Chapter III
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GROWING STRONG BY CONFLICT

Women in Afghanistan have for many years been depicted as neglected and harassed. They have been pictured as pitiful, ostracized and pushed to the margins. They have been featured as birds with broken wings, voiceless and incapable of experiencing happiness and joy. As portrayed in the media Afghan women are seen as creatures who have to face discrimination and marginalization in the hands of their men folk and also their fundamentalist society. Today the media reports that women's rights in Afghanistan have gradually improved in the last decade under the Karzai administration. The truth is far from it.

Afghan women writers have delved into and made public the injustice and enslavement undergone by Afghan women. They proclaim their dire straits or draft the savagery perpetrated on them to affirm their individuality. So as to obtain a slot for themselves, they find it necessary to resuscitate their past history and re-live their lives in the current moment garnering strength from the earlier generation. They do this with faith, as they contemplate on a futuristic period of unrestricted liberty and egalitarianism. The maltreatment of women and women’s viewpoints are revamped by the female writers, turning it away from the patriarchal scholastic archetypes in an attempt to revise the custom that has oppugned and invalidated women. The writings of Malalai, Zoya and Latifa deal with coercion candidly but simultaneously they accommodate a utopian farsightedness and a veiled intransigence throughout. When and where there is heavy abuse and coercion, the feasibility of resilience redeems the victims and they obtain the competence to reciprocate. “Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar present women’s resistance
to social and literary constraint in terms of a theory of the anxiety of the patriarchal influence. They trace in women’s writings the inscriptions of tensions, self-doubt, renunciation and above all rage against the society which confines them” (Sudha 40).

Malalai, Zoya and Latifa are unparalleled yet not exclusive, so a common thread can be seen in their outpourings. They divulge through their memoirs the dexterity and skill by which women operate in trying situations, how they diversify and actualize their responses, how they traverse from suppression to defiance and eventually carve out positive and promising reflections of freedom. The struggle Afghan women indulge in is not a solitary struggle. It is a global phenomenon because women everywhere in the world are denied equality and liberty. Afghan women like Malalai, Zoya and Latifa portray response to this suppression of rights. They confront and repel from within the fetters of discrimination and patriarchal preponderance. “It is not oppression that mobilizes masses but hope and certainty, the belief that the end of oppression is near, that a better world is truly possible” (Wallerstein 24). The power of passionate hope inflames the marginalized and suppressed Afghan women and fills them with verve and vivacity that they combat for parity and freedom and thwart everything which is noxious to their development. These memoirs bear testimony to the anguish and ordeal undergone by Afghan women and also record their struggle to prevail over cultural, social, religious and patriarchal repression. Malalai, Zoya and Latifa work within the fabric of family and women’s community from which they draw the strength to fight against the cultural and patriarchal hegemony. Suppression and recrimination toughen their spirits and the resilience they display amidst all the anguish and torture is proof of their moral tenacity.
The Arabic term *muqawamah* (resistance) was first used by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani in his work *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*. Barbara Harlow in her work *Resistance Literature* calls the non-armed resistances as ‘cultural resistance.’ While reviewing this seminal work, Caren Kaplan in the essay “Resistance Literature, and The Writer Written: The Artist and Creation in the New Literatures in English (review)” says thus:

Resistance literature is thus a global phenomenon created by political conflict between Western imperialism and non-Western indigenous resistance movements. As a body of literature, it is characterized by links of affiliation with liberation struggles around the world. Harlow's conception of resistance literature challenges the conventions of literary criticism as she locates writers in a historicized context of political revolution and struggle. Affiliations of resistance supersede strictly national and ethnic identities. (Kaplan 184)

Kanafani wanted to liberate the people of Palestine from the political and economic bondage brought about by imperialism. He used resistance literature for that purpose. He called resistance the radical and subversive operation and reiterated its importance which would train people to adopt a process which would translate structures of exploitation into a concerted unanimity for emancipation. A germ of this can be seen in the memoirs of Malalai, Zoya and Lathifa because these works seek to decipher the exploitation that has plagued Afghan women for a long time. They do not stop with that; instead they endeavour to rise above the threatening and distressing social fabric which has confined them to the fringes of society.
Writing memoirs have been a means for Afghan women like Malalai, Lathifa and Zoya to contend their claim to live free from the fetters of social, religious and patriarchal domination. Telling the world about the harsh and horrifying conditions women in their country face opens them up to new vistas from where they can garner hope and expectation for freedom and liberty. As a literary genre, a memoir (derived from the French mémoire and from the Latin memoria, meaning ‘memory’, or ‘reminiscence’), forms a subclass of the autobiography but it becomes quite difficult to distinguish between the two in modern lingo. Memoir is a kind of autobiographical writing, but all autobiographies do not use the memoir as the touchstone. Memoirs are contrasted from formal autobiographies, where the latter intends to feature the complete life of the author, aiming attention on the growth and maturity of his psyche and temperament. The sequential purview of the memoir is decided based on the background and circumstances of the work and as a result is more fixated and flexible than the time-honoured sequence of birth to childhood to old age as found in an autobiography.

Memoirs are mostly penned by persons pursuing or occupying elective offices, people living in societies which curb their rights, sometimes by military leaders and businessmen. These works mostly deal particularly with the public life and careers of the authors and do not focus much on their private life. While making a historical study about memoirs it can be seen that public matters garner more momentum than the personal. Unlike older memoirs which contain very little information about the author, most modern memoirs are generally written from the first person point of view.

When Malalai, Zoya and Latifa pen their memoirs, their writing forms the regulating pattern where each experience is scrutinized and investigated within the
particular context and then fashioned into an intrinsic part of the scripting process. Resistance becomes the procedure in which that writing engages in. The works of these women develop as a unified compilation, which epitomize protests against the imperious patriarchal systems in their country. The influence of writing preserves the trials the women undergo and the reporter becomes the voice for other women who attempt to ride out. The struggle undertaken by Malalai, Latifa and Zoya shows their defiance against the disparate social stratum and gender bigotry. It is thus possible to fix their works under the league of resistance literature because they engage in a tussle for emancipation of women in different areas. A memoir has a very paramount and significant commission in the struggle for freedom. It regulates the experience of a particular individual with the unified resistance of a community. Resistance can be seen as an effort to enable suppressed people to fight positively against their exploitation and literary resistance can be seen as part of this unified resilience. Resistance is validated when there are concrete evidences of maltreatment and abuse. Resistance is adopted so as to scale down or oust such outrages. Biased behaviour, traditions, precedents, laws or systems like discrimination, encroachment of rights, torture, exploitation or nepotism, all condone resistance.

A large number of educated women who played an active role in Afghanistan’s socioeconomic development prior to and during the Soviet invasion migrated to Pakistan. Some of these women believed that if they went to Pakistan they could still participate in one way or other in the liberation struggle. However even while they were in Pakistan, they were confined to their homes and forced to wear the burqa when outside. They were denied health care and were prevented from opening schools for young girls. But many strong-willed women rebelled against such conservative practices. They launched self-supportive
programmes for women which were opposed by conservatives and Islamic fundamentalists.

But such revolutionary and politically active women in Pakistan had to endure constant harassment and were even sometimes subject to assassination. They were prevented from participating in social projects and resistance movements. Their participation in politics was also prohibited.

But in spite of all these repressions, there arose “many progressive and secular movements which recognized women as a revolutionary force and maintained that no social revolution could succeed without the active participation of women who constituted half of the country’s population” (Emadi 133). Sazman-e-Mubariza Bara-e-Azadi-e-Tabaq-e-Kargar dar Afghanistan, The Organization for Liberation of Working Class of Afghanistan (also called Akhgar), Sazman-e-Azadi Baksh-e-Mardum-e-Afghanistan, the Organization for the Liberation of People of Afghanistan (SAMA), Sazman-e-Rahaye-Afghanstan, and the Afghanistan Liberation Organization (ALO) were some movements formed to support the rights of women and their equality with men. These movements were formed by men who were active in the struggle for freedom, democracy and national liberation. “In addition to supporting women’s rights, the revolutionary movements also made it their policy to glorify women who gave their lives in the liberation struggle. These women were depicted as “heroines” of those in Afghanistan who opposed the Soviet occupation and who gave their lives to advance the cause of national liberation” (Emadi 135). These movements upheld many tenets like ‘full equality for women,’ ‘economic assistance for mother and child protection,’ ‘an end to social and class privileges, and the safeguarding of equality regardless of sex, religious, national and ethnic affiliations’ and the like. But the founders of these
organizations were abducted and murdered by the conservatives and fundamentalists. “Patriarchal traditions require women to be completely submissive to men. It is a disgrace for a woman to protest any physical or mental abuse by her father, brother or husband. Women are not only sentenced to death for sexual impropriety, but may be killed if they contradict or disobey a man of the family” (Emadi 36).

