

## The Diary of Gul Makai

IT WAS DURING one of those dark days that my father received a call from his friend Abdul Hai Kakar, a BBC radio correspondent based in Peshawar. He was looking for a female teacher or a schoolgirl to write a diary about life under the Taliban. He wanted to show the human side of the catastrophe in Swat. Initially Madam Maryam's younger sister Ayesha agreed, but her father found out and refused his permission saying it was too risky.

When I overheard my father talking about this, I said, 'Why not me?' I wanted people to know what was happening. Education is our right, I said. Just as it is our right to sing. Islam has given us this right and says that every girl and boy should go to school. The Quran says we should seek knowledge, study hard and learn the mysteries of our world.

I had never written a diary before and didn't know how to begin. Although we had a computer, there were frequent power cuts and few places had Internet access. So Hai Kakar would call me in the evening on my mother's mobile. He used his wife's phone to protect us as he said his own phone was bugged by the intelligence services. He would guide me, asking me questions about my day, and asking me to tell him small anecdotes or talk about my dreams. We would speak for half an hour or forty-five minutes in Urdu, even though we are both Pashtun, as the blog was to appear in Urdu and he wanted the voice to be as authentic as possible. Then he wrote up my words and once a week they would appear on the BBC Urdu website. He told me about Anne Frank, a thirteen-year-old Jewish girl who hid from the Nazis with her family in Amsterdam during the war. He told me she kept a diary about their lives all cramped together, about how they spent their days and about her own feelings. It was very sad as in the end the family was betrayed and arrested and Anne died in a concentration camp when she was only fifteen. Later her diary was published and is a very powerful record.

Hai Kakar told me it could be dangerous to use my real name and gave me the pseudonym Gul Makai, which means 'cornflower' and is the name of the heroine in a Pashtun folk story. It's a kind of *Romeo and Juliet* story in which Gul Makai and Musa Khan meet at school and fall in love. But they are from different tribes so their love causes a war. However, unlike Shakespeare's play their story doesn't end in tragedy. Gul Makai uses the Quran to teach her elders that war is bad and they eventually stop fighting and allow the lovers to unite.

My first diary entry appeared on 3 January 2009 under the heading I AM AFRAID: 'I had a terrible dream last night filled with military helicopters and Taliban. I have had such dreams since the launch of the military operation in Swat.' I wrote about being afraid to go to school because of the Taliban edict and looking over my shoulder all the time. I also described something that happened on my way home from school: 'I heard a man behind me saying, "I will kill you." I quickened my pace and after a while I looked back to see if he was following me. To my huge relief I saw he was speaking on his phone, he must have been talking to someone else.'

It was thrilling to see my words on the website. I was a bit shy to start with but after a while I got to know the kind of things Hai Kakar wanted me to talk about and became more confident. He liked personal feelings and what he called my 'pungent sentences' and also the mix of everyday family life with the terror of the Taliban.