

The Dressmaker of Khair Khan: Five Sisters, One Remarkable Family, and the Woman who Risked Everything to Keep Them Safe

by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon

Published by Harper Perennial, 2012, 304 pages

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The Dressmaker of Khair Khana: Five Sisters, One Remarkable Family, and the Woman who Risked Everything to Keep Them Safe, written by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, is the true story of women entrepreneurs in Khair Khana, a suburb of Kabul, Afghanistan. The story takes place in the years 1996-2001, when Kabul was under the extreme Islamist rule of the Taliban. The unlikely heroine of this story is Kamila Sidiqi, a woman who “believed with all her heart that by starting her own business and helping other women to do the same, she could save her long-troubled country” (p. xxvi).

The author, Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, began her career as a journalist, working for ABC News and writing for the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *CNN.com*, and the *Daily Beast*; however, it was not her love of a good story that led Lemmon to Kamila, but rather her interest in international development, particularly female entrepreneurship in war zones. While completing her MBA at Harvard, Gayle made her first trip to Afghanistan and began to learn the stories of women who, despite edicts banning their participation in commerce, were risking their lives to provide for themselves and their families through small businesses.

The book is organized into nine chapters plus an introduction and epilogue. The introduction and epilogue are heavily autobiographical in that they detail the experiences of the author while researching and writing this book. This includes her travels through Kabul as a foreign woman and the relationships she developed with the subjects of her book.

Chapters 1 and 2 depict life in Khair Khana from the first moments of the Taliban occupation of Kabul. The most drastic change was a brutal new system of law in which anything regarded as a distraction from worship was banned, including music, movies, television, card playing, chess, and even kite flying. An even more powerful transformation enforced by the Taliban was the following:

Women will stay home

Women are not permitted to work

Women must wear a *chadri* in public. (p. 26)

Women who did not obey the edicts put forth by the Taliban were publically beaten and shamed. Prior to the Taliban occupation, women had served as doctors, teachers, civil servants, and factory workers. Despite the fact that Kamila had just completed her teaching certificate before Taliban occupation began, the new law imposed by this regime meant she would never get to be a teacher.

In addition to changing the lives of women, the Taliban oversight also meant big changes for Kabul’s men. The unspoken ultimatum was “join or be treated as an enemy.” Kamila’s neighbors began to flee, and even her father, Woja Abdul Sidiqi, fled the Taliban fearing for his life. Once gone, there was no way to know if neighbors and family members had survived.

Chapters 3 and 4 detailed life for the remainder of people in Khair Khana, and specifically, the Sidiqi women. As a result of the tight Taliban control, few supplies could get into the

city, resulting in a food shortage. Items like food and clothing became difficult to come by. A particular concern was how to acquire and be measured for the *chadris* when many tailors were men, and direct interaction between women and men not-related by blood or marriage was forbidden.

In the midst of this hardship, Kamila was struck by an idea: learn to sew and sell the dresses to provide for her family. As women were not allowed to participate in business, this idea was exceptionally dangerous. To protect the family, Kamila took on a new identity, Roya, and she and her sisters began making and selling dresses in local markets.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 detail the growth of Kamila's business and the increasing risks taken by her family. As Taliban control of trade became even tighter, the demand for clothing increased. To meet the growing demand, the Sidiqi sisters turned their home into a make-shift factory, complete with sewing machines for when sporadic electricity was available, and began a tailoring school for women and even hired some employees. At this point, the business became not only a way to provide for the Sidiqi family, but also a way to provide for the people in their community.

These changes considerably increased the risk that the Taliban would take notice. The Taliban's treatment of women was becoming increasingly hostile. If the family were found educating women and participating in commerce, they, as well as all of their students and employees, could all be beaten and sent to jail; however, through an unexpected customer, the family discovers that the Taliban was aware of their business ventures and "were quietly supporting them" (p. 162).

Chapters 8 and 9 describe the new age of entrepreneurship in Khair Khana and the growing influence of foreign organizations. Kamila's business became so well known that she was approached to work as a part of a UN Habitat program called Community Forum, a place where women could gather to take part in jobs and social programs locally designed, supported, and supervised. Despite the risk, Kamila felt she needed to say yes. "This is an opportunity to support a lot of women, women who have no place to turn" (p.186). Kamila went to work for the District 10 Community Forum and eventually also participated in the UN's International Organization for Migration as well.

As Kamila courageously sought to provide for her family and her community, the world around her became increasingly more dangerous. In a matter of weeks, Massoud, the last Afghani military holdout against the Taliban, was killed, and America's World Trade Center was attacked by Osama Bin Laden, a member of the Taliban. Four weeks after the attacks on 9/11, the United States of America launched an attack on Kabul. While many residents of Kabul evacuated the city, the Sidiqi family remained inside the only home they had ever known. "Kamila and her sisters had no way of knowing how much longer the war would go on; or whether they would live through it" (p. 216). The chapter ends with the image of Kamila in prayer: "She prayed for her country, which had known nothing but war and bloodshed for her entire life. Despite the fighting that now engulfed her home and her city, she wanted to believe that whatever came next, the future would be brighter" (p. 216).

The book's epilogue begins with the invasion of the Northern Alliance and the beginning of the Taliban retreat from Kabul. Kamila is enmeshed in efforts to rebuild her country and strengthen its partnership with the United States of America. Lemmon and Kamila's relationship has evolved from journalist and subject, to friendship and sisterhood. Lemmon writes that this story is meant to share the "quiet feats of courage" demonstrated by Kamila and her family.

The Dressmaker of Khair Khana is a thought-provoking, moving, and inspiring book. Professionals hoping to incorporate this book into their curriculum or student programming will be pleased with the widespread applications and accessibility of this text. Touching on themes of faith, gender, war, terrorism, international politics, community, and individual advocacy, this book is an excellent starting point for a variety of dialogues. As a teaching platform, this story could easily serve to raise awareness of stereotypes, multiculturalism, the role of America in international affairs, individual

limitations, and parallels between conflict zones, whether they are in American inner cities or oceans apart.

A variety of unique perspectives are offered. Lemmon offers American readers the opportunity to step outside of their cultural context and view the impact of UN programs and American foreign policies from the perspective of a local Kabul resident. This book provides a vivid description of daily life in a conflict zone—an experience most young Americans cannot conceptualize. Furthermore, the text may help students develop an understanding of the differences between American Muslims, Muslims, and Muslim extremists like the Taliban. The ability to differentiate among these groups is of critical importance for young Americans, as the War on Terror is unlikely to be resolved in the near future. Additionally, this book helps readers explore gendered perspectives, as so few stories exist about modern Afghani business women, and even fewer are told from a female perspective. Finally, this text provides insight into how one determined individual could change not only her own life, but the life of her family, community, and country.

As a result of the aforementioned perspectives and themes, this is a book that can easily be integrated into a first-year or common reading program or a number of courses. There are clear ties to disciplines such as journalism, business, sociology, psychology, history, and religious studies. Additionally, this text would pair nicely with courses and programming addressing cross-cultural competencies, international studies, and student success. It should be noted that not all students have the geographical, religious, or historical context required to fully grasp the poignancy of this story. As such, instructors and administrators hoping to use this text should be sure to provide the additional information and support students need to contextualize Kamila's struggle and triumph in Kabul.

The Dressmaker of Khair Khana is an outstanding read and is recommended for students, faculty, and staff across institutional types. The themes and unique perspectives addressed in this book should be considered a core component in the education of the modern American student. Whether integrated into a new student reading program, the curriculum, or as additional educational programming, Lemmon's exploration of women entrepreneurs in Khair Khana is a must read.