

‘Artivism’ in Afghanistan: Can it Survive the War?

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Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan is termed to be one of the ugliest cities in the world. This a rather tone-deaf statement, but as a city at war, Kabul is lined with dozens of concrete blast walls. Houses of powerful people, government buildings and embassies are lined with double rows of these concrete walls (Newsela | *Afghani Artist Puts Beautiful Images on Kabul's Ugly Walls of War*, n.d.). This represents the divide in Afghanistan. Inside the walls, you are safe, but only if you are important to the Taliban – the terrorist group that has been ‘ruling’ Afghanistan for decades. Outside the walls, you are susceptible to all kinds of danger. Daily, the people of Afghanistan face suicide and car bombers and other extremist attacks. They are vulnerable to such danger by simply stepping out of their houses. While these walls are a visual representation of the class divide, they have also provided a canvas for artists to challenge the Taliban’s views. In 2014, a group of activists called the Art Lords emerged. Their work is



centred around their campaign for peace and social transformation. The Art Lords paint murals on walls in Kabul that were damaged during bomb blasts in Kabul. They turn bleak corners affected by the war into colourful and vibrant places that promote peace and encourage a democratic future for their country. Their first mural, "I See You" (2015), focused on the high levels of corruption and the various issues facing Afghanistan. Their work immediately caught the eye of various international news outlets, and it brought to attention the state their country was in (Walla, 2020).

Human rights, especially the rights of women and girls are severely compromised under the Taliban's rule. Women under the rule of the Taliban, are treated merely as commodities. An estimated number of 850,000 girls in Afghanistan are at risk of child marriage, and economic and sexual exploitation (OHCHR, n.d.).

This is exactly why pieces by fearless female artists like Shamsia Hassani must be discussed. Her work brings to light how women in her country are dehumanized and disregarded, despite being women of the 21st century. In a country that erases



women, her work inspires thousands of women to stand up against the Taliban. The graffiti she paints around Kabul focuses on highlighting the serious tragedy women face in Afghanistan. Through her Dreaming Graffiti series (2013-), Hassani depicts Afghan women as strong, brave and rebellious.

The work that activists in Afghanistan perform is extremely meaningful for the people there. It helps them maintain a sense of normalcy, express their pain through art and most importantly, ignites hope for a future of peace despite the bleak situation. However, the ground reality does remain that while pieces of street art like Shamsia Hassani's "Dreaming Graffiti" (2013) or the mural "I See You" (2015) by the Art Lords do not change the Taliban's mindset, they do help heal the people of Afghanistan and spread awareness. Building awareness beyond the country's borders is crucial to shed light on the Taliban's daily violation of human rights.

I aim to prove the relevance and impact of activism by analyzing the work of the Art Lords and Shamsia Hassani. I sectioned every argument to elaborate on the

selected activists' local and international impact, as well as how they function after the Taliban resurfaced in 2021, and what makes their work and presence critical to keep spreading education about the human rights crisis in Afghanistan. Although it is uncertain how activists can continue to make and publicize art despite the harsh rule of the Taliban, art continues to be a source of hope and serenity in turbulent Afghanistan.

Historical background – The Taliban and the US involvement in the War in Afghanistan (2001-2021)

The Taliban first gained control over most parts of Afghanistan in 1996, overthrowing the government. The United States briefly intervened in 2001, taking control of Afghanistan until 2021, when they withdrew. The departure of the US troops gave the Taliban an opening to take control of Afghanistan once again. Eventually, in September 2021, less than a month after the US troops left Afghan land, the Taliban had full control of the country and its governance. The Taliban is known for their extremist interpretation of Islamic Law and its harsh implementation.

The Islamic Law, called the Sharia, is fully and strictly administered throughout the Taliban's regime. There has always existed a history of debate surrounding Sharia law and its various interpretations. However, under the veil of creating a country of 'lawabiding' citizens, the Taliban has declared violent crimes such as public executions, stoning, flogging and amputations to be part of their judicial system. Clearly, this indicates a severe human rights crisis. According to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Afghans are trapped in a human rights crisis that the world seems powerless to address (OHCHR, n.d.). The crisis particularly affects women, who are barred from attending school or university; they cannot work, nor can they live a life of freedom and fulfilment. The Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. In 2001, the Taliban was overthrown when the US troops entered Afghanistan.

