Article by Ruth Thomas

THE RUGMAKER OF MAZAR-E-SHARIF

Najaf Mazari and Robert Hillman

INTRODUCTION

Najaf Mazari was born in Afghanistan in 1971. His homeland has a long history of conflict. Civil and international wars have raged there for centuries and have intensified during Najaf’s lifetime. Between 1978 and 2001, five separate conflicts took place in Afghanistan. Eventually, the situation became so dangerous that Najaf was forced to flee.

Najaf arrived in Australia as an asylum seeker after being picked up on Ashmore Reef with a group of people fleeing other wars. He was detained in Woomera Detention Centre while his application for refugee status was processed, and then he settled in Melbourne, where he opened a rug shop and was later joined by his wife and daughter.

The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif is Najaf’s memoir of living with conflict. It is written as an autobiography – a narrative in which an author writes about their own life, using a first-person narrator. Robert Hillman, a fiction writer and biographer, helps Najaf tell his story. Najaf’s autobiography unfolds through two separate narratives: one set in Australia, narrated using the present tense, and another which recounts Najaf’s life in Afghanistan, using the past tense. As co-author, Hillman transforms Najaf’s personal memories and stories into a written narrative that illustrates the far-reaching ramifications of war on individuals and communities, particularly on those who take no active part in the fighting.

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Encountering Conflict in *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif*

The principal type of conflict portrayed in *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* is armed conflict, or war. During Najaf’s life in Afghanistan, numerous civil wars (armed conflict between opposing parties within one country) and international wars (armed conflict between two or more countries) were fought. Wars in Afghanistan, like others around the world, are frequently fought on the premise of achieving a better state of affairs for the country, such as a fairer government or the eradication of terrorism. Does war ever result in positive social change? The text suggests that, in Afghanistan at least, one war only leads to another. *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* does not document any positive result of conflict. Rather, the text shows that civilians (people who do not take part in fighting) suffer greatly as a result of wars in which they have no active part or say. It documents the extent of conflict’s personal and social consequences. In this way, the text raises questions about the justness of war. Is it fair and reasonable that civilians suffer?

Najaf, as a character and a narrator, is not interested in the details of how each war is fought. He does not, for instance, give the details of important battles, or discuss the decisions of military leaders, or describe how victories or losses change Afghanistan’s political system. Instead, the narrative focuses on conflict and its consequences on an individual level. It also explores how ordinary people like Najaf cope with incessant conflict. Can someone live an ordinary life during armed conflict? Can someone live through violent conflict without becoming bitter or vengeful? Does continual conflict destroy hope and humanity? These are questions raised by the text. *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* shows that different people respond to conflict in different ways. Some people take sides and join the fighting, fuelled by anger or religious fervour. Others, like Najaf, are resilient. They deal with despair, overcome tragedies and continue peaceful, productive, ordinary lives amidst the violent conflict happening around them. In this way, *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* celebrates hope and the resilience of the human spirit.
IDEAS & ARGUMENTS IN THE TEXT

The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif can be used to explore a number of key ideas relevant to the Context Encountering Conflict. These are outlined below and will be developed further in the following section.

Overview of key ideas and arguments

Conflict has far-reaching consequences

The text highlights the many and varied ways in which conflict affects individuals and communities. These diverse consequences range from immediate effects, such as injury or death, to long-lasting psychological and societal consequences, such as grief, powerlessness and cultural change. Najaf’s story reveals the full extent of conflict’s consequences, particularly for civilian men and women.

Genre is important in developing this idea in the text. Because The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif is an autobiographical narrative, it is able to illustrate the extensive personal ramifications of conflict more thoroughly than a fictional work might.

Conflict is futile

Despite the enormous and extensive costs of war in Afghanistan, the conflicts Najaf witnesses achieve nothing. There is no winner and no change, only more fighting. Armed conflict, as Najaf has witnessed it, is destructive and antithetical to lasting achievement, which, he believes, requires hard work and patience.

