Chapter II

AFFLICTED BUT NOT CRUSHED

Resilience can be defined as the confident and decisive transformation of a person who has undergone a nerve-racking, antagonistic and detrimental encounter. When a person is “bombarded by daily stress, it disrupts their internal and external sense of balance, presenting challenges as well as opportunities” (Richardson 12). Resilience is the unified modification of physical, psychological, emotional and metaphysical facets in a set of favourable or negative ambience, a definite impression of self that is able to preserve constructive assignments that arise at diverse phases of life. “Resilience research is focused on studying those who engage in life with hope and humour despite devastating losses” (Buheji 145). Resilience is not just transcending an acutely exigent dilemma, but also rebounding from that arduous situation with dexterous alacrity. In fact, resiliency allows a person to ricochet from catastrophes as a rejuvenated, ingenious and enterprising individual.

Psychological resilience is the potentiality of a person to triumphantly reconcile to life with alacrity in the thick of inimical and devastating circumstances. Catastrophe, distress and tension may visit a person in many different ways. These hard knocks come in the form of failure in relationships, suppression of a person’s desires and needs, humiliating circumstances, health issues as well as physical and emotional torture. Resilience is the capacity to recuperate from a colourless experience with commensurateness and proficiency. It is not an extraordinary and exceptional skill; People do possess it within themselves in differing measures. It can be mastered and executed by all and sundry. It should be recognized as a system, rather a technique, and not an attribute of one’s character.
Rutter defines it as “a process of individuation through a structured system with gradual discovery of personal and unique abilities” (Rutter 10).

Most people believe in the myth that people who exhibit resilience do not harbor conflicting and pessimistic feelings or sentiments and remain buoyant and cheerful in all trying situations. But the reality is that resilient people have learned the ropes through careful practice. They have over a particular period, built up good survival systems which help them to efficiently and competently cruise through the most terrible and disastrous cataclysm. In the words of Piper, “People who demonstrate resilience are people with optimistic attitude and positive emotionality and are, by practice, able to effectively balance negative emotions with positive ones” (Piper 113).

When individuals find the willpower to positively connect to their surroundings which results in their comfort and advantage, resilience is born. It is not a momentary transformation, rather a progressive, steady process. Research has shown that when people find themselves face to face with an antagonistic condition, there are three ways that they access it. The approach that they adopt will give an idea as to whether they can emerge strong or not. The three approaches are: First, they explode with rage. Secondly, negative emotions crush them. They cave in, become dazed and frozen, and find it impossible to respond. Finally, they are extremely dismayed about the upsetting scenario.

The third type of approach is adopted by the resilient people who become agitated about the disturbing state and thus try to alter their prevailing pattern to grapple with the situation. The first two categories of approach cause individuals to embrace the victim’s part by criticizing others and repudiate any coping methods even after the catastrophic dilemma is over. They do not respond to the situation in a mature manner instead they
react impulsively, rather than respond to the situation. They battle against numerous negative emotions like angst, apprehension, misery, fury, antagonism, anguish and despair which reduce their potentiality to iron out the problems they come into contact with. In the process, they become drained and their resiliency is sucked out. On the other hand a resilient person deals with threats and disastrous situations depending on individual reserves, tenacity, vigour and other positive capacities of psychological capital such as faith, confidence, expectation and productiveness. Tiding over a crisis by resiliency is outlined as “ricoeheting back” to a natural state of functioning.

It can be perceived that psychological resilience points to a person’s capability to combat against distress and not display psychological debilitation like fragility and vulnerability. This is the major psychological outlook of resilience, that is, resilience is a person’s sufficiency to avoid becoming jaundiced and pessimistic notwithstanding disturbing circumstances.

Chronic stress can be caused by a majority of factors. It can be death of a loved one, a major illness, emotional and physical assaults, violence, survival struggles and the like. Such events can be called stress factors or risk factors. Resilience is built in a person by training him/her to adopt techniques to cope in the midst of such risk factors. They have to learn to adapt themselves in so as to overcome such disturbing situations.

The basic flow model (called the transactional model) of stress and coping is: A stressor (i.e. a potential source of stress) occurs and cognitive appraisal takes place (deciding whether or not the stressor represents something that can be readily dealt with or is a source of stress because it may be beyond one's coping resources). If a stressor is consider to be a
danger, coping responses are triggered. Coping strategies are generally either be outwardly focused on the problem (problem-solving), inwardly focused on emotions (emotion-focused) or socially focused, such as emotional support from others. (Neill 45)

Humanistic psychology defines resilience as a person’s strength or rather efficiency to bloom and attain potency in the midst of such stressors. Resilient individuals and communities are more prone to see difficult situations as openings for development and progress. Strictly speaking, resilient individuals do not just wrestle well with harrowing agonies and stressors but they identify such challenges as learning and development opportunities.

It can be seen that certain persons validate themselves as being more resilient than others, but it should be understood that resilience is a progressive and active quality. It is not a permanent or constant faculty. In other words, resilient people exhibit charismatic and compelling self-renewal, whereas less resilient individuals find themselves fatigued and exhausted, negatively impacted by the throes of agonizing life situations. John Dewey, the renowned twentieth century American educational philosopher, describes this sense of continuance through dynamic self-renewal:

A stone when struck resists. If its resistance is greater than the force of the blow struck, it remains outwardly unchanged. Otherwise, it is shattered. While the living thing may easily be crushed by a superior force, it none the less tries to turn the energies which act upon it into means of its own further existences. . . . It is the very nature of life to strive to continue in
being. Since this continuance can be secured only by constant renewals, life is a self-renewing process. (Dewey 1)

It can be observed therefore that resilience is some kind of intense and powerful characteristic that is very personal and individualistic. If entrenched solidly within, resilience can lie dormant yet animatedly existent in seasons of calamity and misfortune, and then blossom forth when the state of affairs becomes more agreeable. The core beliefs and ideologies as well as value systems that each person possesses is the most prevalent entity in the human psyche. Human psychological involvement is radically constructed by what happens in the inner sanctum or core beliefs. When situations become overwhelmingly staggering, when the wind is knocked off one’s sails, when things go terribly wrong, resilience emerges as the capability to still discover the wherewithal, grit, tenacity and sanity to wrestle with the eventuality and in the midst of all disparities and handicaps, to find routes for survival. The ability of human beings for discovering ingenious survival tactics is highly commendable. It is not by using sheer will power alone that enables a person to resist causalities and emerge victorious. There needs to be an inveterate and deep-rooted commitment per diem to focus on and engage one’s inmost capacities of resilience so as to honestly consider oneself supple and resilient to a potpourri of human challenges. It has to be noted that resilient people not necessarily emerge survivors or winners. Many resilient people fail to achieve their ends. Many of them fall. But they fall not just by passively taking the blows. They ride the waves high before sometimes being sucked into the depths. There are many famous people like Nelson Mandela, Helen Keller, Anne Frank, Aung San Suu Kyi and Oprah Winfrey who have become famous because of their resilient struggle. However, it is not a standing rule that resilient people should make
headlines always. Most resilient people are not famous. Yet their lives are however distinguished by incidents, processes and episodes which en masse epitomize the traits that empower a person not only to shoot ahead of what others may put up with as debacles but to endorse such experiences to penetrate into life’s quintessence and ride on the crest of the wave higher than ever. Resilience it not something that ever happens by accident. It can be found in people who have trained hard, have particular mindsets, mental and emotional skills and a deep sense indomitability and tenacity to triumph over critical predicaments.

Genres in literature are born as a result of modifications in the social and political diapason; literature is a mode of discourse used to rearrange the societal volatility and a new genre is the most of the times a product of these literary discourses. Literature is often used as a way to naturalize political ideology, and it is often “produced by members of the dominant classes in society who tend to represent and naturalize differences as it is seen from their social and cultural position” (Gugelberger and Kearney 3). Not quite long ago, there has been a new emanation in Latin American literature, called testimonial literature, or the testimonio.