The US government spent nearly \$145 billion trying to rebuild the Afghan economy. The US government also hoped that, through this investment, it would be able to eliminate the Al-Qaeda and Taliban regimes. While the costs invested into bettering the situation in Afghanistan served a significant level of change –

especially in the areas of health care, maternal health and education, it was not enough (*What We Need to Learn: Lessons From Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, n.d.). Afghanistan and its people had suffered a great deal of trauma, and earning their trust was difficult. Further, the US government itself was overwhelmed with the task of quite literally, rebuilding a country. Eventually, due to the loss of life of both Afghan civilians and US troops, the US military withdrew in August 2021, without leaving a residual force. Afghanistan once again slipped into the power of the Taliban and faces yet another human rights crisis. Afghanistan has been in this war-like state for over 21 years, yet the lack of awareness regarding the actuality of the situation there is alarming.

Literature Review

In this paper, I aim to prove the importance and relevance of Activism in a country severely impacted by years of war. To do so, it is important to understand who these activists are, and how their personal experiences during the war impacted their work. Hence, it is crucial to my argument to utilize sources that directly quote the ideas of the activists. I heavily utilized information directly from

the artists' websites. Since both the artists I discuss were street artists initially, their websites were relatively new. Nevertheless, they provided a synthesized review of all their work and the ideas behind them. Shamsia Hassani's website (*Shamsia Hassani - Official Website*, n.d.) provided short explanations of the artist's inspiration behind each of her pieces, making it incredibly useful to my in-depth analysis of the message behind her artwork. To better understand the artists whose work I examined, I needed to read about their experiences under the Taliban. Personal and one-to-one interviews I found through research greatly aided me in better understanding the circumstances that took them toward the path of Activism. Pabón-Colón's interview with Shamsia Hassani proved to be extremely helpful in aiding and abetting my arguments regarding the intent behind her art. It also provided a window into her thoughts and fears about being a female artist under the Taliban rule, which is crucial to the scope of my paper and helped examine the extent to which freedom of expression has been curbed in Afghanistan. Similarly, a first-hand collection of experiences shared by Kabir Mokamel (*Newsela / Afghani Artist Puts Beautiful Images on Kabul's Ugly Walls of*

War, n.d.) aided in understanding and elaborating an argument on the vitality Activism holds in healing the people of Afghanistan. The overlapping themes of personal anecdotes provided by the artists' websites as well as interviews helped me highlight the relevance of their work.

I also analyzed specific pieces of art by these selected artists to convey the essence of the artistic movement in Afghanistan. With the help of the Art Lords website (*Art Lords*, n.d.), I was able to examine their pieces *I See You* (2015) and *I will build my homeland* (2021). These two distinct pieces helped visualize the shift in their work during the Taliban reclamation of Afghan land. Hassani's website (*Shamsia Hassani - Official Website*, n.d.) also helped observe how her "Dreaming Graffiti" (2013-) series evolved and was kept alive despite not continuing as a form of street art. Later, I utilized her Facebook post from 2021 (Hassani, S. 2021, Facebook) to examine one of her paintings, *Nightmare* (2021), which expresses her outrage towards the new Taliban mandates banning women from schools and universities. The impact this piece had helped me tie back to my main argument regarding awareness and education about

the human rights crisis in Afghanistan.

For a broader perspective and a basis for an introduction to the paper, I utilized an academic paper by Eleni Zaras (*Art Lords: Effecting Peace Through Art In - ProQuest*, n.d.) on the Art Lords. It provided me with background information to frame an introduction to. Build on the later argument as to why Art Lords are at the helm of Artivism in Afghanistan. I also utilized statistics from the Human Rights Council in Afghanistan (OHCHR, n.d.), to reason why female activists like Shamsia Hassani are so keen on highlighting the lack of women's rights in Afghanistan. For building on a more holistic introduction as to how and why Afghanistan ended up in a severe human rights crisis, I made use of the article *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*. It elaborated on the slow recovery of the Afghan economy under the U.S. regime and how their efforts were not sufficient, leading to the eventual slippage of Afghanistan back into the hands of the Taliban. It was important to examine this shift of power to understand how it affected the Art Lords and Hassani's work in Afghanistan.

