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Research Article

Solidarity in Adversity: The Transformative Power of Female Bonds in Siba Shakib's *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*

Dr. Nisha Thomji Varghese[1*]

Abstract
This paper explores the theme of female solidarity in Siba Shakib's *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*, highlighting how bonds between Afghan women offer emotional, psychological, and physical support amidst patriarchal oppression. Shakib portrays sisterhood as a refuge from societal constraints, illustrating how female friendship nurtures resilience, empathy, and empowerment. Characters like Shirin-Gol, Azadine, and others demonstrate the power of collective strength, transforming personal suffering into communal resistance. Despite adversity, these women unite, creating a tapestry of shared hope and determination. Their unspoken camaraderie becomes the foundation of their survival and emotional liberation against overwhelming odds.

Introduction
Women, from the dawn of time, have been a silenced and oppressed group, their voices stifled, their existence dismissed. Such suppression is the offspring of a long-standing fallacy: the belief that gender is an immutable biological fate, granting legitimacy to subjugation. French feminist Simone de Beauvoir critiques this, asserting that women are often reduced to mere sexual entities, shackled by a label that obliterates their individuality and humanity. Trapped within the prison of their femininity, they are cast as the 'Other,' while men reign supreme as the universal, autonomous beings. This insidious patriarchal machinery has cunningly marketed the concept of an 'eternal feminine,' a notion feminists vehemently reject. They argue that to regard all women as sharing identical experiences is a dangerous oversimplification. "There is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns," (Butler 17) as Octavia Butler wrote, underscoring the complexity of women's unique reactions to life's trials, both triumphs and tribulations. While there may be no universal thread in their responses, the ubiquitous reality remains: across the globe, women are subjected to systematic patterns of abuse and marginalization, not for their individuality, but for their mere existence as women.

Feminization, a pervasive force across global cultures, operates as a silent, unconscious ritual by which women are "psychically induced into femininity" (Rose 89). Their minds become saturated with gendered assumptions, molded by expectations that manifest in uniform behaviors across patriarchal societies. Women are coerced into adopting social norms that conform to a system which perpetuates their inferiority, casting the feminine as inadequate, a shadowy reflection of the male's perceived dominance and grandeur. Their thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives are meticulously sculpted to align with this narrative, trapping them in a carefully constructed illusion of subordination. Yet, the crushing weight of this repression often stirs women into rebellion. The moment a woman discerns the chains of oppression around her, she is stirred with a fire that refuses to be extinguished. She gathers the courage to defy the foundations of her enforced 'otherness,' challenging the patriarchal edifice. In this courageous defiance, she exhibits resilience, refusing to remain a prisoner of her own gender. She reclaims her individuality, breaking free from the bondage that seeks to define and diminish her.

The journey toward a woman's authentic self—one markedly distinct from the identity imposed upon her by society—begins the moment she dares to question the patriarchal fabric that has long

[1*] Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Albert's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam, Kerala. 682018

suppressed her. This courageous introspection empowers her to uncover the singular brilliance of her own identity, fostering the emergence of a unified, self-actualized persona. When women scrutinize and rebel against the rigid norms of a male-dominated society, the seeds of feminist consciousness are sown. Many women, scarred by trauma, summon the strength to shatter the chains that bind them, realizing that true emancipation must arise from within. This inner liberation is not without difficulty; it demands immense courage to confront the deep-rooted patriarchal forces. As Germaine Greer affirms, "She cannot begin by changing the world but by reassessing herself" (Greer 4).

Sisterhood as Sanctuary

One powerful source of this resilience is female solidarity. In the embrace of women's friendship, there is a profound sense of dependability, transcending self-interest and aiming toward collective upliftment. This bonding, a sacred alliance, equips women with the strength to confront insecurities and face male oppression. "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition must have strong wings" (Chopin, 136).

Early feminists astutely recognized female bonding as a force that transcended individual struggles, highlighting women as a distinct group exploited by men. In communities where tragedies, afflictions, and patriarchal domination reign supreme, such solidarity becomes a beacon of hope. Female bonding carries immense significance, for it empowers women to rise above their adversities, drawing strength from the deep connections they forge with other women. Through this sacred communion, they gain invaluable insights, seeing themselves anew through the reflections and experiences of their counterparts. This process initiates a profound transformation, fostering personal and collective growth.

Female bonding can be seen as the harbinger of women's development, heralding a shared sensibility rooted in their mutual affinity. This solidarity shatters the artificial divisions imposed by patriarchal systems, allowing women to discard perceptions of inferiority. The unity born from female bonds paves the way for liberation, offering women a unique avenue to escape the suffocating conditions that have long oppressed them. Afghan women, for example, historically stripped of their human value and treated as mere possessions, found solace and strength in the quiet resilience of their sisters. Denied autonomy and individuality, their dreams could only be realized through the shared understanding and emotional support of other women.

Across time, women have steadily dismantled the walls of subjugation, cultivating a tradition of female solidarity that endures. From within and without, they derive immense emotional fortitude from these connections. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese poignantly asserts in *Feminism Without Illusions*, female bonding is the ideal that must supersede 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 to life" (Genovese 28). Through this enduring sisterhood, women not only empower themselves but also reclaim their rightful place in the world.

