Chapter IV
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THE WEB OF SISTERHOOD

Women have been from time immemorial, down the ages, a quashed group, whose voices have been stifled and who have been always rebuffed and rejected. Such deprecation has been the result of the delusion of regarding gender as an innate biological determinant that commands and legitimizes discrimination. According to the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, the gender conflict forces women to label themselves as a sexual being, that is, they are identified and pinpointed out as ‘just women’ devoid of any individuality or humanness. This label can be very precarious as it circumscribes and incarcerates her within the precincts of her sexual nature. She is demarcated as the ‘other’ while the male occupies the pedestal of absoluteness. She is forced to abnegate her own subjectivity. The imperative patriarchal system has played its cards right. The female ‘other’ has been sugar coated and portrayed as a ubiquitous category and the term like ‘the eternal feminine’ has been used to describe her. But feminists do renounce these viewpoints. They do not hold the view that all women have the same experiences in similar circumstances. They find it difficult to subscribe to a concept like the eternal feminine. According to them, women react differently to situations, be it positive or negative. There is no common thread that connects them when it comes to their reactions. The only thing that links them is the almost systematic standards of abuse and maltreatment they are subjected to all over the world, just because they are women.

Feminization works in more or less similar ways in different cultures across the world. The social procedure that women are exposed to is a continuous instinctive and unconscious exercise by which they are “psychically induced into femininity” (Rose 89).
The female mind is imbued with presumptions and preconceptions about gender which is revealed in the exhibition of an identical way of behaviour in all male-dominant communities. Most women are impelled to procure social habits and proclivity acceptable to the system and to incorporate recusant portraiture of the feminine such as its complete inadequacy and dissimilitude when compared to the male’s imperial singularity. Even their beliefs, perspectives and perceptions are schooled suitably.

However the acute repressiveness of such an encompassment, time and again arouses the female into mutiny and rebellion. When women are able to perceive and identify the numerous oppressions that she strives under, she is many a time galvanized into action. She garners the spunk to challenge the premise on which the position of an interminable ‘otherness’ is assigned to her. She displays resilience so as to come out of the bondage of the ‘other.’

The quest for her real self, something vibrantly different from the one that has been thrust upon her by society and culture commences the moment the woman starts catechizing and challenging the constitution concocted by a patriarchal society. Such an attitude, one that examines, interrogates and probes would definitely capacitate women to have a full-blown apperception of their uniqueness. This would in turn lead to the development of a unified consummate personality. Whenever and wherever women put the accepted norms of the dominant patriarchal society through the wringer and adopt a contumacious attitude towards them, the feminist sensibility is born. Many women who have gone through terrible trauma succeed in breaking the constraints that bind them. They realize that the emancipation has to come from within them. To emotionally liberate themselves from the bondages of the patriarchal dominating structures is not an easy task.
It needs a lot of mental courage to exhibit that kind of resilience. “She cannot begin by changing the world but by reassessing herself” (Greer 4). Female bonding is one way in which she is able to liberate herself. Women friends provide for each other a dependability that goes beyond the concern for self and aims at reaching out to sisters in an attempt to help and elevate them. Women use their friendship to fight insecurities during their girlhood and assure their safety and survival while facing political instability and male chauvinism. This bonding helps them build and strengthen their self-esteem.

As per the early precocious feminists, female bonding suggested that all women were a distinct group exploited by men. Female bonding, which is imminent in communities where mishaps, afflictions and patriarchal domination are apparent, is a component of paramount relevance because it aids in empowering women to look beyond their misfortunes by garnering strength by connecting with their female counterparts. The insights gained from this process benefit the parties substantially by enabling them to look at themselves from new angles in the light of their comparing of notes with one another. Female bonding can be anticipated as a precursor of women’s development as it heralds new a collective sensibility. This coherence abides in the profound affinity women harbor in their hearts for their kind. The outcome of female bonding is that it motivates women to discard every impression of disparity which they have had imputed upon them. This bonding opens up unique alleys for them to redeem themselves from their asphyxiating situations and come forth as empowered persons. The life of the Afghan woman is a chronicle of the Afghan community that was estranged, marginalized and exploited. Afghan women did not summon prowess to rebel against their patriarchal society which always treated them as chattels. They were never accorded any value that
is the due of a human being. They were always made to remain passive. They were depraved and their plea for distinctiveness and singularity repudiated. As a result these women were compelled to achieve their dreams through female bonding in life. Down the ages it can be seen that women have broken down the barriers of a very prevalent history of subjection and oppression and have tried to cultivate a tradition of female bonding. It can be clearly seen that from within and without, women derive a lot of emotional strength from female bonding. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in *Feminism without Illusions* holds the view that female bonding is the female ideal which has to succeed the male ideal of individualism. “Men have wreaked havoc and death out of domination but women with their politics of partnership will bring a renewed commitment of life” (Genovese 28).

This bond among females became one of the most powerful weapons of the middle class Black women’s movement in the 1960s and 70s. Black women’s literary tradition can be traced back to Phyllis Wheatley in the 18th century. Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou are some prominent writers who tried to keep Wheatley’s legacy alive. No major writer has dealt with the theme of female bonding or relationship of women with women with such complete understanding, sincerity and truth as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have done. Women have been trained to believe that their relationship with men is superior to any other relationship. They try to do everything in their capacity and even go out of the way to keep that relationship the most hallowed and cherished. They make sacrifices and put up with all kind of mistreatments because they have been taught that the greatest relationship on earth is the man-woman relationship. But many a time circumstances force them to depend on each other. This leads them to understand the worth of female bonding. Just like the Black women bonded together to
empower themselves and fight against the patriarchal autonomy they were subjected to, Afghan women’s common experience of oppression goads them to form bonds in order to retaliate against the impact of religion, societal norms and gender. Female friendship not just helps women thwart the ill-effects of patriarchy but it also furnishes them with satisfaction, protection and even restoration.

Khaled Hosseini and Siba Shakib in their novels recognize the relevance of friendship between women, in order to underscore the dominating power of patriarchy and also caution women about how a lack of bonding is likely to jeopardize their lives. In their novels different forms of nourishing sisterhood, that is, camaraderie which stems from heartfelt commitment is vividly portrayed. Both the novelists depict female friendship pertaining to the social and cultural realities of the particular environment they are part of. Both epitomize the impingement of patriarchal structures like race, class and even marriage on female bonding and what it means to be an Afghan woman. They present female friendship as a form of carte blanche which enables women build a new sense of individuality. This empowerment would in the long run help them tide over their misfortunes. This form of sisterhood usually extends to female unanimity, which accommodates more women who profit from this benevolence and sustenance. It is true that though close companionship repairs heartbreak and anguish resulting from preconception and helps women to survive, many challenges do crop up which try to water down its triumphs. Other than dominating patriarchal designs, issues such as egomania, unsuccessful handling of disparity between women and the absence of committed dedication can prove to be detrimental and shake loose the firmly entrenched anchor of female friendship.
Female bonding draws the attention of some theorists who analyze and examine women’s relationships and the different challenges that they face. Clenora Hudson-Weems, Bell Hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Carole Boyce Davies, Elizabeth Abel and Obioma Nnameka study women’s identities and relationships and their relevance in the society. They analyze women’s experiences related to race, class and gender, and how women develop strategies that allow them to survive. They depict how women bond not only to seek healing from the calamities and afflictions that come their way as a result of patriarchal domination but also to administer to themselves assuagement and well-being.

As Elizabeth Abel says:

In developing a theory of female friendship, I seek to represent the world as women imagine it could be, and as many women have created it. Feminist theory must take into account the forces maintaining the survival of women as well as those that maintain the subordination of women. A theory of female friendship is meant to give form, expression, and reality to the ways in which women have been for our Selves and each other. (Abel 434)

This reciprocal acknowledgement and sharing bestows a chance to assimilate, evolve and reap much advantage from the exchange. When women bond together, there is a process of learning. They not only learn from their own mistakes but also from the mistakes of other women. This helps them to grow and gradually become women of substance. The heroines of Hosseini – Mariam and Laila epitomize the real disposition of female harmony. They try to beat all odds and nourish and enrich a sisterhood that helps them to sustain each other and also proffer emotional, psychological as well as and physical support. Each renders a helping hand to the other during challenging and
strenuous situations and emboldens the other to make decisive changes that would allow the other to boldly face the threats of polygamy and patriarchy in general. Because they undergo the same kind of experiences, they are easily able to fathom the depth of the other’s pain and commiserate with the other. Since they are unfortunate victims of the system of polygamy, the only breather they find from this suffocating ordeal is by joining forces to reassure and soothe each other. Thus, female bonding gives them the liberty to intensify their coherence and ease the anguish of betrayal. In the words of Hudson-Weems:

> Given that we know all too well how comforting sisterhood is, we must welcome it and its rewards for others as well as for ourselves. Thus, for the moment, let us reflect on how much more beautiful our world would be if all sisters simply loved each another. Our children would be more secure, for they would have not just one female guardian, but many to attend to their needs. (Hudson-Weems 73)

Hosseini and Shakib advocate meaningful and collective commitment between Afghan women so that emotional lacerations caused by brutality and coercion related to race, gender and patriarchal duress may be healed. “Women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves” (Nnaemeka 19). Female affiliation depends upon on dispensing and reaping heartwarming conscientious support, sharing stories and experiences, tending to and cherishing each other. This form of relationship may ensue between any women and not necessarily within family.