The Art Lords, their work and purpose

"Afghanistan is known for its 'druglords' and 'warlords', but we wanted to reclaim the term through our organization's name – 'Art Lords'." – Kabir Mokamel (Newsela | Afghani Artist Puts Beautiful Images on Kabul's Ugly Walls of War, n.d.)

The Art Lords are a society of artists, brought together by two Afghan men – Kabir Mokamel and Omaid Sharifi. They aim at spreading awareness, healing, and togetherness through their murals across Afghanistan. The Art Lords started working in 2014, and since then, they have brightened up corners of Kabul with their work. The Art Lords work on concrete walls, which are meant to protect civilians from bombing. They turn the bleak greyness of the walls into colourful murals, all while encapsulating the message of peace and prosperity as an important piece of their country's future. For Mokamel, the artwork he makes acts as a healing mechanism. He remembers an incident from when he was just 10 years old. His father had rushed to his school to pick him up because the war in Afghanistan had started. He remembers hearing explosions, fighter jets and machine guns when he reached

home. These memories haunted him and marked the start of a new normal for all Afghan people. Children would now hear explosions daily. Years later, Mokamel painted a mural illustrating what he felt that day (*Newsela | Afghani Artist Puts Beautiful Images on Kabul's Ugly Walls of War*, n.d.).



Figure 1 'I See You' (2015)

The Art Lords aim to further the message of peace through expression in the arts. They desire to provide a platform to implement social and behavioural change among the people of Afghanistan. Their artwork highlights and illustrates their collective desire as a community to move away from a perpetual state of violence and war. Through their artwork, the Art Lords aim to generate dialogue and initiate discussion among Afghan citizens and the international world alike, regarding the cruel and unfair situation the country and its people have been subjected to. Their series of murals is painted

on blast walls, typically near government ministries and focus on anti-corruption. One of their very first pieces was a mural titled 'I See You' (2015) (*Art Lords*, n.d.). The mural is an illustration of two huge eyes, depicting that the Afghan civilians see and notice the corrupt act of their so-called, political leaders. This mural, like most of their pieces of art, was painted on a concrete wall outside a government ministry. While these concrete walls are meant to protect all Afghan citizens from bombings, several government ministries and houses of people of supposed importance to the Taliban are lined with two rows of such concrete walls.

This demonstrates that the Taliban are ever ready to protect those whom they want to, while civilians are subjected to constant violence. Civilian casualties hit an all-time high in 2021, signifying that neither the Taliban nor the US troops cared about a commoner's right to safety in their own country. The mural is a pivotal piece of activism for contemporary Afghanistan since it characterized the dawn of activism in Afghanistan. It symbolized the start of peaceful activism through art in a country of war. 'I See You' (2015) represented that the civilians of Afghanistan were ready to stand up for their right to live a

peaceful and secure life.

The Art Lords, hence, succeed in their aim to change the negative psychological impact of the constant terrorizing environment created by the Taliban into a positive visual impact for the citizens of Afghanistan. Their work also serves as a means for Afghan people to express and emote their trauma and understand that what they as a community have been through is in no way justified. At a local level, the impact the Art Lords have on the people of Afghanistan is phenomenal. They regularly hosted group art therapy sessions, music sessions and worked with their community to paint their murals. By working on art together as a community, the Art Lords not only help themselves heal but also heal the people they involve in the process of making their art. They prove to be a ray of hope and quite literally paint a picture of a peaceful future for the people of Afghanistan. In January 2020, Sharifi and Mokamel appeared at the US Institute of Peace (USIP) in Washington to share their art and the vision behind it (*Art Lords: Effecting Peace Through Art In - ProQuest*, n.d.). They managed to garner extensive media coverage and gained a loyal community of supporters on an international level, and attended several events

such as the one in USIP. These events enable them to not only garner support but also gain diplomatic recognition. The group is now heavily funded by international donors.