The bond among women emerged as a formidable weapon in the Black middle-class women's movement of the 1960s and 70s. This powerful unity, rooted in the literary tradition of Black women like Phyllis Wheatley, has been nurtured and expanded by icons such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou. No writers have explored the theme of female bonding with as much depth and authenticity as Morrison and Walker.

Women have long been conditioned to believe that their relationship with men holds the highest significance, often sacrificing their own well-being to preserve these ties. They are taught to regard the man-woman connection as sacred, enduring mistreatment in the belief that it is the ultimate bond. Yet, when circumstances compel them to lean on each other, women discover the unparalleled strength and solace in female solidarity. Like the Black women who banded together to challenge patriarchal domination, Afghan women—crushed under the weight of societal norms, religion, and gender oppression—find resilience in one another. Female friendship, a sanctuary of understanding and protection, not only shields them from the ravages of patriarchy but restores their sense of worth, offering deep emotional fulfillment and empowerment.

Siba Shakib, in her novel *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*, underscores the profound importance of female friendship, not only to expose the overwhelming power of patriarchy but to caution women about the peril that arises in the absence of such bonds. She vividly portrays sisterhood in its many forms—a camaraderie rooted in deep, heartfelt commitment. She crafts a vivid tapestry of female relationships, reflecting the social and cultural realities of Afghanistan, where patriarchy wields immense power. Her narrative highlights how race, class, and even the institution of marriage serve to restrict female autonomy, portraying friendship as a refuge from these oppressive forces.

For the Afghan woman, female friendship is a form of carte blanche, granting her the freedom to build a new sense of individuality and empowerment. In time, this sisterhood becomes a sanctuary, helping women rise above their adversities. The bonds they share often extend into a greater collective unity, inviting more women into the fold, where they find benevolence, strength, and sustenance. Yet, despite its healing power, female friendship faces challenges. The oppressive designs of patriarchy are not the only threats—issues like egocentrism, a mishandling of differences, and a lack of unwavering commitment can erode these relationships, threatening to unmoor the deeply entrenched solidarity that nourishes women through life's trials.

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.

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 mutual recognition and sharing bestow upon women the opportunity to assimilate wisdom, evolve, and reap profound benefits from their collective experiences. When women unite, a tapestry of learning unfolds—they not only glean insights from their own missteps but also from the trials and triumphs of others. This shared journey fosters growth, gradually molding them into women of substance.

Sisterhood in Strife

Siba Shakib's female characters epitomize the true essence of female harmony. Defying insurmountable odds, they nurture and enrich a sisterhood that sustains them, offering unwavering emotional, psychological, and physical support. Each extends a compassionate hand to the other during arduous and tumultuous times, emboldening her to make decisive changes that empower them to boldly face the looming shadows of polygamy and pervasive patriarchy. Their shared hardships enable them to delve deeply into each other's pain, fostering a profound empathy and solidarity. As unfortunate victims of polygamy's oppressive grasp, the only solace they find amidst this suffocating ordeal is in uniting their strengths. By joining forces, they soothe and reassure one another, transforming their collective suffering into a beacon of resilience and hope. 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)

Shakib champions the transformative power of meaningful, collective commitment among Afghan women, asserting that through sisterhood, the emotional scars inflicted by racial, gendered, and

patriarchal oppression can begin to heal. As Nnaemeka affirms, "Women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity, and in the process reinvent themselves" (Nnaemeka 19). Female bonding thrives on the exchange of heartfelt, conscientious support, the sharing of stories and experiences, and the nurturing of one another—an intimate, empowering connection that transcends familial ties, uniting women across boundaries in profound solidarity. 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 her novel, Shakib portrays ordinary Afghan women whose bonds emerge not from a conscious awareness of feminist principles, but from their lived experiences and the pressures of their environment, compelling them toward female solidarity. Through these rich, interconnected relationships, the author delves into the social and psychological landscapes of Afghan women, illustrating how friendship and kinship become the crucibles of self-discovery. Unlike the archetypal lone adventurer seeking self-affirmation, the Afghan women in this narrative find their worth in connection with others. They are not alienated outsiders, but deeply rooted within their communities, tethered to their children, other women, and their homes.

Shirin-Gol in Siba Shakib's *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*, though physically mobile, embarks on a spiritual journey. Her quests are internal, driven by a need for emotional and psychological growth. Betty Friedan's assertion resonates here: "It is easier to live through someone else than to become complete yourself" (Friedan 36), emphasizing the depth of the woman's journeys, which requires her to navigate complex personal relationships as part of her identity quest. Through these bonds, she gains strength, healing, and a profound sense of self-awareness. The indomitable spirit of Shirin-Gol propels the narrative through the harrowing turmoil of Afghanistan's turbulent history. Shirin-Gol's journey is one of unyielding resilience as she battles the oppressive forces of the Russians, the mujahedeen, and later, the Taliban. Her odyssey, which stretches across borders into Pakistan and Iran, is fueled by an unwavering resolve to secure a future of dignity and safety for her children. Encumbered by a husband lost to the shadows of opium addiction, Shirin-Gol faces the daunting task of family leadership and survival with remarkable fortitude. Though her husband, while not cruel, offers little practical support, she rises to the challenge, making pivotal decisions amidst chaos and ensuring her children's well-being against relentless adversity.

