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Conflict and Trauma: A Study of Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone*

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Abstract:

The Soviet Union and the U.S rivalry of being superpower resulted in the Cold war (1947-1991) between the two power blocks which lead to the major events like Korean war, the Cuban Missile crisis, the Vietnamese war and the Afghan invasion in the world history. The imperial interests of the Soviets and the U.S set the stage for the Soviets military expansion, rise of the U.S backed mujahideens, the rise of Taliban, 9/11 attacks and the U.S invasion respectively. The war fragmented the multi-ethnic Afghanistan and destroyed entire villages, leaving millions of people dead, homeless and starving. Thousands of people were forced to flee and take refuge in camps outside the country. Imperial expansion in Afghanistan snatched the minimal rights ever enjoyed by Afghani women folk and added more miseries to the lives of these women. As they were already the victims of patriarchy, religion and societal oppression, the imperial invasion added to this injury and subjected them to cruelties like violence, rapes, sexual slavery, emotional and psychological trauma, domestic violence, broken homes, and death. The Afghani-French novelist Atiq Rahimi's novel *The Patience Stone* gives a voice to woman once living in silence and self sacrificing abnegation now emerging as a human being. The present paper, through the unnamed protagonist of the novel, explores the inner world of Afghani women and unravels the life, limited choices and trauma against the context of war.

Keywords: Invasion, Conflict, Trauma, Imperialism, Women.

The invasion of Afghanistan was a part of the expansionist agenda of Imperial powers. Both the Soviets and the U.S. competed to convert Afghanistan into their 'sphere of influence'. E. Germain, in his book *The Marxist Theory of Imperialism* writes that imperialism is not simply conquest of foreign lands, as it is defined by most political scientists and sociologists. The word is in much more precise sense used to describe the general changes which occurred in the political, economic and social activity of the big bourgeoisie of the advanced capitalist countries, beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century. On a political point of view, both United States and the Soviet Union competed for power on a global scale after World War II, and the Soviet took it as a good opportunity to convert the Afghanistan into communist state. Furthermore to exhibit themselves a superpower the USSR used Afghanistan as a proving ground for a new generation of soldiers and military equipment. There were also economical reasons for the USSR to invade. The Soviets saw Afghanistan as a key position for trade in Asia. The USSR hoped to increase trade with India and other countries by access to ocean route and saw it as an opportunity to increase its navel power. Besides the abundance of

natural resources such as, natural gas, uranium, iron ore, and copper made Afghanistan a perfect bargain territory.

The Soviets had a long history of supporting and providing aid to Afghanistan. In 1947, British expulsion from the Indian Subcontinent effectively removed the only counterbalance to the growing Soviet influence in Afghanistan. When the United States declined to provide requested economic aid and arms assistance through the early 1950s, the Afghans reluctantly turned to the Soviets. Over the 25 years that followed, Soviet influence in Afghan trade, economic aid and arms and other military assistance became predominant. The Afghan regime of the late 1940s was monarchical but governed by a parliamentary structure within what could be described as a limited democracy. Soviet political influence reached its zenith in 1978 with the 'April Revolution' that brought pro-Soviet Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) into power in the proclaimed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). DRA Prime Minister Nur Mohammed Taraki formalized long term cooperative relations with the Soviets in December 1978 but the Afghan political situation quickly deteriorated.

The Afghan population became disenchanted with factional conflicts within the PDPA and with its Soviet-style program of modernizing reforms, many of which were viewed by conservatives as opposing Islam that resulted in an open rebellion. The most notable of these occurred in Herat in March 1979, where the murder of a number of Soviet technical advisors prompted an increase in Soviet military advisors and the deployment of additional military equipment that included Mi-24 helicopters. Tarkari's liquidation and replacement by rival Hafizullah Amin in October 1979 further exacerbated the situation. Amin's policies of socialist principled modernization failed to engender confidence in the Soviet leadership and further estranged and antagonized the Afghan Muslim populace. By the end of 1979, the stage was set for Soviet military intervention initiating a war between Afghanistan rebels called mujahideen and the Soviet supported Afghani government. Later the retreat of Soviet troops in 1989 created a power vacuum in the Afghanistan and the country was torn apart by warring mujahideen groups which further set the stage for the emergence and rule of Taliban. The Taliban was predominantly Pashtun, Islamic fundamentalist group that ruled Afghanistan from 1996-2001. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan occurred after the September 11 attacks in late 2001. Its aim was to dismantle Al-Qaeda and to deny it a safe base of operations in Afghanistan by removing the Taliban from power.

The Soviet invasion had a devastating effect on the Afghan people. Because the rural population fed and housed the mujahideen, the Soviets tried to eliminate or remove civilian populations from the countryside where resistance was based. Soviet bombing destroyed entire villages, crops and irrigation, leaving millions of people dead, homeless or starving. Thousands of people fled and took refuge in camps around Pakistan.