The Art Lords Post the 2021 Taliban Reclamation of Power

Sadly, not much can be done to change the ground-level reality in Afghanistan. The Art Lords receive constant death threats due to the supposed “Anti-Muslim” messages they convey through their work. They are threatened with kidnapping, bomb attacks and harassment by the Taliban and their supporters. Three members of the Art Lords were brutally murdered by the Taliban in 2021. When the Taliban regained power in 2021, they made it their first order of control to destroy the murals painted by the Art Lords on the concrete walls and replace them with messages that furthered their propaganda. They burned down galleries owned by the Art Lords throughout all the provinces in the country. Many activists ended up destroying their own pieces of art to protect themselves from the Taliban. Sharifi describes this era of fear as a time when the activists lost their ‘human dignity as some of them fled and others were forced into hiding’ (*Art Lords*, n.d.).

Despite the hostile and challenging environment, the Art Lords had a firm belief in their cause and continued working. They brought art into a toxic environment. An environment characterized by hatred and anger, and through art, they changed that. The Taliban regaining power in 2021 and severely clamping down on civil freedom did not stop them. When the Taliban burnt their galleries down, they launched new ones and even built an arts-and-culture magazine featuring a wide range of outreach programs. The Art Lords launched the 'Let's Talk Afghanistan' campaign that empowered youth to come together and work towards a democratic, inclusive, and peaceful future for their country. Due to extremely violent conditions post the Taliban takeover, the Art Lords decided to expand their digital and global presence.

Their newest piece, *I will build my homeland* (2021), illustrates a young Afghan girl carrying the country (Art Lords, n.d.). The piece illustrates that even though many Afghans are leaving the country due to its extremely dangerous environment, they continue to take Afghanistan forward with them. Afghanistan is divided by red and bloody lines in the



Figure 2, *I will build my homeland* (2021)

painting, signifying that even when the country is fragmented and broken, Afghan refugees continue to hold and honour a piece of their country. It signifies that despite coming from a place of trauma, the new generation of Afghan refugees are brave and resilient, and now more than ever are well-equipped to educate others about the war in their country and take their country forward, onto the path of healing. Today, the Art Lords continue working from exile, and they continue to propagate their belief in the transformative power of art. They now focus on building a community of activists among Afghan refugees, across several countries, including the United States, Albania, and Italy.

Although the Art Lords now work from remote areas, the 2,000 murals they painted in over 20 Afghan districts have a lasting impact on the people of Afghanistan. The Art Lords sustain

an international impact and to date, send out ripples of inspiration to activists in Afghanistan and other South Asian countries. Indeed, the Art Lords managed to unite and led a group of forty-five youth artists from several South Asian countries and curated the region's first arts lab. Such initiatives brought forth by the Art Lords united communities, lessened regional disparities within Afghanistan and most importantly, spread awareness and educated the

international community about the ongoing human rights crisis in Afghanistan. Even after facing extreme difficulties in 2021, the Art Lords continue to share the untold stories of civil society through their murals. "Art Lords continues its global advocacy for Afghanistan's artists, activists, and cultural heritage. This is not the end of our story", Sharifi proclaimed in one of his newsletters, and rightly so (Art Lords, n.d.). Activism is flourishing in Afghanistan, and the Art Lords continue to be at the helm of the movement.



The Story of Women in Afghanistan – Through the Eyes of the activist Shamsia Hassaini

Shamsia Hassani is Afghanistan's first female graffiti artist. While the Afghan government and several of its rulers' view women in a different light, portraying them as people without a voice, Hassani aims to give women a voice through her art. When Afghanistan was under the Taliban rule before 2001, they had barred women and girls from schools, universities, and employment and even barred their presence in many public spaces. Women were systemically segregated from social life and were even made to always wear the Taliban-mandated burqa if they were to be in a public space. They could not even step out of their houses without a male relative, by blood, accompanying them. Failure to comply with these stringent laws would result in public execution or flogging.

When the US troops came to Afghanistan in 2001, laws that oppressed women were eradicated. Women's rights improved, but this did not mean that the trauma several women faced as a result of the Taliban regime disappeared. Women had been subjected to years of emotional and mental torture,

with several of them being married off at extremely young ages. Much like the Art Lords, Hassani aims to address the trauma women faced under the Taliban regime. She expresses her pain through art and, through that, represents the suffering of millions of Afghan women. Although her work encapsulates pain, it also displays elements of strength in times of adversity.