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) continued to battle for national liberation especially the emancipation of women prior to and even after the Soviet occupation. It sponsored rallies and meetings among refugee women so as to systematize women in the struggle for a free and democratic Afghanistan. But as per the usual patriarchal norm, conservatives and fundamentalists repudiated women’s presence and engagement in politics. They were put under terrible pressure. They had to give up politics and confine themselves to their homes and within their burquas. Those who flouted or violated their orders were assassinated. Meena Keshwar Kamal, the founder of RAWA was assassinated on February 4, 1987 in Pakistan. Meena and her supporters were active in the women’s movement trying to raise social and political awareness among women to fight for their rights as well as for national liberation. She was a paladin of women’s rights who tried to bring to light the policies of the Kabul regime and actively participated in the campaign to defend women’s rights.

Nasrin Abou-Bakre Gross believes that the current situation around women human rights issue in Pakistan is purely political. She speaks thus:

If we write about Afghan women without understanding the political situation, we are going to hurt them even more. It’s a disservice. We must understand, because she is being used as a political tool of colonization,
her woes come from the political needs of colonization. Her woes today
do not come from the Afghan men. Her woes today do not come out of
Afghan society. Her woes come from a political force which through
militias took power and overnight revoked the rights of Afghan women.
This has nothing to do with Afghan women’s family, society, religion or
culture. As soon as we bring these other things up, we are diluting the
colonizing dimension…Through controlling women, the colonizing power
is controlling the Afghan men. (qtd. in Skaine 53)

Gross in her work *Steps of Peace and our Responsibility as Afghans* concludes
that the first round of colonization was with the Soviet Union. The men in Afghanistan
were guerilla fighters. The men ate away at the power of the Soviet Union with the help of
the United States, and they were finally victorious. She believes that the Taliban are the
second round of colonization and that ‘in the second round of colonization women can
develop a mission of eating away at the power of the Taliban in the same guerilla way that
the first round did; maybe not with stinger missiles, but with other means (Gross 56).

After twenty one years of genocide and a proxy war between the United States
and Soviet Union, says Sima Wali, and after two million killed, one million the victims of
landmines, twelve million dispossessed of their homes and livelihood, and atrocities
committed against women, Afghans continue to remain the largest refugee and internally
displaced population in the world. Wali is among those who believe that it is not the
burqa, but the politics behind Afghanistan’s problems that have kept its women isolated
and dehumanized (qtd. in Skeine 54).
Malalai Joya in her memoir *Raising My Voice* speaks about the deplorable condition of women in 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. She 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).

Noting that many books were written about Afghanistan after the 9/11 tragedy, Joya says that only a few of them offer “a complete and realistic picture” (Joya 4) of Afghanistan’s past. Most of them describe in depth the cruelties and injustices of the Taliban regime, “but usually ignore or try to hide one of the darkest periods of our history: the rule of the fundamentalist mujahideen between 1992 and 1996” (Joya 4). Joya, an alias she adopted during the time of the Taliban when she worked as an underground activist, goes on to hope that “this book will draw attention to the atrocities committed by warlords who now dominate the Karzai regime” (Joya 4). She adopts the surname Joya after the Afghan writer Sarwar Joya who struggled against injustice during
the early twentieth century. He spent nearly twenty-four years of his life in jails and was finally killed because he would not compromise his democratic principles.

Like Sarwar Joya, Malalai is also not ready to compromise her opposition to the fundamentalists or mellow down her words against them. As she says, “. . . I too may join Joya in the long list of Afghans who have died for freedom. But you cannot compromise the truth. And I am not afraid of an early death if it advances the cause of justice. Even the grave cannot silence my voice, because there are others who would carry on after me” (Joya 3).

Malalai describes herself as someone who has become “a voice of the voiceless” (Joya 3) by a quirk of fate and history. According to her Raising My Voice has been written to offer a complete and realistic picture of Afghanistan’s past. People usually blame the Taliban for the atrocities committed against people especially the women in Afghanistan. Malalai wants to draw the attention of the world to the darkest period of their country’s history, i.e., the rule of the fundamentalist mujahedeen between 1992 and 1996. She calls them the warlords who instigated civil war in the country for their own personal gains. They are the people responsible for turning the beautiful landscape into a “land full of landmines, bullets and bombs” (Joya 5). She goes on to say that it is these warlords who are the dominant forces in the Afghan parliament. They are just pawns and puppets in the hands of the Americans who are the real rulers of Afghanistan. America does not want to leave Afghanistan for a number of reasons which Malalai enumerates:

The United States is using my country for its own strategic interests.

They would like to stay in Afghanistan forever, so they can keep military bases and a presence in the region. Central Asia is a key strategic region, and the United States wants to have a permanent military presence there to
counteract China’s influence in particular. The superpower would prefer to keep the situation unstable so they can stay indefinitely and use and occupy our country as part of a big chess game. (Joya 238)

*Raising My Voice* has many other messages for the world. There are a lot of false allegations and misinformation being spread about Afghan people who are depicted as terrorists and criminals. Malalai wants to portray to the world “the truth that Afghans are brave and freedom-loving people with a rich culture and proud history, who are capable of defending their independence, governing themselves and determining their own future” (Joya 4).

Malalai becomes the mouth piece of every Afghan when she says that it is her greatest desire that the lessons of her memoir would penetrate into the soul of the U.S. government and warn them that the people of Afghanistan reject their brutal occupation and their support of the warlords and drug-lords.

Malalai was born in Ziken in Western Afghanistan during the year the Soviet-backed coup changed the history of the country. Ever since as she says “war is all we Afghans have known” (Joya 5). She had a traumatic childhood because her family had to be on the run constantly because her father was part of the mujahedeen fighting against the Soviet occupiers. Malalai clearly distinguishes between the two types of mujahedeen. In her own words:

> It is difficult for outsiders to understand, but our people divide the mujahedeen into two types: the real and the criminal mujahedeen. In the early days of the Soviet-Afghan War, the majority of those who struggled against the Russian forces called themselves mujahedeen- or ‘holy
warriors’. They were, like my father, Afghan patriots, united to fight against an oppressive invader. The day the Soviet-backed regime of Najibullah finally collapsed on 28 April 1992, the real mujahideen laid down their arms, but it was on this date that the extremists and power-hungry groups began their civil war. It is these criminals that today we call *jihadis* to distinguish them from the honourable mujahideen. (Joya 28)

While Joya’s father and his comrades fought for freeing their land they never brought religion into their struggle. They had only one agenda—freedom from the Soviet troops, whereas the rebel leaders who fought against each other for supremacy and power, later on let out to the Western media that the fight against the Soviet troops was for Islam. Joya reiterates the fact that religion was used as a tool to let loose a horde of atrocities on the people especially women by the fundamentalist mujahideen or warlords as she calls them.

As soon as the Soviet troops left Afghanistan, civil war broke loose in the country and many warring factions under the leadership of warlords like Gulbuddin Hekmatayar, Ahmad Shah Massoud, Rashid Dostum, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and Abdul Ali Mazari blasted Kabul. An interim government was tried to be formed by the other warlords and the Islamic jihad Council led by Sibghatullah Mojaddedi tried to stop the chaos. But the fighting raged on and the militias of these warlords pillaged the city, robbing families, slaughtering and raping women. Thousands of innocent people were slaughtered and the city of Kabul was almost entirely ravaged. Though ultimately an interim government was formed under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud and Burhanuddin Rabbani, the country was split into fiefdoms ruled by the whims of rival warlords. They ignited an
ethnic clash in the country and horrible things were done to the innocent civilians belonging to different ethnic groups. Joya says that since the world media had turned away from Afghanistan after the Soviets left, many of the crimes against people especially women remained undocumented and hidden before the rest of the world. It was during this time that thousands of Afghans including Joya’s family fled to refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan.