Testimonial literature is an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as a representative of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or exorcising and setting aright official history. (Sklodowska 86)
This type of literature surfaced as a reaction against the prevailing dominant Latin American literature; it came across as a means to counter and rectify the current literature. These narratives are much divergent from biographies or autobiographies, because in this kind of literature the author interviews a person from a subaltern group, an individual who has been suppressed, subdued and muzzled. The account of that person is translated and sometimes converted to the first person format, which makes the reader feel that the central figure of the narrative is recapping the account orally. Sometimes, it can be felt that this form of narrative is analogous to an ethnographic work, but it is distinct in the sense that it stems from the commitment to construct cognizance about certain societies, and awareness about marginalized sectors and the exploitations they endure. This narrative endeavours to initiate a “global reordering of a social and economic context of power/differences within which “literature” is produced and consumed” (Gugelberger and Kearney 6). Testimonios aim at reconstructing and breathing new life into the already existing literature, giving more importance to the marginalized groups, trying to focus on their issues and problems. They try to create a space for the so called “other” groups who have been relegated to the fringes of society, to try and make their voices heard.

A testimonio is a first person narrative of a situation or series of happenings which the chronicler has gone through or witnessed and whose conduct and viewpoints are an anti-thesis to the status quo ante. Women writers of testimonio bring to light exploitation, injustice and disparities that women endure in their different communities and cultures; coercive and suppressive acts which can be physical, psychological, emotional, mental and also economical which most of the times end up in a convoluted
mesh of domineering and insusceptible power. “What is appealing about their chosen subjects is precisely their exercise of resistance through the act of narrating, and in the willful projection of their own image onto a protagonist who they shape as an agent in her own life story” (Mihaly 1). In mainstream media, the images that depict women in Afghanistan are often bleak, miserable and sad. The stories that circulate outside of Afghanistan are about Afghan women who speak about the dangerous, war-torn, tumultuous conditions that they face. More than anything, what is vocalized is how Afghan women are oppressed; Afghan women suffer under their burqas, at the hands of the men in their life, within their Taliban and tribal controlled culture. The devastating truth is that the classic portrayal of the Afghan woman lacks one crucial thing: the Afghan woman. The media related to Afghan women can be exploitative at times; it victimizes the women, represents them for outside consumption and hardly sheds light on the actual, diverse realities of women in the country.

The mysterious and misunderstood ideas about gender dichotomy in Afghanistan and the historical exclusion of women from the public sphere have shrouded Afghan women’s lives in mystery for ages. Much of this is 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 powerful collection of testimonies also 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 anthropology of suffering is a body of work that gives voice to the physical and emotional pain of people battling with chronic poverty,
social marginalization, and routinized violence. It focuses on disruption and regulation: how ordinary social life ‘hurts’ and how this hurt becomes part of the social experience (Davis 155).

Zarghuna Kargar was born in Kabul in 1982. When the Civil War erupted across Afghanistan, she and her family escaped to Pakistan, and it was there that Zarghuna attended a journalism course organized by the BBC. Then in 2001 her family sought asylum in the UK, and she started working for the BBC World Service Pashtu Section. She joined the team on the groundbreaking programme ‘Afghan Woman’s Hour’ as producer and presenter in 2004, until it was discontinued in 2010.

The stories drawn from Afghan Woman’s Hour 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 Woman’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. There were different dimensions to the programme which contributed to its public appeal. There would be discussions on a variety of topics ranging from child marriage to domestic violence. There would also be reports which would enlighten the women on a plethora of topics like contraception and child mortality. The cultural diversity of the land would be shared through songs and recipes. Subjects like rape, divorce, virginity which
were usually discussed behind closed doors would be discussed at length. In fact, when this programme was first started, the aim was to cover a wide range of issues which really concerned the Afghan woman. But soon listeners started clamouring for life stories, incidents which had the scent and feel of real human struggle and pain.

Though this programme had its origin in London, Kargar soon trained young women in Afghanistan to interview women in their provinces who had gone through 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 heart breaking stories of the women portrayed in *Dear Zari* 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. The candour with which these brave women share their stories made Kargar realize that these incidents needed to be made known to the rest of the world. The women who lived in the more developed parts of the world might not be able to identify themselves with the Afghan woman but they would know how it was to be a wife, mother or sister, how it was to be a woman with thwarted dreams, how it was to face disappointments and disillusionments and how it was to have to forget the man one loved. It was this revelation that made Kargar take the decision to universalize these incidents by putting together the most inspiring and
fascinating of the life stories in the form of *Dear Zari*. All the stories in *Dear Zari* epitomize the suffering caused by deep rooted Afghan traditions.

Sharifa’s story is one that brings to light the Afghan tradition of glorifying the woman who gives birth to a male child. If a woman is unable to produce a male child, she is looked down by the society and her family is not considered complete.

Any woman who manages to give birth to a succession of sons is cherished by her husband, praised by her mother-in-law and respected by her community. In this way, the mother feels proud of having achieved what she believes she was born to do. If on the other hand a woman is unable to produce a boy, she feels a failure and her life is made miserable.

(Kargar 37)

Sons are considered so very important in the Afghan society that most mothers tend to neglect their daughters to favour their sons. Daughters are not treated at par with sons even in the matter of health care and nutrition, let alone education. Kargar speaks vociferously of the innumerable times she had wished to be a boy because she had been deeply saddened by the spiteful comments her mother had to endure because the latter had been unable to produce a son. Kargar speaks about the time she had met a woman who had given birth to twins and who had stopped breast-feeding the female twin because she believed that “one day the daughter would be the property of another family, through marriage to someone else’s son, whereas the boy would make a family in his own parent’s home. He would bring a bride home and together they would one day care for his mother, so he needed to grow up strong and healthy” (Kargar 39). Women would forget their maternal calling and responsibilities and would be so naïve not to understand
that unhealthy and malnourished daughters would make unhealthy and malnourished daughters-in-law. Kargar wonders how men would treat women on an equal footing when mothers fail to treat their daughters equal to sons. But she also realizes how inferior and incomplete women feel when their own family refuses to accept them because they have given birth to a female child and how pained they are when their husbands ignore them and refuse to hold their daughters in their arms.

Sharifa who was Kargar’s classmate at the university for Afghan refugees in Peshawar had to go through a living nightmare because her mother was unable to produce a male heir. She, who was a bubbly young girl, vibrant and full of life, would withdraw into her shell many a time and her countenance would be darkened because she was terribly saddened by the fact that her mother had to be the butt of their relatives’ criticisms and the ire of her father because of the fact that they were seven “incomplete sisters without a brother” (Kargar 42). Sharifa had only one aim in life-she wanted to make sure that she would be able to bear a male heir for her future husband. She had internalized the fact that her future happiness depended on making her future husband happy by giving him a male heir. She strongly believed that a woman would be complete only when she would be able to produce a male heir. She has been made to believe that her mother was incomplete “because she has not given birth to a boy. It’s as simple as that” (Kargar 42). She also had to carry the burden which her relatives had placed upon her, “my grandmother says it’s my fault. I was the first born daughter and therefore all the girls followed me. I brought bad luck on the family” (Kargar 43). When Sharifa’s mother became pregnant the eighth time, there seemed to be a glimmer of hope in the family but even then a cloud was lurking. Her father had threatened to get married a
second time if his wife failed to produce a son and because he didn’t have money to pay for a new wife he would have to exercise the Afghan concept of *badal*. It is a very common thing in Afghanistan for a girl to be exchanged for a wife for her brother or sometimes for a second wife for her father.