Conflict opposes humanity

The simple language of the text reflects the central character’s appreciation for the small things in life. Najaf is a man who believes in honesty, respect and the value of each person. The humanity the text espouses, through the characterisation of
Najaf, is directly violated by war, which only destroys what Najaf believes God has created.

**Conflict is unfair**

Although this text is about conflict, the actual details of each war are only in the background of the narrative. The text’s main concern is with the people who try to live ordinary lives while a war they did not want and did not start rages around them. Najaf is a spectator to Afghanistan’s violent conflict, not a participant. Despite this, the wars regularly and unpredictably encroach upon his life.

**People can survive conflict**

While the text exposes the many physical, psychological and social consequences of war, it also demonstrates that people can survive. Not only does Najaf escape and ultimately flourish in his new home in Australia, but he remains a man of peace despite the horrors he has witnessed in Afghanistan. Through narrative line and turn of events, as well as characterisation, the text shows that people are not necessarily hardened or brutalised by their encounters with conflict.

**Individual experiences of conflict are not unique**

The text concentrates on Najaf’s daily life and therefore portrays an individual experience of conflict. But the text does not argue that Najaf’s experience is unique. Instead, it describes Najaf as one individual among many civilians in Afghanistan and among many refugees in Australia who have had similar experiences when encountering conflict.
Analysis of key ideas and arguments

Conflict has far-reaching consequences

The text shows that the effects of armed conflict are widespread and long-lasting. Najaf loses two brothers, an uncle and a cousin. He is injured when a bomb explodes in his house and suffers financial hardship and shame as a result of his injuries. He is forced to flee his homeland when the Taliban threaten his life. But the text does not simply outline these costs. Rather, it exposes the many ways war impacts upon individuals and groups, with a particular emphasis on conflict’s psychological and societal repercussions.

Psychological consequences of conflict (such as fear, powerlessness and behavioural change) are clearly illustrated. Key incidents, direct comment by Najaf and simile and metaphor are three textual features through which this is achieved. Najaf’s interview at Woomera, a key incident, shows that conflict makes people perpetually fearful. Suspicious and nervous, Najaf is so accustomed to being threatened and to dealing with potential enemies that he inanely worries someone has given the Australian authorities misinformation about him. Najaf’s fear in this situation is similar to the fear he feels as a teenager when interrogated by army recruiters. In this earlier key scene, we see that Najaf’s safety and security are constantly under threat, even as a child. He often comments explicitly on insecurity, stating, for example, that ‘it was impossible to feel safe when battles could change course in a matter of hours’ (p.12) and he suggests, through statements like ‘we acted as if the day when the Taliban would return was a long way off’ (p.177), that even peace is uneasy.

Insecurity leads to a sense of powerlessness. Najaf sums up this state of mind when he realises, early in his rugmaking apprenticeship, that ‘this future of learning and gaining greater and greater skill all depended on things that I couldn’t control’ (p.154). To cope, Najaf trains himself ‘not to think too far into the future’ (p.154). Living with the conflict of war, therefore, changes how Najaf thinks. It also changes
how he acts. Simile and metaphor illustrate how Najaf develops the instincts of a keenly aware animal. For example, while hiding in the cupboard at Ashraf’s house, Najaf and Gassem eat ‘in the way that wild animals eat, with our ears pricked for the sound of our enemies’ (p.197). Later, as he cycles around the countryside avoiding the Taliban, Najaf is ‘always as wary as a wild animal’ easily woken by a ‘stone rolling down a slope half a kilometre away’ or by ‘the crack of a twig falling from a tree’ (p.218).