Hassani aims to empower women through her art. She started painting when Afghanistan was starting a new life, a new dawn, wherein women could dream and make their dreams come true. Hassani wants to cover all bad memories of the war with her graffiti. "I could say my words with shapes to people, easily; the image has more effect than words, and it's a friendly way to fight, as I am fighting, now, for women's rights as well with my art." Hassani states (Pabón-Colón, 2022). Hassani wants her art to remain on the streets so that the tragedy women who faced under the Taliban rule is not forgotten. However, she portrays them not as victims, but as warriors and survivors. She wants Afghan women to be known as the unspoken soldiers who, despite years of war and oppression, are now on the way to making a new life for themselves.

This is what inspired her to begin her series of street art, titled 'Dreaming Graffiti'(2013-). Most of her graffiti in this series contains an identical element, a young girl, whom Hassani refers to by her own first name, 'Shamsia' (A, Figure 3). Hassani, throughout this series, explains that little Shamsia, via her graffiti, walks through the streets of Kabul holding her piano.

to be painting out in the open. She would often be subjected to security breaches and constantly be under the supervision of local orthodox groups, who believed a woman should not be painting in the streets.

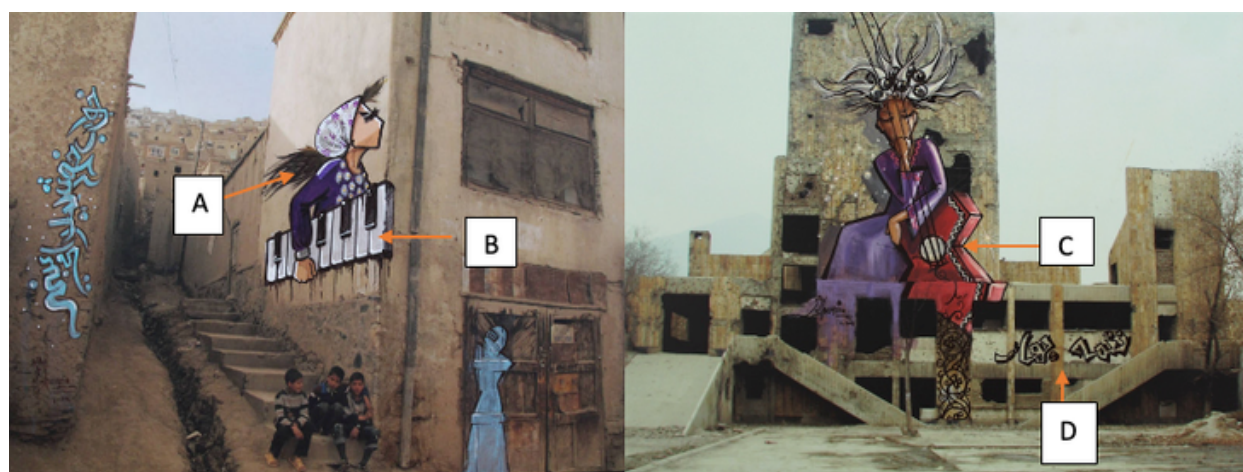


Figure 3, Dreaming Graffiti (2013 -)

The piano (B, Figure 3) illustrates the young girl's artistic dreams, which she would not have been able to pursue under the rule of the Taliban. Some of her pieces also include a guitar (C, Figure 3) and some alphabets (D, Figure 3), which she terms as symbols of positive change. Just like the young girl in the graffiti, it was Hassani's dream to paint the damaged walls of her beloved city, Kabul. She often mentioned how it would be difficult for her, as a woman and as a citizen of Kabul

Being a female activist in Afghanistan

When the Taliban took over in September 2021, Kabul was pushed into a state of chaos, and Hassani had to flee the country. Yet, she still believed she had the responsibility to take forward the message of the existence of dreams and aspirations in a country of war. She continued working on her "Dreaming Graffiti" (2013-) series but painted on the walls of Kabul in a rather

unique and innovative way. Right before she left Kabul, Hassani took pictures of walls and alleys she wished she had painted on earlier. She printed out these pictures on a large scale, continued sketching out little Shamsia and kept her series, *Dreaming Graffiti*, alive. She started circulating her pieces on the internet, and it surely helped her reach a wider audience. Hassani wants her country to be known as a country of healing and art, not a country of war (Pabón-Colón, 2022).



Figure 4, *Dreaming Graffiti*, A piece from exile.