According to the Afghan constitution, the legal age for a girl to get married is sixteen and for a boy eighteen, but many girls are exchanged or married far younger. Most girls simply do as they are told and honour their parents’ choices for them. In poor families, daughters are sometimes kept for exchange later in life so that the family doesn’t have to spend much money on the weeding of their son. This form of exchange is known as Badal: one family finds a bride for their son and in exchange they give their daughter to the brother of the bride, or sometimes to an uncle or cousin instead of payment. (Kargar 47)

Though it is illegal by law for girls to be given away to settle family disputes or to force her to get married against her will, it keeps on happening and is a very common thing because Afghans feel that the family is the best place to settle a dispute. Since girls are forbidden from taking their problems to the courts of law, they find themselves totally at the mercy of their relatives. Even when the women are aware of the illegality many of them do not voice their protests but accept their fate as Divine will. This happens because women are mostly uneducated and have no idea of their legal rights. Afghan men tend to ignore the law of the land when it comes to their families because they feel that familial matters are above the law.
The seventeen year old Sharifa was forced to marry a man in his forties, a widower with five children, the oldest of which was as old as her. And her father would get that man’s relative as his new wife, a girl who was just the age of Sharifa. But ironically Sharifa’s sacrifice proves to be in vain because her father falls sick and dies before bringing home his new bride. Though Sharifa had no say in her destiny, though she had to give up her dreams, though she was forced to give up her education and become the step-mother of five children, she never tries to silence herself. Silencing the self is a strategy in which women inhibit self-expression in order to avoid relational loss and conflicts, judge themselves according to external standards, conform outwardly to gender stereotypes while feeling angry or rebellious internally, and prioritize the care of others over self-care. Silencing the self may be adopted because women’s choices of doing otherwise are limited and are often dictated by realistic fears of negative consequences in patriarchal systems (Jack and Dill 102). She does not passively accept her fate as God’s will but instead adopts self-advocacy. She voices out her anger and pain knowing fully well that it can create negative repercussions for her in her fiercely patriarchal society. She is forced against her will but she makes her misery and sorrow vocal. It is her way of exercising agency.

Nasreen’s story is a classic example of a young woman who has to sacrifice her feelings and happiness on the altar of family honour. She was considered a bad woman because she dared to love a man. She begins her story with the poignant question, “Have you wondered about those women who are married to a man whom they never loved and were never suited to?” (Kargar54). She is prevented from marrying Abdullah, whom she loved deeply, only because she was a Pashtun and he a Tajik. Nasreen and Abdullah were
neighbours; she was fourteen and he eighteen. Whenever they got the opportunity they would meet secretly, and his mother approved of the relationship. In Nasreen’s own words, “my love for him was pure as was his for me” (Kargar 54). She used to spend her days and nights dreaming about a life with Abdullah. But her father and her brother considered their reputation more important than her happiness. When her secret meetings with Abdullah were discovered by a neighbour, her brother restricted her from meeting him.

Even when I told him that I was only talking to Abdullah He stopped me from going out in the afternoon. He also told my mother if he saw me again with Abdullah he would kill me. My brother felt I was causing his honour to be called into doubt and that his standing in the community would be damaged if people thought of him as being a weak man, whose sister was having a love affair he was unable to put an end to. (Kargar 56)

Her father could not digest the fact that his daughter had decided to love a boy of her own choice and that too a Tajik when they were Pashtuns. The two ethnic groups of Afghanistan never got along and distrusted each other. Nasreen is banned from going to school, beaten like an animal, imprisoned in her own home and ultimately married to a forty year old drug addict who makes life a living hell for her.

My married life began and I lived like a maid cooking this man’s food, eating the leftovers and even preparing his hashish. Sometimes he would beat me up as though I were an animal if I was too slow in making his tea or preparing his drugs. I just wanted to die. (Kargar 63)

Even when Kargar speaks in favour of Nasreen, she becomes painfully aware of the fact that even while working in a modern country like the UK, she had to endure the
sneers of her Afghan male colleagues who saw her as someone “using the radio to encourage other women to do shameful things” (Kargar 64) like falling in love! She goes on to say that an Afghan woman would never be allowed to openly express her feelings for a man regardless of whether she lives in Afghanistan or the UK. As long as she is an Afghan woman, she will have to keep her feelings under the wrap or she could be branded a slut. But Kargar admires Nasreen for the very fact that she had the courage to reveal her love for Abdullah. She displays resilience when she dares to question her father and that too in a “culture where girls are not allowed to question their father’s authority” (Kargar 59). Though she knew she would be beaten black and blue, she had the nerve and the boldness to ask her father why he was behaving so unreasonably.

There is Shereenjan whom Kargar first meets in the outskirts of Kabul for Afghan Woman’s Hour in 2006. By then she is about seventy years old and had a grown-up son from a husband in the same family that used to beat her. When Kargar wants to know her story she light-heartedly says:

Look, my child, if I tell you my story in detail, you’ll have to bring twenty cassettes with you. It’s a very long story and most people won’t believe what has happened to me . . . As you can see I’m alive and well, but I do sometimes wonder how I’ve survived everything that has happened to me.

(Kargar 67)

She was given off when she was nine, by her own father as dukhmany to settle a dispute. Dukhmany is the Afghan practice of using girls and women to settle disputes by offering them as brides. Her father had killed a person during a quarrel and Shereenjan is offered to that family for them to exact their revenge. She is ill-treated by that family
because they want to avenge their kin’s death. She is put into a room with animals, beaten mercilessly by old and young alike, made to do all kinds of hard labour and denied food and sleep. She would panic at the slightest sound and tremble all over whenever she heard her name mentioned. In her own words, “This is how it is when you are beaten daily. You can’t think straight and become paranoid. Nobody was kind to me, not my own family and certainly not my in-laws: they were my enemies” (Kargar 75). As a child, she finds all this terrifying but as the years go by she becomes so numb that she hardly feels anything even when cruelly beaten. The moment she attains puberty she is made to sleep with the elder son of the family so that she can bear a son to replace the one who had been killed by her father. There are no wedding celebrations, no music, no new clothes or good food for her. Even the Nikkah ceremony conducted is a eye-wash, just to make the neighbours feel that they were following the Muslim traditions. She is just used as a sex-object, not loved or cherished as every bride longs to be. Her mother-in-law slaps her before ordering her into her new husband’s room. The cruelty with which she is treated on her wedding night is heartbreaking.

I ran to the bedroom and found Azam waiting for me. He locked the door and started touching my body and I was shocked and frightened, and started crying. He ordered me to pull down my shalwar, which I did although I was shaking with fear, and he penetrated me so hard that I started to bleed. Once it was over, he kicked me, told me to collect my clothes and to go back to the cowshed. “Don’t think that because this has happened, you’ll become my wife. you’re only going to be the vessel for
my children. They will live in the house but you will only come to my room when I need sex so that you can bear me a son.” (Kargar 80)

Eventually after months of sexual violence and abuse, she conceives a son who becomes the light of her life. Her husband takes as wife a girl of his choice and as time flies the people who had been cruel to her either die or leave. As Shereenjan grows old the abuses become a bad memory but the scars linger. Her son takes care of her. She chooses not to think badly of her husband or his parents because like most Afghan women she accepts it as her destiny. But she finds it hard to forgive her father who had pushed her into such a life.

In spite of all the violence and the beatings and the cruelty she had to face as a child of nine, she tells Kargar how she had managed to survive by learning a few tricks. “Despite all the hardships I was still quite naughty” (Kargar 79). She would wait in the afternoon for everyone to take their siesta and then would sneak into the bathroom, steal a bit of soap and wash her hands, face and hair. She would pretend to be beautiful and would talk to the cows in the cowshed. The animals were her only comfort and she basked in their company. For her, they were the only family she had. That was her way to survive the pain caused by the emotional and physical torture.

“What happened to Shereenjan was more than fifty years ago. Yet the practice of giving away young girls to settle disputes continues to this day. In villages all over Afghanistan it is very common” (Web), Kargar explains. In fact, the same year she met Shereenjan a child was given away from among Kargar’s own family. “I found out that the daughter of my first cousin, Pana, was given away by her granddad to settle a family dispute in Pakistan,” she says. “She was 11. My heart was crying for her but I couldn't do
anything because I cannot change that tradition. I couldn’t help with money, I couldn’t help with anything. And she was gone like Shereenjan in 2006 with no wedding. That is why it touched me personally” (Web).

Samira’s story is a classic example of an eleven year old girl who dreams of going to school like her ten year old brother but who is condemned to spend her entire childhood in front of the kargah (loom) weaving carpets. In many parts of Afghanistan carpet weaving is considered the finest example of Afghan art.