Shakib's novel masterfully portrays the resilience of Shirin-Gol and other Afghan women, illustrating their unwavering determination in the face of relentless hardship. The narrative is as much about resistance as it is about the bonds of female camaraderie. Shirin-Gol's odyssey reveals the profound significance of female friendship, with the novel capturing moments of solidarity and support in every new place her family seeks refuge.

The novel presents a tapestry of female characters, each contributing to the story of survival. While male characters appear, some benevolent, the novel's core revolves around the lives of women. Shirin-Gol dominates the narrative, but figures like Azadine, Malalai, the unnamed girl-woman in Pakistan, and Shirin-Gol's elder sisters, including Bahara and Abina, also play crucial roles. These women, who come together in Azadine's home to run clandestine schools and hospitals during the Taliban regime, leave indelible marks on the story. Their lives are a testament to the grim reality of systemic exploitation and abuse, depicting a daily struggle entrenched in a patriarchal cultural framework.

Initially, some of these women appear subdued, their voices muted by timidity and societal constraints. Their attempts at communication are often overlooked or dismissed. However, women like Shirin-Gol and Azadine emerge as symbols of resilience. They forge strong bonds to combat their shared adversities, demonstrating that through female solidarity, they can find meaning and purpose in an otherwise bleak existence. As Bell Hooks aptly notes, "Life-transforming ideas have always come to me through books" (Hooks 112), encapsulating how Shirin-Gol's and her companions' strength and unity transform their lives despite their oppressive circumstances.

Resilience and Defiance Amid War and Patriarchy

The novel *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* opens amidst the tumult of the Soviet invasion, with young Shirin-Gol witnessing the harrowing plight of her elder sisters. They are tragically thrust into prostitution, their faces adorned with "lips painted red and eyes black" (Shakib 16). In a society steeped in deceptive morality, where not veiling oneself is deemed synonymous with "sullying the honour of the family" (Shakib 16), their surrender to violation is an act of grim resilience. This desperate measure is undertaken not for personal gain but to stave off starvation for their family, whose male members have been conscripted to combat the Russian forces. Yet, in a dark twist of defiance, the sisters use their plight to fight back: they seize the opportunity to kill young soldiers caught off guard and pilfer their weapons, which are later smuggled to their brothers in the mountains. They engage in this perilous struggle "for freedom, for honour, for faith and with the aim of staying alive" (Shakib 21).

As the Russians advance on Shirin-Gol's village, the family is forced to seek refuge in Kabul. The city stands in stark contrast to their isolated mountain home, where they had clung to age-old traditions. The cultural shock is palpable: Shirin-Gol's father is aghast at the sight of unveiled women and the progressive educational opportunities provided by the Afghan People's Party, who support the Russian presence. In their mountainous retreat, Shirin-Gol and her peers were schooled to "be inconspicuous, to work, and to obey the orders of boys and men" (Shakib 11). Kabul's liberal environment, with its progressive social norms, profoundly disrupts their entrenched patriarchal values. The father's dismay lays bare the deep-rooted patriarchal and cultural mores that govern Afghan society, revealing the profound clash between tradition and the encroaching modernity.

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. (Shakib 26)

In the patriarchal fabric of Afghan society, women are relegated to mere chattels, their voices stifled and their thoughts deemed inconsequential. This universal plight reflects a broader theme of female marginalization, where women are systematically deprived of agency and relegated to the shadows of public discourse. As Krolokke and Sorensen observe,

"…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 & Soreson 31).

Shirin-Gol's father embodies this entrenched patriarchal rigidity. The burgeoning freedoms of Kabul, with its unveiled women and progressive ethos, clash violently with his deeply ingrained traditions and religious dogmas. In a move laden with irony, he departs with his sons and elder daughters to the mountains, joining the resistance fighters against the Soviets, conveniently forgetting the earlier reality of his elder daughters' exploitation as prostitutes in their remote village. Shirin-Gol, alongside her mother and twin brothers, remains in Kabul, as the mountains' treacherous landscape offers no refuge. Embracing her new environment, Shirin-Gol relishes her schooling and dreams of becoming a doctor. Yet, she harbors a deep-seated fear of disclosing her family's resistance activities, a remnant of her father's oppressive legacy.

