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Bitter Roots, Tender Shoots.

The Uncertain Fate of Afghanistan's Women

by

Sally Armstrong

Il testo che segue è la trascrizione del capitolo 11 dal titolo *Survival* del volume di Sally Armstrong *Bitter Roots, Tender Shoots. The Uncertain Fate of Afghanistan's Women*, Viking Canada, Toronto, 2008, pp. 276. Sally Armstrong è giornalista, attivista nell'ambito dei diritti umani, autrice di reportages da varie zone di conflitto: dalla Bosnia, dal Ruanda, dalla Somalia e dall'Afghanistan; ha inoltre fatto parte della Commissione internazionale femminile presso le Nazioni Unite. Le sue pubblicazioni sono state premiate in numerose occasioni. Tra esse ricordiamo: *Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan* (2002) e *The Nine Lives of Charlotte Taylor* (2006).

Basato su un gran numero di interviste, *Bitter Roots, Tender Shoots* ricostruisce la vita delle donne afgane prima e dopo il regime talebano. Le storie narrate nel volume parlano di discriminazione, povertà e sofferenza, ma anche dell'impegno delle donne per promuovere il cambiamento, nelle leggi e nelle istituzioni.

Ringraziamo l'autrice per averci autorizzato alla pubblicazione del capitolo e per averci inviato la *Postfazione* che abbiamo tradotto in italiano e inserito alla fine del capitolo.

Survival

> If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us struggle together (Attributed to Lila Watson, Australian Aboriginal activist).

Fatima Gailani has always been a "somebody" in Afghanistan. She belongs to the chattering class – the elites, the respected scholars, the families whose names suggest gentility. They survive despite the thugs who grab power, the boorish warlords, and the drug barons. Most of them leave during the insurrections, but invariably they come back, drawn to the Old World ways of their homeland, taking a visceral flyer on the future.

Fatima holds a master's degree in Islamic jurisprudence and is the daughter of Pir Sayyid Ahmad Gailani, the spiritual leader of the Sunni Muslims. I met her in London, England, where she and her daughter were in exile in 1997. She said at that time: "A woman with a covered head is not more honourable than a woman

 ISSN 1824 - 4483

without a covered head". Divorced from her husband, she moved in powerful circles and travelled with her father to Rome, the same year I met her, to meet with Afghanistan's King Zahir Shah, to try to find a solution to the Taliban debacle. Then she packed up and left for Providence, Rhode Island, married an Afghan who was a professor at Providence College, and lived a life of tranquility: smart cafés, theatre, women's clubs, neighbourhood walks with friends. But like so many affluent Afghans who made a life in another place – the United States, Canada, the Scandinavian countries, Australia – she came back soon after the Taliban were ousted. Now she is president of the Afghanistan Red Crescent Society (the Muslim equivalent of the Red Cross). Her husband, Anwar ul-Haq Ahady, is the minister of finance. She travels into the darkest corners of the country, including Taliban-occupied territory, because the Red Crescent is neutral and is mandated to respond to the needs of all the people. "The Taliban is the enemy of the country, but their children aren't", she says. She wears a scarf to cover her head, even while sitting behind her expansive desk in the Red Crescent office in Kabul. Her life has been immeasurably altered

She was part of the team that wrote the constitution in 2004 and met with the Taliban, as well as the soldiers of strongman Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a warlord who has been blacklisted by the United States as a "specially designated global terrorist". Of those conversations, she says:

> We sat in the mosques and under the trees in remote districts like Wardak. We had heated discussions but we were making progress. Then Iraq became the centre of attention and everything started to change. It was right after the constitution was written that the kidnappings and suicide bombs started.