Much of Afghanistan can be seen its carpets. The country’s ethnic diversity-Turkmen, Uzbek, Tijak, Hazara, Kuchi and Pashtun is there in its patterns. The wool comes from the sheep, goats and camels that graze on our hills, and the traditional dyes from our plants, fruits and vegetables. Pomegranate peel and walnuts make brown, red comes from the roots of the madder plant, yellow from saffron or chamomile, and blue from the indigo plant. But above and beyond the materials, our carpets are threaded through with the emotions and feelings of the women and girls who weave them. (Kargar 83)

Girls are valued based on their skill of weaving carpets. If a girl is able to weave carpet that can fetch a very price from the tojar (merchant) then she is held in high esteem and she will be much sought after as a potential bride. But the sad fact is that the girl’s worth is equated to her nimble fingers. She is not sought after for who she is, but for her five fingers which are described as five chirags (lights).

Samira enjoys listening to music and steals some time in between her carpet weaving to listen to her favourite singer Sitarah on the radio. She nurtures a dream of
becoming a singer but her mother says “You’ll never be a singer because your father wouldn’t want our family to be shamed” (Kargar 88). But Samira’s feisty spirit is revealed in her retort to her mother, “If father isn’t ashamed of showing off the carpets I’ve woven, then why should he be ashamed of people hearing my voice? Singing is just as much of a talent as carpet weaving” (Kargar 88). Young girls like Samira are confined to the darkness of the house, forced to weave carpets in the dim light, hunched by the loom for hours that they develop physical problems early on in life. The mother and the daughter do not even have a decent lunch as a proper meal is cooked only when the man of the family gets home. Even the children are not spared. They suffer pangs of hunger and survive on meager rations until evening when their father gets home. When poor Samira who has spent so many hours hunched up in front of the loom flexes her tired fingers and asks her mother whether her five fingers are like chirags her mother’s reply is something that breaks the heart of the little eleven year old girl.

My dear daughter, your fingers are not yet five lights but they are on their way . . . when I tell you to get up early and go straight to the kargah and you do it immediately, that will be the day. When you stop complaining that your brother goes to school and you don’t, that will be the day. When you stop moaning that your fingers are tired and you don’t want to weave carpets, that will be the day. And finally, when you weave a six-metre carpet on your own without complaining, that will be the day your fingers become like five chirags. (Kargar 90)

For Samira, her entire childhood is locked within the four walls of the house in front of the kargah (loom). She cannot go out and play with her friends or make dresses
for her dolls. She knows that her entire life would be spent huddled in front the loom. Though she longs to fly freely like a bird she knows that her fate is sealed. There would never be an escape from this wretched life. She would weave and weave and weave. It would never end. In the end when her mother would feel that her fingers had become five chirags she would be married off to some Turkmen man and the cycle of weaving would continue interspersed with the duties of taking care of her children and husband.

But there is an even darker and diabolic side to this grim picture. In order to keep her young baby daughter from disturbing them from their work, Samira’s mother gives her a tiny dose of opium so that she would sleep for hours at a stretch. She does this though she hates doing this but she knows that unless she and Samira finish the stipulated number of carpets they stand the chance of facing her husband’s ire. She is uneducated and does not know the dangers of opium for a baby’s health, how it can harm their brains and stunt their growth. She is one among the thousands of Afghan women for whom this is an age old practice. As Kargar poignantly points out:

The skill and dedication of people like Samira and her mother have brought Afghanistan an international reputation for its traditional handicrafts, but at what price? No one acknowledges the hardships women like Samira and her mother endure to turn yarns of wool into works of art. And no one thinks of the babies that are silenced by opium so that their mothers can weave sufficiently fast to meet the demands of the tojars and buyers. (Kargar 97)

Ilaha and Gulalai represent all those women who live in misery and shame carrying the burden of a crime they did not commit. Their only fault is that they did not
bleed on their wedding night. As a result of that they face insults and taunts which break
the very soul of their womanhood. Virginity is given extensive publicity in Afghanistan.
The custom that is much–hyped is the visit of the bridegroom to the bride’s home on the
day following the marriage night displaying the blood stains on the white handkerchief
symbolizing her virginity. The visit is a gesture to show his appreciation to the bride’s
parents for having brought up a cultured girl who has kept her purity. Illogical and
preposterous, this custom has altered the status of many women from wives to divorcees
after the marriage night. Ilaha is a poor uneducated woman and her husband divorces her
for this ‘crime.’ Though Gulalai’s husband does not divorce her, he uses this ‘deficiency’
as a trump card to control her. Kargar goes on to relate her own experience at this point.
She relates the fear and tension she underwent on her wedding night because she didn’t
bleed. When her husband repeatedly tells her that a virgin should bleed, he subtly points
an accusing finger at her, questioning her chastity. Even though she was educated and
came from a liberal family, she too is caught in the vortex of Afghan traditions
surrounding virginity and marriage. Afghan girls have been told from a very young age
that ‘good and pure’ girls do bleed on their wedding nights but they have never been
allowed to discuss their feelings openly nor ask for advice or information. If at all she
does dare to ask, she is called shameless. Many of them do not even know what a sexual
relationship is. As Kargar points out:

Girls in Afghanistan are not taught anything about sex, yet when they
marry at the age of fifteen or so, they are suddenly expected to know what to
do. There is no formal sex education for either boys or girls, and parents don’t
talk openly about sex to their children, although boys tend to be a bit more
knowledgeable on the subject as they talk about it amongst themselves. But more than that, sex tends to be considered as something that belongs to men. I remember when girls at school wanted to know about sexual relations between men and women, the information we were given was limited to how we should all make sure we were virgins when we married as it would be important to our future husbands. For girls, the very idea that they might want to talk about sex was considered shameful. (Kargar 104)

Ilaha was not able to tide this dark period of her life because she had no formal education and was unemployed. The appalling experiences she had undergone had sapped her of her sanity. She was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Though Gulalai was educated and employed she couldn’t divorce her husband because in Afghanistan a divorced woman loses the custody of her children and added to that would be guilty of bringing dishonor and shame to family. Even the educated, employed Kargar who lived in London had to undergo the same predicament. Her married life was also an endless cycle of chores being done to please her husband because she had failed to prove her virginity. She had never once questioned her husband Javed whether he was a virgin or not because it had been ingrained into her very soul that Afghan women must be virgins when they marry. In her own words,

I know now that Afghan women feel the same, whether you are Ilaha in a village, Gulalai in Kabul or Zarghuna in London. The women who blame you for not bleeding on your wedding night have been told by their mothers and their grandmothers that clean and good women bleed. It is the sign of a woman’s purity. I know from my experience that Afghan
families do not discuss women’s feelings . . . no one knows when their
daughter becomes a woman and no one helps her . . . a girl who bleeds on
her wedding night is fortunate indeed, and the pride of her mother-in-law,
her parents, her husband and the whole family. Bleeding is not just a sign
of virginity, it also guarantees the future family life of the young bride, for
a girl who does not bleed is not considered to be a virgin, and she must
start married life with the worry that she might be kicked out of her in-
laws’ home or usurped by a second wife. (Kargar 112)

Both Ilaha and Gulalai try to glean recognition and acknowledgement of their
own psyches and yearnings but realize that it is far from conceivable in the microcosm of
their existence. Their culture and community demands on attuning them into guises that
are not delineated by themselves which commence into an extremely painful strife
between their own perception of themselves and the way others scrutinize and pigeonhole
them. Basically, the matter of contention is the Afghan society’s indisposition to concede
women as autonomous beings who have the freedom to live as individuals and this
definitely is the fact that is radical to patriarchy.

The story of Anesa is one that can move anyone to tears. Among the different
ethnic tribes that live in Afghanistan, weddings are a big affair and most of the girls are
married off in great pomp and splendor. Anesa also dreams like any other young woman
about her wedding and her future husband. Her parents too work tirelessly to give her a
grand wedding. But her dreams come crashing down on her wedding night when she
realizes that her husband is not interested in her as a woman. He fails to turn up when she
is taken to their room by his mother and eventually when he comes in sometime in the
wee hours of the morning, he is in a hurry to prove his manhood. The Afghan tradition demands that women should bleed on their wedding night and Anesa’s husband Jabar manages to fulfill that tradition.