Societal consequences of conflict are also presented through a range of textual elements. Sometimes, Najaf simply reports facts. For example, he states that life expectancy for Afghani men, women and children declined between 1979 and 1999 due to the number of civilian casualties in the successive wars – a social change that directly results from conflict. He later observes that war was ‘the main industry and the biggest employer’ in Afghanistan (p.153). At other times, Najaf is more suggestive than explicit. For example, when he states that Afghani fathers parent their sons with ‘tough love’ so that the sons can endure the hardship which has been ‘the pattern of life’ in Afghanistan for ‘thousands of years’, Najaf implies that conflict has shaped Afghani culture (p.34). Boys are raised differently in Afghanistan because they need to cope with conflict. This conflict also shapes other cultural practices. Ashraf’s house with the concealed cupboard, built to shelter men in emergencies, suggests that conflict influences housing and architecture. War also shapes attitudes. Najaf frequently describes the pragmatic resilience civilian Afghanis possess. He observes, for example:

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\text{warfare had become a disaster so common that it was useless to think of it as something that could be avoided; it was more like earthquakes and floods and plague – catastrophes that you had to live with because they could not be controlled. (p.129)}
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Discussion questions

- How does the genre (autobiography) help illustrate conflict’s impact on individual civilians?
• Najaf observes that people in Melbourne ‘do not walk in the way they do in Afghanistan’ (p.184). Why might this be so, and how does this observation contribute to the argument that conflict has far-reaching consequences?

• Thinking about powerlessness, account for the actions of the man in Woomera who sews his lips together, and the riot that breaks out afterwards.

**Conflict is futile**

Seven different wars take place in the timeframe of *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif*, but there are no winners and no change, only more fighting. In fact, Najaf worries that his country will ‘be at war for a long time to come’ and notes that this is ‘not new’ to the people of Afghanistan (p.251). It is not surprising that Najaf’s memoir argues that war is futile.

This argument is developed in a number of ways. Firstly, the pointlessness of conflict is illustrated by broad historical events recounted in the text. The successive wars that form the background of the narrative demonstrate that war does not achieve stability but only leads to more fighting, such that it seems to Najaf ‘as if the two sides could fight until not a single building was left standing in the entire country’ (p.150). As armed conflict becomes a way of life, soldiers lose sight of the war’s political objective. Recruiters do not conscript teenagers who believe in the cause, but care only that the youths can ‘carry a gun and shoot people on the other side’ (p.151). War in Afghanistan is self-perpetuating; the consequences of one war breed the causes and conditions for the next. As Najaf explains, the Taliban emerged from poor, fundamentalist refugee communities in India and Pakistan: communities themselves generated by the Russian and mujahedin wars, and communities in which exiled young men learned to hate and to fight.
Secondly, Najaf’s immediate encounters with conflict show it to be ineffectual. He knows men ‘who would be prepared … to commit themselves and a hundred generations of their family to battle, from now until the end of the world’ (p.36), a characteristic of Afghani men that shows little faith in conflict’s constructive capacity. This idea is further developed in the key scene that describes Gorg Ali’s death. Neither the Russians nor the mujahedin accomplish anything in the three-week affray that claims Gorg Ali’s life. A good man is killed, but no territory is secured or resolutions reached. Later, in Woomera, Najaf sees detainees refused visas or relegated to the high-security Sierra section as punishment for participating in arguments or fights. Detainees resort to conflict, but their problems are not solved by it, only compounded.

Thirdly, the idea that war is futile is expressed via Najaf’s direct comment. Najaf frequently states that conflict arises from a lack of common sense, from losing ‘all sight of the bigger picture’ (p.75), or from ‘the passion and anger in the arguments of one political party’ that ‘simply aroused the same sort of passion and anger in another’ (pp.10–11). When conflict does arise in these situations, it does not offer anything constructive. War, Najaf warns, is entirely destructive. As Najaf puts it, ‘a gun has one purpose, and that purpose will not build anything, but will only tear down what others have built’ (p.52). Collectively, these statements demonstrate Najaf’s attitude to conflict and support the argument that war achieves nothing.

**Discussion question**

- What is the meaning of the epigraph? How does it support the argument that war is futile?

