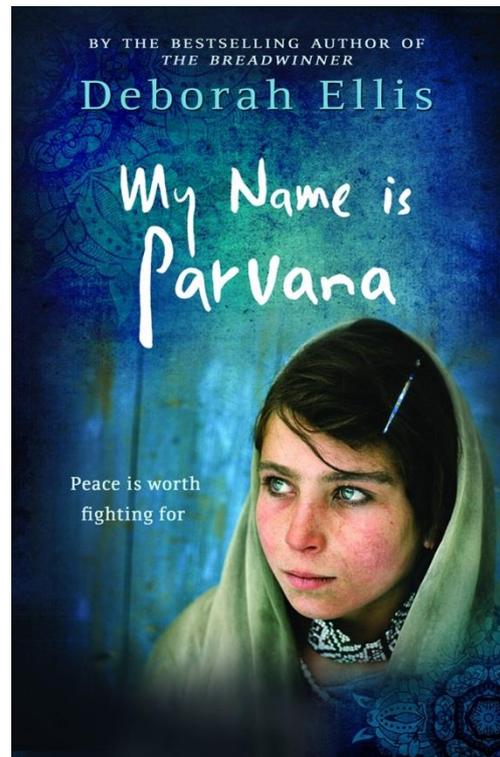
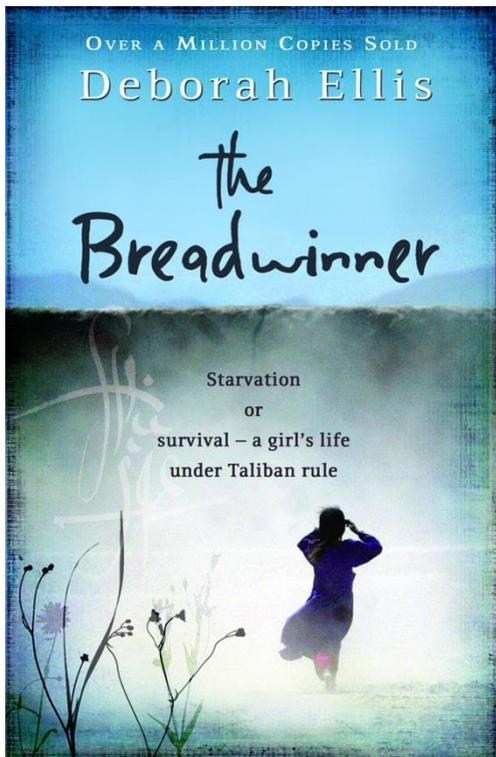


**The World of**  
***The Breadwinner***  
**and**  
***My Name is Parvana***

**Ideas for exploring Deborah Ellis' novels with pupils  
in Years 5-7**



# *The Breadwinner*

## Introduction

Parvana is an eleven-year-old girl living in war-torn Afghanistan under Taliban rule. When Parvana's father is arrested and taken away by Taliban soldiers, the family struggles to bring in enough food. Under Taliban law women and girls are not allowed out alone, so Parvana must disguise herself as a boy to venture out to the market place and earn enough to buy basic food supplies for the family. Every day has its dangers—she witnesses Taliban brutality, suffers beating and intimidation and walks in fear of land mines—but in a world full of threat Parvana stays positive, finding friendship and hope.

## Synopsis

The story opens in the market square in Kabul, where Parvana is with her father at his little stall, selling his services as someone who can read and write, plus a few items the family can spare. Parvana is eleven, and, due to Taliban ruling, she has been banned from attending school. She is allowed to help her father walk to market every day—his leg was badly injured by a bomb. Parvana's family, previously well off, is now reduced to living in one room in a partially derelict building. We learn that Parvana's parents are from old respected Afghan families, and have had an education. They can read and write and speak a number of languages including English. Parvana's love of school, and learning, is apparent.

Parvana has two sisters, Nooria and Maryan, and a baby brother, Ali. Nooria is the eldest and she is always arguing with Parvana. There was an older brother, Hossain, who was killed by a land mine at fourteen. The family are resilient in the face of their difficulties, and all work hard. Parvana fetches water every day. They struggle to maintain normal family life with its chores and daily routines; mealtimes, stories and laughter. But Parvana is often lonely even with her family so close around her, and feels a sense of injustice about the preferential way Nooria is treated by their mother.