I was like a helpless doll in his hands. He did whatever he needed and got whatever he wanted: the proof that he had slept with me. There was a drop of blood on the white sheet, the sign of my virginity. I think my body went into shock and I couldn’t stop shaking…On that dark morning my life changed. I had hoped for a loving husband, but my life and freedom as Anesa had ended. I would never look forward to new clothes for Eid or weddings, and I would never watch another Bollywood movie with Fareba. (Kargar 130)

As the days pass Anesa realizes that Jabar hardly spends time with her. It is only after the birth of her two sons that she discovers the shocking truth that her husband is a homosexual. Her shock and anger deepens when she realizes that her mother-in-law had known the truth all along. Jabar’s mother had chosen Anesa for her son to keep her son from being killed by the mullahs. Islam considers homosexuality a grievous sin and the penalty is death. Anesa is deeply pained when her own family refuses to allow her to leave Jabar for the fear of the scandal of a divorce. As her mother tells her that in their culture women were to live and die in the house where they were married to, something inside Anesa dies.

I realized my personal pain wasn’t so important to my mother or to my mother-in-law that they could disregard our customs and traditions. I had gone to them for help because I thought as women they would share my
pain. Instead they had told me to say nothing . . . I was angry with all of them: Jabar’s mother had used me as a camouflage for Jabar and his activities, my own mother wanted me to put the reputation of the family before my suffering and Jabar himself had betrayed me. All the people closest to me had let me down. I had no choice but to suffer in silence. I didn’t realize it that time but it was the beginning of a new chapter in my life. (Kargar 135)

Anesa’s horror and pain know no bounds when Jabar brings his lover Babrak to live with them. Then Babrak takes over, and Anesa and the children are subjected to untold miseries and horrors. Jabar’s parents turn a blind eye to all that because they don’t want their son to be killed. They want Anesa to keep up the façade of a marriage and threaten to take away her children if she left Jabar. Anesa’s parents fearing the shame of divorce do not interfere.

When I questioned my rights I was told that under Islam my children could be taken away from me if I divorced, and yet when it came to my husband neglecting me and my children and sleeping with a man, Islam didn’t apply. Jabar’s parents were doing everything in their power to protect their son. (Kargar 138)

So Anesa continues to live as a human shield, silently suffering. Divorce in Afghanistan is considered too big a shame. There is a stigma attached to it. Women who get divorced are ostracized from society. Anesa’s only option is to stay and suffer. She has no other way because her own family also washes their hands off her. Though she contemplates on committing suicide many a time her filial love for her children
prevents her from taking the extreme step. So Anesa carries on in spite of her personal pain so that at least her children will have a better future. This reveals the endemic nature of heinous customs binding Afghan women in a symbolic way. “And when a woman is transformed into a symbol by a man, woman becomes a symbol of her social decontextualization, her silencing, the occlusion of her suffering, the suppression of her feeling” (Power 411).

Wazma’s story is about the young woman who is discarded by her husband when she loses a leg in a rocket attack. During the early 1980s, many rockets were fired into Kabul on a daily basis and people lived in fear. Every simple daily activity like going to school or going for work would be an extremely risky affair. The Soviet government that ruled Afghanistan then would launch rockets called stingers against the Mujahedeen which devastated the country killing and maiming hundreds of people. Wazma who lived a rather happy life with her husband Waheed and one year old daughter Farah was training to be a teacher. She counted herself fortunate because unlike many Afghan men, Waheed was a loving husband. But this happy life comes crashing down on the day she becomes a victim of a rocket attack. She loses her right leg and becomes an invalid. But far more than the pain of losing her leg is the pain of losing her husband and daughter. During the time that she was in hospital she realizes that her husband had never come to see her. When she is informed later by her parents that Waheed had refused to accept her because she was an invalid she goes into shock. She is unable to believe the fact that the husband whom she had loved with all her heart and who had cherished her would discard her like a piece of old cloth. When she makes the arduous journey up the mountainous area where she had lived with Waheed, her hopes are dashed. Waheed
rejects her telling her that it was impossible to live with a wife who was disabled and that
he would be getting married again. Something snaps inside her then.

And when I asked to be allowed in to see my daughter he raised his hands
as if to bar my entry. “You can’t come into the house. It’s not your home
anymore.” I begged to be allowed to stay so that I could at least be with
my daughter but Waheed shook his head. “I want to be happy,” he said.
“How can I live with a wife who has no leg? You can’t even look after
yourself, so how can you take care of my daughter?” At that moment
Waheed died for me. He became like a small insect in front of me. I had
lost my leg, I had lost my love and now I realized I had lost my baby girl.

I heard his words and yet I didn’t hear them. (Kargar 157)

Wazma is emotionally maimed and imprisoned by the social and gender divisions
of the Afghan society. It is not the physical bruises that tear her apart and sap the very
strength from her. The psychological torment undergone by her distorts her personality
and has its impact both, directly and indirectly on the lives of her parents and siblings.
But Wazma shows her resilience in the fact that she bounces back to survival. She
accepts the fact that “war and fighting turn some hearts to stone” (Kargar 144). She joins
the centre for disabled people in the Qal-e-Fatih Ullah area of town so as not to be a
burden for her parents and brother’s family. She learns to sew clothes and starts earning
money. She steel her heart whenever memories of Waheed and Farah come rushing in.
Kargar says:

I was very upset by what happened to Wazma but I admired her for her
determination and hard work . . . I asked her what she would have done if
the rocket had taken Waheed’s leg instead of hers? Wazma smiled and replied that she would have stayed and looked after him. She would never have left him. She said that she was cast out because she was a woman.

(Kargar 159)

The alienation that many women experience in the Afghan phallocentric society simply because of the fact that they are women result in behavioural aberrations, insanity and incongruities. Separation from familiar circumstances like in the case of Wazma can be really traumatic.

By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which a person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the centre of his world, as the creator of his own acts . . . the alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like the others, is experienced as things are experienced: without being related to oneself and the world outside, productively. (Fromm 11)

But Wazma rises above her alienated situation; she collects her broken pieces and snapped strings and carries on. Though the broken pieces when put together will never create a picture without cracks, she looks beyond the cracks to find a remnant of beauty. Like all the women in the book, she was keen that other women should hear her story. “I really want to explain my life to the listeners of Afghan Woman’s Hour,” she told Kargar. “It’s the first time I have spoken openly about my feelings and I’m hoping that people will understand what I’ve gone through” (Kargar 150).
People often see Afghanistan as a society where religion plays a conspicuous role. One of the preeminent issues Kargar came across during her work with the *Afghan Woman’s Hour* was the paucity of Islamic knowledge. She believes that there can be much amelioration in the society if proper religious education is provided.

“Many people across Afghanistan still believe that whatever they do traditionally — if they marry a young girl at the age of 9 or 12 without her consent and all these kinds of issues — is their religious duty,” she says. “It’s not — it’s wrong. We know as Muslims that every nikah is done with the acceptance of both sides. If they don't accept there is no nikah — in my opinion that is what Islam tells us. But this information is very limited to people in Afghanistan and the people who give religious information mix tradition with it. I believe as an Afghan woman that these traditions are in favour of men. They are made by men for the interest of men. Women suffer as a result.” (Web)

Janpary is an example of this conflict between tradition and religion. She was a “poor, hardworking widow struggling to feed her children” (Kargar 164). Though she lived in the thriving city of Jalalabad, she experienced extreme poverty. Decades of war had deprived most people of their homes, lands and jobs. Poverty was a mammoth problem for the Afghan population, one which was sucking their lives out. “According to the UN report, a third of the Afghan population lives below the official poverty line. In many of the poorest families the breadwinner is disabled, has fallen ill or even died . . . so those who have no one to care for them starve, their children starve, and they die from the freezing cold in winter or the stifling heat in summer” (Kargar 162).
Janpary is reduced to this state after the death of her gambler husband. She had no means to look after her four children because she was uneducated. She had been sold off to this old man as his wife because her brother had been unable to repay a gambling debt. She had been young when she had been married to this man as his second wife. Her life hadn’t been easy. She had to work hard in the house so as to please the first wife. Her husband was an inveterate gambler but at least he used to provide for her and her children. But with his death her state of affairs underwent a sea-change. Initially during the communist regime widows were given assistance so she used to get provisions to feed her children but when the Mujahedeen and later the Taliban took over, her life became very miserable and tough. The Taliban prevented women from going out of their homes for work. So Janpary found herself a widow with no education, stuck in poverty and with four young children to feed (Kargar 168).

