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My Share of the Sky: Review 1

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My Share of the Sky: Review 1

Abstract

My Share of the Sky speaks like a poem. A poem of love, of life, and of loss. It is a story of finding refuge and freedom in a foreign land and reconciling with the longing for loved ones back home. Presented as an audio diary, Sheida Jahanbin invites listeners into her world as she and her husband Madyar make a new life for themselves in Oslo, Norway as political refugees from Iran. The program presents a stream of live happening moments which intimately capture Sheida's life as it is unfolding. Juxtaposing the mundane and the terrifying, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the program gives full expression to the range of experiences of a refugee's life. There is the constant grappling with not only the simple and menial things such as a blocked drainpipe but the ongoing attachment to the politics back home and the loved ones who remain there. The program's fragmented structure gives expression to this tension by drawing on the range of experiences Sheida and Madyar have during their first months of settling into a new life. This acute insight into her own personal experience as a refugee, alongside her husband, is what makes this program both enthralling and harrowing. Produced by Sheida Jahanbin and Rikke Houd, *My Share of the Sky* secured third place in Prix Europa 2012.

Keywords

asylum seekers, refugees, documentary, Iran, Norway, audio diary

My Share of the Sky

Producers: Sheida Jahanbin and Rikke Houd, NRK (Norway 2011). 41.20mins.

Editing and sound: Rikke Houd. Mix and final Editing: Erki Halvorsen.

NRK consultant: Kjetil Saugestad. Norwegian voice: Annette Hobson. Translation: Eric Scobie.

Reviewer: Helene Thomas

The very first sound we hear in *My Share of the Sky* is a man clearing his throat. What unfolds from here is a fairly typical office interaction between strangers. The official asking for the usual information on newly arrived refugees such as date of birth, permit status, education background, and the spelling out and articulation of foreign names. That information is typed, as we hear, and entered into a computer system. It is on the whole an uneventful opening scene. But it is the routineness and unremarkableness of this scene that calls our attention to it and it contains what the listener needs to know to move into the story with narrator and audio diarist Sheida Jahanbin.

My Share of the Sky (produced by Sheida Jahanbin and Rikke Houd) presents as an audio diary as Sheida and her husband Madyar make a new life for themselves in Oslo, Norway as political refugees from Iran. Presented in the program is a series of encounters that Sheida (and sometimes Madyar) experience during their first months of starting a new life in a new country, learning a new language, surrounded by new people, and adjusting to the different customs and an extremely different climate to that of Iran. The use of Norwegian, English and Farsi (the program predominantly presented in Norwegian) reflects both the unifying and dividing forces in language and the enormous pressure placed on refugees to borrow and learn multiple languages in order to break down communication barriers.

Early in the program we learn that Sheida and Madyar fled Iran because of a blog they publish which reports on human rights violations in the country. They continue this work in Norway, and Madyar fastidiously monitors the blog to the point where he stresses his eye muscles from excessive computer work. We learn halfway through why the blog is so important to him. We also hear, very briefly, how the couple fled Iran suddenly, without goodbyes, crossed overland through the mountains from Iran to Turkey, and spent two years there until they were granted asylum in Norway.

This c. 42mins program consists of approximately 30 scenes. We are taken into a classroom where Sheida learns the language of her host country, into the offices where she meets regularly with her counsellors, into the communal laundry room in the block of apartments where she lives, into a neighbour's house, a doctor's surgery, and of course into her own private space of her apartment. But none of these are as achingly touching as the encounters she shares with her husband Madyar as they both reflect on their memories of Iran.

These scenes are butted up against each other, at times so sharply it feels disjointed. But the fragmented scenes add to the candour of the documentary and cleverly juxtapose the mundane and the terrifying. This is, after all, what makes the program so compelling. The disjointed structure resembles that of a personal diary where Sheida's day-to-day encounters and reflections are recorded. Sheida begins recording these experiences eleven days after arriving in Oslo, with the program capturing their first six months in Norway. The unremarkable encounters that Sheida has outside her apartment are sharply positioned against the emotionally-charged moments that occur inside. One example is the scene where a prisoner in Iran telephones the couple. They record him reading his poem:

When your share of the sky isn't just a small window in the roof. How can I explain my feelings to you?