Shirin-Gol's father, reeling from the liberating airs of Kabul, perceives the city's progressive freedoms as a violation of the entrenched traditions and religious doctrines to which he clings. In a bid to reclaim what he views as cultural purity, he retreats with his sons and elder daughters to the mountains, enlisting in the resistance against the Soviets. This departure is steeped in irony, as he conveniently disregards the sordid reality of his elder daughters' past roles as prostitutes in their remote village. Left behind in Kabul are Shirin-Gol, her mother, and her twin brothers, seeking refuge from the treacherous conditions of the mountains. In this new, alien environment, Shirin-Gol

immerses herself in the joys of education, nurturing a dream of becoming a doctor. Despite her burgeoning aspirations, a lingering fear grips her heart—she remains hesitant to reveal her father's resistance efforts to others. Her first profound lesson in resilience and defiance is imparted by Malalai, her neighbor, whose bravery echoes that of the legendary Malalai of Maiwand. Fearless and unapologetic, Malalai lives boldly, flouting traditions and enjoying outings with boys—acts of liberation that inspire Shirin-Gol. Joining Malalai on these clandestine escapades, Shirin-Gol experiences a heady sense of freedom, a thrilling liberation from the oppressive chains of her past, akin to "liberating the New Woman from the Old" (Cixous 878).

Shirin-Gol's world shifts once again when she marries Morad, her brother's friend, as part of a transaction to settle a gambling debt. This arrangement starkly exposes the harsh customs of Afghanistan, where women are bartered to resolve monetary disputes. Though Morad is inherently kind, he holds fast to the patriarchal belief that a wife's intellect should not surpass her husband's, encapsulated in his assertion that "men do not want wives who are cleverer than they are" (Shakib 41). Despite this, Shirin-Gol, forged in the crucible of her tumultuous experiences, remains resolute. She defiantly insists on pursuing her education and achieving her dream of becoming a doctor, confronting Morad with her emotional and intellectual autonomy.

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 once descended from the rugged mountains of Afghanistan. Shirin-Gol has evolved into a symbol of resilience and determination, embodying the lessons of strength and fortitude she has learned. Her unwavering resolve to pursue education shines through her actions, even in the face of daunting challenges. Despite Morad's initial resistance to her aspirations, he is ultimately conscripted into the army to fight against the Mujahideen, leaving Shirin-Gol to forge her own path. Her passion for learning is so profound that, just four days after giving birth to her daughter, she makes her way to school, embodying a fervor that transcends mere survival. When Morad returns from his harrowing experiences in the army, a broken man, Shirin-Gol steps into a new role with ease and grace. She becomes the bedrock of her household, embodying leadership with a natural poise that seems as if it were her birthright. Morad, leaning on her "powerful, strong girl-woman shoulder" (Shakib 47), finds solace and strength in her presence. His battlefield revelations about the significance of education lead him to encourage Shirin-Gol's pursuit of becoming a doctor, recognizing her unwavering commitment to her dreams. "You can depend on me," she reassures him, "now and forever" (Shakib 47), her words a testament to her newfound strength and resolve.

Yet, fate has other plans. Morad is summoned back to the front lines, leaving Shirin-Gol to navigate a tumultuous world on her own. As she gives birth to a son and the conflict between warlords escalates, the family is forced to flee to Pakistan. The exodus is chaotic, a desperate scramble as thousands of Afghans pour out of Kabul. At the border, Shirin-Gol encounters a young woman who, unashamedly, reveals her grim reality of prostitution as a means 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), she says, a stark reminder of the sacrifices and dehumanizing choices made in the direst of circumstances.

This encounter painfully echoes the past of Shirin-Gol's own sisters, who had resorted to the flesh trade to support their family. It starkly exposes the paradox of their struggle against Soviet encroachment—an endeavor ostensibly fought in the name of Allah and the Prophet—while simultaneously betraying the very women they claim to protect. This contradiction intensifies when juxtaposed with Shirin-Gol's father's rhetoric, justifying the holy war to prevent their daughters and wives from becoming "whores." The disparity between the proclaimed virtues of their cause and the brutal reality of their struggles reveals a bitter irony.

Survival through War, Sacrifice, and Female Solidarity

As Shirin-Gol and her children wait at the border, the scene is bleak—young children, burdened with heavy loads, traverse the desolate landscape, their lives reduced to a constant struggle for survival. They carry their burdens, hoping to exchange them for a meager meal, their existence stripped of name, age, desires, and future. "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" (Shakib 65). In the face of such stark despair, Shirin-Gol transforms the grim reality through her storytelling. She weaves a fantastical narrative, turning the dreary procession into a parade of regal grandeur. The children, in her tales, become queens and princesses, bearing the crescent moon as they journey from one palace to the next. "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). Through this imaginative lens, she crafts a world of enchantment for her children, shielding them from the harshness of their reality and allowing them a fleeting escape into a realm of wonder and hope.

In the relentless upheaval of war and displacement, Shirin-Gol and her family encounter a fleeting yet poignant act of solidarity. Amid the chaos of the border, a girl-woman, who earns her living through prostitution, extends a gesture of profound empathy. With the proceeds of her trade, she ensures that Shirin-Gol's family is well-nourished before they embark on their perilous journey. This selfless act exemplifies the intricate web of female solidarity that the novel so powerfully depicts. Although strangers, an unspoken connection binds them, transcending the barriers of their immediate circumstances.