But her resilience is revealed in the fact that she refuses to neither beg on the streets nor beg from her rich brother who had in fact been responsible for her present state. “My pride won’t allow me to beg on the streets. Why should I beg when God has given me a body that is fit for work?” (Kargar170). She manages to find work in a rich household as a servant and does all the menial jobs like cleaning and washing with lot of gusto so as to make both ends meet. Her mistress comes forth as a warm-hearted woman who apprises her of her Islamic right to a share in her parent’s meeras (inheritance), which had all gone to her brother. Though Janpary knows it very well that in her culture daughters are not entitled to their meeras even when The Quran endorses it, she decides to fight for what is rightfully hers. She confronts her brother boldly and does not waver in the face of his recriminations. When her sister-in-law calls her a whore and a shameless woman she is pained but stands her ground. The impact of these allegations and
indictment accord her a sense of dauntlessness and determination that she decides to go before the court of law to fight for her rights. “At that moment Janpary decided to take her meeras from her brother no matter the personal cost . . . Janpary was frightened at the prospect of doing this but she was determined to fight for her right. She had made her decision and was going to stick to it” (Kargar 180). She exhibits a sense of power which Hanna Pitkin describes as “something — anything — which makes or renders somebody able to do, capable of doing something. Power is capacity, potential, ability, or wherewithal” (Pitkin 276).

Because she goes to the officials for legal advice, Janpary is severely beaten by her brother. He threatens her and tells her that the next time she mentions the word meeras she would be killed. Her children plead with her not to bring up the matter again because they don’t want their mother to be killed. The impact of her brother’s cruel treatment instills in her a sense of self-denial. Roberta Rubenstein remarks, “The constriction of the growth of the self is implicitly linked to restrictive or oppressive cultural circumstances” (Rubenstein 126). She tells her children, “My children, toba! I have said toba (never again) to the meeras. Women like me have no rights in this country. We must stay quiet; we cannot speak. Our voices are not heard” (Kargar 183).

Women in Afghanistan do not have the power or the freedom to ask about their inheritance. Though their holy book The Quran advocates the fact that women are to receive their rightful inheritance, in most cases it is seen that “tradition usually overshadows religion” (Kargar 183) and in a male dominated society like Afghanistan, men usually make the decisions which are beneficial to them and women are always at the receiving end. Kargar says that many women are unaware of the Islamic rights because
they are uneducated. They accept everything that has been passed down to them as tradition naively believing “that a custom is in fact religious law or duty” (Kargar 185). Janpary is one such victim. But her power and resilience is revealed when she goes to the rich woman’s house the day after receiving the brutal beating. Even with the terrible bruises she continued to work because she was determined to take care of her children. Nothing could daunt or deflect her from her chosen path. “She accepted this experience as part of her fate and continued to work in the big house as a cleaner” (Kargar 184).

Three decades of war and strife in Afghanistan have produced a vast population of widows. Widows are among Afghanistan’s most defenseless and susceptible faction. They are most of the times branded as morally loose only because of the fact that they do not have any male support. In Afghanistan a woman is regarded with scant respect even when she has a male benefactor like her father, brother or husband. So it goes without saying in the case of widows that they are looked down upon because they don’t have a male to support them. They are vulnerable and exposed to violence. According to the UN report in February, more than one in four Afghan widows who were interviewed experienced violence after their husbands’ deaths, mostly inflicted by their in-laws, who saw them as a burden. “Some families think widows belong to them. They treat them like property,” says Malalai Shinwari, a former lawmaker and women’s rights activist.

“Because she is considered the property of her husband's family, a widow may be forced into levirate marriage, a practice whereby she is required to marry a close male relative of her late husband” (Web).

Becoming a widow in a traditional society like Afghanistan means you lose the right to talk freely, you lose the right to put on make-up and dress
up. Instead a good widow takes care of her dignity. She wears black, doesn’t comb her hair or take any pride in her appearance… An Afghan widow is like a pot without a lid. People around her throw things into the pot but they don’t put the lid on. They say things and gossip about her, they treat her badly and when she asks for help they run away. She is helpless and hopeless… An Afghan widow feels as if she is being watched all the time. (Kargar 193-194)

Layla’s story is about a woman who has been widowed thrice. Though her childhood was relatively happy, her life underwent a change when she turned thirteen. She was married off to a soldier in the national army. Though her husband was a good and kind man Layla was disappointed by the fact that she had to discontinue her education. After five years of marriage and four children Layla’s worst fears come true. Her husband is killed in a war with the Mujahedeen. He dies defending his country. Layla is shattered because “he had been her protection in many ways, apart from providing for her and the children: he was a safeguard for her honour. She was nothing without him” (Kargar 196). She is viewed as a malevolent force and kept away from all festivities and family functions and gatherings. Since she was pretty her mother-in-law was always vigilant because she was afraid that Layla would dishonor the family. She had to constantly watch her every step and as a result she shrivels and withdraws into a shell. The once pretty vivacious girl that she was, Layla becomes a ghost of her former self. Because she refuses to marry her husband’s brother she is sent home empty handed to her own family where she and the children find themselves unwelcome and unwanted. Her only ray of hope was her old father but he was a helpless old man.
Unable to bear his daughter’s suffering, Layla’s father gets her married a second time, again to a soldier in the Afghan national army. Though her life improves considerably after her marriage, her happiness is short-lived because her second husband also gets killed in the war. “In Afghanistan, widows are shunned by society. Those who have been widowed twice, like Layla, are considered a particularly bad omen for men. Other women call them ‘man-eaters’” (Kargar 200). Her only bright spot in life, her children are also taken away by her first husband’s parents because as her mother-in-law says, “When a widow marries a stranger she loses her children. You have no right to them anymore. We’ll take them into our custody” (Kargar 200). According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA):

> Often, if a widow does not remarry into the same family she risks losing her children. According to the Afghan Civil Code, once children have reached a certain age (nine for girls, seven for boys) guardianship is with the father, or in case of death or divorce, with the family of the father. The lack of authority over her own future limits a woman’s choices. (Web)

Though Layla is broken, she fights for her children in the courts. It is a losing battle. And life changes again when a local warlord fancies her and asks for her hand. Her family readily agrees. “She was used to being married off and letting those around decide her future, so she saw little point in protesting. She had lost all belief in love and human kindness” (Kargar 201). It was an unhappy marriage and “turned her into an old woman at a young age” (Kargar 202). Her third husband too is killed in a combat and his relatives “accused her of ‘eating him’ and for being ‘a woman of dark steps’” (Kargar 203).
She returns to her brother’s house as a servant but does not let her fate tie her down. She goes to a woman’s rights office and explains how she had been an expert at embroidery one upon a time. With the help of the activists there she manages to re-discover her buried talent and pours all her energy and emotion into her work. Her embroideries fetch her money and she is able to stand on her feet. Though she never sees her children again she is satisfied by the fact that they grow up in a place where they never lack food or clothing. Hage argues that in contexts of marked inequality, society is a mechanism not only for the distribution of social opportunities, but also for the distribution of social hope. Such hope is about “one’s sense of the possibilities that life can offer . . . its enemy is a sense of entrapment, of having nowhere to go, not a sense of poverty” (Hage 20). In Havel’s critical definition of the term, hope is not the illusion of a favourable outcome in the future, but “the certainty that something makes sense” (Havel 181). Layla displays this hope when she decided to pick up the broken pieces and move on.