**Conflict opposes humanity**

Najaf’s loathing of conflict arises, in part, from his devout faith. He is attuned to see wonder and beauty in the smallest and simplest of things, such as bread or apples, and he works diligently to create beautiful things, like his rugs, his family and a new, safe life in Australia. In the text, Najaf’s notion of humanity is constructed
through simple, direct language, even when the ideas described are complex. For example, in Woomera, Najaf ponders the number of different words in different languages for the ‘necessary’ things in life, things like bread, apples and women. He then considers unnecessary things, like ‘political party’ and ‘gun’ and ‘bomb’ (p.27). His conclusion is simplistic, but profound: ‘Isn’t it strange that the unnecessary things are the most dangerous?’ (p.27).

Armed conflict by its very nature destroys things. It wounds and kills people, it scars the landscape and it cripples communities. The disparity between war and Najaf’s world view is clearly evident in the passage that describes the death of Najaf’s brother, Gorg Ali. Gorg Ali is portrayed as a man of patience and good sense, and as ‘one of those people who make the world possible ... who holds things together’ (p.105). As a man who has an inexplicable power over snakes and who tends the bees that have lived in the hives at Shar Shar for many, many years, Gorg Ali embodies tradition. He represents wisdom, peace and the timelessness of peasant life in Afghanistan. This makes his sudden and meaningless death tragic. The setting of this key scene is also important. Consider how the field is described. It is an idyll, where poppies, tulips and violets bloom like ‘a carpet of coloured snow’, where the streams are silver and where the sky is ‘so blue that it makes you think, “Yes, that is where heaven must be, that is where paradise must be.”’ (p.111). When the soldiers leave, the idyllic landscape is scarred – dotted with shell craters and destroyed buildings, the grass blackened and littered with ‘the wrappers of food rations that the Russians had thrown away’ (p.114).

The depiction of Gorg Ali’s death illustrates the idea that war destroys what is good and beautiful. The text also argues that for war to be fought, the fighters must blind themselves to the beauty of ordinary things. People must be brutal to kill. This idea is illustrated by the story of Khandi Hazara. After the first two mujahedin assassins fail to kill the dancer, the third assassins are given strict orders to shoot immediately, without even looking. They must literally blind themselves to Khandi Hazara’s beauty to kill her. The Taliban, the text suggests, are similarly blind to the
beauty of life because they are ‘fanatics, without any concern for anything other than fighting or worship’ (pp.171–2). There is an implied lack of humanity here.

Discussion questions

• Describe the language used to narrate Najaf’s memoir. What effect does this have, aside from helping to convey Najaf’s notion of humanity?

• How is traditional Afghani culture celebrated in this text (through language, metaphor or imagery, for example)? What does this celebration contribute to ideas about conflict in the text?

Conflict is unfair

One way in which the text makes the argument that conflict is unfair is through Najaf’s recurrent statements that his encounter with conflict was one of chance, not choice. For example, in introducing his most calamitous encounter with conflict – the mortar attack on his home – Najaf is constructed as a spectator of the war by a very simple statement: ‘I have witnessed a number of explosions in my lifetime, always unwillingly’ (p.7). This sentiment becomes a recurrent motif to describe both Najaf’s situation and that of Afghani people in general. The sketch of Afghanistan’s history provided by Najaf shows how the country has been repeatedly invaded by various international forces and treated as a pawn ‘to fit into the political strategies of the powerful’ (p.35). Najaf later remarks on how many heartbreaking stories can be told by ordinary people in Afghanistan and concludes, ‘It is not that Afghanis have chosen a path of suffering out of madness; no, other people have chosen that path for us’ (p.105).

The sentiment of these statements is supported by key episodes in the narrative. The mortar explosion above Najaf’s family home, for example, is a concrete physical demonstration of the sense of chance and spectatorship that Najaf’s comments express. Najaf and his family are not military targets. The bombs explode accidentally on their home. The Mazaris are chance victims. The event is
so chaotic and unpredictable that the family does not even know the provenance of the rocket. When a passer-by quizzes the injured Najaf about whether the rocket was Russian, Najaf can only reply ‘Who knows? We think it was mujahedin’ (p.134).

