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Between Gender and Conflict: Reclaiming Narratives in Selected Short Stories by Afghan Women Writers

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Abstract: Colonialism/Imperialism determines how the colonised is represented in popular discourses. The Afghan conflict, a product of foreign imperialist and native traditional ideological clash, has likewise disoriented the literary representation of the Afghan people, particularly Afghan women. In this regard, the native women writers' literature holds utmost significance to dissect the socio-political landscape and its association with gender. Emerging from the strain of postcolonial literary resistance, Afghan women writers' short fiction counters their absence or distorted representation in mainstream narratives. Translated from the original Dari and Pashto languages into English, they defy the homogenous interpretation of their perspectives through the multifaceted interplay of gender and conflict. This paper aims to analyse three short stories by Afghan women writers through a Postcolonial feminist lens. With a specific focus on the intersectional aspect of the Postcolonial feminist perspectives, the paper endeavours to analyse the relative impact of gender bias and conflict, which have disproportionately shaped Afghan women's identities.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Afghan women, resistance, gender, conflict.

Introduction

In her book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013), the Palestinian-American anthropologist, Lila Abu Lughod counters the misrepresentation of Muslim women in popular narratives referred to by scholar Dohra Ahmed as pulp non-fiction. These memoirs and autobiographical accounts typically feature protagonists "with feminist ideals who do not want to remain trapped in their strange and sordid worlds" (88). These works follow the pattern of singled out woman singlehandedly or in a group fighting for freedom which implies "escaping not just the Muslim men who torment them but their own communities and cultures" (101).

The position of Afghan women under the religious extremist regimes in the late 20th century prompted the abundant production of literature sharing the similar strain. This genre of the "oppressed Muslim woman" serves as a fundamental element of Gendered Orientalism, a concept perpetuating the Western scrutiny of Muslim cultures, portraying them as inherently regressive and in need of intervention. Through the dramatic portrayal of forced marriages, marital rape, polygamy and religious oppression, these representations reinforces the notion of women's oppression being an integral and unwavering characteristic of these societies, overlooking the complex socio-political and historical contexts. As a result, the reinforcement of subjugated Muslim women stereotype relegates the entire culture to the monolithic discourse of oppression. This representation transcends literary context transforming into a political tool to legitimize imperialist interventions. However, the militarization that follows imperialist endeavors often result in far more devastating consequences than the cultural practices being condemned. "Militarization always has hidden consequences for women; these surely have more force than culture or tradition." (Abu Lughod 53) Ironically the women portrayed as in need of rescue become most vulnerable to the brutality that accompanies war, occupation and political upheaval. The profound impact of such imperialist endeavours far transcends the influence of any cultural or traditional practice, perpetuating the cycles of conflict in these societies, where gendered oppression is exacerbated rather than abolished.

By casting Muslim culture as the exclusive means of women's oppression, Gendered Orientalism diverts attention from the socio-political and economic repercussions of imperialist projects. "Blaming culture means not just flattening cultures, stripping moral systems of their complexities, and hiding the most modern political and social interventions that no community escapes; it means erasing history" (Abu Lughod 136). By suggesting that culture, rather than global power dynamics as responsible for their adversity, this approach not only misrepresents the true causes of gender oppression in these societies but also deflects responsibility from the foreign powers that destabilize entire regions under the guise of liberation.

The anthologies of translated short fiction, *My Pen is the Wing of a Bird* (2022) and *Under the Kabul Sky* (2022) offer a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in Afghanistan, going beyond the generalized depiction. The sociopolitical consequences of war dominate the influence of gender, stripping it of its autonomous agency. This interconnectedness of Afghan women's experiences is vital to understand the

unique challenges faced by them, who must navigate not only gendered expectations but also the ramifications of war. The analysis of selected stories in this paper emphasizes how these converging dimensions shape women's lives, offering a profound understanding of their realities.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a Postcolonial feminist framework for the analysis of the selected short stories by Afghan women writers. Postcolonial feminism critiques the intersection of colonial/imperialist legacies, socio-political landscape and gender dynamics, challenging both universalizing disposition of Western feminism and local patriarchies. A significant aspect of this approach lies in its emphasis on Intersectionality, which facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the convergence of the social, cultural and political factors to shape Afghan women's identities.

Drawing on Lila Abu-Lughod's critique of popular non-fiction for the misrepresentation of Muslim women, the paper highlights how Afghan women's writing counters the reductive portrayals that attribute their oppression exclusively to cultural factors. These narratives, instead, expose the devastating repercussions of imperialist interventions and war, which often surpass and exacerbate the impact of cultural factors.