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)

Following this act of compassion, Shirin-Gol and her family reach the refugee camp at Torkham, a place overwhelmed by the squalor of war. The camp is a grim tableau of human misery: disease festers, filth accumulates, and people are crammed into makeshift shelters. The air is thick with desperation, and the struggle for basic necessities—food, clean water, blankets—is relentless. In this bleak landscape, a cruel irony unfolds; amidst the deprivation, the pervasive patriarchal dominance remains unyielding. An Afghan man at the registration counter scornfully dismisses Shirin-Gol's assertiveness, relegating her to a lesser status by placing her twin brother in charge. "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 term 'sia-sar,' used pejoratively to describe young women, reveals a society steeped in oppressive norms. These women, with their untouched beauty and youthful vigor, are derided as temptations that undermine societal strength.

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 derogatory view underscores the pervasive control exerted over women, revealing a society with deeply entrenched moral codes that stifle female agency.

Despite this oppressive environment, Shirin-Gol encounters a resilient figure—a woman who, despite her own hardships, assists others. She illustrates the profound strength found in female solidarity, stating, "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) This sentiment reflects the survival strategy adopted by women, finding solace and purpose in aiding each other amidst their collective suffering.

In the refugee camp, Shirin-Gol channels her indomitable spirit into a clandestine act of resistance. She establishes an underground school, teaching not only her own children but also other young

learners. Despite the danger, she is driven by a fervent desire to provide her children with a semblance of normalcy and hope for the future. She wishes them to be educated and to one day contribute to the rebuilding of their war-torn homeland. “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 her secret school is discovered, Shirin-Gol is subjected to brutal punishment, and Morad, now an opium addict and smuggler, faces public humiliation. Despite her distress over Morad’s degradation, Shirin-Gol remains undeterred in her resolve. The hypocrisy of Afghan morality is starkly revealed when the same mullah and camp leader who had denounced her come to her for help with reading and writing. They insist she keep their request secret, underscoring the contradictory nature of their societal norms.

When fate thrusts Shirin-Gol into an abyss of despair, her world shatters with a tragic accident involving Morad, compounded by a dire scarcity of food and medicine. Stripped of alternatives, Shirin-Gol is driven to a harrowing decision: to barter her body with Morad’s smuggler-chief. The act, steeped in shame and anguish, is a testament to her unwavering commitment to her family’s survival. She endures the indignity with a heavy heart, acknowledging the bitter reality that her sacrifice, though extreme, is a lifeline for her children and Morad. The weight of this act, deeply etched into her soul, offers no solace despite the thousands of Afghan women who have faced similar fates. It is a poignant reflection of her resilience, where familial duty outweighs personal honor. Her endurance in the face of such adversity, though profound, manifests in the presence of her daughter, a living reminder of her trials.

Sisters of Resistance

Yet, her suffering does not relent. Shirin-Gol is subsequently subjected to a brutal assault by three Pakistani policemen, an ordeal that drains her vitality and plunges her into a state of emotional numbness. In her withdrawn state, her children are left unattended, and Morad’s opium-induced mood swings only deepen her despair. It is at this low point that Bahara, a compassionate Afghan neighbor, emerges as a beacon of hope. She tends to Shirin-Gol’s children and nurtures her back to health. In her desolation, Shirin-Gol had kept the details of her trauma veiled in silence, her pain rendered mute. But Bahara’s gentle care becomes a balm for her wounded spirit, prompting Shirin-Gol to open up. As she begins to recount her harrowing experiences, the floodgates of her suffering burst open, and her narrative spills forth with a fervor that seems to cleanse her inner turmoil. “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 bond that forms between Shirin-Gol and Bahara becomes a powerful testament to survival. Through their shared pain and empathy, they develop a blueprint for navigating their anguish. Bahara’s tears, flowing freely as she listens to Shirin-Gol’s story, become a healing salve for the latter’s deep-seated grief. In their mutual support, they embody a profound truth: “how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something.” (Morrison 40) Through their connection, they find solace and strength, navigating their shared struggles with a resilient spirit.

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)

A new chapter unfolds as Shirin-Gol’s family embarks on a journey back to Afghanistan, venturing into a secluded haven nestled in the majestic Hindu Kush Mountains. Here, far removed from the cacophony of conflict and chaos, lies a tranquil Hazara settlement with fewer than a hundred souls. “The people are nice but skeptical,” (Shakib 107) a sentiment that underscores the cautious optimism that accompanies their arrival. For the first time in a long while, Shirin-Gol and her family experience a semblance of peace. This remote village, untouched by the ravages of war, becomes a sanctuary where Shirin-Gol’s resilience finds fertile ground.

In this serene enclave, Shirin-Gol's innate leadership flourishes. The villagers quickly come to revere her; children seek her affection, women look up to her, and men value her counsel. Her remarkable ability to connect with others and her unwavering spirit mark her as a natural leader. Among her newfound companions is Abina, a woman who, after a perilous childbirth, owes her life to Shirin-Gol's intervention. Grateful and deeply inspired, Abina becomes Shirin-Gol's protégé, absorbing lessons on domestic life and hygiene with a fervor that mirrors her admiration. Most crucially, Abina learns from Shirin-Gol the strength to resist and assert herself. She finds the courage to stand up to her domineering husband, embodying the empowerment that Shirin-Gol imparts.

