

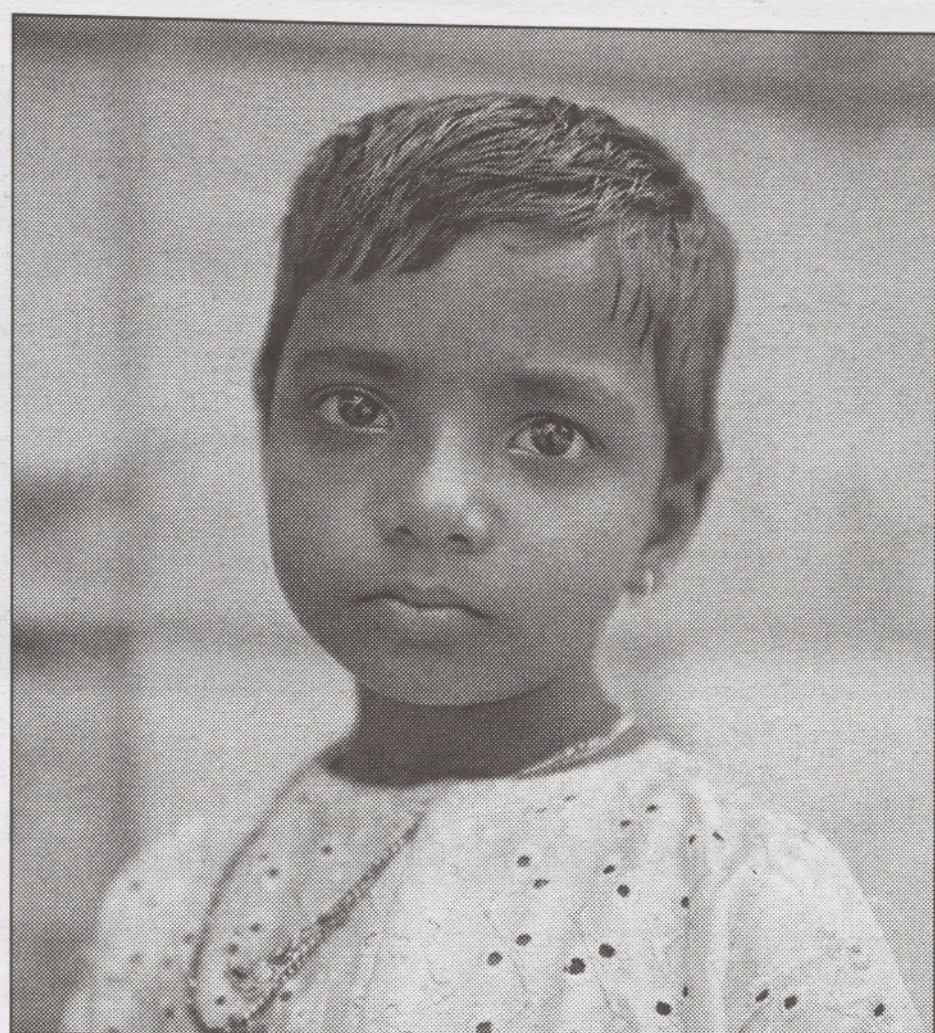


PHOTO BY FAZAL SHEIKH

Above, this photo of Malikh was taken at a squatter settlement in Delhi, India, in 2007 for the series "Ladli." During this time Fazal Sheikh's work focused on the situation of young women in India, where women still live in a patriarchal system with few individual rights.