Intersecting Axes of Oppression

The first short story titled "Silver Ring" by Freshta Ghani, translated from Pashto by Shekiba Habib poignantly illustrates the harsh realities faced by women in the aftermath of war. It narrates the tale of a woman whose life takes a dramatic turn when her husband, a soldier in army is killed in war. After the husband's death, the family is pushed into drastic penury as the wife is left behind to take care of their five children. Her financial situation compels her to wash people's clothes for meager wages and to borrow food to feed her children. As a result of her poor health condition coupled with lacking social assistance, she is forced to sell her husband's first wedding gift, a silver ring, of which she says, "Even when I die I won't have it taken off my finger." (Ghani 135)

The familial setup in which the husband takes the financial responsibilities and the wife carries domestic responsibilities resonates with the broader social arrangements of Afghanistan. These social arrangements are rooted in accordance with the majority (73%) rural population with limited educational and economic opportunities, lending a traditional essence to the broader socio-cultural dynamics. The cultural

landscape of Afghanistan is characterized by the centrality of the family and kinship system, intertwined with the notions of honor, a deeply embedded sense of communal identity and a lifestyle reinforcing restraint and modesty, as valorized through both cultural and religious principles. “More permanent, enduring and influential in Afghan social structure than classes, interest groups and social organization is the family.” (Wilber 88) The well knitted social setup based on family stability, cultural continuity, community harmony, ethical order and economic functionality operates in a certain cultural context as, "civilization is not something absolute, but ... is relative, and ... our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes" (Boas 589). Cultural relativism upholds that cultures cannot be objectively judged as inferior or superior according to external standards but evaluated and understood through the lens of their own culturally acquired norms. The familial system in the story is a practical arrangement aligning with the broader community's well being, values and social harmony, providing security and protection to women.

The conflict, however, acts as a catalyst for disintegration of social structures, subjecting the wife to an intersectional form of marginalization. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term ‘Intersectionality’ while analyzing the double discrimination of sexism and racism experienced by Black women, defining it “as a metaphor for understanding the ways the multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking” (Crenshaw 1989). The phenomenon of Intersectionality emphasizes the ways in which multiple factors intersect and reinforce one another leading to a compounded impact on individuals.

The unexpected shift to financial responsibility due to her husband's death not only disrupts her culturally rooted sense of security but also exposes the rigidity of traditional gender roles. Her love and persistent grief for her husband and her daughter's reminiscence about the past happiness and prosperity in her family showcases the reliable and fulfilling nature of the familial setup implying that traditional roles for women are not inherently oppressive. War, nevertheless, results in disproportional vulnerability of women by interrupting the very socio-economic conditions that make traditional arrangements functional. When the protective function of the conventional systems collapses, the dissonance between cultural norms and demands of the conflict is highlighted. Though the traditional roles protect women in stability, their effectiveness is contingent on socio-economic and political conditions remaining intact as they often fail to

equip them with skills or economic alternatives in times of adversities like war. The wife's status as a woman relying on the traditional system for survival and protection renders her vulnerable and the war makes her condition precarious by acting on her vulnerability. The war-induced socio-economic fragility intersects with her gender to create a compounded marginalization for her.

Cultural relativist perspectives are often criticized for overlooking the wrongs perpetuated within certain traditions and as such providing, "cultural excuses for women's oppression" (Okin 46). Although traditional roles provide stability during peaceful times, they are rigid, restrictive and conditional upon the socio-economic and political stability. However, the large-scale destruction of social structures during political conflicts far exceeds the disruptions experienced in times of relative peace. As Cohn observes, "Wars destroy long-evolved bonds of trust among individuals and within communities, and leave communities devastated both directly, in war-torn societies, and indirectly, as the impacts of war and conflict ripple out from the centers of fighting in the form of economic disruptions, refugee flows, infrastructural damage, and political instabilities" (Cohn, 2013, p. 36). These disruptions fracture the social fabric that sustains communal bonds, dismantling systems of support and interdependence. For women, the impact of war proves more profound than cultural norms, as it amplifies the women like the wife's marginalization by collapsing socio-economic foundations, undermining traditional support systems and forcing them into the role for which they are unprepared.