Shirin-Gol's intellect is as sharp as her compassion is deep. She possesses an answer for every query, even those that leave men scratching their heads. Her wisdom and clarity elevate her to a near-sacred status in Abina's eyes, who views Shirin-Gol as a divine emissary. "Abina spends every minute she can spare with Shirin-Gol, watching her, listening to her every word, memorizing everything, copying her every movement, asking a thousand and one questions." (Shakib 118) Summer brings a festive gathering as the village women convene to dry and preserve fruits and vegetables for the coming winter. This period of communal effort is imbued with camaraderie and fellowship. Shirin-Gol, ever the storyteller, enchants them with tales of war, distant lands, and the grim plight of women across the country. For these Hazara women, whose lives have always been confined within the same borders, Shirin-Gol's stories are revelations. Through her, they learn the art of resistance and the power of saying no. Their acknowledgment that their menfolk believe Shirin-Gol is "making them kharab (rotten)" signifies the profound impact of her lessons on resilience.

However, the specter of war re-emerges, and the idyllic village succumbs to devastation. Shirin-Gol and her family, having foreseen the approaching calamity, narrowly escape the massacre that obliterates their sanctuary. Their journey leads them to another village, where Shirin-Gol encounters Azadine, a woman doctor who embodies the epitome of resilience and feminist strength. Azadine's life story is one of formidable struggle: she has braved the upheavals of war to complete her medical education, traversing Kabul, Pakistan, and Iran to achieve her dream. Her reputation as a skilled and compassionate healer endears her to the villagers, who hold her in high esteem.

The connection between Shirin-Gol and Azadine is immediate and profound. Azadine represents the very essence of resilient feminism, boldly declaring to Shirin-Gol, "We have to stop living our lives according to what other people say." (Shakib 145) She defies societal expectations by rejecting marriage, asserting her independence with a spirited defiance.

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)

Azadine's words resonate deeply with Shirin-Gol, who sees them as a form of resistance. As Azadine explains, "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) Through this dynamic exchange, Shirin-Gol gains not only a mentor but also a kindred spirit. Azadine's unyielding spirit and liberated stance invigorate Shirin-Gol, reinforcing her own resolve to challenge societal norms and continue her quest for personal and communal empowerment.

Shirin-Gol's long-cherished dream materializes as she begins assisting Azadine, immersing herself in the world of medicine. Her compassion for the women in the village, many of whom carry the heavy burdens of domestic abuse, fuels a profound connection. This emerging female solidarity becomes a source of solace and healing. Women approach her, their hearts heavy with despair, often expressing, "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) Through these interactions, Shirin-Gol's nurturing presence transforms their sorrow into a semblance of peace. Her partnership with Azadine blossoms into a vision of hope as they plan to establish a school for girls in the village. They dream of a future where women can aspire to become doctors, midwives, and

teachers, a testament to their shared resolve to uplift their community. “So that in times to come there will be women doctors, midwives and women teachers.” (Shakib 156)

Unbreakable Bonds of Resilience and Female Resistance

However, the arrival of the Taliban brings a chilling shift in their circumstances. The atmosphere becomes suffused with oppressive taboos, and the life they have painstakingly built faces imminent disruption. Shirin-Gol’s eldest daughter falls in love with a young Taleb, a rare exception to the Taliban’s harsh doctrine. Their marriage marks a departure from the village, prompting Shirin-Gol and her family, including Morad, to undertake yet another arduous journey, this time to Iran. As with their previous travels, the journey is fraught with challenges, but Shirin-Gol’s unwavering resolve propels them forward.

Upon arriving in Iran, they initially encounter a warm reception. Shirin-Gol’s integrity and diligence help her secure employment, and for a while, their lives improve. A significant transformation occurs when Morad enrolls in a literacy course, driven by a newfound ambition to “learn to read and write so that someday I might get decent work.” (Shakib 199) This step signifies a profound shift, embodying the positive reinforcement instilled by Shirin-Gol’s resilience. Rosemarie Skaine aptly characterizes this development as “a meaningful signal for the future, a beginning of the politicization of Afghan women.” (Skaine 142) Yet, their relative prosperity is short-lived. The economic strains in Iran lead to a surge in anti-refugee sentiment. As resources become increasingly scarce, the once-welcoming host nation begins to withdraw its support. The Islamic Republic of Iran, along with the United Nations, offers financial aid to refugees willing to return to Afghanistan. Shirin-Gol, Morad, and their children, with the exception of their second-born son Nasser, decide to go back. Nasser, imbued with the resilience and optimism he has inherited from his mother, chooses to remain in Iran. He has absorbed Shirin-Gol’s lessons of fortitude and resistance and is determined to carve his own path.