Life changes dramatically when one day Taliban soldiers burst into the room and arrest Parvana's father, dragging him off to prison. They search for his books, and Parvana bravely tries to intervene, only to be hit by their sticks. The family are in shock. Parvana and her mother (heavily wrapped in her burqa to hide her face and body) risk everything and cross town to the prison in search of Father. They are stopped by soldiers and Father's photo is ripped to shreds. When they return, with bleeding feet so unused to walking any distance, Mother collapses. Nooria and Parvana are forced to take responsibility for looking after the family and finding food for everyone. Parvana breaks Taliban law by going out to shop for bread, unaccompanied by a man and without a burqa. She does this with courage but is caught by a Talib soldier on her way back, and is questioned and beaten. As she runs away, she bumps into Mrs Weera, a friend of the family. Mrs Weera helps Mother recover from her trauma and

she and her granddaughter move in. A plan is made to disguise Parvana as a boy, so that she can more easily go alone to the market, and run her father's stall herself. The family needs money and food. Parvana is to be the breadwinner. She has her hair cut off, and wears her dead brother's tunic. Parvana enjoys her new-found freedom and the normality of being out all day at the market, with its noise and bustle.

One day a strange thing happens—whilst sitting on her rug she notices a small piece of embroidered cloth and realizes it has been dropped from a window above. Other small tokens are regularly dropped, and there are glimpses of a woman at the window. Another day a tea boy rushes past and trips in front of her—she recognizes the face of a girl from her school, Shauzia, also disguised as a boy. They become inseparable friends. Together they are strong, and they come up with a number of enterprising ways to make more money; gathering old human bones from a graveyard and selling them on, then investing the money in cigarettes and chewing gum to sell from trays around the market.

Meanwhile Mrs Weera and Mother plan to start up a tiny school from the room they live in, and to publish stories about other families' experiences of Taliban rule. Nooria wants to teach. The girls are drawn one day to a crowd gathering at the stadium—they think it is a football match but it is in fact a public display of brutality. The Taliban are cutting off the hands of men who have been caught stealing. Parvana is deeply shocked by what she has seen.

Shauzia has a secret. She tells Parvana that she is saving money to escape to France, a place she believes to be full of sunshine and fields of lavender. She asks if Parvana wants to go to. Parvana shares her secret about the Window Woman, and they fantasize that she is a princess who needs rescuing. But some time later Parvana hears angry shouting inside the building and she fears for the mystery woman.

Summer in Kabul brings heat, flowers amongst the ruined buildings and fruit to the market. Parvana is weary, and wants her childhood back. She wants to return to school, and have some normality again. A secret little school has started up for five little girls at Parvana's home. One day Parvana returns home to find that Nooria is going to get married. She will be leaving for Mazar, in the north and an area not yet under Taliban rule where she will be able to continue at school. The family decide to leave Parvana in Kabul with Mrs Weera while they travel north. Parvana continues with her daily work, and one day, caught in a rainstorm she discovers a young woman hiding in a building. She is called Homa and has fled from the newly Taliban-occupied northern city of Mazar. Parvana fears for her family and is for a while too shocked and exhausted to work. However, she picks herself up, showing courage and determination. She is rewarded by the return one day of her father, scarcely recognisable. Slowly he is nursed back to health, and Parvana is filled with hope. News reaches them that people are fleeing Mazar and are staying in refugee camps. Parvana and her father plan to search for the rest of their family, and Mrs Weera and Homa are going to Pakistan. Just before they leave, Parvana receives one last gift from Window Woman, a tiny beaded camel. She plants some flowers on the spot, a symbol of hope to the lady.

Shauzia is leaving too, heading off alone with some nomads, destination: France. The two girls plan to meet in twenty years' time at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Parvana ponders her future, and the new life that is unfolding as she leaves Kabul with her father.

***“Parvana could cross their main room with ten regular steps one way and twelve regular steps the other way...She knew every inch of it.”***

Parvana’s family struggles to keep day-to-day life going as normally as possible, but, living in just one room, their conditions are very restricted.

- If you can, pace out a space this size!
- Imagine what it would be like to live with your family in just one room.
- What might be some of the problems living in conditions like these?
- How does Parvana’s daily lifestyle compare with yours?

***“Bombs had been part of Parvana’s whole life. Every day, every night, rockets would fall out of the sky, and someone’s house would explode.”***

- What do you think it is like for children living in a war-torn city like Kabul?
- Do you think the dangerous environment Parvana has grown up in has influenced the kind of girl she is?
- Can you think of other places in the world right now where children are living in war-zones?

