

Women in Conflict: A Study of Afghan English Novels (With Special Reference to Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone*)

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Abstract: Wars are by and large man's creation and women voluntarily or involuntarily get dragged into it. In any war-torn society women always have to face the pitfalls doubly. They as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters have to negotiate space for their men folk and silently live a life of troubles in their own way. Women are the most vulnerable section of any conflict driven society. Violence against women in a conflict and attacks on women conducted by either of the marauding factions of militias across the world are a war tactic, and it is always universally acknowledged fact that while women are punished for the aggressions they have endured; their perpetrators are absolved from punishment. Women are vulnerable to widespread violence during a conflict and face conflict related violence doubly, as part of civilian population and due to their gender. Afghanistan a country bereft of peace for almost four decades has seen her people suffer the horrors of unending conflicts. Like any other conflict zone, in Afghanistan the most potent tool of repression, as used in the theatres of political conflict, are rape, sexual humiliation and sexual torture as a message of retribution to the resistance movement. The land ravaged by warfare, gender conflicts, and poverty for decades altogether has pushed its women to the wall and left them to suffer silently. It also shows that sexual abuse is used systematically to demean the women and their community. The impact of conflict on family life of the women leads to violence within the family. Conflict has impacted the lives of women by reinforcing the patriarchy which aggravates the women's social position. Stigma suffered due to sexual violence and detention in army camps also leads to change in the social positioning rendering women vulnerable to violence within family.

Key Words: Conflict, Trauma, Retribution, Resilience, Patience Stone, Patriarchy, Violence

“What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open”. Muriel Rukeyser

People living in the thick of turmoil, trauma, and chaos of a drawn out conflict are left with no choice but to live through what comes their way. In such conflict driven societies women as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters spend their lives negotiating space for their men folk and living with strife in their own way. Violence against women in a conflict and attacks on women conducted by both pro and anti government militias across the world are a war tactic, and emphasises that while women are punished for the aggressions they have endured; their perpetrators are absolved from punishment. Women are vulnerable to widespread violence during a conflict and face conflict related violence doubly, as part of civilian population and due to their gender. “Women are threatened by all sides of the conflict: by the armed groups which threaten, kill, and rape them; by the male dominated security and police forces which fail to protect them and are often complicit in violence against them; and by criminal groups which take advantage of their desperate circumstances. They are simultaneously betrayed by a broader political, legal and cultural context that allows perpetrators of gender based violence to go free and stigmatizes or punishes victims”(Qtd. in Lemghalef N.P.) The other

preoccupations are sexual assault along with the commodification, disappearances, captivity and torture of women. This paper in no way is an attempt to traduce any single party or country in a dispute but to showcase the gagging and victimization of women in general by the parties involved for their own gains.

Khaled Hosseini in the introduction to Atiq Rahimi's novel *The Patience Stone* (2011) highlights that “...women are the most beleaguered members of Afghan society. Long before the Taliban, Afghan women struggled for basic rights. ... all of this made infinitely worse by three decades of war, displacement and anarchy”(N.P). In marital life in Afghanistan and many other countries around the world, a woman has no sexual rights. She cannot express her desires and even she is not supposed to enjoy sex as it is told in their society code that a wife is needed only for giving birth to a ‘male’ child. Like any other conflict zone, in Afghanistan the most potent tool of repression, as used in the theatres of political conflict, are rape, sexual humiliation and sexual torture as a message of retribution to the resistance movement. The land ravaged by warfare, gender conflicts, and poverty

for decades altogether has pushed its women to the wall and left to suffer silently. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) a novel by Khalid Hosseini recounts the experiences and emotions of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, whose lives become entangled with the history of recent wars in their country. War is a constant companion to the characters of this story, as one political and military faction supplants another. The uncertainty and chaotic socio-political factors affected Mariam and Laila and made Laila more outspoken than Mariam and who is more daring to stand up to Rasheed, their rude misogynist husband.

A Thousand Splendid Suns portrays the daily anguish of Afghan citizens especially women caught in an unending whirlpool of violence and carnage of war. The novelist showcases two resilient women brought together by unexpected turn of circumstances brought about by war. The undaunted spirit of these two women offers a glimpse of spirited resolution in a place where violence and suppression seems to be a routine affair. The novel covers forty years from 1960s to post-September 11, 2001. The novel opens in 1960s where Mariam, an illegitimate child of Jalil, an established businessman, from his housekeeper, Nana, whom he throws away from his house. He did not summon courage to take her as his fourth wife but instead sends her along with her daughter to live in a hut away from the locality. The violence against women is not because of war only. The humiliation Mariam and her mother, Nana, an emotionally unstable woman, face at the hands of Jalil and his family shows the gender discrimination and violence in a patriarchal society. At first the bitterness of Nana and her taunting attitude for Miriam looked uncalled for. She introduces the word 'harami' to her and time and again dissuades her from harboring any hope of acceptance in the society. "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter. Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam" (Hosseini 9). The pessimistically ugly observations of Nana prove right as Mariam is disowned even by Jalil who forcibly marries her off to Rasheed, an aged brute. The mistreatment and violence she faces in Rasheed's house, for failing to produce a male child or a child at all, unmasks the unfavourable socio-cultural system of Afghanistan. The six consecutive miscarriages and the consequent agony she silently bears unquestioningly. "There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school.... Only one skill and it's this: tahamul – endure" (Hosseini 20-21).