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” (Joya 28). 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 such constraints.

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 grandmothers—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. (Joya 32-33)

Joya remembers with gratitude how she was given access to education in the refugee camps because her parents were insistent on that. She became part of an NGO later on and started literacy classes for adult women. Her stints in the different refugee camps were an eye opener to the various kinds of sufferings women underwent. There she realized the power of education and how empowering it could be. She read voraciously and was determined to transmit knowledge to the poor downtrodden Afghan women, so as to empower them and make them aware of their rights. Reading biographies of people like Gandhi, Che Guevara, Patrick Lumumba, Nelson Mandela and the like gave Joya the much needed courage and determination to fight against the injustice rampant in her beloved country. She realized “the importance of fighting to the end even when the odds are stacked against you” (Joya 38).

Joya joined the organization called Organization for Promoting Afghan Women’s Capabilities (OPAWC) in 1998 as a full time activist. By this period the Taliban had overthrown the warlords and taken over Afghanistan. Though they had promised security to the people of the country, “their security was like the graveyard” (Joya 39). They kept
repeating the atrocities that had been committed by their jihadi brothers. Strict rules and repressive medieval measures were introduced in the name of religion. OPAWC were planning to send someone to the Herat province of Afghanistan to start underground classes for girls in defiance of the Taliban and Malalai was the natural choice as she had been handling literacy classes for women in the refugee camps.

It was on her return to Afghanistan Malalai started exhibiting resilience and pertinacity. She was determined to restore the rights of her people even if it meant treading on dangerous waters. She adopted the burqa not because she wanted to comply with the orders of the Taliban but because it helped to hide school books and other forbidden objects under the long blue robes. She also befriended neighbourhood girls and they rebelled against the Taliban in many ways. They would gather together and dance together to amuse themselves. They would secretly dress up in Western-style clothes and even put make up under the burqa. All this had been forbidden by the Taliban. Schools were set up for girls in the basements of certain homes and this was done carefully and with lot of secrecy. Many times such schools were discovered and the inmates punished and tortured but this never prevented people from starting at a new place. Even though television had been banned by the Taliban, Malalai says how she and her five sisters watched the movie Titanic at a neighbour’s place. It was all done in secret. She remembers how on many instances the common Afghan people stood with each other to trick the Taliban.

Though it was really dangerous teaching at an underground girls’ school, Joya never even for once thought of giving it up. She had close shaves many a time but she was determined to fight. In 2001, she was named the director of OPAWC in Western Afghanistan which came as a big responsibility. It was in that year in September that the World Trade
Centre and the Pentagon were attacked. Within days the American invasion began and for the Afghans the next disastrous period commenced. Thousands of innocent people lost their lives as a result of gunfire, mortars, aerial bombings and explosive devices.

But women however displayed a great sense of resilience in the face of terror. Malalai had sparked off a revolution of change and courage and thousands of Afghan women fanned the spark of resilience into a great fire of indefatigability. Women were ready to risk their lives to defend the honour and dignity of other women, like Malalai says “we were our sisters’ keepers” (Joya 56). Malalai had made the women of Afghanistan understand that the key to their freedom was in their own hands, so they dared to be brave and prepared to make sacrifices to remove the obstacles in their path. To quote her, “Afghan women are like sleeping lions who when awakened . . . would play a tremendous role in any Afghan social revolution” (Joya 145). They were not passive and were capable of standing up for their rights.

Because of being outspoken and bold, Malalai has had to face many threats including assassination attempts. She has no private life and has to always have body guards escort her. She cannot go out with a friend even to do a simple thing like have an ice-cream. Her wedding had to be conducted with no fanfare and her husband’s name also cannot be revealed. She has to keep on changing her place of residence off and on to avoid getting killed by her enemies. But all this has never deterred her. She has met high level diplomats and boldly and unflinching spoken up against the American interference in deciding matters for her country. She has voiced her concerns about violence, poverty and women’s rights in Afghanistan at global meets. She has tried to dispel the very bad image of Afghan culture that has been propagated by the fundamentalists and by foreign
powers. She has tried to expose the corruption of the warlords and call for their prosecution in lieu of their heinous crimes. She has been elected as an M.P but has been expelled from the Parliament for voicing the truth. She has been defamed by the press many a time. She has never even once thought of seeking asylum in another country, because as she says, “I can never leave when all the poor people of Afghanistan that I love are living in danger and poverty . . . I am just one among many who are willing to sacrifice their lives to allow the brightness of liberty to shine in my poor country” (Joya 245). She has tried to let the world know that the burqa is not the most important problem that Afghan women face. Without security or a justice system that protects women from rape, without employment, food and basic services, the issue of the burqa is irrelevant. She has won the prestigious Anna Politkovskaya award in 2008. She has tried to portray to world that even after eight years of intervention by the United States and NATO, women’s rights have not been brought to Afghanistan, and they have achieved neither democracy nor justice. She has brought to light the fact that her country has lost everything during the past four decades. Even today she lives under the shadow of the gun, with the most unpopular and corrupt government in the world.

But Malalai believes that this situation will change. She knows she might be killed but she has chosen to follow the glorious past of hundreds of heroes and heroines of her history who have stood by their people to the end and preferred to be killed rather than be silenced. She is the epitome of resilience. She displays the capability to anticipate risk, limit impact, and bounce back rapidly through survival, adaptability, evolution, and growth in the face of turbulent change
As I often say, there are many others to follow me. Afghans are more than just a handful of warlords, Taliban, drug-lords and lackeys. I have a country full of people who know and believe what I believe: that we Afghans can govern ourselves without foreign interference. That democracy is possible here but can never be imposed at gunpoint. That the blood of millions of freedom loving martyrs runs through our veins, and their memories live on in every corner of our country. . . . That Afghan women have been at the forefront of our struggle throughout our proud history. Like Malalai of Maiwand, they inspire us to pick up our flag and carry on the struggle for justice and freedom. It is a battle we will never surrender. (Joya 271)

Foucault speaks about a concept called ‘relationships of power.’ He says that it is not a political structure or a government or a dominant social class or a master and a slave that he has in mind. “I mean that in human relations, whatever they are...whether it be a question of communicating verbally . . . or a question of a love relationship, an institutional or economic relationship . . . power is always present: I mean the relationship in which one wishes to direct the behavior of another” (Bernauer 11).

This notion of power in Foucault is referred to as bio-power. He speaks about the “capillary form of existence” of power, “the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into the actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (Foucault 39). When Foucault analyses power he brings in the “images of war, conflict and resistance” (Rouse 113).

For it is true that at the heart of power relations and as a permanent condition of their existence there is an insubordination and a certain
essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom, then there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight. Every power relationship implies, at least in potential, a strategy of struggle. (Robbins 88)

Foucault holds the viewpoint that wherever there are power relations, there is unquestionably, the likelihood of resistance. He argues that there is the probability of “violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation” (Foucault 123). In Raising my Voice there can be seen a group of women who record their dissent and defy whatever is pernicious to the feminine pursuit of individuality, attestation, self-sufficiency and self-confidence. This act of provenance, the course of budding into existence from reticence to assonance, is recorded as the process of power dynamics advocated by Foucault, an evolution from insignificant anonymity into pivotal perception.

Latifa’s My Forbidden Face is a heart-rending and moving personal chronicle of life under the Taliban rule. With agonizing candour and transparency, she depicts the way she painfully surveyed her secure world falling apart, in the name of a frenzied interpretation of faith that she could not assimilate. Her voice not only apprehends a misplaced innocence, but also reverberates with her steadfastness to hold on to life in all optimism and confidence. ‘Latifa’ is the pseudonym she uses to write the book because she still has family and friends back in Afghanistan, where she was born and raised in an educated, middle-class family. In 2001 Latifa and her parents escaped Afghanistan with the help of a French-based Afghan resistance group Elle. This book was written while in Paris with Shekeba Hachemi, the founder of Afghanistan Libre, who works on behalf of Afghan women. 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.

