

Rigmarole of Perpetual Servitude of Women: Reflections on Atiq Rahimi's *the Patience Stone*

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Running my eyes over the annoying news report "Rape Victim Faces Honour Killing" in *The Hindu* dated July 21, I was dumbstruck and reminded of the most woeful existence of women in Afghanistan depicted by Atiq Rahimi in his novella *The Patience Stone* and the poignant statement of the popular novelist Khalid Hosseini about forlorn Afghanistan women in his introduction to the novel. In *The Hindu*, it was reported that at Kunduz in Afghanistan, a ten year old tiny girl was raped by a Mullah in the sanctity of a mosque after Koran recitation. It was highly abominable and calamitous that the anger of the public was not against the rapist but on the pitiable victim and her well wishers. The Mullah, even without slightest compunction, nonchalantly claimed that he had thought that the girl was seventeen and offered to marry her. The activists who sought justice for the forsaken victim were intimidated by the supporters of the Mullah and the Government alike. It is daunting that, the girl's aunt declared that "they wanted to take her and kill her and dump her in the river" (Rod Nordland 12). The girl's mother, the only human being with some sympathy for her bemoans and wails in agony the heart rending words, "We will make you a bed of dust and soil. We will be safe"(12).

It is deplorable that women do not enjoy liberty and opportunities on par with men. Technological advancements and drastic changes in socio-economic paradigms could not vouch for equality to women. Violence against women is a global scourge and they are susceptible to abuse, brutality and reduced life chances. The mighty grip of primitive social norms and lopsided moral codes detain women and they have to launch a stiff affray for recognition and acceptance. Simon de Beauvoir succinctly sums up the predicament of women as follows:

[A woman] is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to her. She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other. (13)

The present paper seeks to analyse the torments and tortures of women in the war torn Afghanistan unmasked by Atiq Rahimi in *The Patience Stone*. Discerning the miserable plight of beleaguered women in Afghan, Hosseini remarks that they "continue to languish under unquestioned, absolute domination of tribal customs that deprive them of meaningful participation in social life. For too long Afghan women have been faceless and voiceless" (*The Patience Stone*. Introduction). *The Patience Stone* is a stirring/gripping story and its action occurs in a single room where

the unnamed female protagonist tenderly nurses her severely bruised husband who lies motionless. In the course of tending the man, the miserable wife prays fervently for his well being and laments her fears, aspirations and even intimate secrets. Concurrent to her prayers and confessions, gunshots are heard outside which makes her two daughters wail of panic and adds to the eerie atmosphere. Like the mythical tutular stone, the man patiently harks the discourses of the woman and at last in a dream like sequence, he gets up and strangles her.

Leaving out the story line, what draws the attention of the readers towards *The Patience Stone* is the delineation of the most excruciating state of Afghan women who struggle to survive without means to live, voice to articulate and identity to cling on. To quote Hosseini again who enunciates that, "Rahimi's nameless heroine is a conduit, a living vessel for the grievances of millions of women like her, women who have been objectified, marginalised, scorned, beaten, ridiculed, silenced" (Introduction). Through the judicious introduction of a nameless protégé, the author generalises her experiences to all women in Afghan.

One of the sordid facts about the rueful existence of Afghan women is their exclusion from quotidian domestic affairs and they have to depend on men for anything and everything. As her husband is not recovering very quickly, the protagonist is much worried and in her utter dismay she even fears that her neglect of prayers may be the cause for it. "She touches the man's arm. But you are my witness. You know that I live only for you, at your side, by your breath" (Rahimi 9). In the course of the prayer, she avers that her husband is wounded in a war for Allah's sake. Her love and respect for her husband make her claim, "I swear, I wont ever let him go off to fight again like a bloody idiot. Not even in your name. He will be mine, here with me" (17). The protagonist vividly demonstrates that a woman is a non entity merely depending on men. She cries, "Without you, I have nothing. Think of your daughters. What will I do with them" (14).

Rahimi attempts to substantiate that the women in Afghan are still under the clutches of asymmetrical and monstrous tribal customs which are very strong to break or too tall to scale over. Shabnam Nasimi rightly observes that, "the strict tribal norms, gendered values and religious extremism which are embedded in the history of Afghanistan have been associated with gross violations of the rights of women . . ." (www.opendemocracy.net). To underscore the boorish nature of marital laws and customs in Afghanistan, the author graphically presents the marriage of the protégé in the absence of the bridegroom. As the bridegroom is fighting a

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war, his mother came to the place of the protagonist and proposed her younger sister. Since it is not the younger sister's turn for marriage, her mother-in-law expressed her desire to marry the protagonist for her son. She very casually said, "No problem, we'll take her instead". These words bear proof to the fact that women are considered as mere commodities. Her father, without taking into account either the sensibilities and desires of the protagonist or the wishes of her mother, another voiceless victim, accepted the proposal. "My father, who wanted nothing more, accepted without the slightest hesitation. He didn't give a damn that you weren't around" (53).