This particular kind of sisterhood refers specifically to an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly
share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes, and their dreams.

Enjoying, understanding, and supporting each other, women friends of this sort are invaluable to each other. With such love, trust and security, it is difficult to imagine any woman without such a genuine support system as that found in genuine sisterhood. (Hudson-Weems 65)

In their novels, Hosseini and Shakib present ordinary women. These women form bonds; they may not even know about feminist principles, but their experiences or environment urge them towards female solidarity. In exploring the social and psychological contexts and implications of friendships, these texts contribute to an understanding of Afghan women. Hosseini and Shakib do not present their heroines as alienated outsiders or the lone adventurer in her quest for self-affirmation. The Afghan woman presented in the novels of these writers comes across as an individual who finds her worth in connection with others. She does not tread the less travelled path alone. Instead she is tied to her children or to other women and to a particular place. She lives within her community and is dependent on her friends and family. She conducts her quests within close boundaries as in the case of Mariam in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Even if she covers a lot of territory as Siba Shakib’s Shirin-Gol, her physical movement is not very important as it is her spiritual development that demands one’s attention. The heroine’s quest is usually an internal one. The Afghan woman’s inclination to form complex personal relationships adds to the depth of her identity quest. These relationships are beneficial as they add to her self-discovery.

Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is set in Afghanistan from the early 1960s to the early 2000s. It traces the deterioration of the beautiful country first at the
hands of the Soviet Union. Then the Mujahideen under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud drive out the Soviets but buckle under the pressure of establishing a united front. Factions are formed and they wage war against each other with such vengeance and hatred that the landscape is ravaged and thousands of people killed. The violence that ensues is gory and murderous. “Laila remembers too well the neighbourhoods razed, the bodies being dragged from the rubble, the hands and feet of children discovered on rooftops or the high branch of some tree days after their funeral” (Hosseini 372).

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* reinforces how brutal and insensitive men can be against the feminine side of a culture. Women never have a voice in Afghanistan, because it is a patriarchal society and men make themselves believe that the Koran allows them to have total control over their wives, though that is not the truth but just a twisting of the text. A man, like Rasheed, can decide, even in a relatively modern Kabul, that his wives must wear the burqa. He can refrain from introducing his wives to his friends. He can expect to be waited hand and foot by them. He can practice infidelity and expect total chastity from his wives. He can beat them and even kill them in the name of their honour. He can keep them at home and deny them basic rights without punishment. This is echoed in the words of Nana, “Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Miriam” (Hosseini 7).

In this novel Khaled Hosseini presents the different angles of female sensibility where the women characters question and probe the connections between cultural conditioning, psychosexual determinants and religio-political factors which govern their destinies. The women forge strong bonds despite the efforts of their husbands and their
government to reduce women’s power and thus discover alternative ways of survival and empowerment

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* narrates the story of two women Mariam and Laila brought together by war, cultural mores, and marriage to the same abusive man, Rasheed. The story begins with the word that Mariam comes to hate her entire life – *harami* or bastard – which she hears for the first time when she is only five years old.

At the time, Miriam did not understand. She did not know what this word *harami*-bastard meant. Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the harami who are culpable, not the harami, whose only sin is being born.” Even though she didn’t understand the meaning, Mariam knew from the way her mother spit out the word that it meant she was an unwanted thing: an illegitimate person who would never have a legitimate claim to such things as love, family, home, and acceptance. (Hosseini 4)

Mariam is a *harami* (the scorned illegitimate daughter) of a wealthy businessman Jalil and Nana, his one-time servant. Jalil visits his daughter every Thursday with gifts. Miriam adores her father and waits longingly for these visits much to her mother’s displeasure. Jalil always calls Mariam “his little flower” (Hosseini 4). He tells her stories about Heart and great poets and orchards. He creates a spectacular world for her. The significant characteristic of Mariam is that she is completely aware of the fact that her days are arduous but she never loses heart. She always remembers what her mother had repeatedly told her, “There is only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life . . . only one skill. And it’s this: *tahamul*. Endure” (Hosseini 18).
So endurance becomes Mariam’s watch word. She craves for Jalil’s affection. She wants to be publicly acknowledged as his daughter. She would give anything to spend a little time at least with her half-brothers and half-sisters. She feels the emptiness of having to spend her days in loneliness without the warm companionship of a sibling. She often collects ten pebbles and arranges them in upright rows. This is her own secret, one which she doesn’t wish to share with anyone. She always places four in the first column for Jalil’s first wife’s children, three for the second wife, and three for the third wife. She is not done with that. There is a fourth column and a solitary pebble hidden away which she places in that column. The lone eleventh pebble, one which symbolizes her isolation and desolation.

But Mariam has learnt to live with the choking loneliness. She tries to make most of Jalil’s visits and finds happiness in the little things that he does. But Nana pricks Mariam’s bubble of happiness by speaking ill about Jalil. This is because she fears that Mariam will leave her alone and so resists anything new in her daughter’s life that might take her away from the kolba. She continuously feeds the girl blackmail that there is no other life for her outside of her childhood home and her mother’s influence. But Mariam goes to visit Jalil at his home without her mother’s knowledge and comes face to face with the naked truth that Jalil does not care for her. He does not let her enter his house instead lets her spend the night on the street. Nana desperate and agonized by the fact that Mariam has gone commits suicide.

Left all alone, Mariam is forced to live with her wealthy father, his three wives and their ten children. Mariam realizes too late that Jalil was ashamed of her and had been doting on her to ease his guilty conscience. “Nana had been right about Jalil’s gifts.
They had been halfhearted tokens of penance; insincere, corrupt gestures meant more for his own appeasement than hers” (Hosseini 75).

This is doubly reinforced when Jalil under the influence of his ‘legitimate’ wives forces the fifteen year old Mariam into marriage with Rasheed, a forty year old shoemaker. He does not lift a finger to help her instead cowers under the scathing words of his wives who want Mariam off their hands. When Mariam pleads silently with him to prevent the nikah he lashes out at her, “Goddam it, Mariam, don’t do this to me” (Hosseini 49). This is ironical because he makes it sound as though some injustice is being done to him.

Rasheed is a man with a hideous temper who grows increasingly brutal with the advancing years. The first days of marriage for Mariam are a mixed lot. She has been ordered out of her room and told to act like a wife; she has been forced to cover under a burqa; she has been taken to wondrous places and made to eat different foods than she has ever seen or eaten before; Rasheed gives her a beautiful shawl as a touching gift from a husband to a wife; and then he comes to her room and forces himself on her because he feels that it is his right but it is out and out rape, because Mariam tells him she doesn’t want to do what he demands. It reinforces how much life has changed for her.

Rasheed, a notoriously abusive man never allows her to have friends, talk to people or show her face in public, and beats her on a regular basis. He indulges in pornographic pleasures while demanding strict and austere life from his wife. It is through the sub-text of silence that Mariam reveals the saga of her suffering. She leads a quiet subterranean life of obedience and service. The political events within Afghanistan mirror the violence that is escalating inside Mariam’s home. As the Communists rise up
against the republic led by Daoud Khan, Rasheed rises up against Mariam for being such a disappointment to him. The coup begins with attacks from the former Afghani Air Force and is soon followed by looting and executions of the president and his family. Because of his anger over Mariam’s seven miscarriages, Rasheed begins with kicks, slaps and punches. However, he eventually escalates to making her chew pebbles as a punishment for the small mistakes she makes while cooking. The pebbles also echo the pebbles she had once used as a child to represent her half-brothers and sisters, the family she so longed for and which now she must chew as if chewing up her chance to ever have one.

As the days go by, Rasheed becomes more and more abusive. It takes the slightest provocation for him to let his ire loose upon her. The marital bond becomes bondage. Mariam finds herself locked in the prison of Rasheed’s willful nature from which there is no escape for her. But since she had learned *tahamul* from a very young age, she resigns herself to her fate. She had always been unloved and unwanted and she accepts the same fate in her marital life too. She doesn’t resist Rasheed’s brutal clobbering, kicking, slapping and verbal insults.

There was always something, some minor thing that would infuriate him, because no matter what she did to please him, no matter how thoroughly she submitted to his wants and demands, it wasn’t enough. She couldn’t give him his son back. In this most essential way, she had failed him—seven times she had failed him—and now she was nothing but a burden to him. She could see it in the way he looked at her. She was a burden to him. (Hosseini 98-99)
The other female character is Rasheed and Mariam’s neighbour Laila - a smart and spirited fourteen year old girl. Laila is the daughter of Hakim and Fariba, who appreciate education and encourage her to live up to her full potential. Her father a former university professor tells her she will change Afghanistan, and her friends tell her she will be on the front page of the newspaper. But her childhood also changes dramatically after the deaths of her brothers Ahmad and Noor. Her mother forgets her daughter in the grief of losing her sons. Laila like Mariam longs to be accepted and nurtured.