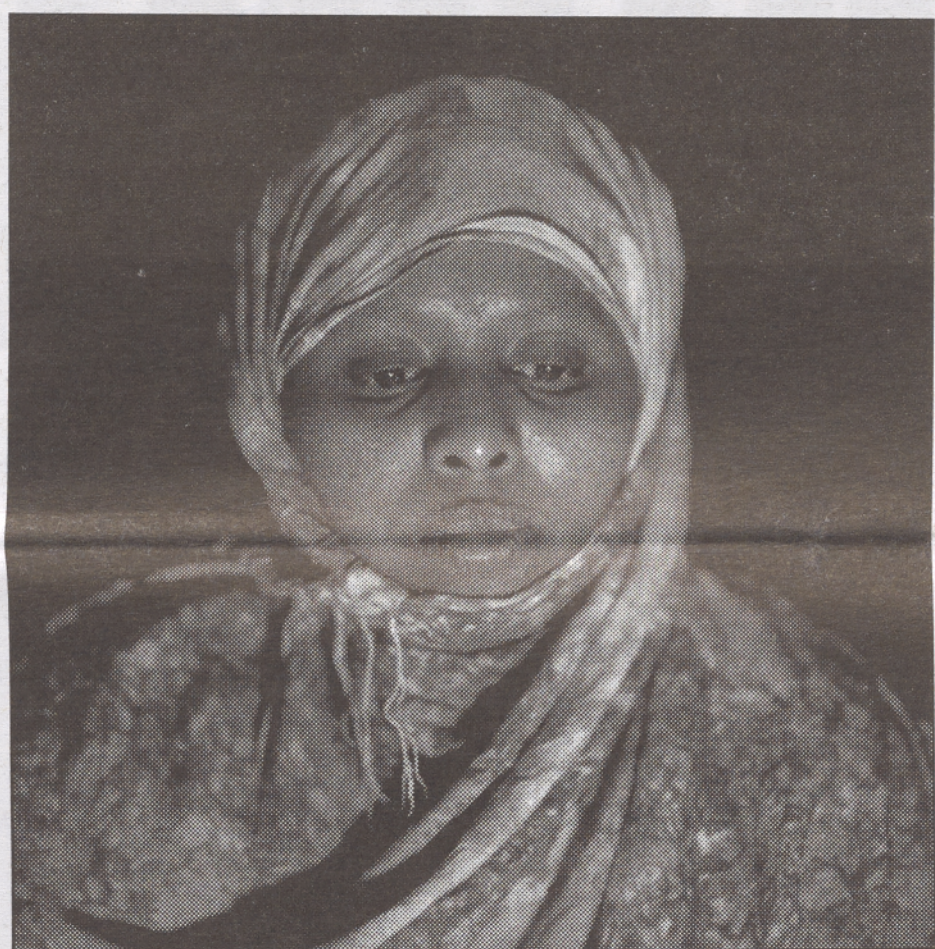


PHOTO BY FAZAL SHEIKH

Seynab Azir Wardeeren's picture was taken in 2000 for the series "Ramadan Moon." The series focused on this woman as she gazed into the night during the month of Ramadan while she was detained with her young son in a shelter for asylum seekers in the Netherlands.

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the kind of mode I can imagine it being compelling.

E.G.: The exhibit is titled "Common Ground," and it would seem that people who are marginalized, displaced or fleeing conflict in different areas of the world must all have some things in common. In the years that you've been photographing these groups, have you noticed any changes in that common ground shared among those communities that you've been documenting?

F.S.: Well the kind of common thread through all of my work is this idea of myself as an American, born and raised in New York with family that comes from farther afield, from East Africa and from India. It was important to reconcile those different impulses within my very being; an ability to move fluently from one community to another and to insist that there is a kind of harmony across that divide. In essence, all of the work is about that.

Many of those projects are made in communities that are currently vilified by my government, and so I kind of bristle at that notion. I'm a little bit heartbroken by the sense that coming back to the city of my birth, with my name, Fazal Sheikh, soon after Sept. 11, and treated as though I was guilty by connection. I think that's something a person like me has had to learn to live with as part of their reality in the last 15 years – this idea of certain groups being vilified, of certain communities being ostracized and a xenophobia about what having those people in our country might mean. It's kind of based on fear. The same kind of fear with which we might imagine homeless communities or so this inability to remove oneself and to imagine oneself in the position of another.

I think that was true in the refugee communities in Africa for instance. It always was the notion that this was the gaze of another. It was only after Bosnia, when the refugee communities were fleeing and the fighting was coming to Europe that people started to realize, "Oh actually, I myself, given the wrong, unfortunate circumstances, could find myself in that same position."

The subtext of the whole exhibition is a

wish for the viewer, the reader, to be able to imagine themselves in the position of those whose lives they're witnessing.

E.G.: At this exhibition, among all the many faces that you've photographed, are there any in particular whose memory stays with you, that you find your mind returning to from time to time?

F.S.: Oh absolutely. You know in some of the Somali camps for instance, I returned over the course of many years. When I was photographing in feeding centers, and then returning eight years later and finding those same children who had been infants being treated in the centers, and the women – there is one part of the exhibition called "A Camel for the Son," and the title drawn, actually, from a letter that was given to me by Abshiro Aden Mohammed, the Somali women's leader of a camp called Dagahaley, in the desert, who had lived for more than a decade in these camps. She writes very openly, forcefully, pointedly about the plight of women and children, not only within the camps, but in their own society back home. Imagining, what is real activism? How does one sustain a life in activism? When you witness people like that, and you are able to bring their voices forward, then you've really witnessed true activism.

Particularly now, when so many of us as artists, photographers, writers, have felt without any power in the current administration, where do you gain a kind of degree of solace? I realized that in a way, putting yourself back into the process and looking for those kinds of stories once again is the best that we can do. And so I'm frequently thinking back to those moments of meeting such women as Abshiro, or the woman whose story is the basis of "Ramadan Moon," Seynab Azir Wardeere, another Somali woman who speaks very forcefully and bravely about what she has endured in her life, and laced within those various stories is a degree of strength and perseverance, which is something I actually admire. I'm not sure, if I were in the same circumstance, I would be able to muster as much strength and dignity as they have.

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