Atiq Rahimi's novel *The Patience Stone* has illustrations of Afghan wars. Through the story of an unnamed protagonist and her comatose husband, it focuses on the inner thoughts,

emotions and limited choices of an Afghani woman who is a mother of two daughters. Against the backdrop of war, the novel revolves around the Persian myth of Syng-e-Saboor i.e. a patience stone, which confides all the ills of the society and will explode on the judgement day. The novel is set at the time of retreat of Soviet forces in 1990, when rival bands of mujahideen were fighting like rabid dogs over the remnants of the city. In this chaotic world, there lies a middle aged comatose man, with a drip pipe in the mouth and the fixed open eyes. His dutiful wife, a young beautiful unnamed woman changes his drip solution, pouring drops to his dry eyes and cleaning him time to time. This ‘warrior of God’, had been decerebrated by a bullet lodged in his head, not in so called battle of god but over a trivial issue with fighter of his own side. Near him, sits his wife, chanting the ninety nine names of Allah. As the war rages outside, this woman hides in the cellar with her two young daughters and comes sometimes up to the room to clean her husband’s perfusions. Her husband’s family has fled away leaving them without any provision or protection. She has only one last link left i.e. her aunt who runs a brothel in other part of the town. Later, she leaves her two daughters with her aunt and comes back to her husband despite the danger to take care of him. Though she is afraid of his inert body, she still keeps on talking to him. His inert body gives her a stimulation to give a vent to her feelings that have been laying hidden deep inside her for several years. In his silence, she recalls episodes of her life, including her aborted dreams, her forced marriage to a husband who was always on battle front, her father’s abusive nature, the sad fate of her sister and aunt and the mistreatment of her mother-in law. Though her voice remains hesitating initially, but later on she puffs off her bitter feeling and abuses her husband who has always cherished her male pride, the patriarchal society. Once living in a self sacrificing silence, she now emerges as a human being, a woman with a voice. Sometimes, though, the shelling and bombing come too close and she takes refuge in the cellar. At one instance, three warriors burst into the room. She escapes from them by telling them that she sells her body, knowing that they would not touch her as she is impious according to the holy book. But the younger warrior of them returns to her after a couple of days with money and demands her services. She submits to him because she had no choice. Then the boy frequently visits her and the woman develops feelings for him after learning about the mistreatment he suffers from his commandant’s hands. And eventually, her husband, her patience stone wakes up, full of her shameful secrets, wild desires, frustrations and melancholy, strangles her and in turn gets stabbed to death.

An academic writer and researcher, Elaheh Rostami Povey in her book *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion*, explores the gender oppression, women’s struggles, women’s strategies and action against imperialism and states:

There exists a very strong Afghan code of honour which dictates that, once married, an Afghan man must protect and care for his wife. A woman’s status increases significantly once she produces children, while childlessness is regarded as disastrous for both men and women. At another level, the practice of exchanging girls and young women to settle tribal feuds or to repay debts remain ingrained. (18)

The Patience Stone can be studied in light of Rostami Povey's observations. In the novel the protagonist gives a very painful account of her father's unloving attitude towards her and her sisters. She highlights her father's obsession of quails. She tells that her father only cared about his fighting quails; her mother and the seven sisters starved for his affection. Every Friday he used to take his quail to the fight at the Qaf gardens and would indulge in betting and if he lost he would come home and beat all of them including her mother. Sometimes, he also won a lot of money in those fights but then he used all the money to buy a highly expensive quail. She recalls, "As fate would have it, he lost. He had no money left to honour his bet, so he gave my sister instead. At twelve years old, my sister was sent to live with a man of forty!" (59).

The unnamed protagonist gives a grievous account of her marriage. She sarcastically reminisces her marriage and recalls how her husband was busy bringing victory and couldn't attend his own marriage and how she was forced to marry his 'photo' and 'khanjar'. She recalls how his mother came to her father's house and asked for her younger sister but as it was her turn to get married, she simply said, "No problem, we'll take her instead!" (53). And how her father who wanted nothing more, accepted this without the slightest hesitation. At the end of third year of her marriage he finally returned from war front and until his return she was not allowed to see her friends or her family as, "it was not considered proper for a young married virgin to spend time with other married women"(54). Time and again her conscious returns to her comatose husband who now lies almost dead and could not protect his honour, his wife and daughters. She again and again begs him to come back to them. She cries numerous times and pleads him not to abandon them in such a way. She begs God to send him back and not to leave them so desolate, later she gets frustrated and abuses him for joining that crazy fratricidal war. She mimics him out of frustration and thinks that out of thirteen years of marriage, they had only three years of conjugal life and for the rest of the time he was at war front and now he lays in coma with a bullet in his head which was shot by his fellow warrior and is unable to protect his family. The woman broods over the pressure to beget children in their society and tells the story of her aunt who was infertile and how cruelly she was treated at her in-laws home and reminisces her own experience when she was declared barren by his mother who left no moment to harass her. Then she recalls the choices made by her for survival, she tries to assert herself in front of her comatose husband by confessing to him that her daughters are from other man as no one would have ever accepted that the 'warrior of God' was infertile.