Laila lay there and listened wishing Mammy would notice that she Laila hadn’t become shaheed. But she was alive here in bed with her that she had hopes and a future. But Laila knew that her future was no match for her brothers’ past. They had overshadowed her in life. They would obliterate her in death. Mammy was now the curator of their lives’ museum and she Laila a mere visitor. A receptacle for their myths. The parchment on which Mammy meant to ink their legends. (Hosseini 140)

But unlike Mariam, Laila had two bright spots in her life – her father and Tariq, her childhood companion who ultimately becomes her lover. But the political situation of Afghanistan forces Tariq’s parents to leave the country. Laila is devastated by the turn of events. But before long, life deals another cruel blow to her. Her parents are killed in a Mujahideen bombing and she is left orphaned and pregnant with Tariq’s child. Rasheed gives her refuge in his home but he has devious intentions. He employs a person to tell Laila that Tariq has been mortally wounded and then proposes to her.

Laila agrees to marry the old man to avoid the shameful situation of unmarried pregnancy. Predictably, this second marriage of Rasheed is an insult to Mariam and she
wages a cold war on Laila. She blames and targets Laila, who on her part takes the abrasive treatment with malice towards none and no complaints to Rasheed. After an initial rivalry, Laila succeeds to win over Mariam and they become steadfast friends.

War and drought devastate the land of Afghanistan. Poverty and starvation take hold of Rasheed’s house too. Laila is forced to put her daughter, Aziza by Tariq in an orphanage against her wish. On her way to the orphanage she happens to meet Tariq after several years. Rasheed comes to know of the incident and begins torturing Laila. He begins beating and bruising her and the torture exceeds all limits that she can endure no more. On one occasion and that too for the last, Rasheed catches her, throws her up against the wall, and beats her with the belt and the buckle slams against her chest, shoulders, arms and fingers, and drawing blood wherever it smacks.

The physical assault gains brutal dimensions when Rasheed hurls Laila to the ground with his hands wrapped around her neck. Her face starts turning blue with her eyes rolling back as about to be killed. Mariam feels herself foolish, wretched and ungrateful to view the situation without any protest. She remembers how once Laila had come to her rescue when Rasheed had tried to assault her. Though she feels powerless and incapacitated, Mariam decides to take matters in her own hand. The danger that Laila was exposed to fills her with fearlessness and tenacity. Her maternal sentiments come pouring out, when she sees that Laila was going to die. She had stopped struggling and was turning blue. “He’s going to kill her, she thought. He really means to. And Mariam could not, would not, allow this to happen. He’d taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too” (Hosseini 340). She brings out an armament, one which she has never tried out till then – brutal force against brutal
force – she tries it out on Rasheed because she has nothing else in her kitty. Rasheed had always used brutality and violence to dominate Mariam and now she decides to pay him back in the same coin.

Ann Jones explains the state of a person in this situation, “People who go through it (violence), as victims or as witnesses, learn (among other things) to fear violence, to avoid violence at all costs, or to be violent” (Jones 1) and Mariam who had always taken things passively and who had always been apologetic and fearful now decides to do a reversal of roles. She had endured his violence for many long years and by taking justice into her hands she delivers a fitting reply to the abuse. She puts an end to it as she takes a shovel and hits him across the temple.

And so Mariam raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could, arching it so it touched the small of her back. She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life. And, with that, Mariam brought down the shovel. This time she gave it everything she had. (Hosseini 341)

After Rasheed is dead, the two women hide his body in the shed and then make plans to escape the country. Mariam knows all along that they both cannot go, because then they might both be caught and there will be no one to care for and protect Laila’s children. So, even though Laila is convinced they can make it together, Mariam refuses to leave, willing to face death rather than Laila dying, too. Mariam is executed by the Taliban but she goes to her death with the conviction that her sacrifice is not in vain.
Mariam’s last moments reminds one of the supreme sacrifice of Sydney Carton in Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Mariam wished for so much in those final moments. Yet as she closed her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the harami child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A Mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Mariam thought that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings. (Hosseini 361)

The inner strength and resilience of women amidst the harsh realities and cruelty that surrounds them is the most prevalent theme. Both characters, Mariam and Laila, are forced into life situations which challenge their strength and their ability to endure. Mariam is born illegitimate in a world which turns its back on such women. She is later forced into a marriage to a cruel, abusive man and endures twenty-seven years with him. She bonds with Laila later in her life, which allows her to understand that she can love and be loved in return. In the end, her great strength allows her to face the sacrifice she makes of her own life to save the ones she loves. As for Laila, she is born into a somewhat privileged world where she has parents who love her and a father who believes she deserves a life where she is valued and loved. Although her mother spends much of Laila’s childhood grieving for her lost sons, Laila endures her Mammy’s setbacks with love and as much understanding as she can give. Later, when she finds herself pregnant
with Tariq’s child, she marries Rasheed to protect her unborn child only because she believes that Tariq is dead. She, too, endures the abuse of her husband and fights back against him whenever she can even though it means she will be beaten. In the end after Rasheed’s death when Mariam insists she flee with Tariq and the children, she recognizes she must live for her children’s sake even though it means the death of Mariam alone for the crime of murdering their husband. She then accepts her responsibility to honor the memories of her parents and Mariam by rebuilding Kabul and her country as a strong, determined example to all her countrywomen.

Born a generation apart and with very different ideas about love and family, Mariam and Laila are two women brought together by war, loss and fate. Both are poles apart in their temperament and demeanour. Laila and Mariam manifest aspects that are unprecedented in their own way. Laila is courageous and aggressive. She possesses a pertinacious vitality and is always prepared to resist the male supremacy whereas Mariam is vulnerable, meek and accommodating, buckling under the tough situations that come her way. Through the characters Mariam and Laila, Hosseini sketches the innate as well repressed life of the Afghan women. He exposes the veil as a smokescreen which prevents the world from recognizing the longing of the Afghan woman for the very ordinary amidst the chaos and pandemonium which erupt around her. Both characters evince habits and idiosyncrasies which are conflicting, but when it comes to propensities like perseverance, resilience, resoluteness and love, they complement each other. Through their shared self-rendition and by supporting and encouraging each other they discover who they are thus making their disintegrated selves complete. Though their bonding, geared with self-denial, magnanimity, benevolence and unequivocal love is an
indefensible contingent nevertheless it has the power to wrestle against malevolent warlords and heartless patriarchs.

Hosseini gives a powerful portrait of patriarchal despotism where women are agonizingly dependent on fathers, husbands and sons—the bearing of male children being their sole path to social status. This is evident from the way Rasheed treats Laila after Aziza is born He is galled by the fact that Laila has not been able to produce a son. He even treats Aziza with contempt not considering the fact that she is only a child. Even Laila’s childhood was darkened by her mother’s indifference. She was not as important as her dead brothers. If the society had given equal importance to both the sexes Laila wouldn’t have had to face rejection and rebuffs but she goes through the pain because sons were considered more important.

Women share a territory of lived experiences set apart by their oppressions, compromises, endurances, silences, and thwarted aspirations and ambitions. They continue to be a burdensome appendage. Hosseini explores and probes into the experience with intensity, precision and concreteness. The regular pattern of abuse, wife battering and rape are pointers to the fact that women are vulnerable to marital violence. A woman internalizes the man-made constructs even from early childhood. She has no say on her future and has no right to protest or to complain. She is always forced to hide behind a veil which signifies fanaticism and subjugation because the burqa does not allow women to show their beauty but encloses them inside a black carcass devoid of femininity. When Mariam discusses with Mullah Faizullah about going to school like her step sisters Saideh and Naheed, Nana’s sharp retort penetrates into the very soul of the reader and gives a distinct picture of the status of women in the Afghan terrain.
And you, akhund sahib, with all due respect, you should know better than to encourage these foolish ideas of hers. If you really care about her, then you make her see that she belongs here at home with her mother. There is nothing out there for her. Nothing but rejection and heart ache. I know, akhund sahib, I know. (Hosseini 19)

Nana’s vehement words carry the intensity of all the pain and agony she has endured during her lifetime.

But Hosseini has not simply portrayed the women as restrained, muted veiled commodities. He has given positive strokes too. Mariam and Laila have been able to recapture their voice and agency which they feared had been quashed by the domineering patriarch Rasheed. Hosseini constructs an arena in his document for his women to navigate against the direction of their adversaries by repudiating the ambitions of their oppressors. Mariam and Laila are empowered to resist against the tyrants and protect each other. They embrace systems that try to repress them; they make a conscious effort to work within those repressive structures. In a stratified sociopolitical system that deprecates them, in spite of the innumerable traumas both of them are subjected to, their understanding of their individuality prevails and stays intact. Mariam develops as the novel progresses. She picks up during the course of her tumultuous journey, power, instrumentality and expression. Laila who had been very revolutionary, while in the security of her father and Tariq, fortifies herself with a semblance of languor.