This episode also demonstrates the callousness with which civilians are treated during this period of conflict. The suffering of civilians, frequently referred to explicitly by Najaf and demonstrated by key events, further develops the idea that conflict is unpredictable and unfair. International laws exist to protect civilians during combat, but these were not observed in Afghanistan, according to Najaf’s narrative. Of the civil war, Najaf remarks ‘both sides expected that it would be necessary to kill civilians, or at least that it would be too troublesome to avoid killing them’ (p.12). The reckless and unconscionable actions of all armies in all Afghanistan’s recent conflicts are borne out in key events: Najaf’s house is bombed, Gorg Ali is killed and Hazara men, women and children are massacred in the streets of Mazar-e-Sharif.

Discussion questions

• Najaf describes Afghanistan as ‘a type of explosion laboratory’ where Russians tried out bombs ‘fresh off the drawing board’, and where Americans gave Afghanis the ‘privilege of being killed by ultra-modern high explosives’ (pp.7–8). How would you describe Najaf’s tone in this description?

• How does this description help develop the idea that war is unfair?

People can survive conflict

While the text vividly illustrates the consequences of war and the immense human suffering it causes, it also shows that individuals and communities can survive conflict, both physically and psychologically. Najaf’s arrival in Australia and his establishment of a new life in Melbourne is one example of surviving conflict. Many other examples can be found in the text.
Najaf’s commentary about ordinary life in Afghanistan, for example, shows that civilians are resilient. People simply carry on in spite of extremely difficult circumstances. Najaf observes that civilians ‘made plans for the future. They married. They had children. They built houses’ (p.164). Najaf himself builds a house, gets married and has a child despite the conflict. Persistence is a recurrent motif in the text. For example, after the death of Gorg Ali, Najaf’s family experiences a ‘big black cloud’ of grief and fear, but they persist because, as Najaf states, ‘in such situations, you must go on working steadily’ (p.117). Similarly, after the initial defeat of the Taliban in Mazar-e-Sharif, Najaf and his neighbours go on ‘as if the day when the Taliban would return was a long way off’ (p.177). Persistence is also expounded in the story of the old camel climbing the mountain path, an allegory that suggests life is composed of many challenges, each of which can be surmounted if one has the will to simply go on (p.159). Living with conflict is just one kind of challenge and people, the text shows, have the capacity to endure it within their everyday lives.

Characterisation also shows how people survive conflict. Najaf is born into and grows up amidst incessant violence and tragedy, but he is not hardened or made vengeful by this. Rather, he is a sympathetic and compassionate man, and inarguably a man of peace. He claims that peace ‘is part of me, something that was inside of my brain and my heart when my mother gave birth to me’ (p.76). Najaf’s actions throughout the text support his description of himself. At Woomera, for instance, he smiles at all the other detainees at breakfast (p.20), carefully doles out equal servings of rice and potato to everyone to prevent a fight breaking out (p.75) and discretely protects Abbas’ feelings after the latter’s marriage proposal is rejected (p.127). Despite his experience of conflict, Najaf remains a peaceful and gentle man and this supports the idea that people can survive conflict both physically and psychologically.

Given that the text is Najaf’s autobiography, his character demonstrates this most clearly, but other characters show that people more generally are equally capable of such survival. Gorg Ali, for example, is inarguably a man of peace and good
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sense. Qadem, who helps arrange Najaf’s escape from Afghanistan, is from a tribe traditionally hostile to Najaf’s own tribe, the Hazara, yet assists Najaf because Najaf was ‘a human being in his mind and heart, not just a nameless Hazara’ (p.227). Compassion and humanity are qualities that survive in many of the text’s characters, despite the background conflict.