Povey in her book brings into focus the traumatic results of consecutive Afghan wars. She insists that armed conflict exacerbated the existing inequalities between women and men and had put them at a heightened risk of physical and emotional abuse from male members of society. Rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced marriages and widowhood were the brutalities endured by women. In many cases women were separated from the men who traditionally were their only source of income and were forced to adopt survival strategies that involved exploitation. Next to women, were the innocent children who suffered the most in the war. They were abducted and forced to work for many militias and to serve the commanders. Sometimes they were forced to participate as child warriors in violent acts

under the threat of losing their own lives. As young children lack the cognitive capacities compared to adults, they were rarely able to talk about their traumatic experiences and show aggressive and regressive behavioural states. Displacement and separation from loved ones, witnessing death and destruction, severe injuries, starvation etc caused psychological injuries to the children and resulted in barred physical, mental and moral maturity in the later years of their life. Rahimi's fiction is filled with references of ongoing war and its traumatic results.

In the novel *The Patience Stone*, violence and destruction is repeatedly portrayed. The novel is filled with number of war scenes that show destruction. One of these scenes is elucidated in the novel as: "Far away, somewhere in the city, a bomb explodes. The violence destroys a few houses perhaps, a few dreams. There's a counter attack. The retaliations tear through the heavy midday silence, shaking the window panes but not waking the children" (4). Another such incident is quoted below:

Suddenly, the blinding flash of an explosion. A deafening blast makes the earth tremble. Its breath shatters the windows. Throats are torn apart by screaming. A second explosion. This one closer. Therefore more violent. The children are crying. The woman is wailing. The sound of their terrified footsteps rings out in the passage, and disappears into the cellar. (32)

The trauma of conflict is visible in the lives of the protagonist and other characters like her two young daughters, her husband, her aunt, and the young warrior who comes to her. Her husband is an example of a sufferer of physical and psychological trauma. After he returns from the war to consummate their marriage, he is never good or kind to his wife. It seems as a war is constantly running in his head. He is always absent and violent.

I was looking at you, but you were staring into thin air. I still don't know if it war modesty or pride. It doesn't matter. But I saw you, I watched you, I kept glancing at you, observing you. Nothing the slightest movement of your body, the slightest expression in your face... And you seemed so arrogant, so absent; you just weren't there. The saying is so true: One should never rely on a man who has known the pleasure of weapons! (56)

One of the most common types of violence inflicted on women folk in war is rape. It is the most horrible trauma that annihilates their body, soul and status in the society. After such horrible incident of brutality, women are often rejected by their own family or community. So, in this way they are doubly marginalised. In one incident in the text, the unnamed heroine feigns being a whore to escape rape but later she is forced to serve a young fighter who comes with money and orders her services. Even her lie could not save her and she gets raped by a young teenage fighter. But as the plot progresses, she develops feelings for the boy that results in affair. The plight of young teenage fighter is itself very miserable. He is also a victim of the war. He was an orphan and was kidnapped by a commander. The commander has been sexually assaulting him since then. The young fighter is shown as timid, stammering and raping the unnamed woman. He is himself torn and craves for emotional and physical satisfaction from her. He symbolises the fate of millions of children of Afghanistan

who have lost their parents, their childhood, and their youth and are turned violent, venting out their frustration on other. These children have lost all sense of morality and are just puppets in the hands of war lords. The harassment suffered by the young boy can be understood from the lines, "The boy's body is black and blue! He has burn scars all over- on his thighs, hid buttocks... It's an outrage! That guy burns him with the barrel of his gun!"(119).

To sum up, Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* depicts the trauma suffered by Afghan population, against the backdrop of Soviet Afghan war and the U.S invasion of Afghanistan. The novel can be read as an expression of the plight of women in a conflict zone and ponders over the limited choices and the brutalities silently endured by them for the sake of survival. The forces behind the sufferings of women in Afghanistan can be traced back to the subservient status of women in Afghanistan and how women emerged as a doubly marginalized class in wake of the war prompted by the imperialist agenda of the two powerful blocks i.e. the Soviet Union and the U.S which emerged in the post world war 2nd era.

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