At first, Mariam is very meek and surrenders herself to every kind of atrocity. Tahamul is deeply ingrained within her. She remembers Nana who compares the quiet endurance of women to the silent snowflakes. Though Rasheed is brutal and inhumane,
Mariam holds to the residues that life offers her. Rasheed can never take away the humaneness that constitutes her very soul. Mariam displays tenderness and benevolence when she agrees to Rasheed marrying Laila. When Rasheed deceives her with lies of what could happen to Laila if she ever fell into the hands of the Mujahedeen, the ever humane Mariam agrees to the marriage though it breaks her heart. She doesn’t have the guile to recognize Rasheed’s lust for the young beautiful teenager. But Laila is not a submissive passive person. She is highly resilient and plays an equally deceitful game with Rasheed. She subverts his unrestrained passion and exaggerated self-opinion, to give her unborn child a legitimate name and guardianship in those precarious times. Since the Afghan society places a whole lot of importance on virginity, Laila makes sure that she “bleeds” on her wedding night.

Later, when she was sure that he was asleep, Laila quietly reached beneath the mattress for the knife she had hidden there earlier. With it, she punctured the pad of her index finger. Then she lifted the blanket and let her finger bleed on the sheets where they had lain together. (Hosseini 214)

Mariam and Laila are at first antagonistic towards each. Their profound defensive sisterhood begins when Laila blocks Rasheed who attacks Mariam with his belt. Mariam is at first shocked as no one had “ever stood up for her before” (Hosseini 243). But this act of Laila softens her towards the younger girl. Slowly she starts bonding first with Aziza and then Laila and it is a bonding that grows by leaps and bounds. Though the rampage and bloodshed continues in the city, Mariam and Laila are cognizant of the fact that they need to subsist. While on the outside the country falls apart as a result of constant wars, the two women profess their individuality by way of their intimacy and
camaraderie. This close bonding gives them the courage to be resilient and stave off male domination. Aziza gives Mariam the love that she never had experienced before. She demands Mariam’s time and attention always.

Mariam had never before been wanted like this. Love had never been declared to her so guilelessly, so unreservedly. Aziza made Mariam want to weep. “Why have you pinned your little heart to an old, ugly hag like me?” Mariam would murmur into Aziza’s hair. “Huh? I am nobody, don’t you see? A dehati. What have I got to give you?” But Aziza only muttered contentedly and dug her face in deeper. And when she did that, Mariam swooned. Her eyes watered. Her heart took flight. And she marveled at how, after all these years of rattling loose, she had found in this little creature the first true connection in her life of false, failed connections.

(Hosseini 246)

Though Rasheed continues to brutalize them by intimidating them and trouncing them regularly Mariam and Laila do not come apart. What Miriam Cook communicates about women caught in war zones can hold true for Mariam and Laila, “Unlike the unravelling world around them” they show “a collective responsibility to their family” and are “never weakened throughout” (Cooke 290). Though Laila finds Rasheed loathsome, she cannot bring herself to kill his unborn child “because she could not accept what the Mujahedeen readily had: that sometimes in war innocent life had to be taken” (Hosseini 277). Laila realized that her war was against Rasheed and that the baby was innocent and this thought is echoed in the words of Miriam Cook, “Unlike men who relentlessly wage war, women uncompromisingly campaign for peace” (Cooke 290).
In spite of the torturous ordeal they face, women in the novel bond together to form a sisterhood and they derive the strength from this bonding. The assaults and cruelty faced by the women, the synonymity of their horrible experiences prompt them to join collectively for a common cause, handling the vicious men. Suzanne Prescott and Carolyn Letko observe, “While violence in marriage could be expected to have few positive effects, most women (84%) could pinpoint at least one positive outcome. They reported that violence had helped them to become more independent. Many indicated that they were able to establish relationships by reaching out or seeking others” (Letko 84-85). The women in the novel forge strong bonds despite the efforts of their husbands and their government to reduce women’s power. The bonds are different in character. There is an affinity which Giti, Hasina, and Laila share and it is a kind of girlish amicability, but the relationship that Mariam and Laila establish is a much more robust one. They unite in a bond against the brutality of one man. Nana’s derives the tenacity to face the isolated life in the kolba because of her attachment to Mariam. There is Naghma at Walayat, the Taliban controlled prison where Mariam is imprisoned for having killed Rasheed. Naghma bonds instantly with Mariam and follows her wherever she goes. She tells Mariam, “You are the best friend I ever had” (Hosseini 358). The novel thus suggests that women have a potent ingenuity to find strength, loyalty and encouragement in one another. Mariam is able to attack Rasheed without flinching because she cares for Laila very much and she couldn’t bear the fact that Rasheed would kill her. “Everything she had ever wished for as a little girl Laila had given her” (Hossieni 350).

And in the end Laila comes back to the post-Taliban Kabul and puts her heart and soul into rehabilitating her home town. She puts her suffering behind her and emerges a
victor. She works with Zaman who had once given the brightness of hope to Aziza in the orphanage. Zaman, Tariq and Laila together transform the orphanage and start educating the children. Though Laila misses the presence of Mariam she has peace in her heart.

When they first came back to Kabul, it distressed Laila that she didn’t know where the Taliban had buried Mariam. She wished she could visit Maraim’s grave, to sit with her a while, leave a flower or two. But Laila sees now that it doesn’t matter. Mariam is never very far. She is here, in these walls they have repainted, in the trees they have planted, in the blankets that keep the children warm, in these pillows and books and pencils. She is in the children’s laughter. She is in the verses Aziza recites and the prayer she mutters when she bows westward. But, mostly Mariam is in Laila’s own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns. (Hosseini 401-402)

Thus Mariam and Laila have come a full circle. They have defied all odds and have displayed before the world that an undying spirit of tenacity, camaraderie, hope and humaneness has always existed beneath their veils.

Siba Shakib’s Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep traces the journey of the spirited, bold and resolute Shirin-Gol who tries to flee from the torturous conditions in Afghanistan first under the Russians, then the mujahedeen and later the Taliban. It is an arduous journey that takes her to many places including Pakistan and Iran only because she wants her children to have a decent future without starvation and fear. She is straddled with an opium addicted husband who is most of the time in a stupor. He isn’t a cruel man but she does not get the much needed support from him to run the family.
But nothing deters her. She takes the major decisions in the midst of all turbulent situations and sees to it that her children are provided for and that they are safe from the clutches of the enemy. Throughout the novel, the resilience of Shirin-Gol and other Afghan women are portrayed with all dexterity. Not only is it a tale of resistance but also of female bonding, the camaraderie and friendship is seen in almost all the places where Shirin-Gol and her family set their feet.

In Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep there can be found quite a number of female characters. The tale is all about their survival. Though there are male characters who are good and kind unlike many Afghan men, it is the lives of these women characters which earn a bigger arena. Though Shirin-Gol dominates the entire breadth of the novel, characters like Azadine, Malalai, the girl-woman in Pakistan, Shirin-Gol’s elder sisters, Bahara, Abina, the women who flock together in Azadine’s house to run secret school and hospitals during the Taliban regime also leave their imprints in the novel. Their exploitation, abuse and their circadian struggle is delineated in its alarming usualness. Their personal grief and routine drudgery which is a result of the patriarchal cultural set up is dominant with its barrenness and poses before the reader a number of queries which might not have any answer. There is an assortment of decibels of the female voice and there can be seen a lot of vacillation. It can be noticed that at the beginning, a few women characters are benumbed or have a tone which is quite timid and thus imperceptible. They try to communicate but their delivery has no significance and is usually ignored. But women like Shirin-Gol and Azadine do exhibit resilience and also bond together to resist their common enemy. They believe that it is only through female friendship they can find some meaning in their otherwise drab existence.
The novel begins at the point of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Shirin-Gol is barely a child. She is an eyewitness to her elder sisters who are forced into prostitution. They go down to the village, where the Russian soldiers stay, with their “lips painted red and eyes black” (Shakib 16). They allow themselves to be violated but it is an act of resilience in a country where a sense of false morality prevails, where not to veil themselves is equal to “sullying the honour of the family” (Shakib 16). They do this ‘heinous crime’ to sustain their starving family whose menfolk have gone off to fight the Russians. But they also kill the young soldiers who are caught unawares while in the throes of passion. They would collect a few rounds of arms, hand grenades and Kalashnikovs which they later supply to their brothers fighting in the mountains. Shirin-Gol’s sisters do this “for freedom, for honour, for faith and with the aim of staying alive” (Shakib 21).

