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The Patience Stone: Voice of The ‘Other’

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Abstract:

Woman is represented in a secondary role in literature for a long time. But in modern literature their representation has changed significantly. Woman now asserts her identity as equal and powerful in social status. Especially women writers exhibit tireless struggle for their rights through literature. But there are some male writers also whose depiction of womanhood has been extraordinarily heart-warming and even excels women writers. Afghan Diaspora writers like Atiq Rahimi, a French-Afghan writer, are among those talented personalities who have created extraordinary women characters in their writing. The Patience Stone displays such unique female characters who voice the oppression and struggle of Afghan women. The Patience Stone appeared in 2012, as an international sensation, it deals with certain issues that are still taboo in Afghan society. Originally written in French, the novella is about an Afghan woman who has been looking after her comatose husband and two little daughters. The novel portrays the manifold hardships of Afghan women in a very bold and unique manner. The story comes through the monologues of a female, the unnamed woman character. She explores the Afghan womanhood to extreme limits through an unconventional approach to Afghan culture. The Patience Stone symbolizes the struggle of voiceless and veiled women under Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism and patriarchy. In this novel Rahimi does not hesitate to voice the sexual life of Afghan women. The unorthodox description of desires and fantasies of women is so vivid that Rahimi excels even female writers. The strength of novel lies in shameless and unlicensed exhibition of womanhood and a blow to the age old world-infamous patriarchy of Afghanistan.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Oppression, Woman, Taliban, Afghan

Women have always been a significant part of literature, but in a secondary role. In modern literature the representation of women has changed, unveiling her from her ‘specific role’. She has now been fighting to improve her social status through feminism, a broad term which advocates the equality of sexes and equal rights to women. Feminist workers, thinkers and writers throughout the world are striving to achieve this same goal. Although their goal is similar yet the circumstances differ in accordance with nations and localities. Hence feminists agree partially that gender equality and women’s rights are universal values. The western feminism is not directly applicable to the emancipation of Asian and African woman. Especially nations like Afghanistan are no less than a haunted castle for women. In

Afghanistan there is an abundance of helpless widowbegging for food and forced marriages of small girls. High death rates during maternity, murder, incest, abduction, rape, domestic violence, self-immolation, lack of education, acid attacks and burning of school girls, caged women, wearing of *burqa*, victims of patriarchy and fundamentalism are some of the other hardships faced by Afghan women. The condition of women is taken to be natural in Afghanistan and those who try to escape it are further victimized in the name of honor killing.

In feministic terms Afghan social set-up is horribly gendered, patriarchal and paternalistic. It is absolutely preoccupied by masculine honor and justice. Women are controlled physically, domestically and biologically by men and revelation of any incident leads to rejection and elimination by their own family. Integrated Regional Information Networks of the United Nations reports;

- *Every 30 minutes, an Afghan woman dies during childbirth.*
- *87 percent of Afghan women are still illiterate.*
- *1 in every 3 Afghan women experience physical and psychological or sexual violence.*
- *44 years is now the average life expectancy for women across the country.*
- *70-80 percent of Afghan women face forced marriage in Afghanistan.*

These facts reveal the predicament of women in Afghanistan. The reason of such pitiable condition of Afghan women has its origin in long and deep rooted oppressive patriarchal order. Taliban's radio announcement of decrees of *Sharia* Law exemplifies the orient status of women as;

- *Girls and women are not allowed to work outside the home;*
- *All women who have to leave their houses must be accompanied by a mahram;*
- *Public transport will be segregated, with a bus for women and a separate bus for men;*
- *Suits are prohibited. Traditional Afghani dress must be worn;*
- *Women and girls must wear burqa;*
- *Women and girls are forbidden to wear brightly colored clothes beneath their burqa;*
- *Nail polish, lipstick and make-up are forbidden;*
- *A woman cannot take a taxi unless she is accompanied by a mahram;*
- *No male doctor is permitted to touch the body of a woman under the pretext of a consultation;*
- *A woman may not go to a men's tailor;*

- *A young woman must not engage in conversation with a young man. If they do so, they must be married immediately after this breach;*
- *Engaged women may not go to beauty salon even during the preparation for a marriage;*
- *All offenders against the decrees of the Sharia Law will be punished on the public square.*(Latifa)

Now the question is how literature responds to such predicament? The recent history of Afghanistan is of great upheavals and turmoil. Soviet invasion, local warlord's conflicts, Taliban's regime and America's interference have made Afghan people war-weary. Consequently many people have fled to safer places and such people have memories of their motherland for inheritance. Some of them are highly sensitive and sensible and narrate their stories in words in fiction, memoirs and autobiographies. Literary creativity in conditions of war and terrorism in Afghanistan is a bleak possibility hence most of the recent Afghan literature constitutes by diaspora writing. Though diaspora writing a considerable is dedicated to Afghan woman in last two or three decades yet we are not fully acquainted with Afghan womanhood. How they survive? Who they are? It is observable that there is a remarkable difference in media representation of Afghan women and their literary description but at both place they are portrayed as silent and passive victims of patriarchy. There are some extraordinary narratives which represent woman who breaks the patriarchal norm and defies the oppressive culture and becomes a symbol of progress and hope. Some Diaspora writers have gained world-wide fame and Atiq Rahimi has a unique place among these sensitive and creative personalities.