“*Afghan Woman’s Hour* wasn’t just a forum to provide information to women about their rights; it was also meant to be a celebration of their achievements and sharing of experiences” (Kargar 205). The team looked for women “who had used their skills and resourcefulness to bring change to their lives” (Kargar 205). They were under the wrong impression “that after years of being denied an education and years of war and violence, it would be impossible for women to gain skills” (Kargar 205). But to their amazement they found women “who proved that they did not need a university education to bring about a positive change in their lives” (Kargar 205). Mahgul’s story is about a young woman who in the darkest hours of her life is able to hold on the flickering flame of hope and fan it into a fire of triumph. Her brightly lit world is plunged into darkness when her
loving husband is killed in a freak accident. She loses her direction in life and plunges into deep despair. For some time her family takes care of her and her four children but soon she realizes that she cannot be a burden to her economically weak brother’s already large family. She takes up menial jobs like washing and cleaning because she was uneducated and couldn’t find any other job. But one day she sees a group of children flying kites shouting Azadi! Azadi! The word ‘Azadi’ was used to refer to the free flying kite which had been cut from its string. In her own words:

They each wanted the honour of the free-flying kite. It was autumn, the season for kite-flying, when the winds are just right. We call it Gudiparan Bazi, which means ‘flying doll.’ The kite looked beautiful, like an exotic bird swooping and soaring in the sky. I got such pleasure from seeing the excitement in the children’s faces and their hunger for these pieces of coloured paper and bamboo, which together made azadi. (Kargar 217)

It is then the bright idea takes shape in her head. She realizes she can create azadi (freedom) for herself and her children by investing her talent and skill into something productive, something beautiful which can bring some colour in their otherwise dull lives. She decides to create bright kites which can be sold in the market for a tidy sum.

Kites are popular in Afghanistan.

Kite flying is a traditional game for Afghan men and boys. No one is sure when it started but it has been played for more than a hundred years. It may have from China where kite-flying is believed to have originated. The Taliban banned kite-flying, claiming it was un-Islamic, but since their fall it has become legal and popular once again. (Kargar 217)
Mahgul and her children put their heart and soul into making kites. Though they “didn’t have a clear idea of how they would do it they were determined to make it work” (Kargar 218). She wanted to pick up the pieces of her life and start over where her husband had left and make sure that her children received the education that would enable them to become doctors and teachers in future, just like their kind father had desired for them. Kite-making is a difficult and painstakingly difficult job because so much of effort has to go into careful detailing and precision. But nothing deters her. As she says:

I see myself and the children as being magicians for other children. With a few pieces of wood, some sheets of coloured paper and wire we can make a doll dance in the sky. I like to think that in those kites are carried the dreams and hopes of Afghan children, soaring and swooping in the sky, freely. Our handmade kites are much sought after in the bazaar in Mazar in the north of Afghanistan. . . . Our family is now famous as kite-makers…kite making gives me hope and it gives hope to my children, too. (Kargar 219)

In an interview with Jane Bakerman in 1977, Toni Morrison says, “. . . how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something” (Web). Mahgul has walked the path of survival. She had thought that her life had come to a close with her husband’s unexpected demise. But she proves that it was possible for an illiterate woman like her to delve deep into the world of creativity and imagination and create beautiful patterns and hence construct an economically independent and secure life for herself and her children.
Bhaktawara, who is a Pashtun from the province of Khost is the victim of a bizarre custom followed in most parts of Afghanistan. She had to take over as the man of the family because she had only one brother and he was working abroad. Her parents wanted the surveillance of a male figure so that no scheming relative would take their land away. When Kargar meets Bhaktawara for the first time, she struck her “as a woman whose feelings had been stolen from her long ago, and then imprisoned in a place even she couldn’t access” (Kargar 224). Bhaktawara’s parents had transmuted her appearance from female to male even when she was a baby. They had dressed her up in male clothes.

To dress baby girls as boys in childhood is a common practice among some families all across Afghanistan. Having a son is vital for every Afghan family. A son represents the future prosperity of a family; he perpetuates the family name and is one that his parents will eventually rely on to look after them in old age. Girls are looked on as temporary guests in the family because when they grow up and marry they will make a family for someone else’s son and take their skills to another family. (Kargar 226)

Though this transformation gives some women unrestricted freedom to move around and do things which women in their society never can dream of, it comes with its own limitations. Their right to live as women is taken away. They are expected to bury their womanly desires and aspirations deep in their hearts and never to allow them to surface. Bhaktawara is faced with the same dilemma. She is unable to wear vibrantly hued bangles. Instead, a heavy AK-47 rifle embellishes her hands. Her once smooth hands have become rough from all the heavy work done on the fields. Her skin has turned dark and chapped due to constant exposure in the sun. She has to dress like a Pashtun
man and sit in village jirgas along with men to settle disputes. She is tired of being the
man in the family and shouldering all responsibilities and taking care of others. There are
times when she intensely desires to be a woman. She longs to be loved as a woman.
She longs to be cared for. She longs for a handsome husband who would hold her hand.
She longs for children to cuddle and feed. But she has to sacrifice and suppress all her
womanly and maternal desires at the altar of her family responsibility. She remembers
how her father had put all his trust in her on his death bed and how he had handed her the
responsibilities of taking care of her sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews. So she quenches
all her feminine cravings but once in a while she dreams; nobody can stop her from doing
that. Behind her tough masculine frame lies a woman’s heart beating with passion and
desires. She dreams about the imaginary female world and enjoys it in the privacy of her
room. The worst part of this change is that most women who grow up as boys do not
know how to cope up once their body starts changing during adolescence. They become
fearful and ashamed, caught between two worlds; one which they long to be in and one in
which they are forced to be in. Bhaktawara had to face this same issue when her breasts
started growing and when she started menstruating. When Bhaktawara speaks to her
mother about these changes, the latter tells that “as her father had given her all the
responsibilities it was impossible for her to return to being a normal girl” (Kargar 235).

But the saddest aspect of this transformation is not just the smothering of
womanly instincts; it is being teased and called names by adults and kids alike in the
village. Most children in the village call her narkhazak or eunuch. Though she has got
used to all these with the passage of time, it is still painful. During Afghan weddings
women and men have separate parties and Bhaktawara would usually attend male parties.
But once during the weddings of a close relative, she was allowed to attend the women’s party. But there she realizes how cruel women could be. When they tease her and make fun of her, Bhaktawara realizes how helpless she is:

For the first time Bhaktawara recognized she had less power and confidence amongst women than she did amongst men. On that day too, she realized exactly what she had lost with the denial of her womanhood and she felt a grief almost as profound as when her parents had died. Her physical strength, her gun and turban all helped her gain respect from men, but she had nothing in her armoury to defend her against the maliciousness of women. (Kargar 237)

Bhaktawara is not even allowed to cry even when pain crushes her heart. She has been taught that only weak people cry. She puts on a strong manly façade so that people wouldn’t consider her weak and powerless. But she makes her resistance known. She makes her voice heard when she addresses the women who insults her:

I’ll tell you what I am. I’ve got the same things as you have, I have the same breasts and the same hair and what’s more I’ve got the same feelings as you. It’s just that I have been unlucky…never change your daughters into sons because no one can change the feelings God has given us. You can change a person’s clothes, you can change the way they walk and talk, but you can’t change their feelings. (Kargar 239)

Like the advocates of resilience theory say, Bhaktawara belongs to the category of people who are plainly dismayed about the upsetting scenario but who adopt methods to tide over this disturbing situation. She comes to terms with the fact that her parents and
local culture has thrust the role of a man upon her. Though she is not happy about the turn of events, she accepts her destiny with stoicism and tries to make the best of it. But she makes sure that she gives advice to parents not to turn their daughters into sons, because she has experienced “the harsh realities of both worlds: the world of the man and the feelings of the woman” (Kargar 241).

Unlike the case of Nasreen who was beaten and given off to a drug addict for falling in love, Ghutama’s story is one that resonates with courage. Ghutama was strong and free-spirited Kuchi woman. Kuchis are the nomadic tribes of Afghanistan who have a very unique style of living. They cannot stay put in a particular place for a long time especially within four walls. They graze their sheep and pitch tents wherever they feel like. “So wherever they go, wherever they graze their sheep and build their tents, there in the middle of God’s land is their home” (Kargar 245). Kuchi women are mesmerizingly beautiful and strong-spirited. Kargar meets Ghutama in the refugee camp at Peshawar where her family had been lodged when they fled Afghanistan during the war. Ghutama was an iconic figure even in the refugee camp. With her breathtaking beauty and free spirit she stole the hearts of men and women alike. She was helpful and kind to everyone.