Spaces of Resistance

The second short story "Imprint on the Wall" by Masouma Kawsari, translated from Dari by Parwana Fayaz, narrates the story of a girl named Ranna. Her father is a soldier in Taliban army fighting against Soviets who later changes political beliefs and becomes people's representative in parliament. During the fighting he smuggles Ranna and her mother to Iran and returns to his country for fighting. Because his wife could not give him a son, he married for a second time, explaining "I just could not leave my inheritance to my daughter" (Kawsari 119). Ranna and her mother survive in a foreign land by weaving carpets and return to their country after seventeen years only to find out her father's beliefs have remained unchanged. She works in an architect firm and takes care of her mother with Alzheimer. The story takes a tragic turn when an

explosion throws the bits of her lower body into air and leaves the upper half lifeless in a street, instantly ending her life.

The father's initial beliefs as a jihadi fighting against the Soviets attributes his actions with a religious connotation, implying that his motivations are embedded in faith. By denying leaving an inheritance for his daughter, however, he conforms more to social pressures grounded in gender bias than to religious standards. In Islam, women are explicitly granted the right to inheritance, as outlined in the chapter Nisa (The Women) of the Holy Quran: "Allah decrees a will for your children; the male gets twice the share of the female" (Q. 4:11). The division of inheritance may align with the distinctive financial responsibilities of men and women in Islamic law, the mandate clarifies that women are entitled to a share of family wealth.

The denial of inheritance to women is therefore a violation of religious principles and adherence to gender bias prevalent in many patriarchal societies. Wealth and property, in such societies, are conventionally passed through the male lineage, corresponding with the conviction that men are the natural inheritors and protectors of family assets. On the other hand, women are perceived as temporary part of the families who join another household after marriage. This view diminishes women's status within families, propagating gender inequality, depriving women of financial autonomy and consolidating their dependence on male family members.

As a target of war and gender bias, these factors compound the impact on the life of Ranna, resulting in her double marginalization. Double marginalization can be considered as a precursor of Intersectionality, where multiple forms of oppression, such as gender, race, class, or war merge to produce a summative and often overwhelming effect on individuals. While Intersectionality emphasizes the ways in which these factors intersect and reinforce one another, double marginalization highlights how two or more forms of oppression together create a cumulative effect on an individual. The compounding factors in the story, however, vary in intensity and damage caused to the subject.

The violation of her rights is rooted in deeply entrenched gender bias embedded within the social fabric. The gender bias often transcends the private domain to influence the broader societal and systemic structures but in Ranna's case it predominantly affects her private life, shaping the family dynamics and restricting her individual agency. It is evident in the discriminatory treatment she endures through her father's

decision to remarry in pursuit of a male heir. The consequences of war, in contrast, are immediate and life-threatening, which abruptly disrupt the societal structures and undermine public security and proceed to permeate the private sphere to tear her family apart and reshape their lives. War inflicts profound mental and physical tolls through death, displacement and destruction. Ranna's experience of a seventeen-year exile, the perpetual struggle for survival in a foreign land and eventual death highlight the overarching and catastrophic impact of war, relegating the pervasive yet restricted and less immediate effects of gender bias to a secondary status.

In her book, *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia* (2008), Anandita Ghosh explores the experience of Indian women during British by pointing out how Indian women have been "silenced doubly" in the colonial context (Ghosh 1). "We see women as a silent shadow, veiled and mute before her oppressors, and unquestionably accepting a discourse that endorses her subordination.....for the colonial state this was a part of a strategy to perpetuate domination: helpless and weak Indian women in need of protection provided one moral justification for colonial rule" (1). Later, "Indian men constructed their women as the repositories of all that was pure and worthy in their cultures". (1) Both the ways perpetuated the perspective of Indian women as passive and weak having little or no agency over their lives.

Similarly, Afghan women, whose realities are profoundly shaped by the intricate socio-politics dynamics, are often portrayed as passive victims devoid of agency and resilience. Ranna defies this representation as the insidious and gradual existence of gender bias permits a certain degree of resistance and negotiation unlike the blunt force of conflict. Ranna's efforts to resist gender bias through her pursuit of education and employment highlight her resilience and determination she actively employs to negotiate the deprivation imposed by patriarchal norms. However, this resistance sharply contrasts with her helplessness in the face of the existential threat posed by bomb blasts. While Ranna navigates and challenges gender-based oppression to some degree, the violation of her most fundamental right, the right to live pushes the violation of her right to inheritance into the background, reconfiguring the context in which oppression is experienced and resisted. Gender bias is a chronic issue that defines the protagonist's life trajectory, but the broader

structural violence of war overshadows gender-specific oppression in terms of its life-threatening, immediate and indiscriminate nature.

