

Parvana's Journey: A Critical Exploration of War, Displacement, and Resilience

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ABSTRACT

Deborah Ellis's novel, *Parvana's Journey* delves into the complex intersections of war, displacement, and resilience. This study analyses the effects of war on individuals, families and communities, while also highlighting the remarkable resilience that emerges in the face of adversity. She uses the character of a young girl, Parvana, who disguises herself as a boy to escape the cruelty of society. The society denies women freedom and education in the name of culture which is enforced by patriarchal norms. Through her novels, Ellis provides a platform for marginalized communities and gives a voice to the voiceless. Ellis has spent a significant amount of time in Pakistan, particularly in Afghan refugee camps, speaking with women and documenting their life experiences, which is clearly reflected in her works. This study examines the experience of war, trauma and resilience of Afghan women and children during the time of conflict and displacement. The narrative renounces flashbacks, opting instead to integrate past

information through Parvana's reflective thoughts and descriptive explanations, thereby providing context and background without disrupting the present-day narrative flow. Ellis does not hesitate to portray her characters as being selfish and cruel; she seeks to depict the harsh realities of the world that leaves lasting impacts on readers.

Keywords: War, Displacement, Trauma, Afghan women, Refugee camps, Conflict.

Parvana's Journey is the second book of *The Breadwinner* trilogy series and was a seminal work by Deborah Ellis, a Canadian author, who travelled across war-prone refugee camp to record information regarding their suffering, hopelessness and trauma. Ellis witnessed that war had severe impact on women and children because they lost their livelihoods. The effects of war led to the self-rule of patriarchy; they used this situation by keeping people under their control. They often denied them freedom of education and thoughts. The oppressors knew that education was the only means of gaining freedom. Ellis portrays the cruelty of war and the trauma undergone by people in her works. *Parvana's Journey* is set in Afghanistan, which is under the control of the Taliban. Ellis provides a detailed picture of the trauma faced by women, children and civilians during the distress of war. In the opening of the novel, Ellis discusses the forced displacement of Parvana's family to refugee camps and how they wandered in search of basic needs such as medicines and food. Due to these circumstances, Parvana's father dies from lack of medicine and internal wounds, which are left untreated during imprisonment for being an educated person in the village. Parvana doesn't have time to mourn her father's death. Her inner storm is reflected through the lines, "We all have dead to mourn, but we do not have to do it in the dirt. Come on, boy, get to your feet. Be the strong son of your father would be proud of" (10). This highlights the pathetic situation of individuals who lose their loved ones. Santi Prastiyowati and others in their article, "The Study of Gender Inequality Found in Deborah Ellis's Novel 'The Breadwinner'", discuss the idea "Gender inequality causes people to behave

differently toward men and women. This only creates unbalance control, discomfort, gaps, and only give fortune to one dominant gender” (5). Parvana disguises herself as a boy to survive and to provide livelihood for her family. Women are not allowed to move without a male companion. They must cover themselves with burqa.

Parvana builds her father’s tomb using stones near the graveyard and feels guilty for taking stones from other graves because the place is filled with dead remains. She remembers the time when she used to collect human bones for their survival. The uncertainty of life during war is illuminated in the lines, “Sometimes we are bombed by the Taliban. Sometimes we are bombed by the other side. We used to be farmers. Now we are targets” (Ellis 11). The Afghan people don’t know when they will be attacked. They are unable to lead a normal life. They don’t have a proper environment to live in or raise their children in peaceful surroundings. They are often forced to confront the traumatic loss of loved ones, livelihoods, and employment, which can have a profound impact on their emotional and financial wellbeing. They rebuild their houses after the destruction caused by bombing and attacks. The living conditions of the people are poor. They consume whatever they have and cannot afford to waste food, even if it is spoiled. Poverty forces them to sell their younger sons to Taliban. This survival instinct of the Afghan family is recounted as, “I heard the old men talking. They are going to turn you over to the Taliban. Some soldiers are coming by here any day, and the men think the Taliban will pay them money for you” (Ellis 20). During war, strangers are often unwelcome because they do not have enough food to share. Some people genuinely want to help the needy, but the circumstances don’t let them do so.

Parvana is on her journey to find her missing family members. She becomes the breadwinner of her family after her father’s imprisonment. Her family moves to a different city for her sister’s marriage but are stranded due to war. She misses her family every moment, and as a result she treats every stranger as if they are her own family. She recognizes their characteristics in the people she meets. Throughout her

journey, she longs for care and companionship amid disaster. “It was comforting to have a mother taking care of her again, too, cooking for her and watching out for her again, even though it wasn’t her own mother” (Ellis 18). Parvana enjoyed being looked after. Yet in the war zone, there is little room for such care. People are often too focused on their own survival to look after one another, leaving them to cope with loneliness, trauma, and distress on their own. War can cause deep and complicated pain in everyone involved such as soldiers, citizens and refugees. It affects their feelings, thoughts and bodies. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), illustrates “trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). She highlights how trauma takes control over a person rather than the person mastering trauma. This reflects how survivors may feel haunted by their past, as if they are living inside a story they cannot change or escape. Parvana witnesses many instances where adult women are forced to fend for themselves. From a child’s perspective, Deborah Ellis portrays a world where motherly love is scarce for those who have lost their families. Parvana sees her own mother lying in the house without eating anything after her father is imprisoned. She also encounters a lady in the hill who weeps without responding to her questions. Finally, she sees Leila’s Grandmother, bedridden for months. Through these incidences, Ellis describes how the trauma takes over human mind.