Latifa briefly describes her family's life as a happy, contented existence in a united, affectionate, religious, and liberal family. Her father has his own import/export business; her mother is a doctor. One of her sisters, twenty-year-old Soraya, is a flight attendant, the other, Shakila, is married, living in Pakistan and waiting to move to the US to join her husband. Her older brother Wahid was a soldier who bravely fought during Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, while another brother Daoud is an economics major in college. Latifa dreams of being a journalist. Being the youngest she is petted and pampered by her family. But this idyllic world comes crashing down on the 27th of September 1996, the day the white flag of the Taliban flies over Kabul. The family is filled with dread not knowing what the future would bring them. In her own words:

Even after my brother told us he’d seen the white flags I didn’t want to believe the truth. The government forces must have pulled back to prepare for another attack on the Taliban . . . the mujahideen can’t have abandoned Kabul. So many times I’ve heard, read and preferred to ignore what the government has been telling us about the Taliban: “They imprison women in their own homes. They prevent them from working, from going to school. Women have no more lies, the Taliban take away their daughters, burn the villagers’ houses, force the men to join the army. They want to destroy the country!”(Latifa 4)
Flabbergasted and aghast, Latifa depicts how life in her country altered in just a single day. “Just yesterday, despite the civil war, life was ‘normal’ in Kabul, even though the city is in ruins. Yesterday, I went to the seamstress with my sister to try on dresses we were going to wear to a wedding today. There would have been music. We would have danced” (Latifa 4). These words bring back memories of Anne Frank, the Jewish teenager who recounted the horrors of the Nazi regime in her diary, captive within the four walls of her home.

To get over the sorrow and apathy caused by the forced imprisonment, Latifa tries to think about cheerful frivolous things which are typically feminine like a new dress and cosmetics. This is one way of showing her defiance to the outrageous rule. She is not willing to let go her dreams.

Maybe I’m revealing a shallow side to my character, but I need to cling on to the “normality” of my life as an ordinary girl. It’s a way of denying the imprisonment that is lying in wait for me, lying in wait for every Afghan girl and woman. It’s inevitable. (Latifa 33)

The rigid laws advocated by the fundamentalists surreptitiously and wordlessly kill all the girls and women. The discomfiting constraints, which have already been entrenched throughout the larger part of the country, obliterate women by bolting them outside of society. All women are afflicted, from the youngest to the oldest. They are no longer allowed to work. This results in a debacle, a caving in of medical services and government administration. Latifa passionately recounts, “No more school for girls, no more health care for women, no more fresh air for us anywhere. Women go home! Or disappear under the chadri, out of sight of men. It’s an absolute denial of individual
liberty, a real sexual racism” (Latifa 38). This petty tyranny over their personal lives is intolerable to the Afghan women as their days become endless tunnels of inactivity. Forcing the women to wear the chadri is like shutting them within a cage and “stealing their faces” (Latifa 48). Refusing to step out of the house is Latifa’s way of resisting the fundamentalists. “The only way I can still resist is to shut myself in, refusing to see them” (Latifa 50).

There are women like Soraya’s friend Narguesse who shows her resistance and rebellion by ripping off her chadri in broad daylight and revealing her pretty face. She does that because she is humiliated and refused entry into the building where she had worked earlier. She had been called by the Taliban to collect a few months of her salary. Taking a cue from her, the other women who were also denied entry into the building also take off their chadris and protest in loud voices. Luckily for all of them, the Taliban do not take any action except push them all out, maybe because they felt they were outnumbered. But this first protest demonstration gives Latifa and her friends a little bit of hope. Narguesse who has always been willful and independent tells them, “We have to fight back. Today we couldn’t do much because there weren’t enough of us. But tomorrow if there are thousands of us, then we’ll be able to overthrow these Taliban” (Latifa 61).

Though Latifa’s mother has lost the will to live she still tends to her clandestine patients with the frugal medications and supplies she has, until she runs out of them. She seems “her old self when she can take care of others and give them medical advice” (Latifa 74). She displays resilience when she asks her friend Dr Sima to open a clandestine doctor’s office. The reason why she does is because she is once faced with a despairing situation. Three young girls who have been cruelly and continuously raped by a band of fifteen Taliban come to her with mutilated genitals and battered bodies. Finding it difficult to
handle the situation alone, she requests her friend Dr Sima to come and help her. The duo work on the three girls, “from ten that evening until four the next morning, sewing them back up again” (Latifa 70). Deeply angered by the situation Latifa’s mother decides that Afghan women need a secret clinic. They are not allowed to be treated by male doctors as per the Taliban decree. She encourages Dr Sima her friend to start a secret clinic.

There are too many sick women in the neighbourhood. They come to me even from far away, as you see and I can’t cope by myself. I have no drugs, and almost no supplies. You, on the other hand, have grown children living abroad whom you could ask to send us all the medicine we need. (Latifa 71)

This is the first step of resilience – hoodwinking the Taliban by secretly defying their orders. Encouraged by the words and grit of Latifa’s mother, Dr Sima decides to start the underground medical clinic in Kabul which becomes a haven for many an ailing woman of Kabul.

The second step is taken when Latifa witnesses a mullah in the centre of the courtyard of a mosque opposite her house. He is surrounded by little boys endlessly reciting verses from the Koran under his strict supervision. “It is at this precise moment something clicks in my brain. First of all, of course there are no girls, only boys, in that Koranic school” (Latifa 120). She realizes that the only education that these boys will get is from the Koran. Though she does not undermine the importance of religious education she also realizes that those boys would be losing out on a wealth of subjects like history, geography, mathematics, literature and science. She also apprehends the fact that most of the boys are not sent to any school by their parents because they do not want them to be
indoctrinated by the Taliban. She realizes how lucky she had been to get education in spite of being in the country during the Soviet invasion and later even when caught in the throes of the civil war between the Mujahedeen and the Communists. She had been able to complete her high school when the country was under the Islamic state government established by the resistance. She had been preparing for the entrance exams for the journalism course at the university when the Taliban regime had taken over. She decides to put her knowledge to use rather than moping at home which she had been doing for the past two years since the Taliban had stopped education for women. Her friend Farida gives her the necessary support. They take a cue from their former teacher Mrs Fawzia who had started an underground school in her locality. Though Mrs Fawzia had been well aware that it would be an immense risk, she hadn’t hesitated to go ahead. She had taken a lot of precautions so as not to be caught but once the Taliban had caught her right in the middle of her teaching session. She was badly beaten and imprisoned and later let off with severe warnings and threats.

When Farida suggestst that they start something like what Mrs Fawzia had been doing Latifa agrees because as she puts it in her own words, “the mosque and the little boys reciting as they rock back and forth, hypnotized or terrorized by the mullah—that’s the jolt I needed this morning to spring into action. Sometimes things happen like that—it’s just late” (Latifa 123). The secret school they set up is also to let Mrs Fawzia have her revenge. She would be thrilled that someone was picking up where she had been forced to quit. The entire family pitches in. Latifa’s friends also join. Mrs Fawzia agrees to give them her lesson programmes and advice from time to time. They do take precautions but go about their job calmly. As Latifa says, “Oddly enough, I am not frightened” (Latifa 126). While
teaching history to the students Latifa relives the hard times that she and her family had undergone during the turbulent times in Afghanistan, first under the Soviet regime, then during the civil war followed by the rule of the Mujahedeen and then the Taliban. Her resilience is evident in her words:

And in spite of everything we went on living...Having lived through so much war, we had become indifferent to the tragedy of our country, so anesthetized that we were blind to the final threat that still lay in wait for us: a secret movement of religious students, a new militia that would take advantage of the tribal infighting over Kabul and seize a third of the country in the south west at the end of 1994. (Latifa 142)

The secret school boosts the morale of Latifa’s mother. She helps out in the running of the school and even cooks for the children who come. It gives her new meaning in life. She believes it is a way in which she can resist against the evil force called the Taliban. She encourages Latifa as she says, “Well done! This is a way to keep up the good fight” (Latifa 146).

