

**BEYOND THE VEIL: THE RESILIENCE OF THE SUBSERVIENT
AFGHAN WOMAN IN ZARGHUNA KARGAR'S *DEAR ZARI***

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ABSTRACT

From time immemorial women have been facing discrimination in Afghanistan where men always have had power and control over them. They are treated like second class citizens and discrimination has become a way of life. Hundreds and thousands of women in the war torn nation of Afghanistan have been deprived of their basic rights. Their view of the world is distorted by the *chador* or veil that they are forced to wear. The abuse that they face in their patriarchal society is so appalling that it can sap their vitality and wilt them. They have been prevented from exercising several of their fundamental rights including the right to vote, to get an education, to obtain employment, and to receive health care benefits.

Yet many of them are neither passive nor helpless as they make choices and accept consequences to affect desired ends, both hopeful and tragic. Through their strength and resilience, these women try to overcome these obstacles. It might not always be a win-win situation, but because they are incredibly tough, they never give up.

This paper tries to explore how Zarghuna Kargar in her compelling and enlightening work *Dear Zari*, a gripping collection of life stories, portrays the passionate celebration of human resilience under unimaginable coercion.

Key words: Afghan women, Oppression, Victims, Resilience

Afghan women have been for far too long depicted as victims of war, repression and extremist ideologies. Afghan women, much like the country of Afghanistan itself, appear to be propelled by the whims of outside forces, familial and societal, with little chance of influencing their own lives and futures. Yet many of them are neither passive nor helpless as they make choices and accept consequences to affect desired ends, both hopeful and tragic.

In mainstream media, the images that depict women in Afghanistan are often bleak, miserable and sad. The stories that circulate outside of Afghanistan are about Afghan women who speak about

the dangerous, war-torn, tumultuous conditions that they face. More than anything, what is vocalized is how Afghan women are oppressed; Afghan women suffer under their burqas, at the hands of the men in their life, within their Taliban and tribal controlled culture. The devastating truth is that the classic portrayal of the Afghan woman lacks one crucial thing: the Afghan woman.

The media related to Afghan women can be exploitative at times; it victimizes the women, represents them for outside consumption and hardly sheds light on the actual, diverse realities of women in the country.

The mysterious and misunderstood ideas about gender dichotomy in Afghanistan and the historical exclusion of women from the public sphere have shrouded Afghan women's lives in mystery for ages. Much of this is very vividly portrayed by Zarghuna Kargar in her compelling and enlightening work *Dear Zari*, a gripping collection of life stories which portray the passionate celebration of human resilience under unimaginable coercion. This powerful collection of testimonies also stresses upon the point that other than war, Afghan women have to face a more monstrous enemy, an enemy against whom the chances of winning are less.

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

The stories drawn from 'Afghan Women's Hour' cover such controversial issues as the "exchange" and sale of child brides, rape, honour and virginity, and the pressures on women to produce a son. Some of the most poignant stories are those of the widows and divorced women, who find themselves shunned by their own families.

As Kargar herself says "Afghan Women's Hour' was launched with the aim of giving a radio show to the women in Afghanistan which would cut across all tribal, social and economic boundaries.'(Kargar 8) Since radio was the main source of mass communication in the war torn Afghanistan, most people in rural as well as urban areas had access to it. This programme was broadcast in both Pashtu and Dari languages which was understood by most of the women in the country. There were different dimensions to the programme which contributed to its public appeal. There would be discussions on a variety of topics ranging from child marriage to domestic violence.

There would also be reports which would enlighten the women on a plethora of topics like contraception and child mortality. The cultural diversity of the land would be shared through songs and recipes. Subjects like rape, divorce, virginity which were usually discussed behind closed doors would be discussed at length. In fact when this programme was first started, the aim was to cover a wide range of issues which really concerned the Afghan woman. But soon listeners started clamouring for life stories- incidents which had the scent and feel of real human struggle and pain.

Though this programme had its origin in London, Kargar soon trained young women in Afghanistan to interview women in their provinces who had undergone harrowing experiences. The shocking realities of these women's lives revealed to the entire world the despair and trauma endured by them during the Taliban regime. These women who had been rendered voiceless and faceless for many years were at last given an identity.

The heart breaking stories (?) of Nasreen, Wazma, Anesa, to name a few, are not solitary incidents. They are the untold voices of the suppressed women of a nation that is crystallized in a matrix of male domination wherein the inequality of sexes is the result of a religious law and the fabrication of the society. Kargar's portrayal of these women and their dreams, trials, and challenges presents a complex view of women in Afghanistan that goes beyond oppression and the stereotype of the veil.

