found in the truth.

Archiving the Self

In my family too, I see archiving as a process of testimony. My grandmother had died long before she passed away. In her seventies, an irrevocable change came

over her. She had lost interest in the very things that had once brought her joy: her garden, her home, her community.

After my grandmother's death, my aunt found a shawl amongst her possessions. It is turquoise with gold embroidery and in the folds, she found a card addressed to me. On the card my grandmother had meticulously recorded her acquisition of the shawl and all the places she had worn it. She had also written down where I could find photos of her wearing it. It soothes me to know that even in her darkest moments, when she was completely lost to herself, my grandmother had the urge to record her life wherever possible. She could not fight her depression, but she still wanted to pass a bit of herself and her past through this turquoise shawl to me.

My grandmother obsessively collected objects to map the course of her life. Some of it, like the shawl, is precious. But a lot of it is not: salt shakers filched from aeroplanes, napkins from restaurants, unopened boxes of beautiful marzipan gifted by family members. She did not discriminate between them, these possessions were all treasured because they were entangled with a specific memory or with a person. I ask myself, can I reframe her impulse to hoard as something more deliberate and intentional?

They say that the material is fleeting, and we should seek experience to make our lives richer. But when my grandmother's experience of life was all but a void, her material objects were testament to who she had been. They were evidence of a life much bigger than the one she finally felt resigned to. As I said, she died before she died. I think I finally understand why she guarded her possessions with such ferocity: they were her legacy. It takes something beyond courage to assemble one's possessions, and apportion parts of yourself to your loved ones: *you take this shawl because I want you to understand who I was.*

On her coffin lay dozens of deep red velvety roses. I plucked three: one for each of my grandmother's granddaughters. We each pressed them in heavy books to keep forever, a practice my grandmother herself had instilled in us from childhood. I could not fight against the pain of her death, but the dried rose, less velvety now but still beautiful, is a record of her imprint on me.

What's in a Name?

A child of Bollywood, I always thought I would fall in love with somebody who would lay down his life for me. I thought to love was to rebel against your family and walk through fire together. I envisaged my lover like Shahrukh Khan, arms outstretched, us against the world. Even though I was raised in the UK, I never really believed I would find love in London. Lahore, where my mother's

family lives, set my imagination on fire; colours appeared richer and time unfolded in strange ways. A lot has been written in critique against the diaspora writer's obsession with the mundane of the home country. A lot of it is justified. But growing up, I genuinely believed that Lahore could hold me in ways that London never could.

In spite of that, as my political consciousness developed, I became uneasy in Lahore. Things which I could overlook with the rose tinted glasses of childhood suddenly came into sharp focus: the religious persecution of minorities, the lack of gender rights, the crumbling public services and the sheer scale of the unfolding climate catastrophe. Yet, I could not find relief in London. Brexit and over a decade of an intolerant Conservative government has rendered the social and political landscape completely hostile to anyone who looked 'a bit foreign' (read: anyone who is not white). I started to seriously question who would walk through fire with me. In London, I would open my dating apps to messages like *will you be my caramel Goddess?* In Lahore, I would meet boys who did not relate to me as their intellectual equal and questioned my basic rights. My loneliness made me resentful and I carried rage close to my heart.

When I did fall in love, he did not save me. But he did teach me that love need not be a struggle, it can be something quiet and gentle. My boyfriend and I were raised from different cultural scripts. He knows where Pakistan is, but not

much beyond that. While I watched Bollywood films, he watched *Lord of the Rings*. I loved daal and he loved beans on toast. My family love fiery, tense debates and his family love board games.

Early on in our relationship, he noticed that my family pronounce my name differently to the British way of pronouncing it and started to copy them. It is difficult to re-train one's tongue. I would wince throughout the weeks that he would stumble through the pronunciation of my name, elongating the wrong vowel sound and placing intonation on the wrong consonant. I pleaded with him to halt his efforts. I felt my language and name was inconveniencing him.

When he finally mastered it, I asked him why he had bothered when so many have never noticed or never cared to amend their pronunciation of my name. He replied: *how could I say I loved you otherwise?* Although he may not walk through fire with me, this one small act of care settled something within me. When he says my name, a boy who has no connection to Pakistan or Urdu, he is addressing me in the most intimate way possible. He has taught me that your love does not need to be an arena for struggle, as Bollywood had me believe. It can be as simple as pronouncing your lover's name correctly, for acknowledging them for who they are. There may well be more profound ways of expressing love, but I did not expect to feel so deeply sustained by this one.

Landing Softly

Wherever I turn it seems like life is being stifled. I wonder how much more we can collectively withstand. My mother always asks, *what are we supposed to do now?* I do not know the answer but I do know that I cannot continue living with steel in my spine. In this essay I have tried to explore other methods of care, the abstract and ambiguous ways of loving and protecting. I refuse to cast these methods as resistance or struggle, because I am pointing to something more tender. One day we will have the language to understand, but for now let me end with this: we need something softer and sweeter than steel running through our spines.

Copyright © Laila Ghaffar 2024. All rights reserved.