Atiq Rahimi is a French- Afghan writer and film-maker. He was born in 1962 in Kabul, Afghanistan. Following the Soviet invasion, he fled his mother-land and received political asylum in France in 1985. His novella *Earth and Ashes*(2000 Dari, 2003 translated into English) was an instant best-seller and its film adaptation brought a prestigious award in Cannes Film Festival 2004. After Taliban's collapse in 2002 Rahimi returned to his mother-land after 17 years exile. His French novel *The Patience Stone* (2012) won Prix Goncourt award, the top most literary prize in France. Rahimi divides his time between Kabul and Paris. He is working as a senior creative advisor in Afghanistan's largest media group.

The Patience Stone is a story of an unnamed female protagonist's self realization and emancipation from the chains of patriarchal oppression. In the beginning protagonist has been shown as a devoted Muslim wife kneeling next to her husband rolling the prayer beads. She nurses her warrior husband who has been shot in the neck and consequently in coma for a

few days. The woman has no one to share her suffering with; all her relatives have left her. In her monologues she unfolds her past days of repression as a wife. During the course of her monologues she comes out as a rebellious woman. She recalls her past, at first she whispers and hesitates to voice it but later on her language gets bitter and crazy. She starts with quite prayers and ends with screams. She seems to be a victim of neurosis because of long-term suppression of her desires and sorrows. Now, in absence of a dominant husband, she finds the situation fruitful to vent out her long repressed frustration. She shares her secrets and fantasies with her comatose husband assuming him to be a mythical patience stone.

The novel follows a Persian folklore of *Syng-e- Saboor* (The Magic Stone). According to the myth one can confide everything to the magic stone. It listens and consumes all suffering, secrets and miseries of the speaker and finally explodes to relieve one's woes. Similarly the poor and destitute woman transfers her suffering and develops into a self-dependent and prophetic lady. In course of her purgation she does not hesitate to voice out the sexuality of Afghan womanhood by challenging religious fundamentalism, taboos, tradition and deep rooted Afghan patriarchy.

At psychological level she goes through a dilemma; at one hand she loses her faith in religion and on the other hand she gets fascinated by the myth of magic stone. Her wise old prostitute aunt is her only soul mate. She personifies the will and capacity of survival. She guides her at every step and also helps to give full vent to her deep-rooted suppression. She takes advantage of her husband's comatose condition and takes him as a listener of her sins and woes. Though she nurses her paralyzed husband with complete devotion yet she does not show any sympathy towards him. She believes that the Afghan men are never in pain because of the privileged in patriarchal society. *The Patience Stone* is a story not only about an offensive response of an Afghan lady to long term patriarchy but also displays some minor feminist voices. Protagonist's aunt exemplifies the life of a lady who fails to conceive a child and hence denied a life of respect. In consequence of her infertility, her husband marries again and she is subjected to satisfy her father-in-law's lust. Finally she escapes herself from the chains of domestication. She chooses prostitution to avoid the repeated rapes and finds some comfort in challenging the patriarchy openly.

Protagonist's mother exemplifies a silent woman; she has been subjected into a complete silence in highly oppressive domestic conditions. Her husband does not care for her needs and often humiliates her for no reason. He loves his quails more than his wife and daughters. The protagonist secretly supports her mother, when one day she opens the quail's cage for a

cat. This scene symbolizes the abolishment of means and measures of patriarchy to the suppression of womankind.

The central marriage is totally aberrant. The protagonist is forced to marry an old terrorist in absentia. The husband is unable to make the love pleasurable. During ten years of her married life she comes to like her husband in his paralyzed condition; devoid of any male authority. She enjoys this time until he comes to his senses again. His return to power again tries to hold his previous masculinity by killing her. But protagonist applies the utmost survival strategy of violence and stabs him to death

The protagonist seems to hate masculinity but she shows empathy for a rapist, when she finds the boy too has been sexually tortured by his team commander. Analogy of oppression provokes her love for the boy and she becomes his teacher. In fact her fascination toward the boy portrays her long repressed desires. She tries to portray that the wounds of repression and oppression can be soothed by the fulfillment of desires of the victim. Her teaching does not exhibit any lust still she enjoys it. She wants to subject her husband to humiliation that Afghan women are going through. It symbolizes the magnitude of mismatch in marriages; forced marriage with stone-hearted older man makes the younger man feel betrayed. Paralyzed husband symbolizes the rotten patriarchy, the woman symbolizes the oppression and the boy represents the spoiled future of Afghanistan.

In *The Patience Stone* Rahimi breaks all taboos- social, cultural, sexual and religious of Afghan social set-up. To make the woman speak he makes the patriarchy paralyzed, symbolized by comatose husband. In an interview Rahimi once commented, “When I wrote the novel, I wanted to put myself in the shoes of Afghan women to bare her desires as well as her suffering.” To conclude it is a story of pain, resilience, loyalty and horrible choice of an Afghan female to shatter the patriarchy to pieces.

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