Back in Afghanistan, Shirin-Gol’s family finds themselves amid the sprawling expanse of blue plastic tents in a refugee camp. Despite the squalor and disarray surrounding them, Shirin-Gol remains the steadfast anchor for her family. Her resilience shines through as she assumes control, guiding Morad and the children through the turmoil. She is their sovereign, a “Proud, honest, beautiful, broken queen Shirin-Gol.” (Shakib 336) Her leadership and unwavering spirit earn her profound respect in the patriarchal Afghan society, underscored by Morad’s observation, “Women are stronger than men.” (Shakib 241)

Even when Morad succumbs to the debilitating effects of drug addiction, leaving her alone with their children, Shirin-Gol’s strength endures. She finds her father and brother, long separated by the ravages of war. Despite the visible scars borne by her family, Shirin-Gol remains unyielding in her resolve to endure and overcome the trials imposed upon her. Her determination leads her to visit her elder daughter, who is now married to a Taleb. Though she secretly yearns to reconnect with Azadine, the Taliban’s ban on female doctors has driven Azadine away. Shirin-Gol’s journey, marked by resilience and a relentless pursuit of hope, continues even amidst the harsh realities of a war-torn land. 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. A biologist. Teachers. An engineer. Nurses. Women who can read. Women 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)

In the tapestry of Shirin-Gol's life, the threads of hope, resilience, and female bonding are woven with a profound warmth and tenderness. Siba Shakib's novel is a vivid portrayal of the indomitable spirit of women who, despite the crushing weight of adversity, forge powerful connections with one another. This is epitomized by characters like Azadine, the courageous doctor, and Fawzi, Shirin-Gol's first mentor in Kabul. Malalai, the paragon of bravery, Bahara, the nurturing soul who revives Shirin-Gol after her harrowing trauma, the 'girl-woman prostitute' at the border, Aisha, who defies death with unyielding resolve, and the two women refugees from Iran, abandoned yet resilient, all reflect facets of a collective strength that binds them together.

Each character, whether nameless like Aisha or faceless like the refugees, exemplifies the power of female solidarity. The novel reveals that the brief respite a woman finds often emerges from her association with other women. Shirin-Gol's journey illustrates countless moments where women establish silent, yet resilient affiliations to withstand their trials. This unspoken resistance, as Shirin-Gol terms it, becomes the foundation upon which their spirits are fortified. Amidst the Taliban's oppressive regime, Shirin-Gol's indomitable spirit shines brightly. Morad's absence no longer weighs upon her; she has embraced her role as the resilient one, a realization that propels her forward. Inspired by Azadine's wisdom and the solidarity she has experienced, Shirin-Gol remains a beacon of hope and compassion. In Kabul, Shirin-Gol's compassion is magnified in her encounter with a young boy whose limbs have been shattered by a landmine. As she kneels beside him, offering bread and solace, her act of kindness sparks a wave of empathy among the women around her. Under their burqas, their whispers, caresses, and silent support form a cocoon of shared strength. One burqa whispers of hunger and the need for work, while another soothes her with a reassuring touch, urging her not to succumb to the despair that seeks to overpower them. This embrace is not merely physical but emotional, enveloping Shirin-Gol in a profound sense of communal support and resilience.

Beneath the shroud of "the small mountain of cheap, blue polyester" (Zoya 1), the women remain nameless and faceless, their identities concealed. Yet, beneath this veil lie hearts brimming with resilience, bound together in a shared journey of joy and suffering. They are never alone; their collective strength is palpable (Shakib 286). This profound sense of sisterhood becomes Shirin-Gol's wellspring of fortitude. When Morad returns, she neither questions nor reproaches him. Her emotions are neutral; neither elation nor dismay marks his arrival.

Triumphant Journey of Resilience and Sisterhood

Shirin-Gol has adapted to the stringent Taliban prohibitions against women working, skillfully navigating their restrictions to provide for herself and her four children. With Morad back, albeit in his opium-induced stupor, she resolves to ensure he is cared for, even if it means paying for his opium—though she does not yet know how she will manage. Despite the uncertainties, Shirin-Gol has always found a way (Shakib 288). Empowered by her network of sisterhood, Shirin-Gol secures employment as a cleaning woman for a foreigner associated with an American aid organization. Defying the Taliban's edict barring women from working outside their homes, especially in the presence of foreigners, she bravely takes the risk. Her actions are a testament to the courage and liberation she has drawn from her interactions with Azadine and her circle of resilient women. This bold act illustrates how female solidarity can amplify the potential for transformative and egalitarian change in the face of patriarchal oppression.

Shirin-Gol is struck by the liberating freedom her employer enjoys—women who are audaciously unburdened by societal constraints, freely interacting with men and unashamedly revealing their skin. It is a world both foreign and exhilarating to her. She envisions sharing this newfound perspective

with her friends, telling them of her encounters with women who possess everything needed for happiness and contentment. For Shirin-Gol, the sight of women living unrestrained lives fosters a renewed hope. As long as there are places where women are not starving and are free, Shirin-Gol and her friends will hold onto hope (Shakib 292).

