Chapter I
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INTRODUCTION

*The Bible* says, “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:27-28). The purpose of creating man and woman was for them to live fruitful lives and complement each other. Men and women stand as equals before God, as partners in building up life. Just like men are responsible for the society, women also are equally responsible for the society they live in. Men and women are different from each other physically, emotionally and even functionally, but they are equal as human beings. They have been called to promote life shoulder to shoulder as human beings, equal in humanity. Just like a man, a woman has the ability to reason, to exercise her will, to express her emotions and to fulfill her mission in life. She has her own calling just like a man has. Without making one inferior to the other, God calls upon both men and women to fulfill the roles and responsibilities specifically designed for them.

When one peruses through the annals of history one gets really confused by the picture that is painted about what exactly a woman’s role in society is. In some places she is portrayed as a dominant figure, while in many cultures and throughout much of history she has been painted as second-class at best, and a little more than property or chattel at the other extreme.
Women have a variety of roles in society to fulfill. From the time they are born till they draw their last breath, they go through a number of “performances,” all of which are significant, eloquent and compelling. But the sad fact is that in spite of efficiently executing all her roles, she is still considered weak and second to men. Men exercise too much of domination over her that she is most of the times pushed into a corner or relegated to the fringes of society. She is devoid of a voice and identity and has to rely upon the male counterpart for expressing her essentia.

Women behave, think and work very differently from the way men do. They are said be physically, psychologically and physiologically very distinct from men. But it can be seen that in many spheres of society, women exhibit more responsibility than men. However, it can be seen that the tradition and culture of women lifestyle all over the world has not undergone any change in terms of rights of women. Women are treated differently than men in terms of rights and dues in the modern world. Men keep on dominating women and shove them to a nook, many a time clipping their wings. The basic problems that affect women from performing their roles in society spring from their helplessness, lack of opportunities for education, restricted mobility and lack of autonomous status. “Subordination of women is a socially, economically and culturally constructed phenomenon” (Rehman119). She is not allowed to be her own self. That integral birthright is snatched away from her which is a basic violation of human rights.

Woman has not only be deprived of her right to natural and human created resources but also been deprived of her name. She, despite her possessing equal potentials as that of man, has been systematically thwarted to realize and achieve them. She has been, for ages, subjected to all forms of sex
discrimination on the ground of her sex status. For her, options for
development have been very limited and circumscribed by man who has
promulgated laws to direct, control and regulate her actions within certain
prescribed boundaries. Stepping out of those boundaries was severely
restricted and invited man’s reprisal. (Rehman 2)

From time immemorial it can be seen that so much of victimization has been taking
place in the name of gender. Freud’s theory of biology as destiny mainly determines the
traditional sexual roles that have been attached to men and women. The neo Freudian Erik
Erickson’s assumption that the external and intrusive male sex organs account for men’s
“outer space” perception of reality, while the internal organs of the female explain the
“inner space” of women’s reality (Buncombe 421) has also given rise to major problems.
In a phallocentric culture woman is often defined by reference to the body and sexual
reproduction. But it can be seen that sexual relationships are sometimes traumatic for
women as they are dominated by men and are under the yoke of patriarchy.

Women are denied all rights traditionally. They do not have any right on
themselves, their bodies and their destinies. As Kate Millet says, the relations between
men and women have been a matter of politics or manipulation of power (Millet 23).
The marginalization that women suffer in society is the result of such anomalous power
relations. The brutality that some women face at the domestic level is mostly overlooked
by society and sometimes taken for granted because it is seen as something ‘normal.’
This normalcy is created because of the general acceptance of the fact that women are
created to be submissive, and men dominant.
Onerous patriarchal potency, nescience, social disparities, indifference, insensitivity, irrationality, coercion at the home front are some of the reasons that women have been facing since time immemorial. They have been at the losing end almost always and have been forced to be under the authority of the male. The legacy of patriarchy continues to generate the conditions and relationships. Violence and subjugation are still in most parts around the world supported by a moral order which reinforces the marital hierarchy. Women find it very difficult to struggle against this, and other forms of dominance and authoritarianism, because her contention is translated as erroneous, unethical, and an infringement of the respect and loyalty a wife is supposed to give her husband. Even Martin Luther, the great reformer can be prejudiced when it comes to women:

Men have broad shoulders and narrow hips, and accordingly they possess intelligence. Women have narrow shoulders and broad hips. Women ought to stay at home; the way they were created indicates this, for they have broad hips and a fundament to sit upon, keep house and bear and raise children. (Bullough 167)

Down the ages, woman has been forced to live in the shadow of the man. All her abilities and capacities have been overlooked and ignored. She has been allowed to exist for man, for his pleasure and will. She has never been allowed to voice her thoughts and has been forced to internalize the belief that this is the only acceptable position for her in society. “She has been the shadow and attendant image of her Lord, owing him a thoughtless and servile obedience and supported altogether in her weakness by the preeminence of her fortitude” (Homans 116).
Gender equality is imperative for the realization of human rights. But it can be widely seen that so much of discrimination and bias against women prevail in every intersection of the planet. In many parts of the world, laws are framed in such a manner that second class status is bestowed upon women and girls with regard to nationality and citizenship, health, education, marital rights, employment rights, parental rights, inheritance and property rights. As a result of this, women empowerment takes a back seat almost everywhere across the globe.

Discrimination of women in the world is still a real problem. Even though huge strides have been made against it in many Western countries, it is still devastating throughout the world. All women deserve a life with the opportunity to be educated, to work, to be healthy and to participate in all aspects of public life. Yet in many parts of the world, women and girls live within the confines of rigid gender norms, which frequently result in disproportionate access to essential services and major violations of their human rights.

Most of the world’s poorest persons are women and the number of women living in rural poverty has increased by 50% since 1975. Women work two-thirds of the world’s working hours and produce half of the world’s food, yet they earn only 10% of the world’s income and own less than 1% of the world’s property (Web). Throughout the world and across many cultures it can be seen that there is a colossal level of brutality on an unbelievable range let loose against women. Women find it difficult and sometimes impossible to get access to justice because of discriminatory obstacles – in law as well as in practice. Numerous forms of prejudices based on gender and many other factors such as race, ethnicity, caste, disability, sexual orientation and the like once again supplement the risk of atrocities and terror unleashed against women.
In certain places on the face of the earth, it is found that women are not allowed to do the same stints that men do ordinarily, basic things like dressing the way they want, working outside the home after dusk, get what is lawfully theirs, drive a vehicle, go on a jaunt with their friends, have male friends or give evidence in courts. There are so many discriminatory laws which restrict women. Certain countries even do not allow women to get a divorce and force marital practices like wife obedience and polygamy down the woman’s throat.

As one pores over the literature of the ancient and medieval world, one can find blatant examples of women’s oppression by men in European, Indian, Middle Eastern and African cultures. Women were mostly suppressed and were under the thumb of male members in their families and even in their societies. They were voiceless and even if they tried raising their voices, they were immediately quelled. In certain societies women were not even given an option to live if their husbands succumbed to death. Greece which upheld the values of democracy, failed when it came to women. Women in Greece were not allowed to articulate and enjoy basic human rights. This was the situation in many European counties.

Passive submissiveness and obedience was the trademark of most women across the world. Women always remained a silent enigma, restrained and subdued by the dark forces of patriarchy. Though this attitude underwent a change in many places there are still many countries today where women are still treated as second grade citizens and undergo all sorts of unimaginable ordeals and afflictions. They face umpteen number of perils and are vulnerable to all sorts of impasse. Prejudice with regard to gender and marginalization have become the order of the day for many of them. Many women all over the world also face
physical assaults which can be sometimes real brutal and vicious. The man tries to assert his power and masculinity.

While male superiority encourages the use of abusive force to sustain sovereignty over women, the Western philosophical theory of hierarchical rule and coercive authority is the basic cause of all the mayhem that is unleashed against women (Hooks 118). Since assertiveness and aggression, the so called Western ideals of manhood, are considered ‘unfeminine’ (Gilbert and Gubar 28), women have been at the receiving end of violence for ages. This violence can be sometimes apparent and at certain other times surreptitious. Ruthlessness at the home front, savagery in sexual relationships, inhumanity and barbarity in almost all domains of public and private life have become a regular routine as far as most women are concerned. They are always inhibited and muted and restrained from performing the roles which they have been created for.

**Women in Afghanistan**

Women who live in strife-ridden areas and who go through dissensions and post-conflict situations regularly undergo diversified kinds of brutality and rampage that plague their lives. This can be seen in the political and authoritative nature of tribal edicts of the Afghan countryside. The autocratic patriarchal society and the imperious, tyrannical gentry actively regulate and control the ambit of women’s lives in Afghanistan. This has a compelling effect on the dignity and situation of women in Afghanistan as well as on endeavours adopted for their emancipation and empowerment.

Afghanistan is very craggy in its terrain and different ethnic, religious, and tribal groups sparsely populate it. The largest ethnic groups are Pashtuns and the Tajiks. The next largest groups are the Hazaras, the Uzbeks and the Aima. Both spatial and
traditional impermeability has blocked Afghanistan from ever forming a unified and
comprehensible sense of nationalism. Ethnically based rivalries, combined with open and
varied interpretations of Islam, have created restive cultures. The repercussions on
women have been notably punitive, since women’s lives have often been used as the
primal matter with which ethnic distinction has tried to be validated.

Tribal laws and ratifications have frequently taken antecedence over Islamic and
constitutional laws in determining gender roles, especially through familial echelons in
the rustic areas. Tribal power plays, institutions of honor, and inter-tribal shows of
patriarchal control have put women’s position in danger. Tribal laws look upon marriages
as alliances between groups; women are pledged into marriages and divorce is prohibited
come what may and wives are expected to unconditionally and implicitly obey their
husbands and his family. Women are not allowed to go to school or get any education.

Women are perceived as the repositories of ‘honour,’ hence they are made to stay put in the
domestic arena, celebrate the veil and remain inarticulate. Afghans believe that the nang
(honour) of the family, the tribe, and ultimately the nation is consecrated in women, so they
resort to brutality and uncompromising restrictions to keep women under their thumb.

