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## Unveiling the Plight of Afghan Women in Siba Shakib's *Samira and Samir*

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper examines the plight of Afghan women, the *bacha posh* tradition, the subaltern position of women and the influence of patriarchy in Siba Shakib's *Samira and Samir*. The novel talks about the exploitation of women and the importance of a male child in the Afghan society. The story portrays the abuses of men on women and how they treat them like animals or slaves rather than normal human beings. This paper focuses on gender discrimination, social and political subjugation and the ill-treatment towards women in a patriarchal society. This proves that the women characters are more humane, while the men are like beasts. The women characters endured a lot of hardships and pain but they remained strong till the end.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, subaltern, bacha posh, phallogocentric, hegemony.

### **Introduction:**

Siba Shakib is an Iranian novelist and filmmaker who was born and raised in Tehran. She has written two novels- *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* (2002) and *Samira and Samir* (2005) in German language and were later translated into many languages including English. Her debut novel *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* won the PEN prize. In her novels she mainly talks about the social, political and economic conditions of the war-torn Afghanistan, and has a particular concern for the Afghan women. The position of the women in Afghanistan has remained secluded because of patriarchal local customs and the war.

The plot of the novel *Samira and Samir* by Siba Shakib is well set in post-Soviet Afghanistan where the cultural hierarchy and historical patriarchal traditions hinder the way of women. The novel is a replication of Beauvoir's claim that *"One is not born, but rather becomes, woman"* (Beauvoir, 1989). Samira, the protagonist is brought up as a boy and all through her life she proves to be a strong deconstruct to the image of 'woman'. In the novel she demonstrates that a woman is not in any way substandard to man provided she is brought up like him. Samira proves to be a denial of and defiance to the feminine framework of the Afghan society. This story decodes the mental combats of women especially in a country like Afghanistan. Through the novel, Shakib highlights the issues such as double oppression, gender subalternity, patriarchy and the helpless state of women. At the same time the writer also focuses on the exploration of women and their strengths. The novel *Samira and Samir* takes its name from its female protagonist Samira, who lives in the pretext of a man most of her life. The novel traces her journey as a girl from her childhood where she is brought up by her father as a boy under the strong cultural influence to a mature lady where she becomes aware of her sexual identity.

The novel begins with the birth of Samira, the commander's first child. Here, Shakib has openly talked about the Afghan patriarchal tradition that the firstborn child should be a son. In the framework of the Arab countries, which have a similar social and cultural set up like Afghanistan, Beauvoir writes, *"there was massive infanticide among Arabs: as soon as they were born, girls were thrown into ditches. Accepting a female child is an act of generosity on the father's part; the woman enters such societies only through a kind of grace bestowed on her, and not legitimately like males"* (Beauvoir, 1989). In Afghanistan there is a pressure on the family to bear a male child "Families can be rich, poor, educated, uneducated, Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara or Turkoman- it doesn't matter, they tell me. The only thing that binds the girls together is their family's need for a son (Nordberg, 2014). The want for the male child can be due to security reasons and economic stability but this clearly highlights power and protection. In this novel also the commander says, *"Only if it is a son does it have the right to live"* (Shakib, 2005). The commander is worried about the society and its people who will talk behind his back that he is not a real man as his first child is not a boy. A first-born son is a father's masculine confirmation. Samira is held guilty for being a girl as Daria wishes, *"Instead of being born a girl you had been born dead"* (Shakib, 2005). To keep his head high, the commander decides to keep the sex of the child a secret and says *"We will give her the name Samira, we will call her Samir, he says, lowers his eyes, does not look at Daria, says so that people think you have given me a son"* (Shakib, 2005). The commander might have got rid of his girl-son

but *"the rock's law and his father's father say his first-born child must be a son"* (Shakib, 2005). Naming Samira as Samir in itself reveals the mind of the commander and its imprisonment in the cultural rules which decides that he falls short of and the culture proves to be a far stronger force than him. This episode proves that man is a puppet in the hands of culture and no matter how hard he may endeavour to come out of this grip, he fails. Thus, in the patriarchal Afghan society the birth of a girl child was not welcomed and so the Commander and Dari were not happy on the birth of Samira. They decided to bring up Samira as a boy, a *bacha posh* in order to escape the cultural stigma. This term was first presented in the book *The Underground Girls of Kabul. The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys* by Jenny Nordberg. This tradition is practised by the families who do not have a male child. It is a common cultural practice in Afghanistan where a girl is brought up and dressed as a boy, till she reaches puberty. A simple change in clothing opens up a whole new ground of dialogues and power. It opens up space to re-define the notion of their subalternity. It allows them to venture in to arenas that are otherwise restricted to women.