As the Russians descend on Shirin-Gol’s village, the family flees to Kabul. Kabul is alien to them. It is unlike their mountains where they had lived secluded lives holding on to all traditions. Shirin-Gol’s father cannot bear the fact that in Kabul his daughters would have to go to school funded by the Afghan People’s Party who welcome the Russians in their country. In the mountains where they had lived, Shirin-Gol and other girls had been taught “to look, and to understand a girl’s role in life: to be inconspicuous, to work, and to obey the orders of boys and men” (Shakib 11). The permissiveness that the family sees in Kabul, especially women who are unveiled and who behave progressively with men shocks them, especially Shirin-Gol’s father. His words reveal how much the Afghan society is entrenched in patriarchal as well as cultural mores.
These infidels want to dishonor us. Girls who go to school become confused and curious, they know too much, they get greedy, they start demanding things, they become choosy, and what kind of man is going to marry a woman like that? And in the end, Allah is my witness, these infidels only want to steer us from the right path, stuff our heads and faith and turn our daughters into what that, that, that . . . Her father can’t find the word, but goes on, then her father finds the word and says, that WHORE? Never. (Shikab 26)

Women are seen as chattels to be constantly at the beck and call of men. They are never allowed to have a voice nor a thought of their own. On a universal level such has been the case with women who have been rendered voiceless by the patriarchal set up of the society which they are part of. “. . . women face a dilemma arising from the fact that their experiences and means of communication are restricted by their marginalization in society and their relative isolation within the private sphere- deemed not only irrelevant to public discourse but also less effective than paid labor and consequently less valuable” (Krolokke and Soreson 31).

Shirin-Gol’s father is unable to withstand the freedom that women have in Kabul because he feels it is against all the traditions and religious practices that he has been indoctrinated with. He leaves with his sons and elder daughters back to the mountains to join the resistance fighters and fight against the Soviets. It is ironical because he makes himself forget that fact that his elder daughters had been functioning as prostitutes back in the mountains. Shirin-Gol, her mother and twin brothers stay back in Kabul because it is not safe for them in the mountains. She goes to school, enjoys the process of learning
and desires to be a doctor. But deep in her heart Shirin-Gol is scared of mentioning that her father and brothers have gone back to the mountains to fight the Soviets. She learns her first lesson of resilience from Malalai, who lives with her mother in the room next to Shirin-Gol’s. Malalai is like Malalai of Maiwand, the Afghan heroine from the small village in Kandahar who played a major role in the Battle of Maiwand, during the second Anglo-Afghan war. She is brave, resilient and fearless. She doesn’t have any reservations about speaking about her father and brothers who have gone to the mountains to fight.

Shirin-Gol and Malalai go to school together and learn together. Since Malalai is courageous and free-spirited she goes for outings with boys. She doesn’t care for traditions and she inspires Shirin-Gol to accompany her. Her friendship with Malalai brings about a lot of change in Shirin-Gol. She accompanies Malalai without informing her mother. There is a sense of bravado in that clandestine excursion. For the first time, she feels a sense of freedom, a heady sensation that she cannot be repressed and tied down by any oppressive force. It is like “liberating the New Woman from the Old” (Cixous 878).

In no time Shirin-Gol gets married to Morad, her brother’s friend. He had offered his sister to Morad to settle his gambling debt. This act reveals the custom in Afghanistan wherein women are given in exchange to settle monetary dues. Though Morad is a kindly soul, he opposes the idea of Shirin-Gol going to school. “Men do not want wives who are cleverer than they are” (Shakib 41) is his dictum. He also subscribes to the Afghan patriarchal norm which insists on women being kept away from education. But Shirin-Gol has seen a lot since her journey down the mountains. She has learned to be resilient. She insists on going to school and becoming a doctor. She doesn’t hesitate telling Morad about the gamut of emotions that rush through her mind.
The most important thing is that I have seen and learned all that, it is in my head, and I don’t want to give it up again. I can’t give it up. It is there. It has burned its way into my brain, ineradicably. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t get it out of there. There is still so much in the world that I don’t know, that I would still like to know. I want to see it, I want to smell it. Hear it. I want to put my feet on the ground that I don’t know. I want to hear voices I’ve never heard. Look into the eyes of people I don’t know. I’d like to smell different languages, smell different air. (Shakib 44)

This is a far cry from the timid girl who had come down from the mountains. Shirin-Gol has not only learned the first lessons of resilience, she has tried to live that out in all its fullness. Though Morad doesn’t refute her ideas, he does not relent too. But as he is conscripted into the army fighting against the Mujahedeen, Shirin-Gol is left on her own to pursue her dream of education. She is so passionate about going to school that on the fourth day after delivering her daughter, she turns up at the school.

When Morad returns broken and shaken after his terrible experiences in the army, Shirin-Gol takes up a new role, the leader of the house. Morad basks in her strength and “leans his head against her powerful, strong girl-woman shoulder” (Shakib 47). She gracefully and naturally assumes leadership as though it had been her forte since the beginning. “You can depend on me,” she tells him, “now and forever” (Shakib 47). His experiences in war have made Morad realize the importance of education and so he encourages Shirin-Gol to learn so that she can become a doctor.

But Morad is forced to leave again to rejoin the army. Shirin-Gol gives birth to a son. The Russians leave and the next phase of war between the warlords begin. Shirin-
Gol and her family flee to Pakistan. It is a mad scramble as thousands of Afghans flee Kabul. It is at the Pakistan border that Shirin-Gol meets the girl-woman who unabashedly tells her that she prostitutes to feed her family. “Men who have not had a woman's body for ages and whose mouths water when they see mine. By and large I earn enough, sometimes more than enough” (Shakib 59). This situation brings into focus once again how Shirin-Gol’s sisters had been indulging in flesh trade to feed the family. The fragility of the Afghan struggle against the Soviet encroachment and the abortion of their endeavour to rescue their country and culture in the name of Allah and the Prophet are exposed. This situation further questions the intention of their waging a war on the behalf of religion at the expense of their women’s virtue. This paradox again intensifies when there is a comparison with the discourse made by Shirin-Gol’s father who justifies their fighting a holy war against the heathens so that their daughters and wives would not become whores.

Story telling is a method employed by Shirin-Gol to escape the gravity of the situation. At the border while waiting they see a number of young children carrying heavy loads. They are crossing over from Afghanistan into Pakistan. “They are children with no name, no age, no desires, no past and no future. They are children for whom life means only getting over the border unscathed and coming back. For a piece of bread the size of their hands they carry a new, greasy, heavy part, whatever it may be, on their bent backs, on their heads, drag it on sacks across the ground” (Shakib 65). They do this so that they can sell the part that they carry over from their country in Pakistan with which they can get at least one square meal. Shirin-Gol with her story telling abilities converts this dismal scene into colourful one. She converts them into queens and princesses who are carrying the crescent moon. She creates a world of make-believe, a fantastical world for her
children because she does not want them to internalize the wretchedness and squalor of the war. “They are queens and princesses. They are of noble blood and proud and well-to-do. And they are on their way from one of the palaces to the next” (Shakib 63).

The girl-woman prostitute makes sure that Shirin-Gol, her mother, brothers and children are fed properly before they resume their journey. It is selflessness that makes her buy food for the family, with the money she has earned by selling her body. This is another example of female bonding that is depicted in the novel. Though they are meeting for the first time, there is some invisible bond that connects them. “Women have learnt how to cope with the restrictions and hence they forge a bond among themselves or with a few women with whom they share their feelings, joys, sorrows, conflicts. This bond, moreover, comes up as a bonus in moments of difficulty and crisis because bonding between two or more females generates trust on which they can bank upon. A sense of release or escape is another dividend of this bonding” (Lal 45).

Shrin-Gol and her family leave the border and finally after an arduous journey reach the refugee camp at Torkham. In a refugee camp teeming with people, where disease and filth are rampant, where people are cramped into small tents, where there is scarcity of food, clean water and blankets, where people scream and spit, where a person would not get anything “unless an aid organization registered him and gave him a food card, a blanket card, a mattress card, a pot card, a doctor card, a whatever-else-you-can-think-of card” (Shakib 77). But Shirin-Gol ruefully realizes that in the midst of all this deplorable conditions and scarcity, one thing was there in plenty – unprecedented patriarchal domination. The Afghan man sitting at the registration counter cannot stomach the fact that Shirin-Gol does all the talking. He scorns and berates her and puts
her little twin brother in charge of the family. “The only laws that are valid here are our laws and no others. From now on you are responsible and no one else. Make sure that the sia-sar in your family do not raise their voice in public, it’s unseemly” (Shakib 72).

The Afghan goes on further to explain the term sia-sar. “It means women whose hair hasn’t turned white yet…the ones that have their beautiful curls to turn your head and the head of everyone like us to stop thinking clearly. So that we grow weak and the enemy and the devil can defeat us . . . that’s the devil’s work” (Shakib 73). This reveals the condition of the Afghan society which “has unwritten rules concerning female morals and codes of conduct” (Emadi 32), but even in such a repressive environment Shirin-Gol finds a woman who helps other women in spite of having very little herself. This is a resilient act in the sense that this female bonding bestows upon them a sense of worth in a land where they are treated like dirt. The nameless woman tells Shirin-Gol that by listening to the problems of other women, “we help the other women, but we help ourselves as well. You will see. As soon as you help other people you have the feeling that your own life is not wasted, that it is still some use” (Shakib 77).