The third step of resilience is displayed when Latifa and her friends decide to carry on with the work of a news review which had been shelved ever since the Taliban had taken over. They had been working on the project entitled Fager (meaning Dawn). They would produce a single copy of each issue which would go around the neighbourhood from hand to hand. Latifa and her friends would collect articles and photos related to variety of topics ranging from fashion to films. But under the Taliban regime, people were starved for news. They had no idea of what was going on. They were many rumours about a lot of things but it could never be verified. It is then that Farida comes up with pertinent
question, “How about if we publish our review again? Don’t you want to? I do! All we have to do is to get started” (Latifa 149). She offers to go around, an invisible reporter under her chadri, collecting news items about the Taliban atrocities. Latifa’s brother Daoud offers to get the supplies of paper and do the writing part. Collecting interesting items for the review poses many problems but they continue to carry on with it. They decide to bring out a surprisingly refreshing issue in the year 2000 to mark the millennium issue.

It was a time when the movie Titanic had hit the stands. The whole city was caught in the Titanic fever. TV’s and VCR’s were secretly stashed in the basements of Kabul. Young men got Leonardo DiCaprio haircuts. They exhibited their resilience and rebellion in that way. There was deprivation everywhere, the country was affected by famine, refugees were flooding into camps set up in Iran and Pakistan, in short, life had become miserable. But the Taliban didn’t care. They went about their ‘duty’ of “imprisoning barbers, whipping men, and beating up women” (Latifa 177). So the people who were prevented from laughing, children who were prevented from playing, poured their emotions albeit secretly into the ‘heathen’ love story. Latifa and her friends decide to bring out a special Titanic issue of the Dawn. They clandestinely collect all relevant materials and pictures. They do it with a vengeance as their only desire is to rebel against the viciousness of the Taliban. “Leonardo is so cute! The girls in my neighbourhood need to “sin” by gazing at him. I glue his photo into Dawn with the feeling of rebellion one has at twenty years old, robbed of education and learning, robbed of life” (Latifa 177).

To make matters worse, the Minister of Health, Mullah Mohammed Abbas makes an official visit to Paris which creates a furore in Kabul. While the Taliban are delighted
that they are internationally recognized, the people who secretly listen to BBC or American news are incensed.

A *talib* in Paris, in the country of the rights of man… A “Minister of Health” who bars women from hospitals, who in 1997 dared imprison the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs, Emma Bonino who had come to visit an NGO in need of emergency financial aid in Kabul. She was roughed up, beaten in front of the foreign cameraman accompanying her, and questioned for hours before being released. What right does this *talib* have to go abroad and discuss humanitarian matters? ...This visit is a disgrace. This *talib* is only an uneducated mullah; he’s not seen a doctor, he’s just a Pakistani puppet. (Latifa 181)

Latifa and her friends are enraged that the French had not welcomed one of the women doctors or nurses who were prevented by the Taliban from working. Once upon a time, these women had formed the very core of Afghanistan’s health care system. They had been a vibrant part of the hospitals and the Ministry of Health. They had worked selflessly and dedicatedly to bring about maternal and infant hygiene to the countryside and administer emergency gynecological care. The people in Kabul are heartsick that the French had turned their back on the resistance movement and that they had never written a journalistic piece castigating the repression and torture common people in Afghanistan were facing under the Taliban regime.

The fourth step of resilience is exhibited when Latifa decides to accept the offer to fly to France and give testimony of what she has seen and heard in Kabul, As Dr Sima tells her, “such testimony is only way we can resist” (Latifa 184). The French magazine
Elle was looking for young women who were ready to fly to Paris and speak about the plight of women in Afghanistan. Urged on by Dr Sima and many others Latifa decides to take the trip though she is well aware of the dangers that could come her way if the Taliban got a whiff of the matter. Latifa and her parents arrive in Paris to be welcomed by the officials of the Elle magazine. The trip had not been easy. They had to face a volley of questions at each stopover but Latifa was determined to fight through. The name Latifa which she uses in the memoir is a false name that was given to her for security reasons when she set her foot on French soil.

She attends a number of meetings along with her mother and Diba, another young Afghan woman and meets up with the many top officials. They vehemently speak about the women in Afghanistan:

. . . who have been robbed of their voices and their rights, oppressed as the designated victims of a systemic purge. We have no longer been able to work, to learn, to show ourselves, left beggars and widows in a country where men have been killed, handicapped or exiled by twenty years of war, and have no more weapons with which to fight the Taliban. One day, who knows, the purge will reach its climax, and we’ll see women subjected to the ultimate degradation of a noble and ancient land: forced to bring into this world the sons of the Taliban . . . we want to fight back, we refuse to give up our dignity, and we want to bring back from France the freedom that I have never known in the twenty tears on this earth. We are a proud people, in a land rich with history, and it is there, to them that I would like to take this freedom. (Latifa 196)
But before they can fly back home, depressing news comes from her brother Daoud who is in Pakistan. A ‘fatwa’ (a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority) has been issued against the women because they denounced the Taliban regime. Their house in Kabul had been ransacked and everything gutted. Latifa’s parents are demoralized as all their efforts have proved to be in vain. They cannot return to Kabul because if they do so, they would be killed. In the midst of this heart rending news, Latifa tries to hold on to her sanity. She is devastated. She knows that she will be a refugee in France, a foreign country. She is troubled about her parents who are suffering silently, because the whole family has been broken up and scattered. A thousand questions rush through her mind . . . Where would they live? Where would they start? And what would they start over? But her resilient spirit is not willing to give up. She holds on to what her father had told her before the news of the fatwa had reached them.

You haven’t done this all for nothing. Just wait. Women listen to other women, and what you’ve told them will make people understand what the Taliban are doing to you. A woman is not nothing. If a talib tells a woman that she is nothing and he is everything, he is ignorant. Man is born of woman, the saint has a mother, the whole world was born in the body of a woman. You must remember this Afghan saying: ‘If the pearl tells the oyster it is nothing, and the pearl is everything, then a fish can tell the sky to stop raining.’ (Latifa 197)

When the Taliban are ousted from Afghanistan in 2001, Latifa starts dreaming of a new hope and future. Though she is still in France as an exile, though the family is still scattered she clings on the hope of a better Morrow for her motherland. She has been
delighted that the representatives of each ethnic group of Afghanistan— the Tajiks, the Hazaras, the Pashtuns, and the Uzbeks have attended the Bonn Conference (in December 2001, the German city of Bonn hosted a conference of Afghan leaders to choose the leader of an Afghan Interim Authority – widely known as the Bonn Conference. The Conference chose Hamid Karzai, who was subsequently elected President in 2004) and have pledged their solidarity for the rebuilding of the land that has experienced “a devastation almost unparalleled in the history of the world” (Latifa 200). She sees a glimmer of light at the end of the dark tunnel. For many decades Afghan women have traversed in the darkness of the tunnel tightly wrapped in their chadris like canaries in cages. They have been at the receiving end always and have been pawns of the great Afghan chessboard displaced and tossed about by a number of variant forces. Latifa remembers a line from a European song which says, “Woman is the future of mankind” (Web). She visualizes an Afghanistan in which men would echo those words. Her vision is far-reaching. She has a great perception about the future of her country as she concludes her memoir:

I pray that women may have a greater voice in the coming days… 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 his wife may counsel and assist him; that he may choose advisers of great wisdom, that books may replace weapons, that education may teach us to respect one another, that our hospitals may be worthy of their mission, and that our culture may be reborn from the ruins of our pillaged museums… I will do more than pray, because when the last talib has put away his black turban and I can
be a free woman in a free Afghanistan, I will take up my life there once more and do my duty as a citizen, as a woman, and I hope, as a mother.

(Latif 202)

_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 tortured women of Afghanistan, who are the victims of inhuman suffering inflicted by fundamentalism. Unambiguous and pragmatic, Zoya pens this memoir with John Follain and Rita Cristofari and distinctly portrays the actuality of growing up in a 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. Just like Latifa, Zoya also uses a pseudonym for security reasons.