But a lot of native women have performed very decisive and crucial roles in the
history of Afghanistan, but the sad state of affairs is that much of their operations, inputs
and contributions are not well recorded in Afghan history books. Many women have died
defending the country against foreign invaders, and risking their lives to educate the next
generation of women. The history of Afghanistan is male-dominated like most histories
of the world. Only men are lauded and eulogized. Women who have played definitive
parts are lost in the shadows.
In 1880, a woman named Malalai, who was from a small village of Khig, played a major role in the battle of Maiwand during the second Anglo-Afghan war. When the tide turned against the Afghan fighters and their morale dropped, Malalai cried out, “Young love if you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand; By God someone is saving you as a token of shame” (Web).

When the Afghan flag bearer was shot dead, Malalai used her veil as a banner to encourage the Afghan soldiers, who were fighting the British. Her words revitalized the Afghan fighters and as a result, the battle of Maiwand ended in defeat for the British Army and victory for the Afghans, who were led by Ayub Khan, the Emir of Afghanistan. Sadly, Malalai was killed during this battle, but she was not forgotten. Many schools and hospitals have been named after her, and she is considered Afghanistan's greatest heroine. In fact she is viewed as Afghanistan’s Joan of Arc.

When Amir Abdur Rahman Khan ruled from 1880-1901, he did away with the tribal custom of forcing a woman to marry her dead husband's brother. He also abolished child marriage and gave women the right to divorce only under specific circumstances. Women were also given the right to inherit property.

During the reign of Amir Habibullah Khan from 1901-1919 many political exiles returned. Significant among them was Mahmud Tarzi, a great reformer, also known as the Father of Afghan journalism. He valiantly fought for women's rights. Because of Tarzi's influence, Amir Habibullah opened a school for girls which interestingly had English curriculum. But ironically, Amir Habibullah Khan himself had numerous wives, far more than what was allowed in Islam. His religious teachers twisted the Koran and had the women declared as servants, concubines and harem ladies.
From 1919-1929, the then ruler King Amanullah Khan joined forces with his father in-law Mahmud Tarzai, and his wife Queen Soraya to ameliorate the lives of women in Afghanistan. Polygamy was discouraged and the use of the veil or chador was prohibited. Women were encouraged to interact freely and exercise greater autonomy. At a public function King Amanullah stated, “Religion does not require women to veil their hands, feet and faces or enjoin any special type of veil. Tribal custom must not impose itself on the free will of the individual” (Web).

King Amanullah’s sister, Kobra was the architect of the Anjuman-E-Himayat-E-Niswan which means the Association for the Protection of Women. It was founded in 1928 to defend women’s rights and provide needed support towards women’s liberation and equality (Emadi 183). Anjuman-E-Himayat-E-Niswan emboldened women to come out of their shells and give voice to their grievances. It also spurred women to stand together and support each other and raise their voices against the coercion and injustice they usually faced. It was at this time that Queen Soraya brought out the first magazine for women called Irshad-e-Niswan (Guidance for Women).

The struggle for change and modernity in the post-independence period led to radical economic, social, cultural and educational reforms intended to improve and enhance the status of women. The State built schools for women, established the weekly publication of Irshad-e-Niswan (The Guide for women), built the first hospital for women and a theatre for women in Kabul. One of the major accomplishments of the state in improving the lives of women includes the introduction of Nizamnamah-ye-Arusi, Nikah wa Khatnasuri, laws concerning engagement, marriage
and male circumcision in 1924. The statutes prescribed a minimum age for marriage, encouraged girls to freely choose their mate and take legal action if their spouse ill-treated them. (Emadi 183)

But these radical measures adopted by King Amanullah did not withstand the test of time. Many conservatives who commanded local support vehemently opposed these reforms. Nadir Shah who ruled from 1929-1933 gave in to the hostility of the tribal leaders and erased many of the revisions King Amanullah had brought about. Nadir Shah was careful about not upsetting the tribal leaders and wanted their whole hearted cooperation. He even went to the extent of banning Jarideh Zanan, an exclusive women’s newspaper of those times.

From 1933 to 1973 when Mohammed Zahir Shah took over the reins of the country, moderate but progressive changes took place with regard to the status of women. Women were given opportunities to work outside the home and soon many of them became teachers, nurses and even politicians. This was the result of the concerted and determined efforts of Mohammad Daoud Khan the revolutionary Prime Minister who was also the King’s cousin. The first secondary school for women was started in Kabul in 1941. In fact, Modernization and the women’s movement were initiated from the top by the state and intensified in the immediate post- World War II period. The ruling elite intended to integrate Afghanistan into the modern world, and in doing so, they launched a number of social, political and cultural reforms, which included recruiting a number of women to work for the state owned radio station as singers, sending women’s delegations to
conferences abroad and employing a few women as flight attendants at the Ariana Afghan Airlines. (Emadi 183)

The veil was shunned. “During a celebration of the anniversary of the country’s independence in August 1959, the wife of the King and the wives of top government officials publicly discarded their veils” (Emadi183). In 1964, women were given suffrage rights as well as the power to contest in elections. They became politically savvy. In the same year Anahita Ratebzad, a staunch Marxist, formed an offshoot of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), The Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW) which relentlessly toiled against illiteracy, forced marriages and bride prices.

When Mohammad Daoud Khan took over in 1973, he made sure that women enjoyed freedom and saw to it that their rights were addressed. But the irony of the entire situation was that this prerogative was restricted to the urban areas. Women in the villages and the tribal hamlets still remained exploited and destitute. They were treated as second class citizens or as property to be sold and bought.

In 1977, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) was established in Kabul, as an independent political/social organization of Afghan women fighting for human rights and social justice in Afghanistan. It was founded by a number of intelligent women under the prudent leadership of Meena Keshwar Kamal. RAWA articulated its political programme in these words:

It is our mission, men and women, to unite and fight for the independence of our beloved country, to establish an Islamic Republic, and to build a society in which oppression, torture, execution and injustices must be replaced by democracy and social justice. We will not be able to achieve
these objectives until people and all political forces unite and form a national front…RAWA, which is comprised of progressive women, fights for women’s equality, and maintains that the liberation of the oppressed women is inseparable from the liberation of our oppressed nation. . . RAWA will continue its principled struggle for women’s rights and liberation after the restoration of the country’s independence and freedom from the superpowers and other imperialist powers. (Emadi 186)

Profound reforms for women took place once again towards the end of 1970. As Dupree says, the 1970s witnessed a steep rise in women’s education, faculty in the universities, and representatives in the Parliament. In 1978 the contentious PDPA surged into the echelons of power. During the rule of the PDPA there took place extensive social and economic changes, which were in line with the 1920 themes, and literacy programs for women and men of all ages was made current (Moghadam 17). The PDPA saw to it that the bride price or walwar was revoked. There were huge land reform programs and the marriage age was also raised. Laws were passed in October 1978 which ensured that women were given equal rights as men. These laws were regarded by certain factions as unacceptable and intolerable. They felt that the laws granting equality to women would create hindrances in households (Hanne 45).

In the rural hamlets, the tribal chieftains and religious leaders found these reformatory laws obnoxious. According to them education for women was anti-Islamic and totally against the patriarchal dictates of their society. Moghadam reports that lot of widespread violent acts were perpetrated against women and PDPA propagandists. Women who wore western clothes were shot at and many social workers indiscriminately
killed. “The PDPA’s use of force in bringing the changes to fruition, combined with a brutal disregard for societal and religious sensitivities, resulted in massive backlash from the rural population” (Marsden 24).

During the Soviet rule women enjoyed much freedom and many of them worked as teachers, doctors and nurses. But the country witnessed rebellion and unrest. From the time the Russians set foot on Afghan soil, there was turmoil and the country beheld uprisings and riots which lasted for almost ten long years. The Mujahedeen (freedom fighters) raised arms against the Soviets because they felt that the latter would obliterate the ancient traditions, customs and beliefs of their country. The Mujahedeen joined hands and raised a radical army to eliminate the Soviet troops and they were funded by the political groups of the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China who had their own selfish motives. The Afghan countryside became the lair for these freedom fighters. The irony was that the Mujahedeen brought religion into the war, as a result of which all the liberties related to education and employment that had up to then been the prerogative of women suddenly took a back seat and women found themselves at a dead end.

The Soviets partially left Afghanistan in 1989 and for the next four years there continued a civil war between the Afghan communist government headed by Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai and the Mujahedeen. Since there was a war going on, not much of social development took place. Najibullah had a gut feeling that the religious fundamentalists would eventually slaughter him and so he was not taking any chances. He decided to form strongholds and did not exclude women from helping him. He set up training camps in Kabul and women were trained to arrest and hand over mujahedeen suspects to authorities. As Pakistani journalist Nafisa Hoodbhoy records in The Washington Post:
Twelve years ago, I was astonished by what I found on a trip from my native Pakistan to Afghanistan. I couldn't have imagined a neighboring Muslim country with so many women in public places. Each morning, the Afghan capital was abuzz with young professionals on their way to work, most dressed in Western clothes and some even in miniskirts and high heels as they vied with their fashion-conscious counterparts in Paris. Kabul University, where I saw more female than male students, was another surprise. But even then, the occasional gunfire and bomb blasts in the city—ruled by Soviet-supported President Najibullah—were a reminder that these freedoms could prove elusive. Young women on campus, clutching their notepads in the streaming February sunlight, told me apprehensively, “If the mujahedeen take over, they will force us to veil.” (Web)

When the Soviet-backed regime of Najibullah finally collapsed on the 28th of April 1992, the extremists and power hungry groups began their civil war. They were the power hungry mujahedeen. Most of the main rebel leaders belonged to different ethnic backgrounds. These groups started a full blown civil war, mainly for the sake of power. As Malalai writes in her memoir *Raising My Voice*, “the country was split into fiefdoms, ruled by the whims of rival thugs and warlords” (Joya 26). There is a misunderstanding in the Western countries that the injustice, maltreatment and severe brutality that the women in Afghanistan faced began when the Taliban took over. But Malalai says that this is just a lie and this lie has been perpetrated to turn the eyes of the world away from the real warlords, the mujahedeen who now occupy important seats in the American backed so-called democratic government.
Women and children suffered horribly during this period. In the name of Islam, basic rights of women were curtailed. Schools for girls were closed down. Even the sounds of women’s footsteps were prohibited. This period witnessed a bizarre catachresis by the fundamentalists where stories of violence, rape, murders became the order of the day. As Malalai says:

As early as May 1992, Sheikh Asif Mosheini, the interim governing council spokesman and Sayd Ali Javd publicly announced a new set of rules governing the conduct of women called the ‘Ordinance on the Women’s Veil’. As documented by Mr. Felix Ermacora, Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights, it proclaimed that a ‘A denier of the veil is an infidel and an unveiled woman is lewd’ and outlined the conditions of wearing a veil . . . In most parts of Afghanistan women now had to wear a burqa because of the fear of being kidnapped, raped and murdered. Young girls were forcibly married to jihadi commanders. These so called Muslims married four women in public, which is permitted in Islam, but most of them had more than four wives. They used rape as a weapon to dominate and terrorize people. Their men raped children as young as four, and cut off the breasts of women. There were even reports reaching Pakistan of the criminals raping the dead bodies of women and the old grandmothers- which is beyond imagination. (Joya 32)

The Taliban took over Kabul in September 1996. Initially they were hailed as saviours, as people were tired of the unprecedented activities of the Mujahedeen. But soon it came to light that they were the stooges of the imperial powers like the U.S,
Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, very much like the fundamentalist warlords they had replaced. They misinterpreted Islam and imposed strict rules and repressive measures in the name of religion. Men were forced to sport beards and women had to be shrouded under a burqa. White shoes were forbidden because it was the colour of the Taliban flag. Women and girls were prohibited from getting any kind of education.