Dislocation and Unsettling Identities

In the third short story, "The Paper Cradle" by Parween Pazhwak, a family escapes the ravages of war to start a new life in a foreign country. Amidst the adversities of refugee life, their newborn dies in a camp from a scorpion bite. The economic challenges of a newly found livelihood in an unfamiliar country make the husband realize that having more children into the uncertainty would only proliferate their suffering. Therefore, he forbids his wife from bearing more children, prioritizing instead the financial wellbeing of her, their two children and his parents, who remain in exile elsewhere. When his wife conceives again, he forces her to terminate the pregnancy. This decision leaves her drowning in guilt and sorrow, haunted by the memories of her unborn child.

There exists a fundamental dissonance between the husband and wife's desires and aspirations, aligning with the discord between the customization to their previous life and the compelling adaptation to the new one. While the husband primarily focuses on securing a stable life for his family, the wife yearns to have more children, resonating with the traditional perspective on motherhood and family once cherished in their homeland. War, however, emerges as an external force that disorganizes the familiar patterns they were accustomed to, demanding that they adapt their aspirations to a new reality. Emile Durkheim in his book *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1982) introduces the concept of social facts defining it as a category of facts consisting "manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him" (52). In the story, war operates as a powerful social fact, coercing the family to rearrange their beliefs, values and actions under its pervasive influence.

According to Durkheim, social facts are societal forces largely influenced by political, economic and ideological structures that exist independently of individual thoughts and shape collective behaviors and attitudes. War as a social and political phenomenon transcends autonomous perspectives, as it is shaped by large-scale societal forces and impacts entire populations. The characters in this story are severely impacted as war disrupts their individual choices and transfigures their social reality. It drives them into exile, away from

their homeland, setting off a chain of challenges from displacement to resettlement in an unfamiliar country. Their autonomy is restricted and traditional family dynamics are disrupted as survival becomes conditional upon their economic situation in the foreign land.

This shift in family dynamics is evident as the husband is compelled by his economic concern to not only relinquish his inner want of expanding their family but also impose his choices upon his wife. The survival and financial stability take precedence over the revered norms of motherhood and the extension of family. Weighed down by the war-induced poverty, the husband's compulsive ways to sustain his family influences not only his wife's psychology by traumatizing her with the forced abortion but also her bodily autonomy by exerting control over her reproductive choices.

In this intricate situation, the husband's decisions cease to be autonomous and are largely dictated by the pervasive forces of war. He becomes, in essence, a puppet to the mechanisms of conflict, where his autonomy is overborne by the external pressures of poverty, displacement and survival. Throughout the situation, the wife endures the cumulative repercussions of both war and her husband's dominance. Incapable of redesigning her desires to fit the stark new realities, she becomes subject to his imposed decisions and abuses, which compound the burdens she encounters. She experiences the intersecting forces of war and male authority, with war serving as the primary catalyst for these intertwined effects. The forced abortion becomes a profound source of trauma, plunging her into deep guilt and sorrow as she continuously grieves for her unborn child.

The process of displacement and resettlement exerts profound impact on the intra familial relationships. Initially, the husband prioritizes his wife's and the children's comfort by ensuring they receive food and water before attending to his own needs and demonstrates sympathy and care for her while she nurses their infant in the refugee camp. However, this concern and care gradually give way to dominance as he begins to impose his decisions through violence, even striking her to assert control. This shift underscores how the emotional, social, and economic repercussions of collective forces like war reconfigure family dynamics, drifting them away from harmony and towards dysfunction.

Conclusion

The intersectional study of the short stories brings to light the factors responsible for women's marginalization, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the diverse forces at play. Moving beyond the monolithic cultural critique perpetuated in popular nonfiction, this paper highlights how both culture and society lose their autonomous agency under the larger, pervasive power of imperialism. Gender dynamics, though fundamentally perceived through universal themes, undergo profound transformations under the impact of war. Conflict exacerbates the existing problems and disrupts social structures, generating unprecedented challenges that profoundly influence individual circumstances and collective identities.

Within these narratives, Afghan women confront unique challenges as death, displacement, poverty, trauma and struggle for survival become defining aspects of their routine existence, profoundly impacting their perception of reality. This paper emphasizes the significance of a multidimensional approach centering on the interplay between gender, culture and conflict for a comprehensive understanding of the marginalized experiences and perspectives explored.

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