Though she is only twenty-three while penning the memoir, Zoya has borne testimony to and has also suffered more adversity and horror than most people do in a lifetime. The memories of her childhood are filled with images of the Russian soldiers. The words of her grandmother reverberate in her ears, “They are invaders who have occupied Afghanistan. Their hands are stained with red, with the blood of our people. If an invader from Russia offers something, don’t accept it and don’t go anywhere near them” (Zoya 10). Her parents were very progressive in their thinking and never heeded to any traditional Afghan custom. They even celebrated her birth in a community that gave too much of importance to the birth of a son. Her father always would encourage her to
grow up as strong person, either a doctor or a teacher who could contribute to the
development of their otherwise conservative society. Even when Zoya was a child, her
mother was very busy with lot of work which the little Zoya never understood. She only
knew that her mother left the house early in the morning and came back late at night. She
perceived that her mother was involved in some serious important work. From a very
small age Zoya learns the lessons of resilience and secrecy. Once she happened to see her
mother in the burqa which unnerved her initially. Little did she know that the burqa
would soon become an integral part of every Afghan woman’s life in the future. Later as
a representative of RAWA she finds the burqa a safe haven to hide all the publications of
the clandestine association while moving from her refugee camp in Pakistan to
Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. For the Taliban, “the burqa was the only passport
they demanded” (Zoya 3).

Though her childhood had been interspersed with the horrors of wars and the
deafening noise of missiles, though her parents were away most of the time, she grew up
strong and independent. Her grandmother who lived with them regaled her with
innumerable stories about her country and its culture especially the Pashtun tribe to
which she belonged. Zoya heard stories “about the rich and the poor, and the ending was
always the same. ‘Some people are rich, some people are poor, and the poor have to fight
harder to survive and for their rights. You will have to fight someday,’” her grandmother
used to say (Zoya 32). Even from a very tender age she had been initiated into the world
of resistance, though the initial lessons were verbal.

Zoya was seven when her mother initiated her into the latter’s ‘secret world’.
Her mother was a RAWA agent. All her secret rendezvous were in fact visits associated
with the activities of RAWA. She did the work of furtively, carrying all the documents related to RAWA and handing them over to other women. Zoya finds this job very important. Though she is barely a child she takes up the responsibility of carrying out her mother’s instructions to the dot. From her childhood, the resilient spirit is ingrained in her. At a time when children of her age ran around and played with toys she found great happiness in being with adults. She used to look forward to her outings with her mother though they were very rare. She “never enjoyed the company of other children . . . thought their games were stupid” (Zoya 36). It was a time when the country was caught in the midst of a war between the Soviets and the mujahedeen. The Russians tortured and killed all the people who resisted their rule. Though Zoya never understood the magnitude of the secret work that was being done by her very patriotic parents, she could garner from their secret conversations that it was a time of real danger.

For the first time I realized that people were being killed for their ideas and fear entered my house as never before. My parents worried that the Russians had recruited spies among the people of Kabul and that even their neighbours would betray them. Again and again Mother told me not to speak to anyone about the work we had done together. From that moment on, Mother left the house even more often. Father was sadder than I had ever seen him. When I asked whether I could go outside and fetch something from the shops, I was told it was too risky. “Don’t go out on your own. There is danger outside” were the words that became stamped on my brain. (Zoya 43)
In spite of the dangers that she and her family could be subjected to Zoya’s mother displays the kind of feisty resilience that is a rare quality. She does not stay at home fearful for her own life. She takes up the challenges that RAWA are faced with and carries on her secret mission with firmness and fortitude. Zoya has a hundred questions all of which she patiently answers. She instills in Zoya the courage to carry on her legacy. She tells her about the plight of the women in Afghanistan who are subjected to ill treatment at the hands of their own menfolk and also at the hands of the soldiers who have held their land captive. She makes sure that Zoya understands the pain of those women. As a child Zoya had been mesmerized by the films that she had seen. She had always believed that to resist evil, one needed a gun. She learns from her mother that resilience need not always be displayed using physical force but that moral force was a better strategy. The RAWA volunteers used to write pamphlets and distribute them to the Afghan people especially the women to make them realize that as people of Afghanistan, “they had the right to decide their own future and that they had to fight without violence against the wild Russians” (Zoya 48).

When Zoya voices her fears regarding her mother’s safety, the latter reassures her little girl. “No, don’t be afraid. It is not dangerous. I am not alone, and there are other women doing more than me. And how can I sit in the house and do nothing? If we don’t help the women who are suffering, no one else will” (Zoya 49). She describes to Zoya how people from different places around the globe had fought against many evils like fascism, racism and the like which had beleaguered their own homelands. Zoya is particularly inspired by the story of Malalai of Maiwand. Though she is afraid for her parents because she sees the depth of the passion with which they carry out their work of
resistance, her immature mind imbibes the zeal her parents display and it serves to ignite
the flame of resistance in her later on while in the refugee camp at Pakistan. That even
the hammam or the public bath where Zoya used to go to with her mother used to serve as
a meeting place for RAWA, was something which Zoya discovered much later.

Zoya’s grandmother was also instrumental in inculcating the spirit of resistance in
her granddaughter. The former had been the victim of a terrible marriage. She had never
received any love and care from her husband, instead she been vulnerable to his fits of
temper and selfishness. She had borne many a cruel beating and had faced insults, abuse
and humiliation at his hands. Though she had tried to take her case to her father many a
time, he, in spite of being a mullah (religious teacher), had advised her to stick on with her
husband. In the Afghan society, wives are expected to accept abuse from their husbands
as their destiny and bow their heads to all kind of atrocities that are unleashed against
them. But Zoya’s grandmother, now a widow, would just pooh-pooh these age-old
customs and traditional thinking patterns. She would encourage Zoya to learn to stand up
for her rights. Even as a child, the grains of resilience were deeply embedded in her
psyche. She took her grandmother’s words to heart which later on paved the way for her
to boldly fight for her rights. Zoya admired her grandmother for her strong beliefs
especially when it came to defying the traditional patriarchal Afghan culture.

For women of my generation, things were different. But you must never
tolerate what I went through. It was not human. I admit it; I made a
mistake putting up with it. You must have a good education. You must
never be shy of expressing your opinion I front of men. Don’t let them
have power over you. And the man you choose as your husband must be
well educated, he mustn’t be ignorant, and he must promise to respect you as a woman. (Zoya 56)

From a very tender age Zoya thus begins her odyssey of resilience. Her first act of resilience is revealed when she refuses a chocolate offered by a Russian woman soldier. Though it was one of her favourites, she suppresses her desire and focuses on what her parents and grandmother had always chanted into her ears. And she tells the Russian in no mincing words. “Well, if she is Russian, tell her to get out of my country” (Zoya 11), taking the help of a nearby shopkeeper to translate her words. As she grew older Zoya incorporated within her heart every minute detail related to her parents’ political agenda. She drank in each and every aspect related to the freedom struggle, especially freedom for Afghan women. She never demanded her mother’s time and grew wise beyond her years. She felt proud that her mother had chosen RAWA over her because she believed with all her heart that her mother had an aim in her life. She had learnt that it was important to have an aim in one’s life and so she wanted “to grow up fast that I could achieve something useful” (Zoya 58).