Life in prison is like mountain climbing. Only your thoughts help you to survive. When the guard on duty knocks you can forget all human rights. He only delivers pain and wants you to say something against yourself.

The text is transcribed and posted on their blog. In the scene that immediately follows we hear Sheida explaining to one of her counsellors at social services that they have a blocked drainpipe in their apartment that they cannot fix. The second example of this juxtapositioning is when Shadia, at three in the morning, is recounting her conversation with Madyar the day before when he tells her about what happened to him in prison:

You told me about that night in prison, how you heard your friend scream, you didn't know why he was screaming...

But you knew that soon it was your turn...

They brought you to the interrogation room and forced you to eat feces [sic].

Very quickly we are catapulted out of this dark moment and into a recording of a listening exercise for their Norwegian course, a dull conversation about jogging and walking, and then immediately brought back into Madyar's 'many nights' of torture when he was in prison. It is here where we learn of Madyar's vow, that if he ever survived he would spend the rest of his life defending others who are imprisoned and giving a voice to political prisoners:

Translator: It was a long, bad night. One of many nights with torture.

M: (Farsi) This first week in prison I promised myself...

Translator: They forced me to eat shit. That night in prison I made a promise to myself.

M: (Farsi)...I promised myself if I would ever get out of this prison I would spend the rest of my life defending those that are still not free.

Translator: That if I ever survived this prison, I would spend the rest of my life defending those that are still not free.

It is situating the ordinary against the extraordinary that attests to the complexities and layering of the experiences of a refugee's life. Through Sheida's recordings of a whole variety of encounters that she has as a new arrival, we get a sense of the constant grappling with not only the simple and menial things such as a blocked drainpipe but the ongoing attachment to the politics back home and the loved ones who remain there. The program's fragmented structure gives expression to this tension by drawing on the range of experiences Sheida and Madyar have during their first months of settling into a new life. Sheida's acute insight into her own personal experience as a refugee, alongside her husband, is what makes this program both enthralling and harrowing.

The docu-diary approach works well for this piece because it allows room for aural material that may not ordinarily be used in a conventional journalistic program, for instance, the inclusion of a recording of Sheida singing when she was five years old (at 31'45"), and the recording of her father's parrots in his bird shop (at 29'12"). This archival aural material offers a glimpse into Sheida's childhood and family life in Iran. These tender moments also present a reality of Iran rarely seen or heard about in the mainstream media. In this sense the program offers itself as a counter-narrative that challenges the 'simplified versions of reality' in the media (Pottier 2002, p.203). For although this program reveals, in no uncertain terms, the heavy-handedness of the Iranian regime and the searing consequences for those that fight the system, it also invites listeners to see Iran as a country just like their own, where people fall in love:

S: You were wearing a light blue denim shirt.
We talked and talked.
I enjoyed looking into your eyes.
You asked me a lot of questions about politics.
I just smiled. I wanted to kiss you.

Where children sing and adoring parents record them:

(Sheida singing)
S: This is me singing.
(Sheida singing)
S: I am 5 years old.
(Sheida singing)
Translator: I am singing a song about a father and his daughter.
(Sheida singing)
S: I sing: "I have a little girl."
(Sheida singing)
S: I love her.
(Sheida singing)
S: Every night I sing her a song and say goodnight.
(Sheida singing)
S: In the morning she will wake up.
(Sheida singing)
S: Wash her face, eat breakfast.
(Sheida singing)
S: And go to school with a happy smile.

Where birdsong and the scent of flowers evoke a sense of place for its citizens:

Sheida: My new year is in the spring. It comes with small flowers and birdsong...