It is hard to imagine the stylish, cosmopolitan Gailani on a dirt track in rural Afghanistan, having discussions with illiterate men about reforming a country, its laws, its treatment of women, its need to engage as a civil society. Her father's name provides some protection, her husband's job delivers a level of clout, but Gailani is still taking a chance. She would be a prize for any kidnappers. And the no-guns policy of the Red Crescent means she goes to work unarmed, while her cabinet minister husband has bodyguards 24/7. But she is committed to the country. "If you have the soul, you can build the body", she insists.

She treads a fine line between a life of privilege and a job that requires her to be 100 percent neutral. "When men decide to fight, it's not a choice for the women and children", she says. She is acutely aware of the danger she faces: "I lie to myself and say I have a choice, I can live elsewhere. But millions of women in this country don't have the choices I have. If we don't fix it, it will be hell again".

She was twenty-four years old when the Russians invaded and thought at the time, "Too bad, but I'm leaving. I'll send money back to help, but I'm not staying here". Like many Afghans with the means to leave, she moved to London. She kept in close touch, working with her father to negotiate a settlement from a distance. Now she is in the thick of the elusive search for peace and says, "It's too late to change course. We're all in the same boat together, rowing strongly - we have to find the shore".

A prominent women's rights activist, she calls for a brand of feminism that includes culture and religion, claiming a secular version of equality won't work here.

And she is not shy about sharing her opinions. When men in the villages compliment her, as they do often, she replies, "If you want your daughter to be like me, then you have to give her the same opportunities my father gave me".

She had called a meeting for her staff at the Serena Hotel on January 14, the day the terrorists attacked. But luck was on her side: "I moved the meeting to the Intercontinental Hotel the day before because I was too cheap to pay the fee the Serena wanted". Like so many others in Afghanistan today, she can record those near-misses like appointments in her diary. She says she tries not to think about the deteriorating security. "If I got obsessed about it, I'd be too afraid to work here". Instead, she turns to the same source Afghans have used for a thousand years: "I rely on God to have mercy on me and not put me in the wrong place at the wrong time".

It is always about survival. For those without privilege, the survival stakes are higher. From finding a job to avoiding a forced marriage, the women of Afghanistan have to deal with the fractured past and the uncertain future by practicing survival skills that allow them to scrounge a meal or score a cabinet post. Beating the odds in Afghanistan overrules everything else: it swallows passion, fidelity, even honesty. As security diminishes, the means to an end are invariably unprincipled: whispering about an un-Islamic act, spreading gossip about a faithless infidel, condoning a plot to unseat an enemy or even a friend, or succumbing to corruption all just become methods of survival. The gentle arts of empathy and compassion are traded for a better deal as a second wife or a chance to go to school Tolerance vanishes when your daughter is bartered for blood money. Compromise doesn't work when your access to safety is cut off. The emotional landscape of Afghanistan is tough; love can seem frivolous People often ask about the men – the husbands and brothers whose wives and sisters live with gender apartheid. The men speak in *appeasement-ese* – a language that condones but does not endorse the unequal treatment of women. They shrug with complaisance. "It's the culture", they say. Or they shoot the messenger, saying: "This is our way and nobody else's business", as though the problem is Western interference rather than an abrogation of human rights. Even the rare men who argue for women's rights speak of their own daughters and wives more as chattels than as equals.

A select few avoid being pawns in the struggle. Adeena Niazi, who grew up in Kabul, studied in India, and now lives in Canada, says there was no violence in her family but admits it was the exception. Others such as Gailani – well educated, financially secure, belonging to a powerful family that believes in the emancipation of women – have also been spared. Sima Samar is also a "somebody" who doesn't take instruction from anyone, although her life story contains scattered examples of the same terrible experiences and is governed by the same punishing rules that most Afghan women must endure.

Afghanistan today is in many ways a contradiction in terms. It is a country that embraces religious piety but treats its citizens with brutality. It is a place with mud-brick houses on the same street as the ostentatious mansions known as "wedding-cake houses", some of them pink, which people call *narcotecture*, built with the drug barons' illicit gains. Shop windows here display Hollywood-style mannequins modeled on white women with short curly blonde hair that wear floor-length strapless gowns with huge ballroom skirts while the sidewalks are filled with women

in burkas or wearing hijab. No one seems to notice the contradiction, or asks who the buyers are for these gowns. The window displays have not changed in six years.