Shirin-Gol makes use of her time in the refugee camp in a very fruitful manner. She runs a secret school and has a few pupils including her own children who she teaches to read, write, do sums and even paint. She does this though she knows it is a forbidden act but the resilient woman within her cannot be but silent. She does this because she wants her children “to have a good life, to know neither fear nor hunger . . . she would like them to learn and one day serve their homeland, rebuild the country, guide it into a happy future and make their father and mother proud” (Shakib 82). When she is discovered by the Afghan men in the camp she is beaten and Morad who had joined them
in the camp is humiliated. He is asked “to tame her and keep a closer eye on her, or people will end thinking you are not a real man” (Shakib 83). Morad has become an opium addict and a smuggler but Shirin-Gol loves him and feels broken that she had run the school without telling him. She is feminine in that she feels distressed that her husband had been humiliated. But again the double standards of Afghan morality is revealed in the fact that the mullah and the camp leader who had castigated her for running the school come to her when they want to write and read a letter. She is not to tell any soul about this new development.

When Morad is involved in a tragic accident, and there is no money for food or medicines, Shirin-Gol is left with no option but to trade her body to Morad’s smuggler-chief. She is ashamed and pained at what she had to do but it she “lets it happen” (Shakib 91) for the sake of her children, for Morad . . . “so that we can all stay alive” (Shakib 91). The images of shame and disgrace are etched into her memory “and even the knowledge that many hundreds and thousands of Afghan women have done the same is of no comfort to her” (Shakib 91). But it shows that she is not one to give up on life without a struggle. For her, the family was very important, in fact more important than her honour. She was ready to sacrifice her virtue at the altar of familial commitment. Though she moves on, the memory of those days takes on a concrete reality in the person of the daughter born to her.

Her ordeal does not end there. She is raped by three Pakistani policemen and this really drains the vitality out of her. It is at this point, when she withdrawn and listless, the children uncared for, Morad in his opium mood-swings, that Bahara, an Afghan neighbor steps in. She tends to the children and nurses Shirin-Gol back to life. Shirin-Gol had
never mentioned the details of what had happened to her to anyone. She had been in a
daze, crouched in a corner, lackadaisical, able to neither speak nor cry. But Bahara’s
tender care melts the iceberg of pain within her and “Shirin-Gol suddenly starts talking
and will not stop talking until she has told Bahara all the things that happened that day,
the day she went mad” (Shakib 97). The two women develop survival blueprints that help
them confront the painful situation. Bahara lends a shoulder to cry on, she being the
comforter and Shirin-Gol, the comforted. When Shirin-Gol narrates her diabolic
experience, Bahara weeps, her tears prove to be a balm for the former’s pain. The two
women through female bonding epitomize “how to survive whole in a world where we
are all of us, in some measure, victims of something” (Morrison 40).

Shirin-Gol and Bahara have heard many such stories, both women have
often wept at the unjust fate that befalls their sisters, women who have
been abandoned by God and the world, forgotten, alone and abandoned to
the injustice of war, of hunger, the whims of men. Shirin-Gol and Bahara
hold each other tight, weeping together, and they know those will not be
the last tears that they weep. (Shakib 99)

There is another journey undertaken, this time to Afghanistan. The family reaches
a remote village hidden away in the Hindu Kush Mountains. No war or turmoil has
reached here so far. It is a Hazara settlement within less than a hundred members.
“The people are nice but skeptical” (Shakib 107). In that village, the ravaged lives of
Shirin-Gol and her family experience peace in a long time. Shirin-Gol, the ever resilient
woman soon becomes a leader. Children dote on her, women adore her and men respect
her opinions. She finds a close companion in Abina whom she helps with a difficult
labour. Abina had almost died during child-birth but Shirin-Gol had helped her to come back to life. Abina idolizes her and learns the basic lessons of cooking, keeping house and hygiene from Shirin-Gol. But the most important lesson that she acquires from this bonding is ability to resist and say no. She learns to stand up to her husband when he starts behaving uppity with her

Shirin-Gol is clever. Shirin-Gol has an answer for every question from everyone, women and men. Even questions that make the men shrug their shoulders. It is clear to Abina that Shirin-Gol is consecrated, a saint, sent by God. Abina spends every minute she can spare with Shirin-Gol, with Shirin-Gol, watching her, listening to her every word, memorizing everything, copying her every movement, asking a thousand and one questions. (Shakib 118)

During summer, women gather together to dry and preserve fruits and vegetables for winter. It is a time of camaraderie, sociability and friendship. Shirin-Gol regales them with stories about war, the places she has seen and the sad state of affairs for women throughout the country. It is an entirely different world for these Hazara women whose lives have always been the same. But it is a learning process for them and Shirin-Gol is their teacher. The fact that the women tell her that their men folk think that she is making them kharab (rotten) vouches for the fact that she has taught them the lessons of resilience. Through their bonding they have learned the important exercise of resisting and saying no.

But war stretches its arms once again and the idyllic village is destroyed. Shirin-Gol and her family had seen the signs and had escaped the rampage but the entire village
is massacred. They reach another village where Shirin-Gol meets Azadine, the woman doctor. She is everything that Shirin-Gol had longed to be. She had gone through real struggle during the turbulent war times to finish her medical studies, first in Kabul, then Pakistan and finally Iran. She is honoured and respected by the people in the village, because she is a good doctor and also a generous person. The two women bond immediately after their first meeting. Azadine represents the epitome of resilient feminism when she tells Shirin-Gol, “We have to stop living our lives according to what other people say” (Shakib 145). She refuses to get married because as she says:

I do not need a man. Because I earn my own money. Because I walk alone in the street. Because I do not want anyone to think he owns me. Because I do my own shopping. Because I alone decide when I go to sleep, when I work, whether I work or sleep at all. Because I can decide myself when I eat or whether I want to eat at all. And because I am happier on my own.”(Shakib 146)

This reveals her feisty spirit of resilience and it spurs Shirin-Gol on. Azadine’s words according to Shirin-Gol “is resistance” (Shakib 148). When the women of the village look at her in awe, Azadine confirms it, “Everything we do here is actually resistance. What would your husbands and fathers say if they saw you here, hot and red in the face, with your hair down, laughing, giggling about stories involving strange, handsome men?” (Shakib 148).

Shirin-Gol realizes her long cherished dream of becoming a doctor when she starts assisting Azadine. She is full of sympathy for the women in the village, many of whom have a sorry tale of domestic violence to recant. There is an effusive female
bonding which develops between Shirin-Gol and the women and which brings healing to their hearts. Many of them when they come to her tell her “they would rather be dead than alive. But by the end, when they have to go back to their lives, they say, thank God he sent us a sister like you, now my heart is lighter” (Shakib 149). Azadine and Shirin-Gol make plans to set up a school for girls in the village “so that in times to come there will be women doctors, midwives and women teachers” (Shakib 156).

But when the Taliban take over, the whole situation undergoes a tremendous change. There are taboos everywhere. Shirin-Gol’s eldest daughter falls in love with a young Taleb who is unlike his compatriots. He marries her and takes to his home. Shirin-Gol and Morad along with their other children move to Iran. This journey like all the other ones is just as arduous but Shirin-Gol has the resilience and courage to look forward and egg her tired children on. Iran is welcoming at first. Because she is clean, honest and forthcoming, Shirin-Gol manages to find work and the family is able to see good days. The most important transformation takes place when Morad signs up for a literacy course so that he can “learn to read and write so that someday I might get decent work” (Shakib 199). This can be seen as a metamorphosis that has been brought about by the positive, resilient nature of Shirin-Gol. Rosemarie Skaine calls this aspect of positive reinforcement “a meaningful signal for the future, a beginning of the politicization of Afghan women” (Skaine 142). But this good life doesn’t last long because the Iranians who had welcomed Afghan refugees with open arms “do not want their guests anymore because there are shortages of everything in Iran itself, money, room, houses, flats” (Shakib 226). But the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Nations provide financial help to those Afghans desiring to go back to their homeland. Shirin-Gol, Morad and their children except for their second born son Nasser
decide to go back. Nasser decides to stay back in Iran because he has been positively influenced by the optimism and confidence his mother had displayed all throughout the times they had to undergo fiery trials. He has learned the lessons of resilience and resistance from Shirin-Gol.

“Come with us,” pleads Shirin-Gol. “You can force me,” says Nasser, “but the minute you take your eyes off me I will run off and come back here. I am staying, I am not going back too Afghanistan.” Come with us,” says Shirin-Gol, “you are too young, you are half a child, you cannot stay here on your own, without a father, without a mother.” “I can,” he says peacefully, looking at his mother in the eyes and standing bolt upright in front of her. Straight as a stick. (Shikab 229)

In the refugee camp in Afghanistan, amidst the hundreds and thousands of blue plastic tents, Shirin-Gol and her family feel bereft and confused. But even in the midst of all the squalid conditions, Shirin-Gol remains the anchor for her family. Morad and the children look to her for guidance and sustenance. She is a queen for them. “Proud, honest, beautiful, broken queen Shirin-Gol” (Shakib 336). She takes charge of her household and makes decisions for her husband and children. In the patriarchal Afghan community Morad’s remark “Women are stronger than men” (Shakib 241) speaks volumes about Shirin-Gol’s personality. Even when Morad in a drugged stupor leaves her alone with the children, she survives. She finds her father and brother whom she had not seen for many long years. War has taken a toll on them but she strongly withstands all the suffering and pain that has been inflicted on her. She takes a decision to visit her elder daughter who had
married to Taleb. Secretly she wishes to see Azadine, but because the Taliban had
forbidden women doctors from practising Azadine had left the place.