The second part of the novel takes us to a house where Laila, a school going girl lives with Babi, her sober father, and her grief-stricken mother who is always concerned about her two Mujahideen sons, who later died fighting the

Soviets. Laila's family is unlike Rasheed and Mariam's or Jalil's. Here Laila's father a school teacher is thrown out of job by the communists. A reclusive bookworm he is very much concerned about the education of his daughter. "Babi had made it clear to Laila from a young age that the most important thing in his life, after her safety, was her schooling... *Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated*" (Hosseini 60). "Laila's nurturing father is different from Mariam's father who marries her off to the barbarous Rasheed. Babi's belief in the education of women runs counter to Rasheed's ignorant domination of Mariam. This contrast is a basic theme of the book" (Null 124).

When the Soviets left, Afghanistan was left to the Afghan war lords to fight for supremacy and control over the country inflicting unspeakable pain and suffering on the civilian population. "And that, my young friends, is the story of our [Afghan] country, one invader after another... Macedonians. Sassanians. Arabs. Mongols. Now the Soviets. But we're like those walls up there. Battered, and nothing pretty to look at, but still standing. Isn't that the truth, *badar*" (Hosseini 150). As the violence intensified with the Mujahideen entering Kabul Tariq, Laila's only childhood friend, left for Peshawar, to a safer place. As the war intensifies Laila is left all alone as her emotional and intellectual support, represented by Tariq and Babi respectively, are taken away from her. Tariq who had left for Pakistan is believed to have been killed in a blast and Babi along with his wife died when a stray missile hit their house. Laila now badly injured finds herself in a hospital where she is taken care of by Rasheed and his wife Mariam. Exploiting her situation, where all her loved ones are already dead, Rasheed marries Laila. All her lofty dreams and aspiration got shattered and she had no choice but to pay back the ill intentioned "mercy" of Rasheed. Rasheed gloats, "The way I see it, I deserve a medal" (Hosseini 193). The shared victimhood of Mariam and Laila brings them together as they "discover that they are both victims, not just of the violence of the war around them or of Afghanistan's patriarchal culture but also of Rasheed's temper and unpredictability" (Null 125). The chilling weather of Afghanistan and a sense of insecurity aggravated by war remind Mariam of "what Nana had once said to her that each snowflake is a sigh heaved by an aggrieved woman somewhere in the world. As a reminder of how women like us suffer, she'd said. How quietly we endure all that falls upon us" (Hosseini 95).

As the novel progresses Mariam and Laila realize that they can help each other endure their daily fear and humiliation, and thus the novel becomes more focused on the daily lives of Afghan women during the time the extremists controlled the country. The double standards and hypocrisy of men like Rasheed in a society controlled by

extremist zealots imposed on women their strict, extreme laws requiring them to stay inside and wear the burqa. Expressing her own desire for sex or talking freely about orgasm to even one's own husband may be termed as a chasteless and debasing activity for a woman. Even talking about these 'dicey' topics by a woman is considered vulgar. Mariam in a comely manner satirizes on the facade when she accidentally finds a magazine of nude women in Rasheed's room. "And what about all his talk of honor and propriety, his disapproval of the female customers, who, after all, were only showing him their feet to get fitted for shoes? *A woman's face*, he'd said, *is her husband's business only*. Surely the women on these pages had husbands, some of them must. At the least, they had brothers. If so, why did Rasheed insist that *she* cover when he thought nothing of looking at the private areas of other men's wives and sisters?" (Hosseini 87). The motif of the novel is violence against women, which shows its ugliest face in a conflict torn society like Afghanistan. The bond of sisterhood between Laila and Mariam offers a hope that when the oppression goes too far, whether it be an individual or the state, whether in peace or war, the victim can rise to protect the ones they love, even at the cost of her life.

The patience Stone, written by Atiq Rahimi is a melodramatic novel set amid factional violence "somewhere in Afghanistan or elsewhere", shows a woman in a ruined warzone speaking her mind to her vegetative husband. Here a nameless woman who is also the narrator divulges damning secrets to her husband's unresponsive body and fulfilling the book's premise a little too obviously by referring to him as her "patience stone". Sang-e-Saboor (*The patience Stone*) is the name of a magical stone which absorbs the plight of those who confide in it. The stone, after hearing its fill of hardship and pain, it explodes. It is believed that it listens to the secrets, the miseries and having received too much pain and hardships it finally explodes and thereby relieving the person, who confides in it, of all sufferings and worries. In the novel the Sang-e-Saboor is not a stone but a man, a war hero, who lies comatose with a bullet lodged in his neck. His wife who is sitting by his side cleans him, moistens his open eyes, and feeds him a sugar/salt solution through a drip. She resents him for his present state and sacrificing her to the war, only for wanting to be a hero. His incapacitated being is responsible for the plight of her two young daughters. He never resisted the call to war, never caring for his wife and children, only to prove a male chauvinistic hero of war. First as an obedient wife she politely talks to her husband and endlessly prays for him. Kneeling next to him, fingering her prayer beads she chants the ninety nine names of Allah for the recovery of her husband, as was instructed by the mullah. In spite of many weeks of continuous prayers without any fail he is still unresponsive.