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

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

Any woman who manages to give birth to a succession of sons is cherished by her husband, praised by her mother-in-law and respected by her community. In this

way, the mother feels proud of having achieved what she believes she was born to do. If on the other hand a woman is unable to produce a boy, she feels a failure and her life is made miserable. (Kargar 37)

Sharifa had to go through a living nightmare because her mother was unable to produce a male heir. She was given in exchange for a new bride for her father. This practice called 'badal' is something that is very common in Afghanistan where young girls are exchanged for a wife for her brother or sometimes for a second wife for her father. Sharifa's education was stopped when she was married off to a forty year old widower who had children as old as her. She had to sacrifice all her dreams and happiness to secure her family's future.

Nasreen's story is a classic example of a young woman who has to sacrifice her feelings and happiness on the altar of family honour. She was considered a bad woman because she dared to love a man. She begins her story with the poignant question, "Have you wondered about those women who are married to a man whom they never loved and were never suited to?" (Kargar 54) She is prevented from marrying Abdullah whom she loved deeply only because she was a Pashtun and he a Tajik. Her father considers his reputation more important than his daughter's happiness. Her father couldn't digest the fact that his daughter had decided to love a boy of her own choice. She is banned from going to school, beaten like an animal, imprisoned in her own home and ultimately married to a forty year old drug addict who makes life a living hell for her.

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

Even when Kargar speaks in favour of Nasreen she becomes painfully aware of the fact that even while working in a modern country like the U.K, she had to endure the sneers of her Afghan male colleagues who saw as someone "using the radio to encourage other women to do shameful things" like falling in love! She goes on to say that an Afghan woman would never be allowed to openly express her feelings for a man regardless of whether she lives in Afghanistan or the U.K. As long as she is an Afghan woman, she will have to keep her feelings under the wrap or she could be branded a slut. Kargar admires Nasreen for the very fact that she had the courage to reveal her love for Abdullah.

There is Shereenjan who is given off when she is nine, by her own father as 'dukhmany' to settle a dispute. She is ill-treated by that family because they want to avenge their kin's death. She is put into a room with animals, beaten mercilessly, made to do all kinds of hard labour and denied food and sleep. As a child she finds all this terrifying but as the years go by she becomes so numb that she hardly feels anything even when cruelly beaten. But in spite of all that happens she beats the odds and emerges a survivor.

Ilaha and Gulalai represent all those women who live in misery and shame carrying the burden of a crime they did not commit. Their only fault is that they did not bleed on their wedding night. As a result of that they face insults and taunts which break the very soul of their womanhood. Ilaha is a poor uneducated woman and her husband divorces her for this 'crime.' Though Gulalai's husband does not divorce her he uses this 'deficiency' as a trump card to control her. Kargar goes on to relate her own experience at this point. She relates the fear and tension she underwent on her wedding night because she didn't bleed. When her husband repeatedly tells her that a virgin should bleed, he subtly points an accusing finger at her, questioning her chastity. Even though she was educated and came from a liberal family, she had been caught in the vortex of Afghan traditions surrounding virginity and marriage. Afghan girls have been told from a very young age that 'good and pure' girls do bleed on their wedding nights but they have never been allowed to discuss their feelings openly nor ask for advice or information. If at all she does dare to ask, she is called shameless. As a result many of them do not even know what a sexual relationship is.

Anesa, Wazma, Janpary, Layla are some of the other women in this narrative who rise above their harrowing situations, beating the odds and emerging victors. In Kargar's own words, "In Afghan culture you brew up a revolution if you try to push against the system and break open your cage." (Kargar 256) But the women in the stories have been brave enough to make an effort to break the shackles of traditions which had enslaved them. Many of them might not have been able to achieve their ends, they might have been worse off than they were at the beginning, they might have been insulted and battered for their courage but that never negates the fact that they stood up unflinchingly for what they believed was the right thing for them. They broke their silence and courageously started their own revolution.

The bravery and endurance of these Afghan women give Kargar the courage to make the hardest decision of her life- dissolving her unhappy marriage. Being brought up in a traditional Afghan culture, it was not easy for her to tell her family that she was unhappy in her marriage. But the

resilience of the women who were part of the 'Afghan Woman's Hour' gives her the power to make changes in her life. She realizes that she didn't have to embrace the traditional views of people around her and accept being humiliated as a woman. But it wasn't an easy task. She is blamed and insulted and accused of being a shameless woman who didn't care about the dignity of her family. No one asks about her feelings. Though she experiences loneliness and vulnerability, every judgement and hurtful comment made against her made her more determined and stronger. It empowered her and made her understand the pain of others better.

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

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

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

Kargar's 'Afghan Woman's Hour' has been able to infuse hundreds of women with hope and spunk. They have learnt memorable lessons from the lives of the brave women who have dared to tell their stories. They have learnt to stand up for their rights in harsh conditions. They have also learnt to follow what they felt was right in spite of the opposition from their society and family. And many have learnt that though they have gone through terrible experiences, there is no need that their daughters go through it. So in 2010 when the British government decided to stop the programme, Kargar was not dejected for she knew that the goal had been achieved and the message delivered. The stories would remain a legacy that would always carry a spark to ignite change in the Afghan society.

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