**Discussion questions**

- Do you think the text argues that persistence is an exceptional quality? Is it portrayed as something unique to Afghans? Why, or why not? Think particularly about characters and their relationships.

- How do Qadem’s actions support the idea that people can survive conflict, both physically and psychologically?

**Individual experiences of conflict are not unique**

While this autobiography tells an individual story, it also argues that individual experiences of conflict are not unique. Najaf is not represented as an exceptional person with unusual or extraordinary experiences of conflict. Rather, Najaf’s experiences are shown to be representative of what countless civilians have undergone in Afghanistan and in other countries throughout the world.

This is achieved, in part, by Najaf’s habitual language, such as the frequent use of the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ instead of the individual ‘I’. For example, Najaf speaks of ‘all of us refugees’ in Woomera (p.25) and of the return of the Taliban to Mazar-e-Sharif as an event ‘we knew’ would happen (p.182). It is also achieved by Najaf’s deference to the experiences and thoughts of other people. Najaf, in describing the community in Woomera, directly states that the other asylum seekers from Iran or Chechnya or Kurdistan have had the same experiences of explosions, death and grief as he has had (p.26). Najaf’s views on conflict are also presented as shared ideas. When he gives his appraisal of the mujahedin and the communists, for example, Najaf concludes that he had no powerful feelings about either side and that all he wanted was to be left alone. He then states: ‘I would say that my feelings
... were not any different from those of most Afghans’ (p.150). Nowhere is Najaf constructed as a particularly special, talented or unique individual. His peaceful and reasonable nature is modelled on and echoed by his older brother Gorg Ali. His family choose to smuggle Najaf out of Afghanistan not because of any favouritism but because of pragmatic concerns – he could speak some English, was the one most in danger simply because of his age, and was also more level-headed than the more aggressive Abdul Ali, and thus better equipped to avoid dangerous confrontations with the enemies and authorities he is bound to meet on his journey. His successful flight to Australia is no more courageous than the similar ones made by the men, women and children with whom he shares the journey, or by those who have fled conflicts in other parts of the world – the people with whom he then lives at Woomera.

Najaf’s survival is attributed more to luck than to special talents or characteristics. He was considered lucky by his family because he ‘survived the rocket attack’, kept ‘out of the hands of the militias enlisting men and boys in their armies’, and ‘had come back from the dead after falling into the hands of the Taliban’ (p.220). The fact that many people in Afghanistan did not enjoy such luck weighs heavily on Najaf’s conscience. It is his luck that sets him apart, not his experience of conflict, which is something common to millions. This sentiment of mere fortune, presented in the last lines of the narrative, is further evidence that Najaf does not perceive himself as someone whose experiences of conflict are unique or exceptional.

Discussion questions

- Do you agree with Najaf’s statement that his survival results only from luck and ‘good fortune’? Why, or why not?

- Najaf dubs the community in Woomera ‘Woomerians’ and describes how they might ‘make a new Australia’ (p.142). How does this passage support the idea that individual experiences of conflict are not unique?
Sample passage analysis

This section shows you how to identify and discuss key Context ideas in a short passage from The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif. First, carefully read through the passage, ‘Najaf hides from the Taliban’, from: ‘I was on my feet and running within seconds …’ to ‘… and I found my own home’ (pp.195–8).

Summary

When the Taliban commence a massacre in Mazar-e-Sharif, Najaf runs to the house of his friend, Ashraf. Here, Najaf hides in a tiny, concealed room with his cousin Gassem for fifteen days while the Taliban take over the city. On the fifteenth day, Najaf gives up his refuge to return to his mother, wife and child.

Questions for exploring ideas

• What consequences of conflict are evident in this passage? Consider immediate and long-term consequences, as well as physical, psychological and cultural repercussions.

• Explain why Najaf describes himself as having sadness in his heart (p.197). What does this suggest about the long-term effects that situations of conflict can have on even resilient individuals?