But towards the end of the novel Shirin-Gol finds Azadine. She lives in Kabul
along with a group of women who run a secret school and hospital. They hoodwink the
Taliban and this is their way of showing resilience.

Azadine’s house is full of women. Other doctors. An economist.
who cannot read. Secret women. They flock together in Azadine’s house.
According to the law of the Taliban that is forbidden. The women do it
anyway. That is resistance. They help one another to find work. To earn
money. To find a place where they and their children can live. They help
other women to drag themselves and their children through life. That is
resistance. (Shakib 285)

The women tell Shirin-Gol that the Taliban had stolen everything from them.
“Our little rights . . . they have taken our work from us, our children, our husbands,
fathers and mothers, our honour, our pride. Even our dreams” (Shakib 285). But the
women resolutely believe that the Taliban can never take away their hope.

They can’t. Not as long as we stand together. Not as long as we help each
other and other women. Not as long as we live and breathe . . . Being
alone is a great enemy of girls and women in Afghanistan . . . Women,
whatever country they live in, whatever language they speak, whatever
religion they have, must stick together and resist the oppression and the
nonsense that men spread . . . Wherever we live and how we live, however difficult it is, we have to fight. That is resistance. (Shakib 286)

This is the greatest message of hope, resilience and female bonding that is Shirin-Gol is empowered with. One aspect which stands out in the novel is the warmth of female bonding, humanness, tenderness and altruism of women, and principally, the anticipation of an improved and promising future for their children. Siba Shakib illustrates the essence of resilience, optimism and female bonding through Azadine- the woman doctor, Fawzi-Shirin-Gol’s first teacher in Kabul, Malalai, the epitome of fearlessness, Bahara, who nurses Shirin-Gol back to life after her horrendous rape, the ‘girl-woman prostitute’ whom Shirin-Gol meets at the border, Aisha, who exhibits resistance even in the face of death and the two women refugees from Iran who have been abandoned by their husbands and fathers and who fight poverty and starvation by sheer will power. Some of them are nameless, others like Aisha faceless but what unite them is their resilient fortitude and the friendship they forge with other women to tide over their afflictions. In the novel it can be seen that the only breather which a woman is able to obtain, is in association with other woman. As the journey of Shirin-Gol is traced through the novel, there can be seen plenty of occasions where women seek to establish a type of silent but resilient implicit affiliation not only to prevent themselves from breaking apart but also to withstand all the storms and debacles that may come their way. This is “resistance” in Shirin-Gol’s words.

It is with this resilient spirit embedded in her heart that Shirin-Gol carries on with her life under the Taliban. The absence of Morad no longer bothers her. She has accepted and internalized the fact that she is the resilient one. That understanding gives her the courage to move on. She has learned a lot from Azadine and her friends that she clings on
to hope. She does everything in her capacity to help the helpless. Once in Kabul, she comes across a little boy who has had his limbs blown off in a mine explosion. She squats beside the helpless child to feed him some bread and also to comfort him. That small gesture of hers has many women bonding up with her.

Women under their burqas whisper, stroke Shirin-Gol’s arms, her head, her cheek. One cloth speaks to her, it is hungry, it wants bread, it wants work. Another cloth puts its hand on her back, pulls her up, wipes tears from Shirin-Gol’s eyes and says, do not show weakness, that is all they want. They want us to show weakness so that they feel strong. The cloth embraces Shirin-Gol, hugs her. It is a powerful embrace. The cloth calms Shirin-Gol’s shivering and trembling. (Shakib 79)

The women are nameless and faceless, hidden under “the small mountain of cheap, blue polyester” (Zoya 1). But beneath “the shroud” (Zoya 2) there exist resilient hearts “who belong together, who share their every joy and their every suffering. They are not alone”(Shakib 286). Shirin-Gol derives her strength from that affinity.

When Morad comes back, she asks no questions, does not berate him.

She is neither happy nor unhappy about Morad’s return . . . She has learned how to get around the Taliban’s prohibition on women working, and to find food for herself and four children. And now Opium-Morad is with his family again, she will manage to feed him too. If she has to, she will pay for his opium as well. Even if she doesn’t know how she will do all that. But somehow she has always managed. (Shakib 288)
With the help of the sisterhood network, Shirin-Gol finds a job as a cleaning woman. She starts working for a foreigner, a woman who works for an American aid organization. Though the Taliban have prohibited women from working outside their homes especially in the houses of foreigners, Shirin-Gol boldly takes the risk. She also gives the woman the much needed information about the state of affairs for women in Afghanistan. The courage to do that, the daring to bring her children to the foreign woman’s house so that they can enjoy a little bit of freedom and joy is something that Shirin-Gol had imbibed from her contact with Azadine and her friends. This reveals that the capacity for metamorphic and egalitarian change is intensified when women bond together in the struggle against patriarchal supremacy. Shirin-Gol is amazed at the permissiveness and freedom that women like her employer enjoy, women who are courageous and unfettered, who do not mind exposing their skin, who are free and comfortable with men. . . It is new world for her. She looks forward to sharing with her friends “that she has looked into the eyes of women who have everything in life that you need to be happy and contended. She will tell her friends that she has found new hope. As long as there are women somewhere in the world who aren’t hungry, who are free, as long as that is the case Shirin-Gol and her friends will have hope.” (Shakib 292)

This highlights the fact that the realization of collective rights has the potential to challenge the hegemony and hierarchical nature of the caste-gender matrix of patriarchal honour (Harding 379). The novel traces the journey of revolutionary women who bond together in adverse situations. They survive the cataclysm and are no longer victims. They become the channels of transformation and hold out the torch for other women to emulate.
When the Taliban chance upon their secret agendas, Shirin-Gol, Azadine as well as her friends are caught. Shirin-Gol is prevented from working for the American woman, she is forbidden from selling carpets in the bazaar. She is unable to teach in the secret school. Azadine is imprisoned for her clandestine medical work. Most of the revolutionary women face the same fate. The ‘web of sisterhood’ is ripped apart. When they find it difficult to feed their children, the only option that the Taliban allows them is begging. Initially Shirin-Gol remains resilient while she begs, because she is grateful that “she doesn’t have to sell her body” (Shakib 294). But soon she caves in as the whole ordeal becomes too much for her to bear and she attempts at taking her own life. “The journey to empowerment is not linear but fraught with backward and forward leaps some invigorating whereas some, painful” (Allen 150). But Shirin-Gol doesn’t remain in that passive state for long. She soon fights her way through and makes a journey with her family to her paternal home in the mountains. Like all their journeys this one too is fraught with strain and struggle. But they reach their destination. Shirin-Gol’s brother who is fighting against the Taliban gives them refuge. Shirin-Gol is once again back to her old self, in charge, managing things and being the leader. Her elder daughter also joins them. She is carrying her third child and when her time comes Shirin-Gol functions as the expert midwife that she is. She has come a full circle, first Abina, when she was inexperienced and now her daughter.

“In Afghanistan almost all names have meaning. Shirin-Gol means Sweet Flower” (Shakib 9). She has spread a sweet fragrance all around her throughout her life’s journey and now holding her grandchild in her arms she realizes that she has become Bibi-Shirin, a sweet grandmother. She had been enslaved and discriminated against by many forces. War, men, impoverishment, history, culture, religion and God’s fury had
tried to victimize her but she remained true to her name . . . Shirin-Gol . . . Sweet Flower. Though the flower had been forced to wilt many a time, it had resisted the harsh elements and had blossomed spreading a sweet fragrance. Shirin-Gol, had grappled with all handicaps and had emerged a fragrant victor. In the words of the novelist, “Shirin-Gol is like a tree. Like a powerful, slender poplar that withstands the strongest winds and storms, seeing everything, understanding everything, knowing everything and passing everything on” (Shakib 7).

Women have forever been treated as helpless souls who are always prone to emotional showdowns. They have been down the ages regarded as incapable beings, unable to function on an equal footing with their male counterparts as all of their energy and efficiency would fizzle out in their becoming wives and mothers. It is generally believed in parts of the world that women have been created for the purpose of satisfying a man as well as produce babies. Just like proponents of Social Darwinism uphold the view that the weak dwindle and their cultures are demarcated while the strong grow in power and in cultural influence over the weak, the Afghan society which is predominantly patriarchal believes women have been created just for the purpose of bearing children and those too male children. They are to be kept within the confines of their home and are meant only to be sex-objects for the gratification of men. They are considered to be incompetent creatures unable to contribute to the welfare of the society. It is because such an idea prevails in the Afghan society that women are treated with zero respect. They are beaten, raped and violated because they are seen as objects, not as human beings.