Amid the unwelcome visits of the mullah to her house only to reprimand her and the intrusion of sexually menacing soldiers into her house, she gradually comes to pour out a fierce treatise on women's place in society, love, sex, marriage, and war.

While her neighborhood has become the front line in a civil war the Woman feeds him water through a tube, holds his hand, soothes his feverish brow, cleans him, and chases away the flies that enter his open mouth, and dutifully says her prayers as a good Muslim. Her husband's family refused to help her deal with her present situation and left her and her two daughters without any resources and safety. Distraught by the fears and dangers, she leaves her house only to leave her two daughters with her aunt and always returns to care for her husband, without really knowing why. While caring for her husband, the woman pours out her heart to his still and silent body, recalling the pain and suffering she has endured in her ten years of marriage to this much older man beginning when she was only 17 years old. With each passing day she starts to lose her courage and devotion, she stops invoking Allah's names altogether. In her stream-of-consciousness monologues, she expresses a variety of emotions including fear, anger, regret, and dismay over her current plight. She recalls her childhood in her abusive father's house, her forced marriage to a man who was always on the battle front, even on the wedding day. "And so I had to be married, despite your absence. At the ceremony, you were present in the form of a photo, and that wretched khanjar, which they put next to me in place of you. And I had to wait another three years for you. Three years! For three years I wasn't allowed to see my friends, or my family ... It was not considered proper for a young married virgin to spend time with other married women. Such rubbish" (Rahimi 54). She describes him as an insensitive and abusive man more at home with men than with her. She resents his obsession with war and his desire to be a hero.

In the last section of *The Patience Stone*, the Woman timid and hesitant at first breaks loose to pour her heart out with bitter, crazy words from her inner self which had been holed up for too long. She taunts Allah and His hell, lashes out at men and their never ending wars. The Woman goes as far as to reveal her inner thoughts and secrets and talks about her unexplored sexual desires and then acts on them. She recalls being raped by her husband and treated like vermin by him when she was menstruating. One, who was always quietly praying, now screams. Once living in silence and self sacrificing abnegation, she now emerges as a human being, a woman.

With bombs often exploding nearby, two marauding warriors enter her house and to save herself being raped she tells them she sells her body as they sell their blood, only to be abhorred

being morally unclean as per the Holy books. However she begins a relationship with the younger stuttering warrior who had come back with some money to demand her services. She had no choice but to submit and she tutors him in the art of making love which she had not received throughout her married life from her husband.

Ultimately her *Patience Stone* after listening to her pains, frustrations, agony, sexual misadventures, and unspeakable secrets, explodes. He unexpectedly wakes up and grabs her throat; she stabs him with the khanjar into the heart. But this dying stiff, dry man had strength enough to first to dash her head against the wall and then strangle her, liberating her from all sorts of oppressions and bondages. The unnamed oppressed Afghan Woman wins our empathy with the truth of her confession and the daring of her sexual expression. The daring unnamed woman in the novel is a mouthpiece for the grievances of millions of women who silently face and absorb the brunt of war, the brutality of men, and the religious, marital, and cultural norms that assault Afghan women unabatedly. In the words of Khaled Hosseini the novel gives "voice to those who, as the fable goes, suffer the most and cry out the least" (Rahimi N.P.).

Therefore, it is always a fact and very poignantly shown in the novels also that in a conflict women are faced with situations of bleeding life and smiling death. And in this game of death, which is always man's creation, women are the biggest silent victims. As usual in any conflict, of whatever nature it may be, two things

are definite casualties; one is truth and the other women. In Afghanistan both have happened and that too rather brazenly. The country has mostly been kept involved in war by various vested interests whether internal or external aggressors, never given a chance to shun the tag of a patriarchal, tribal, violent, intolerant society. The ignorance and brutality of the society casts a deep dismal impact on the lives of people in general and women in particular. One of the most important questions we can ask is this: Can a history of regional military or civilian conflict contribute to the rising rate of human rights violations, marginalization, exploitation, human trafficking, specifically sex-trafficking. The answer is yes. "The significance of rape as a gender specific form of abuse in Afghanistan must be understood in the context of the subordinate status of women generally in South Asia, as in much of the rest of the world," said Human Rights Watch (HRW) in a 1995 special report. It also shows that sexual abuse is used to demean the women and their community at large and is systematically perpetrated against them. The impact of conflict on family life of the women leads to violence within the family. Conflict has impacted the lives of women by reinforcing the patriarchy which aggravates the women's social position. Stigma suffered due to sexual violence and detention in army camps also leads to change in the social positioning rendering women vulnerable to violence within family. Going through various trials and tribulations the women characters should be lauded for their resilience during the long conflict.

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