Women in war zone have a tough time because they deal with grave danger. Sometimes they act strong and are brave like Parvana. Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (2011), proposes the idea that “Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man and she is nothing other than what man decides” (26). Women have historically been denied independent self- definition and are instead shaped by societal expectations imposed by men. Educating women is essential for maintaining equality. The Taliban are aware of this concept, which is why they deny education to women. They want women to remain voiceless, confined to household duties and hide behind their burqas. Severe punishments are given to those who refuse to wear them. The article written by Erni Suparti, “Redefining

Children and Women as Heroes in the Children Books about War” points out “I must say that Ellis displays social responsibilities through the lens of humanity in order to avoid cultural biases” (16). As it elucidates, Ellis cleverly focuses on the stereotypes through her characters. Parvana’s father strongly believes that educating girls is the key to ending the suffering they face in society. Parvana finds solace in studying. Her father is passionate about education and teaches her extensively, especially since the ongoing war prevents students from attending school. Despite the Taliban banning girls from receiving an education, Parvana’s father strongly opposes this restriction and ensures she learns as much as possible. During their displacement to a refugee camp, her father makes her repeat multiplication tables and alphabets while walking, using learning as a distraction from their exhausting journey. Parvana carries her father’s book, symbolizing her determination to continue her education despite the hardships. She also teaches Leila and Asif some alphabets at their request, sharing her knowledge with those around her. Ellis illustrates that children possess the resilience to overcome even the most difficult circumstances. The hope in children’s mind can be seen through the letters written by Parvana to her friend Shauzia. She believes that Shauzia is leading a peaceful life in France, and she too longs for a life without fear of bombings and war.

Displacement to a refugee camp paves way for new relationships in the face of adversity. Parvana adopts a baby and names him Kaseem, after her deceased brother. Parvana takes great care of the baby, whose mother had died during a bombing. Parvana draws experience in caring for younger siblings. She then meets Asif, a boy who has lost his leg during an attack. She looks after both, despite the immense challenges. At times, she feels frustrated and even considers abandoning the baby, but she never capitulates to such cruelty. Ellis does not hesitate to portray the harsh realities of war, including the moments of self-doubt and struggle that people experience. She aims to depict these incidents with honesty and authenticity. Later, Parvana meets Leila, who lives with her grandmother. Leila offers Parvana shelter and food, and together they form a family-like bond. They rely on one another during difficult times,

finding comfort in their companionship. To pass the time, they sing and dance, even using songs to remain patient and hopeful during bombings. The idea is that every child deserves love, security, and a happy childhood, rather than pain and fear. It has been suggested by Dave Pelzer in *A Child called "It" and the Lost boy* where he opines, "Childhood should be carefree, playing in the sun; not living a nightmare in the darkness of the soul" (91). The quote underscores the idea that every child deserves love, security, and a happy childhood, rather than pain and fear. During the journey Parvana asks for a job to feed Kaseem and Asif but the adults take advantage of the situation and pay only a bowl of rice for three, which is not even in edible condition. Adults exploit the children by forcing them into extra work, which ultimately leads them to steal for survival.

People adapt to survive in a harsh environment. They no longer feel empathy for others. Leila constantly prays for mines to explode so she can gather some food for survival. She bravely claims, "Land mines won't hurt me" (Ellis 105). She even raises pigeons and kills them for food. Leila uses everything she finds from bombing without feeling guilty of using the belongings of the dead. Ellis powerfully illustrates the brutal nature of society, showing how people prioritize their own survival, even at expense of morality, "Someone please buy my baby so I can feed my family', he pleaded. 'My other children are starving. Someone please buy my baby!'" (183). This points out how a war can change the nature of people. Even parents are willing to sell their own children to ensure their family's survival. The cruelty of such world is unbearable. Parents, like all humans, are driven by desperation rather than compassion in times of crisis. People experience survival guilt after being discharged from refugee camps. They have lost their families and belongings, making it difficult to adapt to a normal life. They struggle to live a life without their loved ones. The death of children in war is not just a statistic report, but a deep wound in humanity, "How many dead Afghan children does the world need? Why is the world so hungry for the lives of our children?" (Ellis

188). Bombings, shootings, and other forms of terrorism often result in the deaths of innocent children. The cruelty of such war infects the minds of the current and upcoming generations.

In conclusion, Ellis brings attention to Canadian children's literature within academic circles and among young readers, helping them to understand and empathize with the struggles of impoverished and homeless individuals worldwide. Her work has inspired both children and adults to connect with the experience of those affected by war, disease, land mines, and poverty. She has also played a significant role in raising awareness and funds to support the most vulnerable. This article stands as a testimony of resilience and dignity of the Afghan people. It powerfully emphasizes the ongoing need for peace, justice, and human rights in Afghanistan and around the world.

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