They were forbidden to work, leave the house without a male escort, not allowed to seek medical help from a male doctor, and forced to cover themselves from head to toe, even covering their eyes. They set up *Amar Bil Maroof Wa Nahi An al-Munkar* (i.e. Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) to monitor and control women’s behaviour. It had a devastating impact on women’s mobility. It policed the Taliban’s gender policy which was declared as a decree:

Women, you should not step outside your residence. If you go outside your house you should not be like women who ised to go with fashionable clothes wearing cosmetics and appearing in front of every man before the coming of Islam. Islam as a rescuing religion has determined specific dignity for women; Islam has valuable instructions for women. Women should not create such opportunity to attract the attention of useless people who will not look at them with a good eye. Women have the responsibility as a teacher or coordinator for her family. Husbands, brothers, fathers have the responsibility for providing the necessary life requirements (food, clothes etc.). In case women are required to go outside the residence for the purpose of education, social needs or social services, they should cover themselves in accordance with Islamic Shari’a regulation. If women going
outside with fashionable, ornamental and charming clothes to show themselves, the will be cursed by the Islamic Shari’a and should never expect to go to heaven. All family members and every Muslim have responsibility in this respect. We request all family elders to keep tight control over their families and avoid these social problems. Otherwise these women will be threatened, investigated and severely punished as well as the family elders by the forces of the Religious Police. The religious Police have the responsibility and duty to struggle against these social problems and will continue their effort until evil is finished.

(Rostami-Povey 27)

Women, who were doctors and teachers before, suddenly were forced to be beggars in order to feed their families. During the rule of the Taliban, women were treated with utmost control than in any other time or by any other society. As Malalai reports in her memoir Raising my Voice, “During the Taliban years it was risky for a woman to move around the city, since she could be stopped and challenged at any time. If she was seen in the market without a Mahram, (a close male relative, either a son, husband, father or brother) Taliban enforcers would flag her down on the spot and she could be badly punished” (Joya 53). Malalai describes the burqa as “not only oppressive but more difficult than you think. It has no peripheral vision because of the netting in front of your eyes. And it is hot and suffocating under there” (Joya 44).

Every day there would be a broadcast on the Radio Sharia and leaflets would be thrown into the courtyards of the houses cautioning the citizens about their calling and their commitment to their country and religion. The transformation they had to undergo
to integrate into the new fundamentalist regime was daily blared out through
loudspeakers. Christina Lamb in *The Sewing Circles of Herat* records the words of Zena,
a woman she had interviewed:

> Zena had been a second year medical student at Herat University when the
Taliban came and abolished female education. “I had always dreamed of
becoming a doctor. If the Taliban had not come I would be practicing by
now. Instead . . . well, if I was to tell you the whole story it would take
many days but what I can tell you is we didn’t live under the Taliban, we
just stayed in our rooms doing nothing like cows in their sheds. We had no
communication with the rest of the world or even outside our home; we
couldn’t listen to television or radio or see our friends. Even to go to a
doctor we had to be accompanied by our husband or father who would
speak for us or we would be whipped . . . women were treated like
parasites in this society.” (Lamb 163)

Elaheh Rostami-Povey reports that under the Taliban, thousands of female-headed
households, who were internally displaced, lived in refugee camps around cities. Most of
them had lost their husbands or sons during the civil war years and under the Taliban
rule. They were addressed as *Zanane bee Sarparast* (unprotected women), a derogatory
term. A section of the Refugee Centre in Kabul was reserved specifically for them where,
separated from other households, they lived as a separate community.

Restrictive policies were applied in all Taliban-controlled areas, but their
impact was felt most acutely in Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat and other
Dari- speaking urban centres where women had enjoyed a greater degree
of freedom than in the more conservative Pashtun heartland cities of Kandahar and Jalalabad. Najia said: Even a small minority of educated women and middle-class women were forced to marry the Taliban . . . They were either forced or did it out of poverty or fear. Sometimes a woman who was married to one Taliban was raped by ten other Taliban. Sometimes they were taken to outside of Afghanistan especially to the Gulf region and were sold as sex workers. (Rostami-Povey 26)

After the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, the administration in Washington, supported by the UK government, led a bombing campaign against Afghanistan in October 2001. An aerial bombardment was unleashed against the Taliban and on the Al-Qaeda forces whom they believed to be responsible for the twin tower attacks. The sad fact was that these bombs killed innocent civilians and destroyed villages and urban residential areas. However, most of the important Al-Qaeda figures escaped to the tribal border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

An estimated 400 civilians were killed in the first week of bombing. The number of dead reached an estimated 4,000 in the following three months, many more houses were destroyed, animals were killed and 2.2 million people were internally displaced. Bombs were dropped on fleeing refugees, the majority of them women and children. Ambulances carrying injured refugees were also attacked. UN mine-clearing officials noted that 14,000 unexploded cluster bombs killed and maimed between 40 and 100 people a week. The bombing campaign broke down the
already fragile infrastructure of aid distribution which had existed under the Taliban. (Rostami-Povey 40)

With the fall of the Taliban, Afghan women had pinned their hopes on the process of reconstruction. But as Elaheh Rostami-Povey states in her book *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion*, “by 2007, any optimism that Afghanistan might have been entering a new era of peace, security and development had been swept away . . . women are victims of a state that has directed its attention towards militarization rather than housing, health, education, infrastructure and welfare . . . women’s demands for food, security, clean water, refugee issues and an end to trafficking have fallen on deaf ears” (Rostami-Povey 42).

The Mujahedeen who had been ousted by the Taliban formed a loose coalition and called themselves ‘The United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan’- better known as the Northern Alliance. They had escaped to neighbouring countries during the Taliban regime and were garnering forces to retaliate against the Talibs, when fortune smiled upon them in the guise of the 9/11 World Trade Centre attack. These warlords returned as the pawns of the U.S. government to unleash another round of terror and pillage the country once more. Though they were portrayed as liberators of Afghanistan and anti-Taliban resistance forces by the Western media, the people of Afghanistan knew that they were no better than the Talibs.

On 19 November 2001, the New York Times reported, ‘The galaxy of warlords who tore Afghanistan apart in the early 1990’s and who were vanquished by the Taliban because of their corruption and perfidy are back on their thrones, poised to exercise power in the ways they always have.’ As warlords marched into power, they used their old habits of using
rape to punish their enemies and reward their fighters. Human Rights Watch and other organizations have documented terrible cases of rape against Pashtun women, simply because they were the same ethnic group as most Taliban. (Joya 62)

Malalai Joya recounts in her memoir that the severe oppression, intolerance and brutality of women did not begin with the Taliban rule as the rest of the world believes but during the time of the warlords. And she vents righteous anger against the fact that these same warlords now dominate the American backed, so-called democratic government of Afghanistan. She speaks out how women were deprived of their basic rights under the name of religion and how the warlords closed the doors of the school for girls and even prohibited the sound of women’s footsteps. The interim governing council also publicly announced a new set of rules governing the conduct of women called the ‘Ordinance on the Women’s Veil.’ It proclaimed, “A denier of the veil is an infidel and an unveiled woman is lewd” (Web). There were other conditions laid down also like women were not perfume themselves, wear adorning, thin or tight clothes, wear clothes resembling men’s clothes, go out of their houses without their husband’s permission, talk to strange men, walk in the middle of the street and many other constraints. In the words of Joya:

In most parts of Afghanistan women now had to wear a burqa because of the fear of being kidnapped, raped and murdered. Young girls were forcibly married to the jihadi commanders. These so-called Muslims married four women in public, which is permitted in Islam, but most of them had more than four wives. They used rape as a weapon to dominate and terrorize people. Their men raped children as young as four, and cut
off the breasts of women. There were even reports reaching Pakistan of these criminals raping the dead bodies of women and the old grand-mothers—which is beyond imagination . . . It was not only the women who were made the victims, but men were also subjected to rape and abduction. Whenever people raised their voices against injustice, they were either insulted and beaten or killed . . . The Amnesty 1995 report was simply titled ‘Women in Afghanistan: A Human Rights Catastrophe.’ (Joya 32-33)

Afghans also believe that the transitional government set up by the Americans with these warlords in power was the beginning of a new era of destruction. From then on the country of Afghanistan has gone from bad to worse. Though a Loya Jirga (or grand assembly that is mainly organized for choosing a new head of state in case of sudden death, adopting a new constitution, or to settle national or regional issue such as war) was held, though so called democratic elections took place, though a new president was elected, though a parliament was constituted, nothing changed for the common Afghan man and especially the Afghan woman.

The democracy we were talking about at the Loya Jirga was still a distant dream for the people of Afghanistan. Almost none of my fellow Afghan women would ever get to drive a car, let alone fly in an aeroplane. Life expectancy is barely forty-five, and many women die much younger during childbirth. Almost 20 percent of infants never reach the age of five. And then there are hundreds of women who kill themselves each year to escape their violent husbands or the shame of being raped or abused. (Joya 101)
Malalai reveals in her memoir that in late 2001, the Western allies flew leading Afghan exiles, including many of the most notorious warlords, for a meeting in Germany “to set up a frame work for installing a ‘transitional’ government and new institutions. Most Afghans believe that it was the start of a new era of disaster” (Joya 63). Hamid Karzai who was brought in as the new President of Afghanistan was portrayed by the U.S. media as “a main anti- Taliban resistance leader” (Joya 62). But Joya says she echoes the sentiments of the Afghan people when she states, “Most people knew he was the man that the Americans wanted for the job and, from the very beginning, his hold on power was dependent on their support. Even his security detail consisted of heavily armed American soldiers” (Joya 64).