In *Samira and Samir*, we have a female protagonist who lives in the disguise of a man for most of her life. The novel traces the journey of Samira from her childhood where she is treated by her father as a boy under the strong cultural influence to a mature lady where she gets conscious about her sexual identity. Samir grows up and becomes very strong like the commander. She acquires all his qualities – big, strong and invincible. Being a *bacha posh* means, *"freer than other women. She didn't have to suffer domestic violence; she could meet men in public and they respected her. She was in charge of her own life. There was no one to tell her what to do. She worked hard and had money of her own, which she could spend as she liked."* (Kargar, 2012). Samir lives in an illusionary world till she becomes conscious of her gender identity. This discovery leaves her dumbstruck. She falls apart and as Shakib writes, *"Samira moves her tongue, opens and closes her mouth. The words do not come out. Samira cannot hear the words she speaks. Samira says nothing. Remains mute. Mute. Mute"* (Shakib, 2005). From this point in the novel, the writer emphasises her muteness by the phrases like, "thinks Samira" (61), "Samira the mute Stares at the ground, bites her lips" (66), "Samira the mute obeys" (80), "Samira the mute stays mute" (83) etc. Samira's loss of voice is a symbol of her helplessness and victimisation in the hands of the phallogocentric Afghan tribal society. She feels that she has nothing to say; but actually, she has so much to say that she is unable to speak. The reason behind her muteness is that, *"she does not see the point of saying false words when she knows the truth. Truth is not truth and lie is not lie. What is the point of Samira*

*speaking when the people think it is Samir who speaks? If she does not even know herself whether it is Samira who speaks or Samir"* (Shakib, 2005).

Samira becomes the victim of patriarchal society as she gets extremely confused between her sexual identity as a boy and a girl. Her trauma grows with the age and at one stage it becomes so powerful that she stays inside her hut for days together. She always feels afraid of being discovered a girl in the guise of a boy. Samira was not conscious of her identity and her sex and she did not know the difference between a boy and a girl. She is in love with the word 'boy' as her father used to call her till, she sees something dangling between a boy's legs which she had not seen before and she questions him "*what do you need that for?*" (Shakib, 2005) and she gets an answer which changed the course of her life- that "*all real boys have one*" (Shakib, 2005). Samira asks her mother, "*am I not a real boy*" (Shakib, 2005). This question is the crux of the novel as it underlines Samira's identity crises and victimization. Through Samira, Shakib highlights the fragile mental state of a *bacha posh*. They enjoy freedom in the disguise of a boy but there is a constant fear in their mind of being discovered by others. This leaves an everlasting psychological scar in their mind. Thus, Samira keeps on asking, 'who am I?' She becomes the victim of her father's tradition, of the patriarchal norm of her tribe, of her mistake of being a girl, of her not being a boy and of not being the 'first-born son' of her father. From now on the real test starts for Samira as she has to live the life of Samir, 'the brave boy'; the difference that she was not aware of till now. She is to have a dual identity which would gradually get obliterated because she could neither be Samira or Samir completely.

Samira is caught in the crises of her body which is emphasized by the writer throughout the novel. Shakib perhaps wants to convey that it is the body of the women which is one of the reasons that give men an excuse to look down upon women. Here Samira feels beaten due to her body which needs to be kept as a secret. In the climax of the novel Samira feels that with the passage of time it will become difficult for her to preserve her identity as Samir. She realizes that her "*breasts are getting bigger and bigger*" (Shakib, 2005) making it difficult for her to conceal her identity. Thus, again her body becomes her limitation and she feels defeated. Even in the case of man the issue of the body is there when Olfat says, "*our commander is not a real man himself He has only fathered a single son, and he has lost his manhood as well*" (Shakib, 2005). This clearly signifies that manhood is recognized with power and supremacy.

On one hand Samira loses her father in war and on the other hand she gains her courage. The Commander's death lends Samira her voice back. This episode has a symbolic significance as now that her father is no more, she has to protect her mother's life. Samira knows the fact

that, if she remains silent, the lustful men will want Daria. On one hand she loses her father and on the other she regains her voice and thus her courage. Before it was due to her father that she lived like a man but now she is forced by the circumstances to pretend to be a man as her mother needs a protector. As in Afghanistan, a woman is not allowed to live alone without a male protector. Now Samira, the *bacha posh* decides to stay as one and hide her identity in order to protect herself and her mother. She decides to be her mother's *mahram*- a male protector which is an act full of courage and responsibility. This shows that women have a typical quality of endurance even in the most difficult situation. But in the due course they decide to leave the village and go and live with his grandfather. She chooses her father's boots, his dagger, and the whip from the bundle which her father gave her earlier.