Once the Communist government left Afghanistan, worse things happened. The fundamentalist mujahedeen took over the country and there were atrocities and barbarity of the worst kind let loose upon the innocent civilians who tried to protest against them. The different Afghan clans turned against each other and everyday there would be reports of torture and death. Women were forced to wear the burqa and were prohibited from going to schools. Young boys were indoctrinated and the only kind of education they had was the religious fundamentalist teaching in the madrassas. Since there was constant fighting and raining of bombs and missiles, Zoya and her family
converted their basement into a shelter. They could hardly come out for the fear of being bombed. In the midst of these dangerous times, Zoya’s parents carried on their clandestine work. They did not allow the negative circumstances to deter them from their purpose. The foreign enemy had be thrown out but now they had a worse enemy to contend with- their own countrymen whose reason and humaneness had been clouded by fundamentalist beliefs and ideologies. They went about their work furtively knowing fully well that they faced danger every moment. This is the epitome of resilience about which Hara Estroff Marano, Editor-at-Large for Psychology Today, writes in her article “The Art of Resilience”:

At the heart of resilience is a belief in oneself—yet also a belief in something larger than oneself. Resilient people do not let adversity define them. They find resilience by moving towards a goal beyond themselves, transcending pain and grief by perceiving bad times as a temporary state of affairs… It's possible to strengthen your inner self and your belief in yourself, to define yourself as capable and competent. It's possible to fortify your psyche. It's possible to develop a sense of mastery. (Web)

Zoya’s worst fears come true when her father soon goes missing. The family has no inkling of what has happened to him. Though he mother is grief stricken she hides her tears in the privacy of her room and carries on her work with much gumption. She does not allow her personal tragedy to detain her purpose. This is exactly what Marano highlights in her article when she says that resilient people do not permit tragedies to limit them. They exhibit resilience by progressing towards the purpose of an action, sometimes all by themselves, overstepping anguish and sorrow by looking at dreadful
situations as a momentary condition. Zoya is shattered when her mother too goes missing. She feels bereft and there is a big vacuum in her heart, a lacuna which nothing can fill. She had loved her parents more than her own self and finds it unbearable to go on without their comforting presence. She even contemplates on putting an end to her life because she feels that such a negation would free her from everything—the choking loneliness, the war, the fundamentalist mujahedeen, the missile attacks and the suffocating angst. But soon she feels ashamed of herself for harbouring such negative thoughts.

The resilient spirit which her parents had ingrained in her surfaces and the negative emotions take a back seat. “I was too young to give up on the world. My parents would have disapproved. Suicide was a sign of weakness. It ran against all they had taught me. I would have been throwing it all away” (Zoya 73). The RAWA volunteers step in at this moment of crisis and help out in all ways, by the way of encouraging Zoya and also bringing food for them. It is much later that Zoya comes to know that her parents had been killed as per the orders of the Mujahedeen. No details about their deaths are known and Zoya and her grandmother grieve that the warlords had “robbed them not only of two lives but also of two graves at which they could mourn” (Zoya 74). Zoya decides to avenge the deaths of her parents “by fighting for the same case which Mother had fought for” (Zoya 74).

When Zoya is fourteen, she leaves for Pakistan as a refugee because her grandmother is afraid that she would be hurt by the Mujahedeen if they continued to live in Afghanistan. RAWA helps her settle in a school run for Afghan refugee girls. There were girls from the different ethnic groups and Zoya gets the opportunity to learn a variety of subjects though she missed being away from her grandmother. The school was
funded by RAWA and safeguarded the ideals Zoya’s mother had fought for. The girls were taught the relevance of resistance and democracy. Even the films that were screened for the students dealt with the ideology of resistance and resilience. Though RAWA faced criticism in Pakistan also, the girls were taught about its ideologies. Zoya was particularly enamoured of Soraya, her political science teacher and a secret RAWA supporter. “From Soraya I learned the meaning of democracy, of human rights, of feminism. I was told that if men were not allowed to become members of RAWA, it was not because we were against men – we needed their help for the organization to continue working – but because of its very nature” (Zoya 107). Though Zoya gets an opportunity to leave for Canada with a distant cousin, she refuses because she wants to be true to the patriotic values which her parents had instilled in her. “When I told him I believed that ‘to love your country, you must be ready to die for your country’, he shook his head in disbelief. ‘You are only a child, he said. Where did you get ideas that are so much bigger than you?’” (Zoya 108).

This is an aspect of resilience about which Maria Konnikova speaks about in _The New Yorker_ “Resilient children have what psychologists call an “internal locus of control”: they believe that they, and not their circumstances, affect their achievements. The resilient children see themselves as the orchestrators of their own fates” (Web).

As the Taliban occupy Afghanistan and start their fundamentalist regime, Zoya and a few of her friends decide to leave school and involve in the activities of RAWA. There was a lot of work and Zoya knew that she couldn’t be just a passive observer because she knew her parents wouldn’t have wanted her to be like that. She is put up in a safe house along with a few other girls who want to involve actively in the affairs of RAWA. Zoya spends her time reading the works of resistance fighters like Brecht,
Martin Luther King, Lincoln and the like. She starts writing articles in Payam-e-Zan, the magazine of RAWA. She drinks in reports of the activities of RAWA and how many of its members had bravely withstood torture and imprisonment to spread the message of resistance. She was particularly inspired by Meena, the founder of RAWA who had called the women of Afghanistan, sleeping lions. Zoya was constantly reminded of the gravity of her job and was given a clear picture of what could happen to her if she remained a RAWA volunteer. She could be arrested, tortured or even killed. The older women gave her the option to leave the association if she felt too burdened by its cloistered life but Zoya was always resolute in her answer, “I know that you have made many sacrifices, and I am ready to do the same” (Zoya 119).

Zoya soon gets an opportunity to go to Afghanistan. She would be going as RAWA’s brand ambassador so as to instill in the Afghan women the spirit of resistance. She is forced to wear the burqa which she hates. She would be smuggling RAWA publications documenting Taliban outrages. In Kabul, Zoya meets Zeba, a very courageous RAWA activist who would film and photograph all the worst crimes committed by the Taliban, including their public hangings and executions. Though it posed a great risk to her life, Zeba went about her job courageously. She always maintained a cheerful disposition which was very contagious. During her brief sojourn in Kabul, Zoya is able to meet many women who have had their daughters raped or killed but some of them do not approve of the peaceful methods of resistance adopted by RAWA. She is appalled by the horrible conditions in the hospitals where women were denied treatment because according to the Taliban, “if a woman was sick, it was better for her to die than to be treated by a man.
If she refused to let a male doctor touch her, she would be certain of going to heaven. If she let herself be treated by him, she would be condemned to Hell” (Zoya 145).

But Zoya also sees flashes of resilience in many places which strengthens her belief in the resilient Afghan spirit. Though the Taliban had banned all kinds of entertainment, music and sport, Zoya finds in several houses that she was able to visit, “not only illegal television sets but also homemade satellite dishes in the yard to catch foreign channels” (Zoya 148). This was the spirit of resistance which Zoya found enthralling. And she says “such discreet signs of rebellion warmed her heart” (Zoya 154).

In the public stadiums which the Taliban had converted into execution grounds where people were forced to gather and made to watch the gruesome executions, Zoya finds women openly criticizing the Taliban though they speak in very low tones. Once she sees a woman in the market without a mahram / male escort. (The Taliban had issued a decree that women were not to go out of their houses unescorted) The former is affronted by a group of talibs who are barely teenagers. When they lash out at her with their whips, she reacts furiously and pulls off her burqa. “She was tall and strong. I guessed she was in her forties. Her attacker was so surprised that he did not know how to respond. No one had trained him for that kind of resistance. All he had been taught was to whip women. He slunk away. I marveled at her bravery” (Zoya 154). The prudent resilience that people in Kabul displayed revealed that they were still alive. Despite the Taliban attempt to crush it to dust, many women clung to their feminity. In her words:

Several of the young women I met wore make up or perfume under the burqa, and they visited beauty salons that operated in secrecy. The salons were popular especially with brides, who wanted to make themselves as
beautiful as possible. Even under the Taliban, strangely, cosmetics were sold in the shops, although their use was forbidden. Even wearing something as pretty as nail polish whim was banned by the Taliban, could bring terrible punishment. I was shocked to see the young daughter of a RAWA member painting her long nails a bright pink colour. “But isn’t that dangerous?” I stammered. “What am I supposed to do? Stop living because of them? If they want to beat me, let them beat me.” I was amazed. I knew that the Taliban had cut off the fingertips of some women they had caught wearing nail polish. (Zoya 155)

Zoya was also deeply impressed by Khalida, who ran an underground secret school for almost three hundred children in various parts of Kabul. She had been warned by the Taliban once, but she had simply defied their orders and moved to another place. Zoya was fascinated by her resilience and courage because she was taking a big chance. If she were caught again she would be executed. RAWA was helping her with the materials and stationery needed for the children.

Like Latifa, Zoya also speaks about the furore that was created when Titanic was released. People defied the orders of the Taliban and smuggled in video cassettes. There were Dicaprio haircuts and Titanic bazaars. There were serious repercussions if caught but the people still spurned the orders. “Nothing the Taliban did could quench the thirst of the people in a country where forced marriages were a rule, for a story of undying love” (Zoya 162).