After the American invasion, many international organizations like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), The World Trade Organization (WTO), UN organizations and international NGOs started their operations in Afghanistan. Even the ISAF and NATO forces established themselves there to start reconstruction work. But women’s unemployment is still sky rocketing. Afghan women have never been trained for skilled labour. There is also a very low demand for female labour. As a result of this, women find themselves confined to a restricted range of income generating activities, mainly agriculture and handicrafts. A few women have managed to find jobs with various NGOs and international agencies which provide them a wee bit of better wages but majority of the women have been left in the lurch.

Rural poverty, landlessness and homelessness have resulted in a mass rural-to-urban labour migration. Despite continuing social restriction on women, a large number of internal migrants are women, but conditions of
work for women in urban areas are more exploitative than men. As in the Taliban period, a large number of women are engaged in begging and sex work. Some women work as servants and carpet weavers. For many families, young girls are treated like a commodity and are valued for the money they may bring in as bride price. (Rostami-Povey 47)

Most of the Afghan women working for these international organizations are not highly educated and they find many of the English words difficult to comprehend. The high blown English used by the volunteers of the various NGOs and UN organizations as well as by television reporters are challenging to these partially educated women who struggle to find the equivalents in their own Dari or Pashto language and many times fail to. They feel that their language is under threat. They wonder whether these organizations are actually bringing in amelioration in the lives of Afghan women or whether they are just pawns in the hands of the U.S. Many women feel that “their native culture is under threat, as many projects on gender, human rights and democracy are based on the western culture of individuality and fail to understand Afghan women’s relations to their family and community” (Rostami-Povey 51).

Women in Afghanistan have gone through wars, violence and brutality for more than two decades. Rapes, domestic violence and cold blooded killings have been etched into their living as well as sleeping moments. The untold suffering, oppression, grief, and outrage that the women of Afghanistan have endured cannot be put into mere words. Afghan women have not only gone through the harrowing experiences of war and the appalling and horrendous circle of violence, but, as Sima Wali, the first Minister for
Women’s Affairs after the fall of the Taliban, in her keynote address at the United Nations’ celebration of International Women's Day in 2002, states:

In addition, in a historically unprecedented way, became the targets of a new kind of war . . . The ferocity of the attacks against Afghan women has been so severe and draconian, that a new term “gender-apartheid,” was coined to describe the extent of the new kind of horror aimed directly at them. The continuum of violence trapped Afghan women into what is often referred to in other contexts as the “feminization of poverty,” as well as another international instance of the “feminization” of forced migration.

The political, social, and physical infrastructure of Afghan society has been ravaged and destroyed. Deplorable human conditions have forced twelve million women to live in abject poverty. Untold countless have been forced into the worse kind of abuses, into prostitution, and subject to trafficking . . . For the past two decades the story in Afghanistan has been about empowerment, the empowerment of the communists by brutish force; the empowerment of the warlords by equally brutish force. But nowhere in this story has the empowerment of the people of Afghanistan, in particular its women, been given a place. For more than twenty years, I have waged my own jihad for social justice and peace, as the rights of my Afghan sisters have been systematically violated to the extent of rendering us as non-citizens in our own country. Afghan women have suffered heinous crimes against humanity, and need diplomatic and financial leverage from the
international community to aid them in their fight to reclaim their rightful place in Afghan and international society. (8 March 2002, United Nations)

The world outside always feels that the crimes perpetrated against Afghan women are because of the extreme ideologies and beliefs of Islam but Sima Wali, defends Islam, and says that the religion that she believes in does not support rampage, brutality, rape, prostitution, or the trafficking and sale of young women and their children. Islam is not a religion that pushes women into poverty and starvation or denies them education and medical care. Islam never approves of keeping women under enslavement nor does it debase women. During the late 1920s Afghan women were allowed to vote by the then existing Afghan patriarchy. The 1964 Constitution granted women equal rights as men under the law of the Islamic Afghanistan. But, seen decades down the line, another male-dominated military took away those very fundamental human rights of Afghan women (8 March 2002, United Nations).

She reiterates that Afghanistan has always been a pawn in the hands of the United States in its battle against Russia. The needs of the people of Afghanistan are not important to the American governments as their own military, regional, economic and strategic interests have been considered before everything else, and they have been ready to sacrifice millions of Afghans to meet these interests. Malalai Joya also affirms this, “The Afghan people are sandwiched between two enemies- the anti-American terrorists such as the Taliban and the pro- American terrorists that came back to power with the Northern Alliance” (Joya 206).

Since the downfall of the Taliban, Afghan women’s activism for structural change has continued. But this championing is under danger of being abraded. There are a
number of discordant forces which are at work to negate this advocacy. The Taliban forces are garnering forces to make a comeback; the U.S. policy makers have their own strategy to silence the Afghan citizens especially women and the so-called American backed democratic government is doing much to help.

Women are denied the right to a voice and to negotiate their identity beyond rhetoric. They are faced with patriarchy, occupation, a lack of social structure and find their culture under attack from an alien regime. They are denied agency in the construction of their new reality. However, they try to continue their agency and autonomy despite the predicament of foreign involvement. (Rostami-Povey 77)

But in spite of all this, Afghan women have valiantly strived for surrogate approaches for persevering and have mapped their aspirations within the background of limited resources and cultural systems. As Cheryl Bernard expresses in Veiled Courage, “I see that Afghan women have begun to defend themselves, because they realize that they are being oppressed. As their weapons they have chosen education, humanitarian aid, information and medical services, not bombs and missiles” (Benard 251). They are neither passive nor helpless as they make choices and accept consequences to affect desired ends, both hopeful and tragic. Through their strength and resilience, these women try to overcome these obstacles. It might not always be a win-win situation, but because they are incredibly tough, they never give up.

The Western doctrine that led to the invasion of Afghanistan was and is about strengthening US political and economic hegemony and control of the energy resources of the region. Afghan men and women do not have
the power to combat them on their own. But they have the power to think and to implement what is best for them and how to construct and develop their country. They believe that in their own way and according to their own culture, they could change their communities to accept the participation of women in the economy and society and find legitimate roles for women in the process of reconstruction. (Rostami-Povey 78)

**Resilience**

In terms borrowed from both ecology and sociology, resilience can be defined as “the capacity of a system, enterprise, or a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances” (Zolli and Healy 7). Defining resilience can be quite a knotty problem because the term is used widely in different areas of study to mean different things. Originally it was first used in engineering to describe a property of timber, and to explain why some types of wood were able to accommodate sudden and severe loads without breaking. Over a period of time resilience came to be viewed as a means of assessing the ability of materials to withstand severe conditions. In 1973, C.S. Holling referred to the resilience of an ecosystem “as the measure of its ability to absorb changes and still exist i.e., the ability to return to its equilibrium state after a temporary disturbance” (qtd. in De Noort 28).

Pfefferbaum introduces resilience as “the ability of community members to take meaningful, deliberate, collective action to remedy the impact of a problem, including the ability to interpret the environment, intervene, and move on” (qtd. in Carpenter 71).

A.Wildavsky defines resilience as “the capacity to cope with unanticipated dangers after they have become manifest, learning to bounce back” (qtd. in Fransden 77). D. Brown
and J. Kulig explain resilience as “the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or sustained life stress” (qtd. in Lucini 41). A. Masten introduces resilience as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten 13). B. Egeland details resilience as “the capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning, or competence…despite high-risk status, chronic stress, or following prolonged or severe trauma” (qtd. in Wong 428). Resilience means the skills, abilities, knowledge, and insight that accumulate over time as people struggle to surmount adversity and meet challenges. It is an ongoing and developing fund of energy and skill that can be used in current struggles (Garmezy 416-430).

These definitions can be analyzed using the ‘Adaptation vs. Resistance’ framework. Most of the definitions echo the concept of adopting transformation to confront calamities. The community adapts to trauma by changing how it functions, or by using resources in ingenuous ways. The anti-thesis is that the community resists catastrophes (or expends resources) to avoid change and its resilience is reflected by how much adversity it can withstand without collapsing or dramatically changing. As J. M. Anderies states, “Resilience is the amount of change or disruption that is required to transform the maintenance of a system from one set of mutually reinforcing processes and structures to a different set of processes and structures” (qtd. in Lucini 35).

Another way to categorize the definitions is in terms of ‘Trajectory.’ Many of the ecologically-derived definitions target on whether or not the community undergoes a paradigm shift in the face of obstacles. Whether these changes are for the better or not are not gauged. The idea propagated is that a community is projected as resilient if it emerges a winner in the face of disaster, and on the other hand as weak if it does not weather the
storm. Most of the other definitions consider the trajectory of the community’s response to cataclysm. They focus on a community’s ability to bounce back after a tragic debacle. As Margaret A. Waller attests, “Resilience is the positive adaptation in response to adversity; it is not the absence of vulnerability, not an inherent characteristic, and not static” (qtd. in Lucini 35).

So resilience can be principally delineated in terms of the “presence of protective factors (personal, social, familial, and institutional safety nets) which enable individuals to resist life stress” (Kaplan 45). An important component of resilience, however, is the hazardous, adverse and threatening life circumstances that result in individual vulnerability. An individual’s resilience at any moment is calculated by the ratio between the presence of protective factors and the presence of hazardous circumstances.

For some, resilience is an attribute of the community. Others take a phenomenological view of resilience as a process. In engineering, resilience refers to the extent to which a structure can return to its original state after being unsettled. In disaster management it indicates the precipitancy with which critical systems can be reestablished after a natural/manmade disaster. In ecology it denotes an ecosystem’s ability to keep itself from being permanently damaged. In psychology it deals with an individual’s ability to battle all odds and get a handle on physical and emotional upheavals and ordeals. “Though different in emphasis, each of these definitions rests on of two essential aspects of resilience: continuity and recovery in the face of change” (Zolli and Healy 6).