Education gives Samir more strength and confidence in herself. In fact, it was her one-armed grandfather who introduced her to education as he believed that the boys have a right to study. Samira is considered capable for education only because she is living in the disguise of a boy, otherwise, even his grandfather might have had a different opinion. Only the teacher shows some real sense as he tells Samira, "*People think girls do not need to be able to read and write. They think girls are not as clever as boys. And because girls eventually turn into women, people think that there is no point in girls going to school because they cannot use their knowledge later on anyway*" (Shakib, 2005). This ideology of the Afghan people clearly shows the prevalent gender discrimination in the society. However, it must be noted that it is Samir's gender that gives power to her voice. Here he befriends Bashir who is shy and meek but later he emerges as a strong man with the help of Samir. As she is a man in Bashir's eyes so he follows her blindly. Shakib here clearly highlights the distinct characters of Bashir and Samir. Bashir is described as a dreamer, one who can read and write but cannot ride, shoot or play buzkashi. On the other hand, Samir is described as brave, rough, strong, one who can ride, shoot and hunt. All these characteristics are associated with real man that Samir is. Although in the tight grip of the male dominated culture, Samira comes out as a winner at the end and the reader anticipates a bright future for her as predicted in the words of her grandfather

Many a times in the novel Samira is herself not able to decide whom she should feel fascinated to. This adds to her dilemma and feels disturbed at the psychological level. Judith Lorber comments, "*Sex doesn't come into play again until puberty, but by that time, sexual feelings and desires and practices have been shaped by gendered norms and expectations*" (Lorber 2011). Sexually Samira is equally persuaded towards Gol-Sar as well as Bashir. Her integrity asks her again and again "*Do you like the sister more than the brother*" (Shakib, 2005). Her sexually motivated meetings with Bashir and Gol-Sar somehow prove this observation.

On the part of Gol-Sar this act is quite normal because for her Samira is a real man. Samira is herself not able to see the reason behind this liking and she feels disturbed.

The last part of the story is powerful and impressive. Towards the end of the novel Samira once again falls silent but for a shorter period. Shakib writes, "*Now you know my secret, says Samira, then falls silent*" (Shakib, 2005). When the secret of her being a woman is discovered by Bashir, the typical Afghan man in him wakes up and he expresses his anger at her manly activities. He behaves like a patriarchal male who needs to take care of Samira. He cannot have compassion for Samira because Samira's burden has increased now as after his discovery she will have to live as Samir in front of Gol-Sar and others and as Samira in front of him. Those actions which were earlier appreciated by him and which he used to follow are seen with dislike by him; he says in anger, "*Stop that.... The throwing, the carving. The squatting on stones like a man. The walking up and down, like a man, being Samir. You should behave like a woman. You should behave like Samira*" (Shakib, 2005). The man in him comes to mind and his sudden change echoes the essentialist dichotomization of the sexes. The novelist portrays him as a typical man who takes everything related to a woman for granted. Bashir wants Samira to marry him and fit herself in the frame of a socially constructed image of a woman. This makes Samira realize that a stage has arrived where she has to make a choice between her love and freedom.

An event that clearly specifies the gender subjugation is when Bashir brings woman's clothes for Samira which is a patriarchal symbol. She actually tries to get into the frame of patriarchal norms which define a woman within the limited parenthesis, by getting married to Bashir. This event clearly indicated gender subjugation and wearing womanly clothes indicates patriarchal symbol. Bashir acts as a typical illustrative of male mindset when he says, "*I will get woman's clothes for you, from now on you can let your hair grow long and weave it into plaits*" (Shakib, 2005). Samira tries to overpower the free human being living inside her rather she tries to suppress the free-thinking voice in her but it becomes tough as she has always been treated as a boy by the society. She has been doing all the allegedly male activities and it becomes almost impossible for her to fit into the image of a woman. For the time being, she tries to live life according to the normative culture of the male female dichotomy. She tries to be as silent as one can be as she is time and again scolded by Bashir for behaving like a man. "*She does not want to act like a man. She wants to stop being a man, she wants to be a woman. A real woman. Samira is silent in public, does not wear her gun over her shoulder, does not jump from the horse and does not swing on to the back of her stallion, waits for Bashir to help her to climb on to her horse and get back down again*" (Shakib, 2005).

However, Samira fails to kill the man living inside her and once she sees the buzkashi game going on, she wants to but she cannot stop herself. *"She does not know why everything happens as it does. She does not intend to whistle through her teeth, to shove her heels into her stallion's sides, Samira does not intend to urge the stallion on. But she does. She charges off, crosses river. The water splashes high, and she dashes across the plain"* (Shakib, 2005).