When the Taliban unearth their covert activities, Shirin-Gol, Azadine, and their allies face dire consequences. Shirin-Gol is barred from working for the American woman, prohibited from selling carpets in the bazaar, and forbidden from teaching at the secret school. Azadine is imprisoned for her clandestine medical practices, and many of these pioneering women share a similar fate. The once-thriving 'web of sisterhood' is violently torn asunder. Confronted with the dire necessity of feeding their children, the Taliban's only allowance is for them to beg. Initially, Shirin-Gol endures this indignity with a measure of resilience, grateful that she is spared the degradation of selling her body (Shakib 294). Yet, the crushing weight of their plight soon overwhelms her, leading her to a desperate attempt at self-destruction. "The journey to empowerment is not linear but fraught with backward and forward leaps, some invigorating, others painfully disheartening" (Allen 150). However, Shirin-Gol's spirit, though battered, does not remain dormant. She fights through her despair and undertakes another arduous journey with her family to her paternal home in the mountains.

As with all their previous odysseys, this one is fraught with strain and struggle, but they ultimately reach their sanctuary. Her brother, who is actively resisting the Taliban, offers them refuge. Resurgent in her old role as a leader, Shirin-Gol once again takes charge, managing their affairs with renewed vigor. Her elder daughter, now carrying her third child, joins them. When the time comes, Shirin-Gol steps into the role of expert midwife, completing a full circle from her early days of helping Abina to now assisting her own daughter.

Conclusion

The name Shirin-Gol, meaning "Sweet Flower" in Afghanistan, reflects her enduring essence. Throughout her tumultuous journey, she has dispersed a sweet fragrance of resilience and strength. Despite being subjected to the harsh forces of war, oppression, poverty, and cultural constraints, she remains true to her name. Shirin-Gol, though battered and tested, has resisted and bloomed with a sweet fragrance, symbolizing her unyielding spirit. As the novelist aptly describes, "Shirin-Gol is like a tree. A powerful, slender poplar that withstands the fiercest storms, seeing everything, understanding everything, and passing on its wisdom" (Shakib 7).

Women have long been relegated to the status of helpless beings, perpetually poised for emotional upheavals. Through the annals of history, they have been dismissed as inherently incapable, their potential deemed to dissipate in the roles of wives and mothers. In many corners of the world, women are regarded as existing solely to fulfill a man's desires and to bear offspring. Echoing the tenets of Social Darwinism, which posits that the weak recede while the strong ascend, Afghan society—deeply entrenched in patriarchy—views women as mere vessels for producing male heirs. Their purpose is confined to the domestic sphere, their existence reduced to objects of male gratification rather than individuals with intrinsic value. This devaluation is starkly evident in their treatment: beaten, raped, and violated, women are

In the novel, the oppressive nature of Afghan patriarchy is manifest in the disdainful remarks of a Mullah in a refugee camp. He reprimands Shirin-Gol for her role as the head of her family, commanding her younger brother to assume responsibility. "Make sure that the sia-sar in your family do not raise their voice in public; it's unseemly" (Shakib 72), he dictates, revealing the deep-rooted disdain for any female assertion of power. Shirin-Gol's plight extends beyond mere societal disapproval; she endures profound trauma, including forced prostitution and rape, becoming a victim of the Taliban's brutal regime. The novel vividly portray how the unrelenting injustice meted out to women fortifies male dominance, affirming a patriarchal culture that seeks to suppress and diminish the feminine spirit.

In the novel, women navigate through unimaginable trials with remarkable resilience, forging bonds of solidarity that become their lifeline. Such connections between the traumatized are not merely survival mechanisms but symbols of shared suffering and collective strength. As Audre Lorde

poignantly notes, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 112). Women across cultures unite in their struggle against patriarchy, finding solace and empowerment in their unity. These bonds of female solidarity foster mutual understanding, support, and harmony, enabling women to rise above oppression and defy male dominance. They transform personal pain into a powerful collective resistance, nurturing hope amidst adversity. This narrative underscores the transformative power of collective rights in challenging the entrenched hegemony and hierarchical nature of the caste-gender matrix within patriarchal honor (Harding 379).

In *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*, Shirin-Gol becomes a beacon of strength and inspiration for Abina, whose previously reclusive nature blossoms into a fiery resilience. This transformation is emblematic of the broader phenomenon within the novel, where women forge subtle, yet potent bonds to confront and defy the relentless adversities imposed by their patriarchal society. Shirin-Gol dubs this courageous solidarity as "resistance" (Shakib 148). Despite their harrowing trials and ongoing tribulations, these women unite with unwavering optimism, driven by a shared belief in a brighter future. Even as the Taliban enforces brutal restrictions to stifle female gatherings, the indomitable spirit of these women persists. They place their trust in the strength and integrity of their sisterhood, leaving no stone unturned to maintain their unity. A clandestine meeting at Azadine's house underscores this resolve: "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). Their collective resistance carves out pockets of freedom amidst oppression, affirming the transformative power of female solidarity in the face of overwhelming odds. 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."(January 1999)

The bonds among the women Shakib's novel unveil a profound blueprint for feminist solidarity. Through their interconnectedness, these women illuminate shared anguish, collective victimization, and unity. They not only offer each other emotional sustenance but also navigate the complexities and aspirations of their feminine identities together, weaving a tapestry of mutual support and resilience amidst their trials.

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