Tania Rosales Moreno identifies resilience as the “subsumptive concept whose indeterminate potential to prescribe liberal structures, ways of life and forms of thought as both imminent and immanent is capable of exhausting all other alternative political
imaginations. Resilience imports a fatal imaginary: to live is not to live but rather not to die” (Moreno 1). Sometimes people are forced to move on to new areas or they find themselves in circumstances which are difficult to internalize or assimilate. Though the situations might have been much better in the prior environment they find that there can be no turning back-no relocation or going back to the original stage. Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy state that in such a situation “to improve one’s resilience is to enhance one’s ability to resist being pushed back from one’s preferred area, while expanding alternatives one can embrace if need arises” (Zolli and Healy 44). Resilience researchers call this phenomenon preserving adaptive capacity, which means the ability to adapt to changed circumstances while fulfilling one’s core purposes- a case of metamorphosis, one that allows for a condition or emergence and renewal. This is an essential skill in an age of unpredictable disruption and volatility.

The Community and Regional Resilience Institute (CARRI) is focused on enhancing the resilience of communities. Its extensive research leads to the conclusion that a definition useful for improving the ability of a community to regain functionality after a disaster ought to embody the following core concepts:

- Resilience is an inherent and dynamic attribute of the community. This means that it exists throughout the life of the community. Potentially it can either be determined absolutely, or at least changes in a community’s resilience can be detected.

- Adaptability is at the core of this attribute. Adaptation can take place either in response to or in anticipation of a crisis.

- Any adaptation must improve the community, i.e., must result in a positive outcome (positive trajectory) for the community relative to its state after
experiencing adversity. This can best be detected by considering the level of functionality of the community after a crisis.

- Resilience should be defined in a manner that enables useful predictions to be made about a community’s ability to recover from adversity. This will enable communities to assess their resilience and take action to improve it if necessary.

Based on this, CARRI has developed the following definition for its use:

“Community resilience is the capability to anticipate risk, limit impact, and bounce back rapidly through survival, adaptability, evolution, and growth in the face of turbulent change” (Web).

People who display resilience when faced with trauma and miserable conditions recognize that it is important to adopt skills which can transform themselves and their communities in such a way as to enable each one to make a significant addition. They realize that it is important to come together as a populace and work for the achievement of a common goal.

Community resilience is . . . the existence, development and engagement of community resources to thrive in a dynamic environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise. Resilient communities intentionally develop personal and collective capacity to respond to and influence change, to sustain and renew the community and to develop new trajectories for the community’s future. (Magis 405)

The National Youth Agency’s Youth Work Week in November 2009 focused on two key qualities – Resilience and Resourcefulness. This approach urged youth workers
to consider the factors that help children and young people manage, cope and even thrive in the face of adversity and disadvantage. It recognizes that personal development, family support and community influence positively impact on young people’s resilience, their ability to bounce back from life’s disappointments and setbacks and enable them to achieve their full potential. As Victor Frankl expounds in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, “Everything can be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way . . . Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment” (Frankl 33). The concept of survival is different from resilience. As Higgins observes, “Unlike the term survivor, resilient emphasizes that people do more than merely get through difficult emotional experiences, hanging on to inner equilibrium by a thread, because ‘resilience’ best captures the active process of self-righting and growth that characterizes some people so essentially” (qtd. in Neenan 8).

There are two ways by which the resilience of a community can be augmented. First, “by increasing its ability to resist when pushed by critical, sometimes permanently damaging thresholds and second, by preserving and expanding the range of niches to which a system can healthily adapt if it is pushed past such thresholds” (Zolli and Healy 8). Recent studies have proved that personal, psychic resilience is more comprehensive, amenable and agreeable than what had been previously conceived of it. The reason for this is because resilience is entrenched not only in one’s convictions and mores; it is not only an integral part of one’s temperament, understanding, know-how and genetic code; it is embedded deeply in one’s “habits of mind” (Zolli and Healy 14) – habits which can be proliferated and advanced.
Tenacious communities display tough social resilience. The community need not be wealthy. Resilience is never a product of the affluence of the community nor is it dependent on the stability of the community’s established institutions. Instead as Zolli and Healy put it, “it is rooted in deep trust, to contend with and heal disruption” (Zolli and Healy 15). It is found that it is next to impossible to introduce resilience from an outside agency but “when those same efforts are embedded authentically in the relationships that mediate people’s everyday lives, resilience can flourish” (Zolli and Healy 15). Every resilient community has a leader at its very core. The leader can either be young or old, male or female and they play a very dynamic role. Sometimes they may be behind the scenes, sometimes in the forefront. In the words of Zolli and Healy:

> These transactional leaders play a critical role, connecting constituencies, and weaving various networks, perspectives, knowledge systems, and agendas into a coherent whole. In the process, these leaders promote adaptive governance- the ability of a constellation of formal institutions and informal networks to collaborate in response to a crisis. These elements- beliefs, values, and habits of mind: trust and co-operation; cognitive diversity; strong communities, translational leadership, and adaptive governance- make up the rich soil in which social resilience grows. Taken together, they suggest new ways to bolster the resilience of communities and organizations, and people who live within them.

(Zolli and Healy 15-16)

In regions which have been devastated and ravaged by war, resilience can be used as a significant tool for investigation as to why in spite of constant exposure to war and
violence, many individuals, families and communities achieve emotional acclimatization, social functioning and withstand recurrent conflict, namely “good adaptation in a context of risk” (Mastern 4).

**Metamorphic Resilience of Afghan Women**

Zohra Yusuf Daoud, the only woman to this date ever to be crowned Miss Afghanistan speaks candidly about the appalling conditions women had to face during the years of militancy, “When the civil war came to Afghanistan the little but significant that was achieved by women came to a standstill. War steals the very breath that life offers, and Afghanistan stopped breathing” (Rostami-Povey 1). In spite of the gruesome and horrendous conditions of life in a country ravaged by war and strife and ruled by misogynists, Afghan women did find a space to display agency and autonomy challenging the essential construction of the passive Muslim woman bounded in domestic space. “A different dialogue is presented - one in which women are proactively engaged in re-shaping, re-interpreting, and reconstructing their roles. They break the predefined spaces of confinement and silence and contest the idea that Afghan society is about building barriers to shut women out, condemning them to a life of domesticity and oppression” (Moser and Clark 23).

Afghan history is punctuated with real life stories of spunky and valiant women who display resilience and courage in the face of adversity. In the tenth century, Rabia Balkhi who was the first woman to write love poetry in Persian had her wrists slashed by her brother when he discovered that she was “dishonouring” the family by having an affair with a slave. She wrote her last poem in her own blood as she lay dying. This was her act of resistance. Malalai of Maiwand who is hailed as one of Afghanistan’s greatest freedom fighters, went to the front lines to tend to the wounded during the Anglo-Afghan
war. She defied odds and encouraged the demoralized Afghan soldiers. She sacrificed her life to inspire the resistance fighters who delivered the British a stunning defeat (Dupree 313).

During the Soviet invasion, a small number of women who lived in urban areas enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom. But even there a great disparity could be seen when the lives of majority of women who lived in urban as well as rural areas were studied. Most of the women lived in poverty and misery. They never enjoyed any rights nor were they party to any process of development. During this period a few intellectual women who had gained access to education and healthcare displayed formidable resilience in the predominantly male Afghan society and started involving with women’s rights movements. Setting aside their apprehensions and fears of being suppressed they boldly questioned the religious leaders who taught that their religious texts gave the man the authority to raise their hands against their wives. But unfortunately these women found themselves isolated and segregated as most of the women could not identify with them. They were looked upon as radicals who had no qualms of subverting *The Quran*. Most of the families were entrenched in traditional gender relations which sometimes even older women whole heartedly supported and in some cases, there were women who looked upon these women’s right movements with mistrust mingled with skepticism. But that never deterred the resilient revolutionaries from voicing their views. Fahima Vorgetts, Director of Afghan Woman’s Fund writes about her experiences. She had always resented inequality that was meted out to women in her culture. She had raised her voice against this discrimination,

> When I took my questions to the adults in my life, I got an unsatisfactory response: This is how things have always been, and there is nothing
anyone can do about it. Moreover I was often given the religious explanation that this is what the Quran teaches and what God wants… Whenever I heard these things, I would become furious. I resented the adults for shoving religion down my throat, and I resented what religion did to women. As I grew older, I started to wonder whether other people were angry and resentful as I was. I asked my friends about their households and families. Were they also being discriminated against, and how did they feel about it? As we shared stories we realized that we all felt the same way. We began to discuss how we could bring about changes. We began to read books together. The timing of our unrest was perfect… At this time, a new organization called women’s Democratic Organization (WDO) was forming. Even though I was only ten years old I helped in its formation…At the WDO, friends and I found supportive environment of like-minded people and we no longer felt alone… We had to struggle for our beliefs, but the struggle only brought us closer and increased our commitment. (Vorgetts 94-95)

RAWA attempted to involve an increasing number of Afghan women in social and political activities aimed at acquiring women’s human rights and contributing to the struggle for the establishment of a government based on democratic and secular values in Afghanistan. Despite the suffocating political atmosphere, RAWA very soon became involved in widespread activities in different socio-political arenas including education, health and income generation as well as political agitation (Web). Payam-e-Zan, the nuanced, erudite, read and studied quarterly political magazine was the publication of
RAWA. The term in English means ‘Women’s Message’ and its focus was on women’s rights. Though Meena was assassinated in 1987, she left a legacy behind, a strong group of women to keep the torch burning. “RAWA is the first women’s organization whose members are willing to risk their lives explicitly for the issue of women’s rights” (Benard 66).

The condition of Meena’s dead body when recovered revealed that she had been tortured before being killed. Yet RAWA members never faced any ramifications nor were any of their secret locations invaded. This shows how she even in the throes of death had derived strength to be resilient, protecting the secrets of the organization.

RAWA provided financial support to conduct knitting, sewing and handicraft classes for women secretly during the Taliban rule. As many of the activists later confessed, these activities took place clandestinely in homes of women. The venues had to be changed frequently as they feared that the Taliban would come and punish them viciously. But with great courage and resilience they persisted. Women who found themselves without a job and an income benefitted greatly from these covert gatherings. They stitched and sewed and made handicrafts which were later sold or exchanged with other women. These secret gatherings emboldened them. They knew they were risking their lives but the spark that had been lit by Meena and other resilient women metamorphosed them from cowering, frightened individuals to resolute and iron-willed women ready to face all odds.