In her memoir, Zoya also speaks about the protest rally conducted by RAWA in Peshawar on the 28th of April, 1998. There were around three hundred RAWA members
and activists as well as a number of Afghan women from different cities in Pakistan. Some women even came for the rally from the nearby provinces in Afghanistan. RAWA was also able to garner the support of some progressive and democratic Pakistani women's organizations. It was an event which gathered much media support as a number of Pakistani and foreign reporters and photographers were present. They were attacked by a group of fundamentalist talibs from a nearby madrassa, but to the sheer amazement of the imperious fundamentalists, RAWA activists were not only undeterred, but they retaliated with an unmitigated effrontery which could only emanate from an insatiable passion for revenge and hatred for these fanatics. Zoya speaks about how a number of women were badly injured. But in spite of their personal injuries they continued to fight with sheer determination. Nobody was going to cow them.

I saw that the arm of a friend of mine hung from her shoulder at a crazy angle. It was broken, but she continued to fight with her broken arm.

I heard Zohreh, another member call out to me. She was half lying, half sitting on the ground, her hand to her pregnant stomach. Her breath came out in short puffs. I saw that there was blood on her trousers . . . Later, I found that Zohreh had lost the baby. I learned that before the demonstration, other members had told her not to take part because of her pregnancy, but she had insisted that she must participate as it was important to her. (Zoya 166)

Zoya continued her work with RAWA working within the refugee camp established by the organization on the outskirts of the Pakistani city of Peshawar. It was a huge camp and there were mud houses and tents for two thousand families set in a
sprawling dusty area devoid of any greenery. She is appalled after hearing about the atrocities the Afghan people especially the women had to face at the hands of the Taliban. She knows it is impossible to restore to the people all that they have lost but she goes about helping them to salvage their sanity and equipping them to pick up the broken pieces and carry on with their lives. She witnesses people squabbling and fighting amongst themselves for basic necessities like food and clothing and she feels sorry for them because she knows that they are “driven wild by desperation” (Zoya 180). Zoya has real admiration for women like Fatima who give up their quiet, clean doctor’s clinic in the city to spend her days among the poor, dirty and emotionally disturbed refugees in the camp. Watching Fatima work reminds her of “the clandestine medical teams that RAWA would send to the more remote areas of Afghanistan where, under the Taliban, women were dying of curable diseases simply because there were no women doctors to see them” (Zoya 185). The teams of women would drive to remote villages in cars, and not in ambulances, so as not to draw attention to themselves. They would be warmly welcomed by the villagers who would show them hospitality. The team would often retire for the night in tents so as not to expose any family to danger.

In the refugee camp, Zoya and other RAWA activists would ensure that the women and girls attended the literacy classes. They would be very strict with the women and would not allow them to shirk classes for any reason. Zoya insisted on education for women because she believed that knowledge was power which would give many of the women a chance for a better future. She has dreams too. She speaks with great longing, “One of my dreams is that every town and village in Afghanistan should have access to a library with many, many books—books on all the sciences, literature, and art in both the
Persian and Pushto languages, books that will document the heritage of Afghanistan and what the Mujahedeen and the Taliban did to it” (Zoya 191).

But September 11, 2001 happens. Organizations and individuals in America who had funded RAWA suddenly turn against them because they are “raghead Afghans with that stupid cloth on their heads” (Zoya 216). Zoya says that the world would never know how much the Afghans hated Osama bin Laden and the Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban. Through no fault of theirs, their nationality had become a liability. She knew deep within her heart that “the Afghans because of all they had suffered, were the people who could best feel the pain of the people in New York and Washington” (Zoya 215). But no American would understand that.

Just like Malalai Joya, Zoya does not celebrate when the Taliban flee Kabul under the attack of the US, because the US brings in many of the fighters of the Northern Alliance, which was made up of several old-time Mujahedeen groups, to form a puppet government. They promise democracy, elections and even women’s rights but Zoya says:

Whatever their promises, I do not believe that the Northern alliance will bring peace and democracy to my country. The only goal of each faction is to have power for itself, and none of them are ready to share it. A civil war is the most likely outcome. Only a United Nations force could end the wars in my country by disarming all the warlords and overseeing free elections. And only a democratic and secular government could guarantee human rights, including women’s rights. (Zoya 227)

Zoya cannot imagine any other life than the one she has chosen-working with RAWA. She knows that it is a dangerous life but she wouldn’t trade it for anything. She
does the work assigned to her by RAWA not because she feels a sense of compulsion but because she wants to. She has great belief in what she does and she knows that this is what her parents and grandmother always wanted her to do. She wants to keep the resilient legacy which her parents had bequeathed her alive always. She will never give up this life, she knows that. It is her way of paying tribute to the memories of her parents and a sweet way of avenging the Mujahedeen for taking her parents away from her. It is not that she is not afraid. She is afraid of being caught but she has learned to live with fear. When perils are always present, one does not experience panic any more. “I know that I will never lose hope and that I will continue to battle for the ideals I believe in, the ideals for which Meena, the founder of RAWA sacrificed her life” (Zoya 232).

Zoya concludes on the note of resilience. She talks about how the school where she had attended had given her the hope to go on in the midst of bleak circumstances. She had learned education and respect for women’s rights could bring about positive transformation and revolution in society. John Follian and Rita Cristofari who co-authored the book speak about her optimism:

She wanted to teach women to read and write in a country where most of them were illiterate, to treat sick women in a country where the authorities decreed they should die rather than be treated by male doctors, to speak of justice and democracy in a country where the only law was that of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth . . . she wanted the book to stand for the suffering of all Afghan women. (Zoya 234)

Malalai as well as Latifa and Zoya identify themselves as women who belong to a country that has incarcerated and exposed them to the razor-sharp weapon of intolerance
and bigotry on the basis of gender. They don’t hesitate to challenge the beliefs of such a country. This uncertainty, resentment, rage and dissent shape the writings of these women which seethe with the minority female consciousness in an absolutely patriarchal dominant society. Though this infuriation is justifiable, many a time it can be seen that they are tossed into a domain of new liabilities and predicaments, trepidation and animosity which threaten to choke them. But they have grasped the harsh precepts of life and painstakingly scrutinize them so as to glean lessons for their future. They put up an intense effort to obtain emancipation and basic human rights after years and years of deprival and maltreatment and it is memorable because they accost all the afflications with daring and boldness.

The memoirs reveal that Afghan women’s susceptibility to onslaughts in the home front as well as outside has accelerated their attempts for emancipation and self-reliance. Notwithstanding the distinctions created by time period and age, the legacy of resilient struggle against patriarchal despotism is a common thread that binds these three women. They have verbalized their indignation, resentment and displeasure through their memoirs, each in her own unique way. These writers focus on the problems of Afghan women’s discrimination and the glories of their resistance. Deborah Rosenfelt says:

Their characteristic structure encompasses mythic progress from oppression, suffering, victimization, through various stages of awakening consciousness to active resistance and finally some form of victory, transformation or transcendence of despair. Feminist novels privilege woman’s bonding and female friendships, reject, marginalize or subvert heterosexual love and passion, and interrogate family and motherhood. Their characteristic modalities are the bildungsroman and the utopia. Their
characteristic tone compounds rage at women’s oppression and revolutionary optimism about the possibility of change. (Rosenfelt 269)

Malalai, Latifa and Zoya have become more and more aware of the negative stereotyping and discrimination suffered by Afghan women so through their memoirs they present the Afghan women’s endeavour to overcome stereotyping suppression and hurdles. They try to recreate their identity and escape from the identity constructed by the other. Their works unveil the autonomy that epitomizes women's writing elsewhere as well – each writer, disregarding the ramifications in terms of acceptance, chronicles the amplitude of agony, torment and dissent or compliance she experiences. They do not make an attempt to conform to any literary genre or social pattern; they have only one agenda, i.e. to let the world know about the trauma and subordination that Afghan women are subjected to. Their works can be seen as rejuvenating epiphanies even though at certain moments the themes seem akin to each other.