

Analysis: Tug of War

It's not unique for a story to contrast the old world with the new, the religious and the secular, the immigrant and the American citizen. Where this story of assimilation distinguishes itself is in the framing. Allie Shah tells the stories of Fartun and Nimco in a way that allows the old and the new to have equal value; the tug-of-war doesn't have a zero-sum outcome, where one culture wins and another loses (the frame for many such stories). Shah accomplishes this by checking her assumptions, learning more about the culture, and allowing her sources to define what is important to them (**DVD: Shaw interview, 2:24; Text: p. 20**).

The story delivers the voice, context, and complexity of a well-told tale of race and ethnicity, and it does so in interesting, provocative ways. We hear from the two teenagers often: Nimco speaking in Somali with her mother and in the slang of her classmates in the hallways at school (**Text: p. 6**); Fartun speaking through her poetry or at home with her siblings (**Text: pp. 10–11**).

Shah paints a portrait of the two girls that is complex and thus sometimes surprising. For example, Nimco is the more outgoing, westernized of the two, but Shah learns through reporting and observation that Nimco's tug is toward Somali and Muslim traditions. Fartun, solemn and faithful to her culture and faith, reveals her extroverted side away from school. When a reporter allows frames to be flexible and assumes that people live complex lives, she can find such interesting nuances in most stories.

Shah is deft at identifying those issues the Somali girls face that raise universal themes, like teenagers battling parents for more freedom (**Text: p. 9**). It's critical that journalists not write as though all differences are specific to the group about which they're reporting. To do so is to risk rendering something as unusual when it is merely a variation on a universal theme.



Fartun's shyness is evident in the Roosevelt High School cafeteria. (Photo: Rita Reed/Star Tribune/Minneapolis-St. Paul 2005)



Nimco, left, and Fartun, meet in the girls locker room at Roosevelt High School. (Photo: Rita Reed/Star Tribune)

Shah does explore differences that are truly cultural, such as an identity based on family, not self (**Text: p. 5**), as well as those customs that arise from Islam and are embedded in the Somali culture, where virtually everyone is a Muslim. Those customs include washing feet and hands before prayer (**Text: p. 7**) and relationship restrictions, such as the prohibition on boys and girls touching once puberty arrives (**Text: pp. 8, 9, 12**). It's important, however, that journalists not conflate faith and culture where that is actually not the case.

Language choices provide two areas of discussion in this chapter. Shah's decision to define or guide the pronunciation of some Arabic words and Somali names recognizes that much of the audience will need that help. Her use of the phrase "cultural apartheid," which she explains in her interview (**DVD: Shah interview, 7:13**), applies a harsh word with malevolent roots to a far more benign scene. Both should make for rich conversation.

In the Classroom



Nimco takes advantage of some extra time to study for a test. (Photo: Rita Reed/Star Tribune)

Students are likely to see the ways their lives mirror those of Fartun and Nimco. Use that reflection to underscore one of the achievements of the story: Shah finds the "us" in "them," the universal story of fitting in that transcends most difference.

Students may also want to spend time talking about some of the ethical dilemmas the journalists faced, particularly the decision to publish three photos that raise the matter of modesty in Somali culture: Fartun dancing without her head covering during a wedding celebration (**Text: p. 13; DVD: Shah interview, 10:52**); a boy playfully pushing Nimco at school (**Text: p. 14; DVD: Shah interview, 8:51**); and Nimco running track in shorts (**Text: pp. 18–19**).

Shah also talks about following Somali custom and exchanging gifts with people she interviewed (**Text: p. 18; DVD: Shah interview, 9:57**). Help the class think about circumstances under which giving or receiving gifts is clearly a bad idea and when it might be OK.

Have them research cultural traditions where giving gifts, food, or other favors is expected. Show them how to use good questions to think through ways of upholding ethical principles while telling a complete story.

Framing the Story

Journalists make a fair number of subjective decisions in reporting and writing but none more determinative than decisions on how to frame the story—that is, which angle to take, which path to pursue, which anecdote to use to lead off the piece.

Sometimes, the frame is obvious and inescapable. Most times, though, journalists have a choice in the matter, and the menu of possibilities will typically include a wealth of clichés, stereotypes, and tried-and-true stories that simply ring familiar in the ears of storytellers. The best stories challenge, improve on, or simply explode old frames in search of fresh, untold stories.



Reporter Allie Shah,
Star Tribune

In “Tug of War,” Allie Shah could have focused on the matter of wearing the hijab and all it means to a Muslim girl in America. She could have focused on the bigotry immigrants face in a new school. She could have told the story of assimilation from the perspective of Somali boys or viewed the teenage years of Fartun and Nimco through the eyes of their mothers or from the vantage point of the small businesses the women operated.

Possibilities abound—some old and familiar, others new and unexplored. Journalists who consciously, rigorously examine the frames through which they see stories will find tales that surprise, inform, and rise above stagnant, predictable storytelling.

Also in the DVD Topic Index

Besides Framing the Story, the interview with Allie Shah has entries listed in the Topic Index in the following categories:

Complexity

Covering People Like You
Doing Your Homework
Portraying People Fairly

Ethics: Various Issues
Language Choices
Power of Images

Assignments

1. Find four human-interest stories from a recent newspaper, online site, TV newscast, or radio broadcast. Analyze each story’s framing. What themes arise?
2. Do a story about someone trying to fit into an environment—school, work, church, community—radically different from the one they’ve known. Push yourself to tell the story in a way that is fresh.

3. Write an essay exploring the assumptions you hold about people who belong to a faith or nationality you feel you least understand. In the essay, talk about how you should manage such assumptions.