The clandestine work brought them into daily mortal danger. Smuggling endangered families to safety. Getting the survivors of massacres out of the killing zone and onto neutral ground. Secretly photographing Taliban beatings, torture and executions to provide documentation and evidence
and persuade the outside world to act. Warning political activists that questions are being asked about them and that the Taliban may be on their trail. Quickly closing down a secret school and shepherding children and teachers to safety before the Taliban patrol can arrive. Subverting the news blackout by gathering information from different provinces and passing it alone. (Benard 69)

During the rule of the Taliban, though there was ethnic conflict, women from divergent traditional and sectarian factions endeavoured together to resist the Taliban. They exercised identity and agency in myriad ways. During the turbulent times of strife and invasion, some Afghan women who were economically stable migrated to various countries. The poorer sections of society were left behind. But what is highly commendable is that many educated women chose to remain in their homeland and many who left returned to formulate survival strategies, working hand in hand to uplift the illiterate and the poor- to give them a voice and identity. They forged nexus of confidence and cooperation in their respective territories and zones, among their companions and also within their clans. These arteries of harmony became great tools of resilience and paved the way for greater women empowerment. Many prominent women became indispensable factors of the women’s movement. Some of them did reconstructive work without any fear, in the open, while some others did it surreptitiously.

The non-governmental Women’s Vocational Training Centre functioned with great vigour for two decades. Lessons in English and German were offered. Students were also made proficient in operating computers. Women were taught handicraft, animal husbandry, apiculture and honey –making. Women were encouraged to work and garner
income from their expertise. Children who were differently-abled were also taught skills which would fill them with a sense on contentment and a feeling of self-esteem. They had always been relegated to the fringes of society because of their “handicap.”

As the Taliban banned women from working, the number of women teachers came down drastically. The education system which had already been fragile caved in. It was at this time, the *Afghan Institute of Learning* stepped in. The AIL had been founded by Sakeena Yacoobi, a native of the Herat province. Though she had lived in America for nearly twenty years, she returned to Peshawar, the Pakistani border town in 1992. Peshawar had by then turned into a sprawling Afghan refugee camp. She initiated a number of teacher training programmes and trained a number of women as teachers. The AIL was set up in 1995 with the help of sponsors from the United States. It not only provided teacher training programmes but also courses on leadership skills, management, life skills and reproductive health. During the Taliban regime, AIL had secret schools for girls in many of the cities of Afghanistan. The organization was also grooming a generation of future women leaders in addition to providing education to women and girls. Prominent among the AIL leaders was Habiba Sarabi, a hematologist who spent most her time working in refugee camps in Peshawar and undercover in Afghanistan. She joined AIL in 1998 as trainee teacher and later rose to becoming its general manager. She was the Minister for Women’s affairs in the 2002 Hamid Karzai government. In 2005, she became the country’s first woman governor when she was delegated as the governor of Bamiyan, the province in Afghanistan famous for the statues of Buddha (Coleman 172).

In Herat, when the schools for girls were closed down by the Taliban, people who really wished to keep the literary culture of Herat intact started a secret school in the
guise of a sewing class. The plaque which they set up by the doorway of a mud walled house was inoffensive- it displayed the name of a sewing class, *Golden Needle*. But within, “there was a network of writers and poets, who had become the focus of resistance in this ancient city, risking their lives for literature and to educate women” (Lamb 156). Women would come to the *Golden Needle* dressed in their burqas. They would carry notebooks and pens in their handbags all concealed under layers of thread, cotton, scissors, sequins, dress materials etc. The owner of the house was Mohammed Nasir Rahiyab, a literature professor from Herat University. Inside the house the women would remove their burqas and listen with rapt attention to literary criticism, aesthetics and Persian poetry which were all forbidden by the Taliban. They would devour with eagerness classics by Shakespeare, Nabakov and James Joyce. The professor continued his job at the Herat University teaching the male students subjects introduced by the Taliban. Though he did not agree with their choice of subjects, he meekly followed their dictum because he never wanted to draw suspicion on the *Golden Needle*. “In a society where teaching one’s own daughter to read was a crime, the Sewing Circle was a venture that could easily have ended in more bodies swinging above Gul crossroads” (Lamb159). This shows the great deal of fortitude displayed by the Afghan people. They were ready to defy death in order to keep their passion for learning intact. The *Golden Needle* emboldened the society so much so that hundreds of identical courses were initiated in different Parts of Herat. Some of the Sewing Circle’s members camouflaged themselves in burqas and went to women’s houses to teach. They knew that they were putting their lives in jeopardy but as Professor Rahiyab comments, “A society needs poets and storytellers to reflect its pain”
According to the UNICEF report, around 29,000 girls and women in Herat received undercover education during the Taliban rule.

Though women in Afghanistan were subjected to a number of monstrosities during the years that war ravaged their beautiful countryside, though they had to witness inhumane and barbaric acts, they never lost hope. Just like a pupa metamorphoses into a radiant butterfly, most of them emerged victors leaving their distorted pupa shells behind. They never looked back but surged ahead. They learned to exploit their own potential and resourcefulness and found ways to survive.

Even after the Taliban were ousted, women have been involved in establishing a powerful, progressive movement within Afghanistan that would challenge the fundamentalists, fight for equality and freedom, and force the U.S. occupation of the country to be replaced by genuine democracy (Joya 265). A large number of women are selflessly working many a time risking their very lives to forge a path towards a future of peace, prosperity and equality. Like Albert Pike says, “What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal” (Pike 11).

This thesis proposes to discuss the resilience of the Afghan women who are caught in the vortex of patriarchal despotism as projected in the works Dear Zari by Zarghuna Kagar, My Forbidden Face by Latifa, Raising my Voice by Malalai Joya, Zoya’s Story by Zoya, A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini and Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes To Weep by Siba Shakib. The works assert how Afghan women confront the dilemmas of patriarchal agencies and other bids to crush them through polyandry, shackles of religion and culture, political vulnerability, domestic violence and the duress of war. All the writers chosen are of Afghan descent or have worked in
Afghanistan. They have been able to capture the horror and angst Afghan women face as a result of decades of war and strife. These works reveal the harrowing stories of Afghan women who were subjected to all kinds of unimaginable horrors during the Soviet rule, under the Taliban and the American invasion.

Zarghuna Kargar’s *Dear Zari* is “a poignant celebration of human resilience” (Web), according to Khaled Hosseini. The mysterious and misunderstood ideas about gender dichotomy in Afghanistan and the historical exclusion of women from the public sphere which have shrouded Afghan women’s lives in mystery for ages have been very vividly portrayed by Zarghuna Kargar in her compelling and enlightening work *Dear Zari*, a gripping collection of life stories which portray the passionate celebration of human resilience under unimaginable coercion. This comes under the genre testimonio, a powerful collection of testimonies which stresses upon the point that other than war, Afghan women have to face a more monstrous enemy, an enemy against whom the chances of winning are less. The stories drawn from ‘Afghan Women’s Hour,’ the BBC radio show, cover such controversial issues as the “exchange” and sale of child brides, rape, honour and virginity, and the pressures on women to produce a son. Some of the most poignant stories are those of the widows and divorced women, who find themselves shunned by their own families.

As Kargar herself says, “Afghan Women’s Hour’ was launched with the aim of giving a radio show to the women in Afghanistan which would cut across all tribal, social and economic boundaries” (Kargar 8). Since radio was the main source of mass communication in the war torn Afghanistan, most people in rural as well as urban areas had access to it. This programme was broadcast in both Pashtu and Dari languages which
was understood by most of the women in the country. Though this programme had its origin in London, Kargar soon trained young women in Afghanistan to interview women in their provinces who had undergone harrowing experiences. The shocking realities of these women’s lives revealed to the entire world, the despair and trauma endured by them during the Taliban regime.

These women who had been rendered voiceless and faceless for many years were at last given an identity. The heartbreaking stories of Sharifa, Wazma, Nasreen, to name a few, are not solitary incidents. They are the untold voices of the suppressed women of a nation that is crystallized in a matrix of male domination wherein the inequality of sexes is the result of a religious law and the fabrication of the society. Kargar’s portrayal of these women and their dreams, trials, and challenges presents a complex view of women in Afghanistan that goes beyond oppression and the stereotype of the veil.

Mahgul, Wazma, Janpary, Layla are some of the other women in this narrative who rose above their harrowing situations, beating the odds and emerging victors. In Kargar’s own words, “In Afghan culture you brew up a revolution if you try to push against the system and break open your cage” (Kargar 256). But the women in the stories have been brave enough to make an effort to break the shackles of traditions which had enslaved them. Many of them might not have been able to achieve their ends, they might have been worse off than they were at the beginning, they might have been insulted and battered for their courage but that never negates the fact that they stood up unflinchingly for what they believed was the right thing for them. They break their silence and courageously start their own revolution.
This is exactly what Elaine Showalter presents in her work *A Literature of their Own*. She deliberates on the female literary tradition which she interprets as a progression through three periods. Though she applied this aspect to different sub-cultures other than the Middle East, Afghan women can be categorized under this breakthrough especially in the second and third wave feminism that she introduces. The second wave is an outcry and revolt against the existing norms and mores and a demand for emancipation whereas the third wave is an unearthing of a latent energy – taking a deep introspection and embarking on a search for one’s identity. The patriarchal culture in Afghanistan had always recognized man as progressive, imperious, enterprising, judicious and ingenious; the female had always been seen as the ‘other’ – phlegmatic, ambivalent, sensitive, incoherent and ordinary. Afghan women were never born. They were made what they were by their male dominated, aggressive society. A few Afghan women, to echo the words of Showalter tried to promote a feminist ideal, boldly coming out of the confines of their homes to take part in the political issues of the country. They had a definite idea about their rights and were fully aware of the hegemony that existed in their society. They stressed upon the need for self-enhancement of Afghan women by educating them and making economically stable. These women had the firm belief that only education could liberate their kind and give them the courage and the fortitude to fight against their hegemonic society which would otherwise never permit them to live normal lives.