Hassani's work has always directly challenged the beliefs of the Taliban since it portrays women as proud, loud, and a force to be reckoned with, unlike what the Taliban believe in. Her work has uplifted and inspired millions of women in Afghanistan. Hassani's work threatens the existing doctrine of rules set for women by the Taliban, making her a direct threat in their eyes. She portrayed women clad in burqas, and sometimes not in burqas, highlighting the necessity for

choice that needed to be given to a modern Muslim woman. While Hassani now works predominantly through a digital medium, her work used to once line the walls and alleys of Kabul. She used to finish her graffiti within the span of 15 minutes and immediately flee the spot, fearing an attack from the Taliban or other extremist groups that roamed the streets of Kabul at that time. One of her most famous pieces, titled "Secrets" (2016), used to be on a wall at the Darul Aman Palace in Kabul. It features a young burqa-clad woman seated on a stairway, with the caption "The water can come back to dried-up rivers, but what of the fish that died in the droughts?" (*Shamsia Hassani - Official Website*, n.d.). The caption signified the women lost, murdered, and brutalized during the years of war in Afghanistan. She claims that the trauma from the years of war is not merely forgotten, and the scars remain.



Figure 5, *Secrets* (2016)

On the other hand, she wants her country to flourish despite the severe blows it has suffered, and she wants the women of Afghanistan to be at the forefront of the new age of the country.

Hassani has always portrayed women in her art as dreamers, achievers, and vital contributors to society. Her work has gained international recognition, and through her work, she provides a platform to voice out the injustice Afghan women have faced. Being a lecturer at Kabul University herself, she values other women as equal patrons to the Afghan economy as men. Sadly, as of 2022, the Taliban is once again taken over the governance of Afghanistan, and even though they promised to value and respect the rights of women and girls this time, as of December 2022, female students are being turned away from universities and schools in Kabul (*Female Students Turned Away From Afghan Universities After Taliban Ban*, 2022). Expressing her pain and her solidarity with the women of Afghanistan, Hassani posted a new piece on Facebook, titled “Nightmare” (2021).

It depicts a young girl, a similar character she uses in all her pieces, hounded by a group of rather scary-looking men, who



Figure 6, *Nightmare* (2021)

The girl holds her piano in her hands, as she walks away in sadness from the Taliban. This highlights all the freedom women slowly gained after the Taliban left the country in 2001, was now lost.

Hassani continues to raise her voice through art and continues to question the Taliban’s decisions through her work. Women who have access to her art use it as a means of empowerment and a vision of hope. Her art portrays young girls in Afghanistan who continue to dream, despite all odds. Hassani has been able to publish her work in several international magazines and newspapers, and this has given her and the women of Afghanistan a voice. It emphasizes

the need for action needed in Afghanistan and the human rights crisis that falls upon the people of Afghanistan, for the second time in two decades.

Conclusion

Artivists in Afghanistan, as examined in the cases of the Art Lords and Shamsia Hassani, find it extremely difficult to function under the Taliban, who have newly reclaimed the power of governance of the country in 2021. But we find that despite the situation being against them and their work, they persist and continue to spread their message. The international traction these artivists bring with the help of their artwork, only helps spread the message of the human rights crisis the people of Afghanistan are now facing. To the artivists themselves, their work is a form of expression of their trauma and their experiences. They get to heal, and through the process, help those with whom they engage in their work heal, too. The people of Afghanistan finally get to find themselves within these pieces of activism.

To most Western media, the human rights crisis in Afghanistan is a mere passing headline. On the other hand, the artivists live through these experiences and

and can memorialize their experiences under the Taliban rule and constantly keep it alive through their artwork. Their work of Activism continues to be a reminder that the people of Afghanistan have been living in a warlike situation for over two decades and the fact that there has been little to no international support to aid them. Activism has no direct impact on changing the Taliban and its mandates.

Although artivists like Shamsia Hassani and the Art Lords are indeed doing far more for raising awareness about their country than any other national or international figure of power. It signifies that the citizens of Afghanistan are still fighting, in a peaceful and thought-provoking manner and are hoping to build a peaceful future for the newer generation of Afghans. They are willing to fight for a future of colourful walls, walls that share their country's stories. The artivists of Afghanistan have had enough of grey and plain concrete walls that merely protect the elite and hide their struggles from the international eye.