Pop music blares from kiosks on the street while mullahs wail from the loudspeakers at the mosque across the road. You can't hear one over the other. Television programs considered un-Islamic are banned, but internet cafés are burgeoning in popularity on the streets of Kabul. The wildly popular Indian soap operas that were the evening entertainment in almost every Afghan house with a television have recently been taken off the air. So the viewers watch their favourite dramas on their computers at home, or burn DVDs on their laptops at work to watch the shows after hours. Asked about the move to ban the soaps, President Karzai told a media briefing that his government was committed to media freedom. But, he said, "We want our television broadcasting to be in line with our culture, based on our society's moral standards".

Liquor is forbidden, yet restaurants serve wine. At private parties with highly placed government officials, the booze flows right along with the contradictions. There is an expression here that, translated, goes like this: "I cannot talk because my mouth is full of water". It means, "I cannot tell the truth because it may hurt someone" or "I am not allowed to comment because of policy constraints".

Laws are written with verbal gymnastics, the language designed to dance around religious jurisprudence, in an attempt to include a modicum of human rights that pays lip service to the covenants and conventions Afghanistan signed with the rest of the world at the United Nations. There is no word for state in the Quran, but the government claims calling Afghanistan an Islamic state is in keeping with the Prophet's wishes. Non-governmental organizations are in business to bring aid to the people but secretly confess they have to pay a bribe to the government to get the health and education projects to their intended recipients.

Integrity Watch did a survey in 2007 that highlighted the extent of the corruption in the country: 40 percent of respondents said they had to pay a bribe to get things done with the government; 41 percent said the justice system was the most corrupt institution in the country; 60 percent said the Karzai government is more corrupt than that of the Taliban, the mujahedeen, and the communist regimes; 90 percent said that connections govern the recruitment of civil servants; and 81 percent believe that sharia law would be an effective deterrent to corruption.

But Afghanistan has charms and cultural norms that are as endearing as they are perplexing. A morning greeting, for example, requires a lengthy dissertation rather than a simple Hi. An oft-used formula goes, *Salaam alaikom, subh bakhair, chetor hasti, khob hastam, khob hasti*, which means, "May God be with you, good morning, how are you? Are you well? Is your family well"? The pots of tea and half-dozen plates of nuts and sweets that are prepared and served at every single meeting, whether it is at an office or someone's home, are rarely touched. They are simply the Afghan way of saying welcome. Even business cards include quaint additional data with the address, such as "backstreet of the National Assembly", "behind the Ministry of Commerce", or "just off Qali Musa Market, close to the British Cemetery". The loyalty and protectiveness Afghans show to a stranger are unmatched in most places around the world.

When spring comes to Afghanistan and signals the rebirth season, you can feel the collective sigh of relief, even though everyone knows the warm weather brings the terrorists out and ups the ante in the insurgency.

Spring was a particular deliverance in 2008 because the winter before it had been so harsh. Nearly one thousand people and 316,000 livestock died of exposure in villages pummeled by snow. Now the swallows and kites fill the sky again, and roses bloom in every garden. But as predictable as the relief that came with the welcome sunshine were the menacing edicts from a government that is increasingly under pressure from fundamentalists. The upcoming election in 2009 means the fundamentalists are tightening the strings on reform. The election campaign is turning into a contest between extremists, who threaten the government with disruption if they dare to alter the suffocating status of women and the reformers who need women's votes to stay in power. The president has to balance his promise to take Afghans into the twenty-first century against the demands made by a collection of power brokers whose bank accounts are fattened by the status quo. The most recent attempt to bring Karzai to heel on reform came by way of the Commission for Anti-social Behaviour and Counter-narcotics (shades of the vice-and-virtue squad), which drafted a law to "ban offensive traditions and Western culture". The rules they demand include:

- Women must not wear makeup in the workplace.
- Men must cut their hair short to avoid looking like a girl.
- Women must not speak to men in public unless they are related.
- Men must stop wearing bracelets, designer jeans, necklaces, earrings, and T-shirts.
- Pigeon flying, animal fighting, and playing with birds on rooftops will be against the law.
- There will be a ban on loud music and loudspeakers at weddings and in restaurants.
- Betting at snooker clubs will be illegal.
- Shops selling revealing clothing will be closed.
- Programs that are un-Islamic and detrimental to the young on television and radio will be forbidden.
- Anyone who sells, keeps, or imports DVDs or photos of naked or semi-naked women will be punished.
- Swearing at women and children in public will be against the law.
- Women and girls must start wearing the hijab in the Islamic way so that all the hair is covered by a shawl.

If the law passes parliament, anyone caught by the police disobeying the new rules will be fined – for instance, 1,000 afghanis (about $10) for pigeon flying, and 5,000 afghanis (about $50) for broadcasting un-Islamic programs.

The proposed law would be laughable if it wasn't for the gossip in Kabul that the government is trying to appease the Taliban in negotiations leading up to the election.

Afghanistan is at a turning point, not just for Afghans, but also for the international community that supports them. Suddenly, everyone from Kandahar to Canada is an armchair expert, poised over the petri dish that is Afghanistan. The poppy

trade, for example, is the subject of much debate. Some argue the poppies should be mowed down and the fields used for saffron crops, freeing the farmers from their bondage to merciless drug barons. The Senlis Council, on the other hand, wants to select and maintain a single poppy operation, harvest the crop, make morphine tablets in local factories, and provide jobs as well as security. United Nations officials claim the plan is folly, that it would not work because the security needed for such an operation is not there. They also insist that there is no shortage of the painkilling morphine. Norine MacDonald of the Senlis Council says, "Let us do a pilot project. Let's see who's right."

There's no shortage of views on the insurgency either. Should we send more troops or bring the troops home? Both propositions have advocates. Or the government: Some argue the corruption is beyond repair, while others believe necessary changes are being made. As for the people who have to live with the decisions, there is a common denominator for survivors in war zones: When you have been in the coma of conflict for twenty-five years, you want your rescuers to ask if you have enough to eat and drink, but instead they invariably ask whose side you are on. It is hard to think about democracy when you are hungry.

It is also difficult to move forward on women's rights when the issue is muddied by those who prefer to see it in cultural or religious terms. There are a lot of highly respected diplomats and analysts, both inside Afghanistan and in the international community, who roll their eyes at the treatment of women and girls, but dismiss it as none of their business. One woman who works for CIDA was asked in a CBC radio interview about the violence against women and replied, "I know it exists but can't verify it by numbers, as no one has done the studies to prove it". There have been dozens of reports prepared by the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation, and by dozens of NGOs, the most recent by Global Rights, a Washington-based human rights association, that surveyed fifty-seven hundred households in sixteen of the country's thirty-four provinces and found that 87 percent of the respondents reported abuse. Womankind Worldwide, a British NGO, also reported that seven years after the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan is still one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman. Every report comes to the same conclusion: Violence against women in Afghanistan is endemic, entrenched, and very much part of the reason this country stumbles in its attempts to move forward. Yet time and again, the lives of those women are blighted by the religious and cultural interpretations of men. It is not about respecting culture and religion. It is about having the moral courage to take on the contradictions and respect international law. How can the world look the other way when women are burned alive for speaking out, when little girls are harnessed to farm equipment and used as plough horses, when all women and girls are treated as subhuman because of their gender? It is one thing for illiterate men to cling to old customs that harm women, but it is unconscionable for the international community to excuse the brutality by buying into a theory of cultural relativism.