Malalai Joya’s *Raising my Voice*, Latifa’s *My Forbidden Face* and Zoya’s *Story* by Zoya are memoirs. *Raising my Voice* speaks about the deplorable condition of women in the so called democratic Afghanistan. The true situation of Afghanistan has been hidden behind a smoke screen of words and images which have been made up by the
U.S. and it is only lies that the Western media portrays. They are fooling the world by creating a perfect picture of Afghanistan whereas the truth is not that. Malalai Joya candidly exposes the situation in her country tracing its glorious history where women once enjoyed freedom and liberty under King Amanullah Shah to what it has come to now, controlled by the U.S. and NATO forces. She is the epitome of a resilient woman who has dared to voice the truth even when she knows that it can cost her, her life.

Her memoir *Raising My Voice*, gives expression “about the plight of the Afghan people from the perspective of a member of my country’s war generation” using her “personal experiences as a way to tell the political history of Afghanistan, focusing on the past three decades” of what she calls “oppressive rule” (Joya 4). She speaks about how women in Afghanistan live in conditions of abject impoverishment, enslavement and emptiness and how they are annihilated by foreign powers that kill innocent people in their determination to take over their governments. Hundreds of Afghan women kill themselves each year as escapism from domestic violence or from the stigma of being known as a rape victim. But even in the midst of such agonizing and traumatic situations, these women exhibit great resilience and dynamism in defying their persecutors. In Joya’s own words, “Afghan women are like sleeping lions who when awakened . . . would play a tremendous role in any afghan revolution” (Joya 145). The Taliban had banned female education. Women were not allowed to work. They could not go to a male doctor for treatment. But Joya speaks about how women took the initiative to conduct secret schools and medical centres. They stood up for each other to defy their perpetrators and in Joya’s words, they are their “sisters’ keepers” (Joya 56). The concord between them allows them to question the patriarchal structures that attempt to dispossess them of their basic rights.
They face different champions of patriarchy who try to suppress them, but they evade being swamped and have no qualms in fighting back in order to win back their prerogatives. This adamant defiance and refusal to concede defeat invigorates them and gives them enough fortitude and pluck to cope with the political turmoil and insurrection in their country.

*My Forbidden Face* is a true story penned by the sixteen-year-old Latifa who has conscientiously documented the occurrences over a five-year period as they transpired in her family’s life after the Taliban came into power in Afghanistan. Latifa is not her real name. She uses a pseudonym because though she had been able to escape to Paris with the help of a resistance group, she still has relatives and well-wishers in Afghanistan who would suffer at the hands of the Taliban and other warlords. From 1997 to 2001, the Taliban defiled Kabul unleashing a torrent of brutalities, accruing dishonor and opprobrium on women. Women were prevented from working. They were forbidden from attending schools, public life was off limits for them and they were not allowed to step out of their homes without a male relative. With a rectitude which is born out of pain, Latifa represents the microcosm of a young woman in Kabul educated first during the Soviet occupation, then under communist regimes throughout four years of civil war, and finally, as a mute spectator to the terrors imposed by the Taliban. Because the Taliban has imposed all kinds of curbs on women, Latifa and other women decide to resist. Latifa and her family by some means withstand and weather the storms of the painful years by first assisting their mother, who is a doctor, to clandestinely treat her patients with the very little medications and supplies she has until she runs out of them. Later on the mother supports her daughters and their friends who run a secret school to
teach the neighborhood children, who come to study without any books or pens, afraid of being arrested while aspiring to learn. Though safe as a refugee in Paris, Latifa still longs for the day she would be able to set foot on Afghan soil. She ardently desires a marvelous future for her beleaguered country, beginning with harmony, affluence and abundance complemented by education and medical amenities. She yearns for a true leader who would be able to lead her country into peace and prosperity. In her own words, “I pray God that whoever will lead our country may be, in his heart, as much Pashtun, as Tajik, as much Uzbek as Hazara . . . that our culture may be reborn from the ruins of our pillaged museums” (Latifa 201). She visualizes an Afghanistan where women would have a voice and who would contribute much to the development of the country.

_Zoya’s Story_ is a young woman’s fiery narrative of her surreptitious struggle of resilience against the Taliban and religious bigotry at the peril of her own life. A saga of angst and misfortune, daring and promise, _Zoya’s Story_ is a compelling testimony of the open-ended campaign to demand human rights for the marginalized women of Afghanistan. She devotes the memoir to “the women of Afghanistan, victims of inhuman suffering inflicted by fundamentalism” (Web). Unambiguous and pragmatic, she pens this memoir under the pseudonym Zoya with the assistance of John Follain and Rita Cristofari and distinctly portrays the actuality of growing up in an Islamic culture, the dread of living in a perennial war belt, the pain of losing loved ones, the terrors of a woman’s life under the Taliban, and the newly perceived healing and metamorphosis that escort her on a path of resilience. Zoya is a spectator to the atrocities executed in Afghanistan by Taliban and Mujahideen warlords who defeated Russian occupiers of that country. But her memoir is not mere images of devastation and outrage but a message of
optimism against all odds. She becomes a member of RAWA and joins in the struggle along with other women, the struggle to liberate her country from the vicious forces that are strangulating it.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* which unravels the lives of two women was inspired by Hossieni’s visit to Afghanistan in 2003. In his own words:

Because I had gone to Afghanistan in March of 2003 and seen firsthand the aftermath of the war there, heard so many stories about what happened to women, the tragedies that they had endured, the difficulties, the gender-based violence that they had suffered, the discrimination, the being barred from active life during the Taliban, having their movement restricted, being banned essentially from practicing their legal, social rights, political rights. I felt it was an outrage and I felt it was a very important story. And when I was in Kabul in 2003 I heard many personal stories about women, and sort of eventually over a couple of years those voices coalesced into a pair of characters. And I sat down finally with the story in hand and wrote *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. (Web)

The novel brings to light how Mariam and Laila who are forced into an oppressive marriage to the same man display fortitude and strength in all the harrowing experiences they undergo. They suffer unimaginable cruelty at the hands of Rasheed, their husband. But they prove to be overcomers. Their resilience is demonstrated in the way they turn to each other in the midst of their suffering to forge a bond which keeps them going. Their common experience of oppression enables them to form a connection so as to fight back and overcome the complexities of race, gender and religion. The coalition between the women not only
helps them to tide over the horrendous situations but also enables them to find some assuagement, healing and consolation. Their female solidarity can be seen as a kind of emancipation which results in them building fresh identities and persevering in spite of their hardships. This kind of sisterhood often becomes so much rooted in their very selves that they are able to look beyond themselves and extend succor and sustenance to many other women who undergo such fiery trials. A paradigm shift can be seen as this relationship which transcends the levels of companionship and becomes a kind of movement which encompasses women as a whole.

_**Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep** by Siba Shakib is the story of a young woman names Shirin-Gol who suffers terribly under the Taliban regime. As a young girl Shirin had witnessed the Russians bombing her tiny hamlet. Along with her surviving family members she relocates to Kabul but life proves to be cruel to her. Her brother gets into a gambling debt and marries her off to the opium addict to whom he owns money. Shirin-Gol’s exodus to refugee camps, the rapes that she is subjected to, the prostitution that she forced into to ensure that her children are fed, her attempt at taking her own life seem like a bad movie but it is the reality. But these crises don’t deter her. She emerges resilient. She forges bonds with other women, takes up the task of ameliorating the society that she finally finds herself in. She never gives up in the midst of all the pain and catastrophes. She is a brave soul and greatly determined to move on because she desires that her children will have a better future. She leaves no stone unturned for that, resists all shocks and emerges a victor. It is through giving more emphasis to the community around her rather than her own self Shirin-Gol survives.
“Women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves” (Nnaemeka 19).

**Review of Related Literature**

The researcher has benefited from review of literature. There are quite a number of books on Afghanistan and Afghan women but hardly any critical works on the novels selected by the researcher. The researcher has studied a few books wherein the resilience of women has been portrayed. Other than books on the history and culture of Afghanistan, the researcher has perused through books dealing with the resilience of women in different cultures.

Louis Dupree’s *Afghanistan* (1973) gives a detailed history of the customs and practices of Afghanistan. Elaheh Rostami-Povey’s *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion* (2007) looks at how women have fought oppression and defied conventions. She states vehemently that the future of women’s rights in Afghanistan is contingent not only on overpowering local male domination, but also on confronting imperial tyranny and obscuring the increasing disjuncture between the West and the Muslim world. *Veiled Courage: Inside the Afghan Women’s Resistance* (2002) by Cheryl Benard reveals the impressive bravery and spirit of the women of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), whose gusty clandestine activities frustrated the forces of the Taliban and warranted the world’s fierce appreciation. By highlighting the multiple meanings of veiling, Sahar Amer’s *What is Veiling?* (2014) decisively shows that the realities of the practice cannot be homogenized or oversimplified and extend well beyond the religious and political accounts that are overwhelmingly proclaimed both inside and outside Muslim-majority societies. Neither defending nor criticizing the practice, *What Is*
Veiling? clarifies the voices of Muslim women who struggle to be heard and who, veiled or not, demand the right to live spiritual, personal, and public lives in dignity.

Hafizullah Emadi’s *Repression, Resistance and Women in Afghanistan* (2002) takes a long look at the role of development and modernization policies implemented by the state in the pre- and post-Soviet eras, under the Taliban, and beyond. He finds that such policies have failed to bring about much-needed change and improvement for women. Modernization strategies benefited only a small segment of urban women and left the plight of rural women unchanged. *Culture and Customs of Afghanistan* (2005) by Hafizullah Emadi reveals much about the customs and culture of the Afghan people and their ways of life that have been in flux for so long. Christina Lamb’s *The Sewing Circles of Herat: A Personal Voyage through Afghanistan* (2002) is about the journey of a British journalist to the suburbs of Afghanistan during the Mujahedeen rule. She documents the lives of the people no one else had written about, the forsaken victims of almost a quarter century of war. She also speaks about the resilient women writers of Herat who endangered their lives to carry on a literary tradition under the facade of sewing circles.

