

Addressing Taboos Through Afghan Poetry

Objective:

You will be able to...

- Identify the central themes and purpose of landais as presented in diverse media in order to create landais that address taboos facing your own communities

Warm-up:

1. What images come to mind when you think of Afghanistan? Draw or write them down. Don't worry about writing full sentences; instead, think about nouns, adjectives, impressions.
2. Consider the source of these associations. Where have you heard about Afghanistan before? Whose perspective of Afghanistan have you engaged with? (Consider: Where are the creators of that information from? What is their job? Why are they interested in Afghanistan?) Discuss as a class.
3. Look at the pictures on your other handout. They were taken by Seamus Murphy while reporting from Afghanistan 1994-2012. Choose one photo and consider the following:

<p>1. What do you see? Write a description of the photo. Avoid making assumptions about what the purpose of something is or what it means.</p>	
<p>2. What do you think? Write a thought bubble for the person in the photo. What is she doing? What is she thinking? What is she feeling?</p>	
<p>3. What do you wonder? Write a series of questions that you could ask this person to find out more about their life. If you could interview the person in the photo you selected, what would you ask?</p>	

Background:

In this lesson, we will explore landai poetry and find out more about the women who create them. In the process, we will challenge our own ideas about Afghanistan and its people and consider the ways in which we can use this artform to open dialogues about important issues in our own communities.

A landai is a two-line poem that usually centers on a subject that is dangerous or uncomfortable for people to talk about, whether political or personal. They are authored by Pashtun women in Afghanistan and Pakistan and are circulated anonymously through oral tradition. The literal translation of the Pashto word landai, “a short, poisonous snake,” can be interpreted in two ways: the poems are weapons in the fight against oppression, and can also be lethal for women discovered reciting them.

Introducing the Reporting:

Resource 1: “Why Afghan Women Risk Death to Write Poetry”

Read Eliza Griswold’s story from the *New York Times*.

Write down your answers to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. How do the images you initially associated with Afghanistan compare with the images you saw in the warm-up activity and the subjects portrayed in Griswold’s story?
2. How does the thought bubble you wrote from your chosen photo’s perspective compare with the perspectives expressed in the interviews and poems from Afghan women in Griswold’s story?
3. Has Griswold’s story answered any of your questions for the subject of your photo?

Resource 2: “Snake: A Film by Seamus Murphy”

On your computer or phone, watch “Snake: A Film by Seamus Murphy” or read the paper compilation of landais from *Poetry Magazine*.

1. While you watch or read, identify and write down the central subject of each landai.
2. Choose one landai that stands out to you. Write down your response to the following:
 - What is the central subject of the landai?
 - Why did you choose this landai?
 - What makes this a poem rather than a simple statement?
 - How does the poem make you feel?

- What language does the author use that makes you feel that way? (Try to identify specific words, sentence structures, poetic devices.)

Reflection:

Write down your answers to the following questions on the same sheet of paper.

1. When a practice or topic of discussion is taboo, it is forbidden because it violates the norms of morality and/or taste.
2. According to the poems, what subjects are taboo for Afghan women? Which subjects are taboo in your community? Which do people talk about openly?
3. Consider the following passage from Griswold's article:

“A poem is a sword,’ Saheera Sharif, Mirman Baheer’s founder, said. Sharif is not a poet but a member of Parliament from the province of Khost. Literature, she says, is a more effective battle for women’s rights than shouting at political rallies. “This is a different kind of struggle.”

Why do you think Afghan women have chosen the medium of poetry to engage in this struggle?

4. What do you think the purpose of the landais is, and how effective are they in achieving that purpose?
5. How does Griswold integrate the landais into her reporting?
6. In what ways are journalism and poetry similar? In what ways are they different?

Activity:

1. Individually, create a list of taboo subjects in your community.
2. Compare your list of taboos to the subjects of the landais read aloud in “Snake.” What similarities and differences do you see?
3. Choose one item from your list that is especially meaningful to you, and answer the following questions about it:
 - In what community is this subject taboo? (your family, your religious group, your town, the world over, etc.)
 - Why do you think this subject is taboo?
 - Who has established it as taboo?
 - Do you agree that people shouldn’t talk about this subject? Why or why not?
 - What would happen if you did talk openly about this subject?

4. Write a landai that expresses your opinion/feelings/experiences related to this subject. Be as direct and honest as you can be; your work will be shared with the class, but only anonymously. Be intentional in your use of language. Consider: How does this subject make you feel? How can you convey that feeling to your reader? When you are finished, fold your paper in half and give it to your teacher. (You can write more than one, time permitting.)

Extension Activity:

Option 1: Local investigation

1. Identify a person breaking the silence surrounding a taboo subject in your community. This could be a poet, an artist, a journalist, a human rights advocate, etc.
2. Interview them about their work, or conduct research on your own. What issue have they chosen to address? Why do they think addressing this issue is important? Why have they chosen their particular medium to address it? What pushback/dangers do they experience in their work?
3. Write a short article about this person and your experience of meeting them, similar to Eliza Griswold's section on meeting Meena. If possible, incorporate that person's work as well as their interview into your article.
4. Send your finished piece to education@pulitzercenter.org for the chance to publish it on the Pulitzer Center's website.

Option 2:

1. Write 2-4 more landais like you did above.
2. Select images that connect to the themes of your text and/or audio recording of your landais, like in Seamus Murphy's "Snake." Use the images to create a visual presentation to accompany your 3-5 landais. You could use your landais as photo captions, create a video or multimedia presentation, make a collage, experiment with tape transfer—put your creativity to work!
3. Present your final project to the class, then send it to education@pultizercenter.org for the chance to have it published on the Pulitzer Center website.