***“I just want to be an ordinary kid again. I want to sit in a classroom and go home and eat food that someone else has worked for. I want my father to be around. I just want a normal, boring life.”***

- Can you sympathize with Parvana’s desire for an ordinary childhood?
- Do you think that we take for granted our peaceful lives?

***“The Taliban are not making Afghanistan a kinder place to live!”***

Parvana’s father says, and Parvana, after reading out a sad letter to a grieving Talib soldier and witnessing him in tears ponders: *“Up until then, she had seen Talibs only as men who beat women and arrested her father. Could they have feelings of sorrow, like other human beings?”*

- Is Parvana right to think about individuals on both sides of the conflict?
- Discuss some of the many acts of kindness we witness in the story.  
The Taliban are blamed for destroying the good things about Afghanistan, but can you think of any moments in the book when you felt understanding with the viewpoint of the Taliban?

- What are the lives of women and girls like in Afghanistan, as portrayed in this novel?
- Discuss the friendship between Parvana and Shauzia. What qualities do the girls have which you most admire?

Find the glossary at the back of the book. Test each other on the terms and explanations you find there: items of clothing worn by Afghan people, the languages they speak, and other objects from the story. Think how much have you learnt about life in Afghanistan from this novel!

# *My Name is Parvana*

## Introduction

Parvana is now fifteen and has rebuilt her life after being reunited with her mother and sisters. Together they are running a school for girls, but suspicion and fear towards the education of women in Afghanistan have put them in all in danger. Parvana is taken prisoner and held at an American army base, suspected of being a terrorist. Once again, she must protect those she loves at all costs.

## Synopsis

The story moves between the present, when Parvana is being held at an American Army base, and the immediate past before her capture when she and her family are running a school for girls.

Leila's Academy of Hope has opened. All the family are involved; their Mother is in charge, sister Nooria teaches, Parvana and Maryam are pupils. Parvana has an uneasy relationship with her mother and Nooria, and is rebellious about her own studies. She restlessly dreams about what she will do with her life. She is spirited and reckless and is once caught out alone without a head covering. She is quickly surrounded by an angry mob of men, but she runs away, pelted by rocks. Back in the safety of the school, Parvana realizes that she must play by her mother's rules, or throw caution to the wind and leave, disguised as a boy. Her friend Asif speaks plainly to her, and she decides she must remain where she is.

When Nooria gets the offer of a place at an American University, Parvana is jealous. Whilst sulking outside the school as night falls a car drives past and a rock is thrown from it with a note attached to it. The message demands that the school be closed down, issuing a death threat. The school continues and reaches its first anniversary. However, it is still viewed with suspicion. Posters appear campaigning for the closure of the school because it is evil. Numbers on the role drop as the word spreads. But Parvana's family press on with their routine. Months pass. Parvana finds a small orphaned girl, Ava, dumped in a sack at the school gates and they take her in.

Parvana becomes suspicious that something is being stored in one of the school buildings, and believes Mr Fahir, their caretaker, is somehow involved. Grenades are hidden there and Mr Fahir suddenly quits.

Mother sets off to a meeting about starting up a college for women. She does not return. Her tortured body is dumped from a car a few days later. Parvana writes to Nooria to tell her about their mother's death, and she and Asif take control of the school. Parvana realizes that only Mrs Weera, an old friend who now works for the Afghan Parliament, can help them. She tries

to protect the school from air attack by painting “School” on the roof of the building. They are at risk of being bombed, but carry on with school activities until one day a peddler arrives. It is Shauzia in disguise, and together they flee in the peddler’s cart. Shauzia is working with Mrs Weera, helping women and children caught up in the conflict, and she knows of a safe house. Parvana forgets to take her father’s bag, and so returns alone to fetch it from the school. The school is now ruined by the bombing which she and Shauzia had just managed to escape. It is at this point that she is captured by American soldiers.

As a prisoner, Parvana is being questioned but refuses to answer. She recites multiplication tables to focus her mind on ignoring her captors. She survives on an inner strength, her memories and her imagination, but she is afraid of what will happen to her. The questioning continues relentlessly, with the soldiers becoming increasingly frustrated at Parvana’s silence. They begin to make her suffer—standing up until she faints, depriving her of sleep and subjecting her to persistent and repetitive loud music. The soldiers are convinced she is a terrorist.

Parvana is aware that someone is showing kindness and giving her food. She saves the wrappers to write on. She is taken to wash, and given clean clothes. But on her return the saved pieces of paper are gone.