The veil can be an instrument of feminist empowerment, and veiled anonymity can confer power to women. Starting from her own marriage ceremony at which she first wore a full veil, Rafia Zakaria in her book *Veil* (2017) examines how veils do more than they get credit for. Part memoir and part philosophical investigation, *Veil* questions that what is seen is always good and free, and that what is veiled can only signal servility and subterfuge. From personal encounters with the veil in France (where it is banned) to Iran (where it is compulsory), Zakaria shows how the garment's reputation as a pre-modern relic is fraught and up for grabs. The veil is an object in constant transformation, whose
myriad meanings challenge the absolute truths of patriarchy. *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (2006) written by Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi deals with her public career and reveals her private self: her faith, her experiences, and her desire to lead a traditional life, even while serving as a rebellious voice in a land where such voices are muted and even silenced by brute force. Ebadi is a tireless voice for reform in her native Iran, where she argues for a new interpretation of Sharia law in harmony with vital human rights such as democracy, equality before the law, religious freedom and freedom of speech. She chronicles her childhood and upbringing before the Iranian Revolution, her education and student years at the University of Tehran, her marriage and its challenges, her religious faith, and her life as a mother and as an advocate for the oppressed. As a human rights campaigner, in particular for women, children and political prisoners in Iran, her autobiography is a vehement expression of the resilience displayed by a courageous and unusual woman.

Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879) traces the awakening of Nora Helmer from her previously unexamined life of domestic, wifely comfort. Having been ruled her whole life by either her father or her husband Torvald, Nora finally comes to question the foundation of everything she has believed in once her marriage is put to the test. She comes to an inner-understanding of her own identity and worth and displays resilience to break free of the restrictions stifling her and fly on her own.

Set against a landscape littered with tragic tales of horrific suffering, Jean Sasson’s *For the Love of a Son* (2010) chronicles the story of one resolute but tormented Afghan woman, Maryam who is determined to achieve freedom and equality with men. From the time she was a little girl, Maryam had rebelled against the terrible second-class
existence that was her destiny as an Afghan woman. Jean Sasson gives voice to the revolutionary and strong Maryam who in spite of living in a restricted environment creates her own pocket of freedom. The power of Sasson’s prose is that she tells the story in the first person, so we hear it as if from the mouth of Maryam herself. In the Afghan society even the relatives conspire against a woman and keep her trapped in an abusive situation. The man’s word is law in their culture and it is never opposed by family members even when they know that the woman suffers tangibly. Maryam is the third generation woman who carries the same spark of grit and prowess which her grandmother Mayana and mother Sharifa displayed. Though tormented she displays resilience and is determined to achieve freedom and equality with men.

Azar Nafisi’s luminous masterwork *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) gives a rare glimpse, from the inside, of women’s lives in revolutionary Iran and is a remarkable exploration of resilience in the face of tyranny, and a celebration of the liberating power of literature. Every Thursday morning for two years in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Azar Nafisi, a bold and inspired teacher, secretly gathered seven of her most committed female students to read forbidden Western classics. Some came from conservative and religious families, others were progressive and secular; some had spent time in jail. They were shy and uncomfortable at first, unaccustomed to being asked to speak their minds, but soon they removed their veils and began to speak more freely—their stories intertwining with the novels they were reading by Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Vladimir Nabokov. As Islamic morality squads staged arbitrary raids in Tehran, as fundamentalists seized hold of the universities and a blind censor stifled artistic
expression, the women in Nafisi’s living room spoke not only of the books they were reading but also about themselves, their dreams and disappointments.

Nadia Hashimi’s *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* (2015) a searing tale of powerlessness, fate, and the freedom to control one's own fate. In Kabul, 2007, with a drug-addicted father and no brothers, Rahima and her sisters can only sporadically attend school, and can rarely leave the house. Their only hope lies in the ancient custom of *bacha posh*, an ancient Afghan custom which allows young Rahima to dress and be treated as a boy until she is of marriageable age. As a ‘son,’ she can attend school, go to the market, and chaperone her older sisters. But Rahima is not the first in her family to adopt this unusual custom. A century earlier, her great-aunt, Shekiba, left orphaned by an epidemic, saved herself and built a new life the same way. Crisscrossing in time, *The Pearl the Broke Its Shell* interweaves the tales of these two resilient women separated by a century who redefine frontiers and take the less travelled road to change their *naseeb* or destiny.

The nameless Afghan woman in Atiq Rahimi’s *The Patience Stone* can be classified as a gendered subaltern who has been pushed to the margins in a world dominated by powerful men. But there is a capacity for resistance within her and it comes from her inner strength. She might be physically weak but there is a power within her which can be unleashed by a suitable agency. In the novel the silence that her husband is forced into acts as her agency to resist. Her resistance is endorsed in his silence. Rahimi has not depicted the woman as a glorified soul languishing ethereally in the *chador*. As the woman’s monologue with her comatose husband goes on, the layers are excoriated, expositions come forth and what emerges is the vignette of an intricate and nuanced human being. She is represented as daring, resolute, an adoring mother, but she
is also imperfect in essential human ways, a woman capable of dissimulating, deluding, of being vindictive, a creature if, pushed hard enough bares her teeth.

In Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock* the protagonist, Maya, is largely affected by her childhood upbringing in her father’s home because in Indian culture there can be seen different norms for raising the male and female children. Being a girl, her life is always under close scrutiny and surveillance. The patriarch restricts the intellectual growth of women; moulds and conditions their psychological development. The novel is an ironical dramatization of Maya’s consciousness of her inner self against the backdrop of the domineering patriarchy. She is emotionally handicapped to adjust with the social expectations due her restricted, unnatural childhood upbringing. She holds her father responsible for her ‘unnatural’ development as a human being who is incapable to build social relationships. Maya develops the sense of grudge against her father which later on develops into hatred. She revolts against the authority of her father by taking vengeance on him by killing Gautama, her husband who represents and stands for patriarchal authority.

The thesis ‘From Oppression to Optimism through Self-spun Philosophy – A Comparative Reading of the Fictional Output of Maya Angelou and Bama’ by Sarojini Sudha discusses at length how the literary discourses of the two representative writers – Maya Angelou, the Black American, and Bama, the Indian Dalit – offer new and positive insights into their communities. A comparative reading of these two writers exhibits their optimism despite the discrimination and disillusionment they had endured. It has been found that there is an intense period of disillusionment in the history of contemporary marginalized women’s writing. But there is also a healthier counter discourse that allows them to go beyond despair. There is a forward looking optimism within their writings that
convey transformability of existing conditions. They register their protest and resist whatever is detrimental to the gynic quest of self-identity, self-assertion and self-worth. This act of autogenesis, the process of coming into being from silence to sound, is recorded as a slow process from marginalized invisibility into central vision.

Afghan women believe that they are capable of great things. They believe truly that they are capable of healing themselves and help healing others around them. For this, they stop playing the victim, get over themselves and realize their potential. Everyone has a choice perhaps not an easy one, but a choice, nevertheless. Thus, they become female-heroes, unusual women. These unusual women cannot be other than what they are because they cannot and in fact, they like themselves. Like many suppressed women across different cultures, Afghan women in the works selected for this study are marvelously and intricately designed, uncommon in thought and action and their problems are as complex as ever but silently borne and successfully fought over. They exhibit their strength and perseverance, enduring great trauma yet through it all resisting and never giving in to the pressure and pain their society put them through.

Statement of the Problem

The Afghan society is crystallized in a matrix of male domination wherein the inequality of sexes is the result of a religious law and the fabrication of the society. One can see a powerful portrait of patriarchal despotism where women are agonizingly dependent on fathers, husbands and sons—the bearing of male children being their sole path to social status. Women share a territory of lived experiences set apart by their oppressions, compromises, endurances, silences, and thwarted aspirations and ambitions. They continue to be a burdensome appendage.
But these women display a rare streak of feistiness and go out their way to bring about a metamorphosis in their devastating situation. They question and probe the connections between cultural conditioning, psychosexual determinants and religio-political factors which govern their destinies. They forge strong bonds despite the efforts of their husbands and their government to reduce women’s power and thus discover alternative ways of survival and empowerment.

**Aims and Objectives**

- To consider the double marginalization status of the Afghan woman
- To trace the history of Afghanistan with special reference to women
- To analyze the dangerous, war-torn, tumultuous conditions that the Afghan women face.
- To map out the actual, diverse realities of women in the country
- To examine the emotional and physical trauma faced by the Afghan women.
- To scrutinize Afghan women as victims of an internalized patriarchy within a religious structure that defines and delimits their agency
- To gauge the Afghan women’s attempt to construct a new identity and voice for themselves and their community
- To interpret how Afghan women who in spite of living in a restricted environment create their own pocket of freedom
- To study the methods of resilience/resistance adopted by the Afghan women to tide over their horrid situations.
- To assess the strength derived by the Afghan women by forging various types of female bonding/sisterhood
Hypotheses

The hypotheses of this dissertation are that Afghan women display a great sense of resilience in the face of terror. Thousands of Afghan women are able to fan the spark of resilience into a great fire of indefatigability, when a few women spark off a revolution of change and courage. Women are ready to risk their lives to defend the honour and dignity of other women. The women of Afghanistan understand that the key to their freedom is in their own hands, so they dare to be brave and prepare to make sacrifices to remove the obstacles in their path. This study attempts to discover the ways these women exhibit resilience in spite of all physical, emotional and psychological challenges put forward by their patriarchal society.

Chapterization

There are five chapters including introduction and conclusion. Chapter One traces the history of Afghanistan and how the destiny of women underwent radical changes through the different periods in history. Chapter Two scrutinizes Dear Zari: The Secret Lives of the Women of Afghanistan by Zarghuna Kargar, a selection of real life stories, which can be classified under the genre testimonios. Dear Zari brings to light the obscure lives of women across Afghanistan and gives them a space to recount their stories in their own words. Penetrating, impassioned, often distressing but at times inspirational, these thirteen stories divulge how the practices of this strongly religious and intensely traditional society can precipitate palpable anguish for many women. Chapter Three analyses the literary works Raising My Voice by Malalai Joya, My Forbidden Face by Latifa and Zoya’s Story by Zoya. They are memoirs and represent how in the midst of many unimaginable horrors, the hijab-clad faceless Afghan woman displays unimaginable levels of resilience and
strength through open defiance of the horrifying conditions that had seemed to engulf her.

Chapter Four interprets the novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, and *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes To Weep* by Siba Shakib– how Afghan women display resilience and fortitude mainly through female bonding. Chapter Five summarizes the findings of the research.

This study gives a deeper insight into the inner strength and resilience of the Afghan women who do not buckle amidst the harsh realities and cruelty that surround them. They have defied all odds and have displayed before the world that an undying spirit of tenacity, camaraderie, hope and humaneness has always existed beneath their veils.