Ghutama had lost her mother when her youngest brother was born. Her father Warishmeen was a lazy man and the burden of taking care of the family fell upon Ghutama’s young shoulders. But she executed all the duties with élan. She would graze and tend the sheep, make Kuchi jewellery and do delicate embroidery in addition to most of the house work. She was popular among the people of the community. “Men respected her for her bravery and her trading skills. Many boys in the village were desperate to find
an excuse to talk to Ghutama. They wanted to gaze longingly at her beauty but her confidence prevented them from showing her insufficient respect” (Kargar 250).

But what strikes Kargar about Ghutama is the bold stand she takes when it comes to matters close to her heart. Ghutama is deeply and passionately in love with a Kuchi man called Babray. But she is also aware that she lives in a society which looks down upon women who fall in love. To make matters worse a rich Kutchi man named Malang seeks her hand besotted by her irresistible beauty. Warishmeen is not very keen on marrying Ghutama off as she is the goose that lays golden eggs, but Malang manages to convince him. Ghutama’s resistance to her father and Malang draws flak among her the members of her community. “She was being judged for falling in love” (Kargar 252). Though the attitude and reactions of the people around her make Ghutama upset she demonstrates resilience by taking matters into her own hands. She publicly seeks the hand of Babray much to the consternation of the people present. They are aghast at her daring move. In Afghanistan, for a woman to ask a man in public to marry her is considered culturally deviant, shameless and unfeminine. It is considered “a massive taboo amongst all the tribes in Afghanistan” (Kargar 254). Like Gloria Anzaldua says, “Culture (read men) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles” (qtd. in Jacobs 53). But Ghutama rises above this rigidity and makes her own decision. It brings in a lot of criticism but she does not care because she is fiercely independent and also she is fortunate to be deeply loved by Babray.

The women in these testimonios rise 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 broke their silence and courageously started their own revolution.

The bravery and endurance of these Afghan women give Kargar the courage to make the hardest decision of her life, dissolving her unhappy marriage. Being brought up in a traditional Afghan culture, it was not easy for her to tell her family that she was unhappy in her marriage. “I was told that a Pashtun woman must suffer in silence” (Kargar 256). But the resilience of the women who were part of the Afghan Woman’s Hour gives her power to make changes in her life. She realizes that she didn’t have to embrace the traditional views of people around her and accept being humiliated as a woman. But it wasn’t an easy task. She is blamed and insulted and accused of being a shameless woman who did not care about the dignity of her family. No one asks about her feelings.

It made me the centre of gossip amongst Afghans in London and back in Afghanistan. I felt lonely and vulnerable but every judgement made against me made me more determined. Every hurtful comment made me stronger. It enabled me to understand the pain of others better. This one action empowered and made me kinder to other women whom I might have judged more harshly had I been the same old Zarghuna. (Kargar 257)

The horrors experienced by Afghan women during the decades of war and especially during the Taliban regime have left indelible marks on them. The hijab-clad
faceless Afghan woman is seen as a symbol of ultimate servitude—an individual whose will is incarcerated. But in the midst of all these unimaginable horrors, unimaginable levels of resilience and strength can be seen in these brave women. The Afghan woman has defied many of the horrifying conditions that had seemed to engulf her and tried to find a space to exercise agency and autonomy. Post-Taliban rule, the conditions of women have undergone a change for the better. They are allowed to go to work or study. Many have become members of parliament and have occupied powerful positions in local government, judiciary and media. But since the religious and cultural roots of this country run deep, laws limiting the rights of women have been passed, signed by the President himself. Women could be starved for denying sex to their husbands and they are also forbidden from leaving the house without their husband’s permission. Though the government argues that the laws are meant for the protection of women, it is clearly evident that it is not so. But in spite of all this, women have found the strength to fight and defend their rights even if it meant confronting their own community.

As Zulaikha Rafiq, Director of Afghan Women’s Educations Centre (AWEC), a leading NGO in Afghanistan for the empowerment of women, writes in her blog:

Today the condition of the Afghan woman is far from ideal, but she is no longer just a nameless, faceless mute victim of unjust traditions. Millions of women and girls are getting an education, thousands are financially independent, and hundreds of women are networking, calling attention to the issues of violence and discrimination against women and in doing so facing threats to themselves and their families. Women are coming to the
realization that no one will give them their rights; they must reach out and take them as human beings, as Muslims and as human beings. (Web)

As Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out, women bury in the depths of their hearts, many disappointments, humiliations, regrets and grievances whose equivalents are unknown to men. Ilaha, Shareefa and Nasreen are epitomes of some of those women who have been caught in the vortex of culture, space and traditions. The predicament of the Afghan woman is the most miserable of all oppressive states. Her life, dreams, hopes and the basic right to a dignified existence are stymied by multifarious bands of coercion. She is a victim of racism, classism, and most importantly, of the primarily subjugating ideology of patriarchy. The dream of transcending the threatening powers of oppression remains ambiguous for her. Even more pathetic is the fact that the domineering powers have so naturalized the suppression of women that she often fails to recognize the pitfall that she is in. She whimpers in that prison forever, often taking it as her ordained destiny to be always the erratic, the aberrant and the preternatural. Where Afghan man is equated with activity and power, the woman is equated with passivity and powerlessness.

For meaning to be acquired by one term, it must destroy the other; as signifying supremacy is attached to the male, the battle is one in which the female must always lose. As Maryam, the protagonist in the novel *For the Love of a Son* concludes:

> With passing time I often look back on my life, sadly remembering all the daughters and mothers in my family. I am haunted by one question: why weren’t we all stronger? Why couldn’t we stand up ourselves against our men? Grandmother. Amina. Mother. Sarah. Me. All of us. We all struggled but we were weak and fell back into resignation. The forces we
were struggling against were not like swimming against the tide . . . but more like swimming against a tsunami. We were swimming against an ancient culture that demands that women always submit that women always stay weak. So I end where I began…dreaming a dream that can never come true. For wherever I am in the world, in my mind I am still in Afghanistan and in Afghanistan only the dreams of boys can come true.

(Sasson 436-437)

But Kargar’s *Afghan Woman’s Hour* has been able to infuse hundreds of women with hope and spunk. They have learnt memorable lessons from the lives of the brave women who have dared to tell their stories. They have learnt to stand up for their rights in harsh conditions. They have also learnt to follow what they felt was right in spite of the opposition from their society and family. And many have learnt that though they have gone through terrible experiences, there is no need that their daughters go through it. As Kargar puts it:

> When I put the headphones and heard the words, ‘Dear Zari,’ my heart would pound with expectation and emotion. I knew the voice wasn’t just speaking to me but to the thousands of women it would touch with its story of pain, courage and hope. This is what these stories do. It doesn’t matter if you are Zarghuna in London or Gulalai listening in Kabul, they have the power to change lives for the better. (Kargar 261)

In 2010 when the British government decided to stop the programme, Kargar was not dejected for she knew that the goal had been achieved and the message delivered. The stories would remain a legacy that would always carry a spark to ignite change in the
Afghan society. Certainly, not everyone would approve of the kind of stories Kargar had chosen to narrate in her book. “Some people might think I am portraying Afghan women as victims and the traditions as bad,” she says. “But I don't think there is such a thing as good and bad. These are truths and facts that have happened and I am talking about them” (Web).

But are Afghan women victims? “In the sense of what they face or how much choice they have to deal with things, maybe they are,” Kargar says. “But in terms of their resilience, strength and belief in having a good future for their daughters, for the next generation, I think they are not. They are the strongest women I have ever met in my life” (Web). This book is a testimony to its impact on the lives of Afghan women, summed up in the words of Suraya Parlika, an Afghan human rights activist: “Dear Zari, Afghan Woman’s Hour has been very successful in exploring human rights in our country. I went into a village and saw some women working; I asked them how they had learnt to do this and they said they had been taught to work by listening to Afghan Woman’s Hour” (Kargar 262).

Dear Zari therefore can be seen as a preserving force of female agency that enables the resilience of the Afghan women. This set of testimonios extensively manifests the truth, that for Afghan women a renewed connection has to be created with her own self if she needs to re-position herself in her cultural framework. Each of the stories narrated symbolizes the reconstruction of the traumatized woman’s identity through her reawakening with her maimed body, and expedites the reintegration of her disintegrated psyche.