The last of the day's sunshine is casting a soft glow when Sima Samar's bodyguards bring her home. She reaches for her clippers and goes to the rose garden, a beautiful sanctuary that puts a difficult day in perspective. As she snips a wilting

rose – "it'll make the new one grow" – she contemplates the one-step-forward, two-steps-backward progress for women in Afghanistan and says, "We started with no systems at all. We have accomplished a lot". She snips another rose, admires the new ones, and casually says there has been another night letter threatening to kill her and all the staff at the human rights commission. She fingers a pale green rose, comments on its originality, and turns the soil in the bed to encourage its growth. It is twilight by the time she has finished. The birds in this peaceful garden are twittering their last songs of the day. On the way into the house, she pauses and says, "It'll take more time. But I am still hopeful."

To a world still traumatized by 9/11, Afghanistan has become a story about terrorists, drug barons, and the Taliban insurgency. To me, it remains a chronicle about blameless women and girls who continue to pay an awful price for the opportunism of angry men. But I, too, am hopeful. The women activists, journalists, and change-makers are slowly breaking down the taboo around talking about the status of women and girls in Afghanistan. The uncertain fate of their sisters is in their hands.

Afterword/Postfazione

Sono tornata in Afghanistan nell'autunno del 2012. È ancora un Paese travagliato e in conflitto; ci sono andata perché ispirata dalla speranza che alla fine il popolo afgano sia in grado di lottare per uscire dal buio in cui è immerso da oltre 15 anni.

Un'organizzazione abbastanza recente, *Young Women for Change*, potrebbe essere protagonista dell'emancipazione di questo Paese, per portarlo da un passato arcaico al XXI secolo. Una delle co-fondatrici, Noorjahan Akbar, mi ha detto: "Il 65% della popolazione afgana ha meno di 30 anni. Noi non abbiamo mai iniziato una guerra. Non ne abbiamo mai combattuta una. Odiamo le vecchie usanze che nuocciono alle persone. Vogliamo cambiare e abbiamo gli strumenti per cambiare: Facebook, Twitter, email e blog".

Probabilmente questo è il messaggio più incoraggiante che io abbia mai sentito in Afghanistan. Quando ho chiesto ad Anita Haidary, l'altra cofondatrice, che tipo di risposta stavano avendo dai fondamentalisti, lei ha risposto: "Ci accusano di tentare di occidentalizzare l'Afghanistan. Ma ho chiesto loro se consentire alle ragazze di andare a scuola è occidentale, i diritti umani sono occidentali e trattare le persone in modo decente è occidentale, cos'è orientale? Che cos'è islamico?"

Il mondo è stanco dell'Afghanistan. Le truppe straniere stanno lasciando il Paese. Alcuni pensano che i Talebani ritorneranno e che le donne saranno rigettate di nuovo in un'epoca buia. Non è vero. I Talebani non possono entrare in punta di piedi militarmente, per questa ragione compiono attentati suicidi non-islamici e provocano vili esplosioni.

Credo siano una forza da non sottovalutare. Ma ci sono altre fazioni, come per esempio i signori della guerra e il governo corrotto, che si aggrappano allo status quo. Ma oggi i giovani, come molte persone in Afghanistan, sanno che la loro religione è stata fuorviata da politici opportunisti e che gli uomini anziani stanno bloccando il processo di avanzamento con le loro vecchie idee. È attiva una nuova ge-

nerazione e c'è nuova speranza. È come se la vecchia maschera sia stata tolta. Alle *Young Women for Change* si sono affiancati i giovani uomini che vogliono il cambiamento. Questo mi fa credere che si possa scrivere un capitolo nuovo sull'Afghanistan.

Il mio nuovo libro, *Ascent of Women – Our Turn, Our Way – A Remarkable Story of World-Wide Change*, uscirà nel marzo 2013.