Translator: I wanted to tell Nina that my father used to sing with me.
That I like the white and yellow flowers that bloom in winter and fill the air in Tehran with their citrus scent.
That I like to drive in my sister's car and listen to loud music.
That I like to look through Grandma's old photo albums and feel my mother comforting me when I'm sad.
I want to tell her that I cannot return to Iran.
Iran will not even accept my body when I die.
I want to tell Nina all this.

Not only do these sentimental moments communicate the nuances of a place, they illustrate how refugees are constantly reconciling the longing for who and what they left behind when seeking refuge in a foreign land.

While 'diary' style documentary making has been around for more than half a century, the audio diary genre for radio was not popularised until the early 1990s when public radio producer David Isay collaborated with two teenage boys who lived in one of Chicago's most dangerous housing projects. He gave them a tape recorder and a microphone to record their daily lives. The result was *Ghetto Life 101*, the audio diaries of LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman. As the program spiel from *Sound Portraits* explains, 'The candor in Jones and Newman's diaries brought listeners face to face with a portrait of poverty and danger and their effects on childhood in one of Chicago's worst housing projects' (*Ghetto Life 101*, 2014). There was a place no journalist or radio producer could ever go and reach to such depths.

Ghetto Life 101 proved to be an unintentional social experiment that did two very important things: it demonstrated the democratising potential of new technologies; and it demonstrated the power of citizens telling their own personal stories (Charlton et al 2006, p. 540). This insider perspective proved to be so compelling and insightful it inspired others to use the format. *Radio Diaries*, founded by Joe Richman, has produced hundreds if not thousands of hours of deeply intimate radio storytelling. Richman believes that the strength of the genre is that it allows the listener to more easily enter the world of the subject (2001). In describing the different kinds of good storytellers he distinguishes between the 'funny, extroverted good talkers' and the 'quiet, intimate' ones, who he believes, 'draw you in and make you lean closer to them' (2011).

As an audio diarist, Sheida is the kind of storyteller you lean in closer to. She has the kind of voice that, as Jay Allison puts it, 'can sneak in, bypass the brain, and touch the heart' (Allison in Biewen & Dilworth 2010, p.184). Alan Hall also notes the sensitivity of Sheida's voice (n.d.). There is a spare quality to her narration which makes it easy to absorb her every word. Spoken sometimes like poetry, her words are unrestrained, honest, which leaves her somewhat vulnerable:

Sheida: My mother and father called this morning,
Translator: Grandmother was also there. I didn't want to answer. I miss them so bad. I wouldn't want them to hear me crying.
Talk to them, Madyar said.

Being so frank and open, Sheida allows us privileged access into her inner world but once we arrive we are not allowed much time to dwell there. We hear about her bad mood:

Sheida : Today I was not in a good mood.
I was tired.

And her feeling displaced:

Translator: I think I am suffering from a sort of culture shock.
It will soon be Christmas and New Year. The streets are full of lights and happy Norwegians.

It is not my New Year. It is theirs.

Sheida: My new year is in the spring. It comes with small flowers and birdsong.
I feel alone. I just have Madyar, but he's alone too.

Translator:

I miss my old friends.

I miss not having to explain.

The only Norwegians I meet is my counsellor Camilla, my Norwegian course teacher, and the old folks who live around me in my tenement block.

We are swiftly taken out of these reflective spaces, usually into interactive scenes which have no bearing on Sheida's previous reflections. Some of these spaces seem to have no real purpose, like the elevator scene where few words are exchanged between Sheida and the man she finds in the lift. However, the inclusion of such brief uneventful scenes are extremely purposeful as they give us a sense of place.

The choice to not edit out the guttural clearing of the throat at the beginning of the program prepares the listener for what seems at times like an unpolished production. By presenting it in this way – in its raw form – it promises to present an untarnished insight into the newly arrived refugee experience. And the stream of live happening moments intimately captures Sheida's life as it is unfolding. A simple and lovely scene is when she is at home with Madyar and they practise speaking Norwegian to one another in preparation for a test. This scene ends with them laughing. But this tender happy moment is, again, juxtaposed with a darker scene.