• How do Najaf and Gassem cope with the situation? Express your answer in terms of a key idea, such as the idea that people can survive conflict. For example: ‘Conflict endangers people both physically and psychologically. The concealed room offers Najaf and Gassem physical sanctuary, but the conversation and support each offers the other is equally important to their survival.’

• How would you describe the tone in this scene, and how do the language choices create this tone? What does that tone tell us about Najaf’s character?
In what ways do Najaf’s own personal qualities enable him to survive a situation of conflict? Do you think such qualities are innate, or can they develop through exposure to testing situations?

**Activities**

- Because the text is autobiographical, only Najaf’s experience of this period is depicted. Imagine what his mother and Hakima endured at home. Write a passage of dialogue that captures what you imagine they would think and feel, as well as how they might cope during this time.
- Write a newspaper article about this event or write an interview transcript in which Najaf and Gassem recall the experience.
- Rewrite the episode as if it were happening to you in your own country.

**Focus on text features**

As well as drawing on ideas from *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* in your writing about *Encountering Conflict*, remember that the language and style of your writing may also be inspired by the structures and features of the text. For example, the following aspects of *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* may influence how you choose to use language in the text you create:

- Narrative focus on the civilian’s personal experience of a conflict, with the details of battles, victories and political movements in the background. This allows the personal costs of war to be conveyed.
- First-person narration that often uses a collective pronoun to show that whole communities are affected by conflict and that individual experiences are not necessarily unique.
- Use of two interlocking narrative timeframes (present and past) to show how an experience of conflict affects a person long after the actual event.
Simple, direct language that produces a ‘matter-of-fact’ tone and allows an experience of conflict to be presented without sensationalism.

**Points of view on the Context**

The discussion questions, activities and sample writing prompts below are designed to help you develop your understanding of the ideas raised by the Context in *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* and to help you develop your own point of view on these ideas.

**Discussion/writing questions**

- ‘War had always been the background to my life … and it surely helped to form the way I thought about things’ (p.163). How does conflict shape Najaf’s life and thinking?

- ‘When the body has suffered great harm, it remembers forever’ (p.153). List the physical and psychological consequences of encountering conflict that Najaf experiences in *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif*. Identify the key ideas behind these consequences. For example, while some immediate consequences of conflict can be healed, all encounters inflict lasting damage on people and places.

- What methods of dealing with conflict are used by different individuals in the text? What do these methods reveal about how people cope with conflict? For example, encountering conflict can cause individuals to re-evaluate life in positive ways.

**Activities**

- Write and perform a dialogue between Najaf and another asylum seeker (such as Abbas or Shokr Ali) at Woomera, to demonstrate the idea that each person’s experience of conflict is highly individual.
• Research and prepare a report on Australia's policy on refugees and asylum seekers since 2000. Include an outline of the various countries refugees have come from in that period.

• Write a series of diary entries or letters showing Hakima’s experiences and thoughts, from the time of Najaf’s capture by the Taliban to her arrival at Melbourne airport.

Sample prompts
1. ‘Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage. The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict.’ Conflict can make us better people.

2. Why conflict happens is less important than how it affects people.

3. ‘You can no more win in a war than you can win in an earthquake.’ Conflict has no winners, only victims.

4. It is inevitable that we will encounter conflict in life.

5. ‘Hot heads and cold hearts never solved anything.’ Problems are not solved through conflict.

THE TEXT


OTHER RESOURCES

The following additional reading and resources will offer you fresh ideas for expanding your point of view on the Context.

Novel

Insight text article on *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif*

**Film**


**Websites**


*Site for International Committee of the Red Cross which oversees the Geneva Conventions, the laws that govern war.*


*A podcast of a presentation given by Najaf Mazari and Robert Hillman at the 2009 Perth Writers Festival.*

UNHCR 2009 *Regional Office – Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific*, UNHCR: The UN refugee agency, www.unhcr.org.au

*Site for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a non-political organisation mandated by the United Nations to protect refugees.*