A blast occurs in the army base and chaos reigns. Parvana is suddenly left alone with an open door. She grabs *Jane Eyre* and runs out into the aftermath of a bomb attack. But Parvana stops when she hears the voice of an injured soldier begging for help. She calls for medical help, and ends up being caught.

Two days later, Parvana is back in her cell. She is absorbed in reading *Jane Eyre* when she hears someone crying beneath her tiny window. She writes a poem on a scrap of paper and drops it through the grating. She remembers the Window Woman who made contact with her like this, in the marketplace of Kabul years ago. For the first time, she breaks down and cries.

The soldiers believe the base was bombed by Parvana’s people, a rescue attempt to reach her. They are still searching the school site, and have uncovered the body of a woman, buried in Islamic tradition, facing Mecca. This is Parvana’s mother, who was tortured and dumped. Finally, the questioning man explains that Parvana is to be transferred to a prison north of Kabul, where conditions will be far worse. Parvana speaks for the first time to declare that they, not she, blew up the school.

As she is being taken away, a car pulls up and Mrs Weera gets out, demanding aggressively that they release Parvana. As she is a respected figure of authority, the soldiers do, and Parvana leaves with her, finding Shauzia in the back of the car. The girls make plans to quit Afghanistan, but change their minds when they realize there are more young girls in Afghanistan who need their help.

## **‘When she was sure she was alone, the girl in the dusty blue chador finally spoke. “Yes,” she whispered. “My name is Parvana.”’**

- What sort of girl has Parvana become when we meet her four years on? Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of her character.
- “*I am the future*” laughs Parvana at the mob of angry men who accuse her of breaking the Taliban law of covering her head. Do you agree that characters like Parvana can help to influence the future of countries like Afghanistan, even if only in a small way?

**Find out about the real life Pakistani school girl, Malala Yousafzai, who, in 2012, was shot by Taliban gunmen for speaking out about the need for girls to be educated. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24379018>)**

- Does Malala remind you of Parvana and Shauzia? What special qualities do they all have?
- Are these young women good role models?

### **Leila’s Academy of Hope**

- Why do you think the school is named the Academy of Hope?
- Talk about some of the things which girls will learn at this school. Do you think it seems a good school?
- Why does Parvana’s family believe so strongly that girls are entitled to an education?
- Why is the School for Girls regarded by some as a place of evil? How can education be viewed as both a good and a bad thing?

### **The Women and the Girls...**

**The novel has a number of strong and determined women and girls in it: Mother, Mrs Weera, Nooria, Shauzia and of course our fiery protagonist, Parvana.**

- Why do you think the women and girls are presented in this way by the author?
- Think about some of the choices each female character has to make in the novel. Would you have the courage to make similar decisions if you were faced with these choices?
- Do you admire the way Parvana copes with being imprisoned?

### **The Men and the Boys...**

- Consider some of the men and boys we meet in the book. How are they portrayed and what are their roles?
- Why do you think the author doesn’t focus as much on male characters?

**“So,” Parvana said, “more of the same, then. More hunger, more fear, and more work,” “This is Afghanistan,” Shauzia said. “What do you want—a happy ending?”**

- What would you do to help make a “happy ending” for people in Afghanistan?
- Do you think that Shauzia and Parvana are right to stay on to help more women and children?

### **Questions for further discussion which apply to both books**

**“You can’t be truly Afghan if you don’t know someone who’s been in prison.”**

**Both Parvana and her Father are prisoners at times in these novels, held by different captors. Compare their experiences.**

**“If all the educated people leave, who will rebuild the country?”**

**Education is a major theme across these novels. Why is education seen by Parvana’s family as a way forward in Afghanistan? Why is it so feared by others? How do you feel about your own experience of school having read these novels?**

**These novels are part of a series, charting Parvana’s fortunes. How do you think her story continues from the end of *My Name is Parvana*?**

### **About the Author**

Deborah Ellis has achieved international acclaim with her courageous, sensitive and dramatic books that give Western readers a glimpse into the plight of children in developing countries. She was awarded the governor General’s Award for her book, *Looking for X*.

Deborah grew up in Ontario, Canada, and from the age of 17 has been a political activist advocating non-violence. After high school she went to Toronto and worked in the Peace Movement. Later she got involved in the Women’s Movement, focusing on women’s rights and economic justice. She continues to be involved in anti-war politics. Deborah has spent a lot of time in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, talking to women and documenting their lives through twenty years of war.