In both the novels it can be seen that it is the unmitigated injustice against women that fortifies men against the feminine side of a culture. The patriarchal society that
Afghanistan is, maintains the ideology that their culture and religion approve of men having absolute authority in the family. Wives and daughters are to be totally subject to the man in the family. This is evident in the words of Rasheed as he insists on Mariam wearing the burqa in public, that too in a relatively modern city like Kabul. “Where I come from, a woman’s face is her husband’s business only” (Hosseini 69). In Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep, this is reflected in the word of the Mullah in the refugee camp who cannot tolerate the fact that Shirin-Gol is in charge of the family. He commands her younger brother to take up the responsibility. “Make sure that the sia-sar in your family do not raise their voice in public, it’s unseemly” (Shakib 72). But this is just minor event in the life of Shirin-Gol. She also goes through the worse kind of trauma just because she is a woman. She is forced to sell her body, she is raped, she becomes a victim to the Taliban and the like.

In many instances in A Thousand Splendid Suns it can be seen that Mariam remains silent in the face of all horrors she faces at the hands of Rasheed. He abuses her, rapes her, beats her, insults her but she is a mute recipient to all his maltreatment. It is a kind of submission to oppression. It is as Deborah Cameron in Feminism and Linguistic Theory suggests “Silence is a symbol of oppression, which liberation is speaking out, making contact. Contact is what matters. A woman who lies or who is silent may not lack a language, but she does not communicate” (Cameron 7). In the case of Nana also, this is no different. Nana has been wronged. She knows it. The entire community knows it. But she is blamed and cast out of the home. She vents her ire in the privacy of her home and only to her daughter. She does not open her mouth when Jalil comes to visit them. She remains impassive and mute in his presence. “Her inner turmoils are so bitter that she is unable to speak them out and remains silent in order not to be frustrated and
disappointed after the disapproval of her actions by the society. She is unable to unfold the truth. Her image becomes like that of a bird who has got wings and knows that it can fly, but, somehow, does not” (Sandhu 43).

But women in these novels tide over these horrendous traumatic situations by exhibiting a very resilient front. Their way of keeping their heads above water during all these traumatic and distressing ordeals is to form bonds amongst themselves. Bonds between traumatized women symbolize common suffering, shared persecution, harmony and consensus. It can be seen that all across the globe women from every segment of society find it beneficial to stick together to battle against the system of patriarchy. Female bonding fosters appreciation, harmony and unity among women and such a bond helps women to find comfort in the midst of all the struggles they face in a patriarchal society. Women become attentive to each other’s pressing needs, they are able to understand and encourage each other during precarious times while coming together against male authoritarianism and coercion.

In A Thousand Splendid Suns, initially Mariam sees Laila as a person who is responsible for the breakdown of her marriage. She cannot accept her presence in the house especially when Rasheed fawns over her. She cannot tolerate the fact that Rasheed insults her and expects her to be a servant to Laila. It is a natural womanly feeling. Though she had suffered at the hands of Rasheed, he was her husband and she resented sharing him though she knew that he never deserved her love or respect. She hates the terms Rasheed used to address her in Laila’s presence. She knew that he was purposely trying to insult her. The word harami brings up painful memories of her childhood. “Mariam was a thirty-three year old woman now, but that word harami, still had sting.
Hearing it made her feel like she was a pest, a cockroach. She remembered Nana pulling at her wrists. You are a clumsy little harami. This is my reward for everything I’ve endured. An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little harami” (Hosseini 216). At first Laila too ignores Mariam though she pities her. This mutual coldness and resentment is due to the fact that they are unable to connect with each other mainly because that they have been badly hurt by personal losses. They have kind of withdrawn into their shells because the people dearest to them have either hurt them or have been taken away from their lives. They feel scared to establish new relationships because they are afraid of getting hurt again.

But there is a progressive transformation in their attitudes once they build and cultivate a rapport between themselves. Their bonding, cooperation and sisterhood play a compelling function in enabling them to enunciate. Their voices had been suppressed for long by Rasheed. Mariam and Laila bond together like Azadine and Shirin-Gol, Shirin-Gol and Abina, Shirin-Gol and Bahara. This sisterhood infuses them with the prowess to react and resist. “The emerging female bond forms the optimistic nature of the story and is the book’s foundation” (Herbert 10). Their bond is reinforced and sustained by the fact that they have a common tormentor, Rasheed. Rasheed soon grows tired of Laila because she fails to give him a son. He also cannot tolerate the resilience that Laila displays. Her boldness and fearlessness set him off. He is the typical Afghan man, the product of the patriarchal system who expects women to be mute, silent and passive son-bearers. He takes out his anger on her by abusing her physically. This draws the Mariam and Laila together. They share secrets about their childhood and youth, secrets which they had kept buried in their hearts, their painful pasts which no other human soul had ever heard. Aziza, Laila’s daughter is another reason for the bond between the women to heighten.
Aziza adores Mariam and is quite inseparable from her. Rasheed treats Aziza quite cruelly. He yells at her and frightens her almost all the time. Aziza looks up to Mariam for reassurance and love. Mariam teaches her verses from the Quran which she recites by heart. She calls Aziza “the noor of my eyes and the sultan of my heart” (Hosseini 350).

Laila never tells Rasheed or anybody about the initial coldness that Mariam and she had for each other. She never reveals the details of the real violent fight that they had. “There was shouting. Pots raised though not hurled. They’d called each other names, names that made Laila blush now. They hadn’t spoken since. Laila was still shocked at how easily she had come unhinged, but, the truth was, part of her had liked it, had liked how it felt to scream at Mariam, to curse at her, to have a target at which to focus all her simmering anger, her grief” (Hosseini 227). Hosseini’s explicit vocalization of this event underscores the reality that women do not exhibit violence the way men do. When Mariam and Laila fight over the missing spoon, when they hurl abusive words at each other, they experience a cathartic effectiveness. It not only liberates them from their ire and resentment toward Rasheed which they had been forced to stifle but it also aids in creating a bond between them, a bond which transcends spatial and temporal barriers. The bond is eternal because while Laila is pregnant and the family contemplates on a name for the new-baby-to-come, “the game involves only the male names. Because, if it’s a girl, Laila has already named her” (Hosseini 402). The similarity of their abominable ordeals bolsters the creation of a versatile alliance which helps them to safeguard themselves and support each other against their violent husband. “Violence, ironically, creates harmony among otherwise warring elements” (Toch 33).
Even after Laila and Tariq return to Afghanistan after the end of the Taliban rule, the strong affinity that had existed between her and Mariam continues. In spite of the fact that the former warlords have been appointed by the Americans as ministers and deputy ministers, in spite of the fact that the warlords, her parents’ murderers live in comfort and do nothing for the common people, Laila does not allow resentment and hate to fill her heart. Because she knows Mariam would have disapproved of that. Though physically Mariam is not present, the bonds they had once formed continue to live on in Laila and she derives strength from that to carry on rehabilitation work in Afghanistan. “Laila has resigned herself to moving on. For her own sake, for Tariq’s, for her children’s. And for Mariam, who still visits Laila in her dream, who is never more than a breath or two below her consciousness. Laila has moved on” (Hosseini 399).

In Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep Shirin-Gol is a role model to Abina. They bond together. Abina who had been till then living a reticent life emerges out of her shell and exhibits a kind of feisty resilience. At numerous points in the novel, there can be seen situations where women try to form a type of unspoken bond so as to avert catastrophes and thwart all kinds of debacles that come their way. Shirin-Gol calls this courageous move “resistance” (Shakib 148). Women in the novel, in spite of whatever they have suffered and still suffer bond together and it is the optimistic faith in a better morrow that propels them on. These women trust in the integrity and solidarity of their female bonding and leave no stone unturned to sustain it even when the Taliban brings in all sorts of inhuman curbs so as to prevent women meetings. The words of the woman who meets secretly at Azadine’s house carry the hope that all Afghan women nestle in their hearts, “This will change. . . Yes, I am convinced that our work will be
successful. We started three years ago, and we have already found work for five hundred women. It is not enough, but it is a start. Wherever we live and how we live, however difficult it is, we have to fight” (Shakib 286). They firmly believe that the coming together of women to resist against the forces that suppress them can create for them pockets of freedom which otherwise would be hard for them to achieve.

This bonding is clearly defined by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her personal essay ‘What Women Share:’

In the best friendship I have had with women, there is a closeness that is unique, a sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need explanation, perhaps because of all the life-changing experiences we share—menstruation, childbirth, menopause. The same tragedies, physical or emotional, threaten us: the infidelity of a spouse or boyfriend, rape, breast cancer, the death of a child who had grown inside our body. Whether any of these strike us personally or not, if we hear or it happening to a woman we love, we feel its reality like an electric shock along our own spine. Even when we disagree with each other, we often know what the other is going to say before she shapes the words . . . we’re sometimes furiously competitive and bitchy and exasperated. But ultimately we can be ourselves with each other. Ourselves with all our imperfections. Ourselves uncomplicated by all the emotions that complicate our other relationships: duty, lust, romance, the need to impress or control. We can be women and know that, as women, we can understand. (Web)
The bonds that exist between the women in the novels of Hosseini and Shakib therefore indicate a preeminent design for feminist interpersonal association. The women who exhibit this bonding bring to light common suffering, shared victimization, and unanimity. They not only sustain and supply emotional encouragement to each other but even assist them to deal with ambiguities and dreams of their feminine selves.