A gloomy threatening-sounding music sets up the next scene as we hear a man's voice on loudspeaker. He is a friend of the couple and he is calling from prison. Farzad recites his poem called 'Night, whipping, torture':

F: (reading poem in Farsi)

S: God, where am I in the world?

F: (reading poem in Farsi)

Translator: At the sound of the whip I left for another world.
Where the humans' concern was to save Australia's lizards.

F: (reading poem in Farsi)

S: But here...here...oh...

F: (reading poem in Farsi)

Translator: With each lash I returned to the past.

To Genghis Khan's time.

But pain has no end.

F: (Farsi)

Translator: I lost conscience and after several hours, I returned to the world again and the floor of my cell.

F: (Farsi)

Translator: Like a newborn child I began to cry and again a poem came to me:

F: (reading poem in Farsi)

Translator: I saw a child being born and therefore I know that the first crying is the first sign of life

And tomorrow I'll hear knocking on the door...again and again...and again....

This is by far one of the program's most impacting scenes, punctuated by a disconcerting sound that is almost like a cry. At 39'07", after Farzad finishes reciting his poem, there is a breathy distressed sound. It sounds like Madyar reacting to his friend's recitation. If it is Madyar, this non-verbal sound is particularly significant. For although he is present in the program we do not know him as we do Sheida. He remains elusive. But through this emotional reaction we are able to feel his plight, and we might assume that he is grappling with his new-found freedom and his fellow 'comrades' fighting for human rights in Iran, who are not free.

The repeated references to the sky symbolise this reckoning with freedom. The title of the documentary is borrowed from a line in the poem of the first prisoner, 'When your share of the sky isn't just a small window in the roof...'

Sheida also makes reference to the sky when she and Madyar go on an adventure on the bus 'without knowing where we were going'. She completes the scene with, 'The sun was shining and the sky was blue'.

When Madyar tells Sheida what happened to him in prison, he makes reference to his share of the sky:

Translator: My cell was so small. I couldn't stretch out.

M: (Farsi)

Translator: There was a small window high up under the roof.

M: (Farsi)

Translator: Sometimes I could see the moon.

M: (Farsi)

Translator: A moon behind bars.

Farzad, in his poem, makes a similar reference:

It was night,
without moon,
without stars, without sky,
even without night, with walls.

In the final scene, Sheida recounts an evening where she and Madyar look at the stars in the sky, and he tells her:

The sky is the same...It is the same moon and the same stars I saw through the tiny window in my cell. They are the same, but they look different.

Sheida concludes:

I can see my favourite stars in the sky. The moon is almost full.

Poetry is woven like a golden thread throughout this documentary and there is a sense that this program is paying homage to the overwhelming importance of poetry in Iran. Persian culture boasts a very rich and old tradition of oral and written poetry. Although Sheida's story is presented as a docu-diary or a radio diary, this program speaks like a poem, a poem of love, of life, and of loss.

Sometimes I miss
the boat that brought me here,
now that I am witness to the icy eyes of a Swedish winter,
under these tired old clouds,
while that suitcase still holds a patch of the sky-blue me.

Excerpt from 'The Boat That Brought Me' by Azita Ghahreman (an Iranian poet)

AUDIO of PROGRAM AND FULL TRANSCRIPT

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HELENE THOMAS wants to live in a world where journalism is produced sensitively and responsibly, and this pretty much sums up her PhD project. She has spent the last three and a half years working on her PhD through Murdoch University (Australia). It investigates what is required of Western journalists to lessen Africa's otherness in their reportage and reduce the potential for media harm to story subjects. As an Australian freelance radio documentary producer she's been featured on ABC Radio National's 360documentaries, Encounter, Into the Music and AWAYE!, and on Third Coast Festival Re:sound.