The protagonist is engaged to the soldier with the promise that the war will be over and he will be back soon. A year later, as the war doesn't come to an end, the marriage is arranged in the absence of the bridegroom. Rahimi exposes the anguish of the protagonist in the following words: "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 Khanyar, which they put next to me in place of you. And I had to wait another three years for you" (54).

Further, after marriage, tribal customs dog the protagonist by curtailing her freedom and by imposing a severe moral code. She is not allowed to meet her friends or members of her family as it is considered improper "for a young married virgin to spend time with other married women" (54). Her mother-in-law keenly observes her movements and forbids even her father-in-law to talk to her.

To throw more light on the insecurity of women in family, Rahimi depicts the family of the protagonist. There are seven girls in the family who long and starve for love and affection. To spotlight on the precarious existence of women, the author draws a comparison between the quails in the house and the daughters. Recollecting her past, the protagonist avers, "All my dad cared about were his quails, his fighting quails! I often saw him kissing those quails, but never my mother, nor us, his children" (57).

Inflicting tortures on women is a common practice in Afghan families. Whenever the protagonist's father fails in gambling he will let lose violence in his house. "When he lost he would get upset, and nasty. He would come home in a rage and find any pretext to beat us . . . and also my mother. She stops herself. The pain stops her. A pain that spreads to the tips of her fingers and digs them more deeply into the roots of her black hair" (58).

To cap it all a father in Afghanistan always reckons a daughter a worthless object. The protagonist's father once loses in a bet. As he has no money to pay he happily gives away his twelve year old daughter to another man. "He had no money left to honour his bet, so he gave my sister instead. At twelve year old, my sister was sent to live with a man of forty" (58-59). In confirmation of the heinous act of the father Nasimi opines that in Afghan, "Some girls are battered into marriage to repay debt or resolve a dispute".

The protagonist blows a gasket and in her fury she opens the cage and lets the quail out. Very soon the bird falls a prey to a stray cat that savours the quail. In her boundless anger she

even feels jealous of the cat and licks the blood of the quail spilt on the ground. When her father learns what has happened, he rains blow on the protagonist, her mother and sisters. In mad frenzy due to his excessive love for the quail, he shuts the protagonist along with a cat in a cellar with a fond hope that the cat will pounce at her and tear to pieces when it becomes hungry. Luckily, due to the availability of rats in the room, the cat eats the rats and spares the protagonist. This incident highlights the inhuman treatment meted to women in Afghan.

Rahimi brings within the corpus of the text, the most deplorable plight of a childless woman who is an aunt of the protagonist to focus on the miserable state of barren women in Afghanistan. The aunt is a beautiful woman married to a rich man. As she fails to bring forth a child within two years of her married life, she is thrown out of the family, only to be abused or ill treated by others. "As she was both beautiful and infertile, her father-in-law used to fuck her without a care in the world" (86). Eventually, she is deserted by her parents as well as in-laws and thrown to the streets like garbage.

Rahimi is careful enough to put on record that, the women in Afghan are reticent victims who encounter oppression, torture, humiliation and abuses of all sorts in every phase of life. Rahimi blatantly posits that religion, nation, society and family are ever waiting to subdue Afghan women with their monstrous tentacles. The Mullah insults and accuses the protagonist for the pathetic state of her husband; the mother-in-law always tries to subdue her; the soldiers and the brother of her husband try to deprave her morally – all try to maim her one way or other.

In Afghanistan, a woman is just a piece of meat, sans emotions, feelings, and likes or dislikes. Women are treated as just objects to satiate men's carnal desires. The protagonist touches and cares for her husband only when he is in an unconscious state. "I can touch you. . . . You never let me touch you, never! She moves towards the man's mouth. I have never kissed you" (66). On the contrary the husband's observation is worth mentioning ". . . Hide your meat! I was a piece of meat, into which you could stuff your dirty dick. Just to rip it apart, to make it bleed".

Towards the close of the novella, Rahimi derives home the disturbing revelation that the redemption of Afghan women is a distant dream. After listening to the lengthy candid confession of the protagonist, her husband, gets back to life mysteriously, in a dream like sequence and forcefully strangles her. The man's resurgence symbolically decodes that the orthodox patriarchal norms, primitive cultural precepts and lopsided moral codes may be hidden and appear mute like the bruised soldier but will not allow women to extricate from debilitating entanglements. Rahimi's narration of the harrowing experiences of women in Afghanistan reminds of the agonising fact, "the position of girls and women remains bleak" (Nasimi).

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