Samira was not able to come to terms with Bashir's definition of a woman. From a social point of view, she is supposed to get into the fold of a conventional woman but, *"She does not know how to live without fishing and hunting, without going to school or the bazaar, without all that and much else"* (Shakib, 2005). There is some effort on her part to come to terms with the masculine world around her but she is not able to subdue the 'free Samir' living inside her. *"She does not want to act like a man. She wants to stop being a man, she wants to be a woman. A real woman ... in the evening she collects woods, lights the fire, spreads out the blankets, unpacks the bread and cheese, puts the pot on fire, sits beside it, puts tea in the port, fills the glass, hands it to Bashir"* (Shakib, 2005). The assigned role of husband and wife in an Afghan family as evidenced in the Commander's household in the beginning of the novel is re-endorse in Bashir's expectations from Samira by the end. Bashir loses the already meek chances of living a life of a typical Afghan husband with Samira. As expected, Samira chooses freedom and leaves her love behind; love which made her weak for a moment. Her choice to choose freedom substantiates her strength and courage from which she lost for a moment.

Male and female behaviour and speech patterns and even their silence is based on their different sets of experiences. Ultimately, she leaves Bashir with, *"a thousand and one questions and not a single answer. Samira stays mute"* (Shakib, 2005). Siba Shakib hints at a bright future for Samira in her dream of becoming a pilot. Though this dream cannot be taken in a literal sense yet one can anticipate the future to be free and bright. One can guess her optimistic and free mind which will never yield again to the cultural and patriarchal compulsions.

In the beginning of the novel, it was war that made Samira's life miserable and due to it her father lost his manhood and later died in the war. It brought poverty and grief as she had to leave her uplands and move towards the plains. It is the war which makes her grandfather invalid and leads her to go out to earn a living. But on the other hand, it is the war which gives her a chance to prove herself in contrast with other men in the novel. War gives her a symbolic courage by refuting her entry into the frame created for the woman. Thus, war helps her to break the typecast regarding woman in the novel as it gives her an occasion to prove her value in all the fields of life.

Generally, this has been the scenario with women who even though have a voice of their own but have been rendered muted by the patriarchal set up of the society in which the language of the speech is entirely man-made. Krolokke and Soreson observe that, "... women face a dilemma arising from the fact that their experiences and means of communication are restricted by their marginalization in society and their relative isolation within the private sphere- deemed not only irrelevant to public discourse but also less effective than paid labor and consequently less valuable" (Krolokke, 2006).

Women are not different from men but their understandings and experiences of life and observation differs. Orbe illustrates Cheri Kramarae's observations in this context as he writes, "First, women perceive the world differently than men on the basis of different experiences and activities rooted in the division of labor. Second, because of their political dominance, men's system of perception is dominant, impeding the free expression of women's alternative models. Last, to participate in society women must transform their own models in terms of the perceived male system of expression" (Orbe, 1998). Thus, we can conclude that women conventionally have been muted by a male-dominated communication system, which considers women's benefits and dialogue as marginal and insignificant and gives value to whatever is connected with men. Kramarae argues that language is "man-made" and helps in defining, criticizing and excluding women. Hence, "Violence against women is one of the sharp indicators of the subordinate position of women in society. Violence exists in different forms and at different levels, from personal and physical violence to structural violence, all of which is justified by religion, culture and laws" (Web).

One significant thing in Shakib's novels is that even though the women characters suffer but they never give up. Samira, Daria and Shirin Gol suffer; they were dominated and victimized by war, man, poverty, history, culture and God's fury but they endured it and remained bold till the end.

The novel also emphasises on the suffering of Daria and Gol-Sar. Daria is lucky as the commander is shown as a patient husband who is not very harsh on her. Typically, the fingers are pointed on a woman to have given birth to a girl and she is punished for this but Daria's giving birth to Samira doesn't bring any disaster of this sort to her. However, he reproaches her, "It is your fault that the first child you pulled out of your body was not a real boy. It is your fault that I have no son that I can take with me to the rock. It is your fault that I shall no longer be ruler of the upland" (Shakib, 2005).

Though she is rarely reproached by her husband but the cruel patriarchy diminishes her voice and it is the influence of her husband which controls. Daria raises her voice sometimes

but every time she doubts it as Shakib writes, "*Daria hisses her words like a snake. She has hardly spoken them, when she already regrets it*" (Shakib, 2005). She does not believe in the holy power of the rock to which the commander attributes all his strength and knowledge. Later her act of making love with the commander on the rock signifies her love for her child and her way of defying the male domination which is symbolized by the rock. Another illustration of her boldness is when "*Daria the warrior. Daria the victor*" (Shakib, 2005) hits back at her husband, who falls silent, ". . . a real boy must start early. A real boy" (Shakib, 2005) Daria realizes whatever happens around her and speak her mind but she is inaudible as she is a woman.

Shakib manifests the concept of women empowerment and importance of women education through the character of Bashir's sister, Gol-Sar. Through her character the writer provides an understanding about how a woman feels with reference to her relationship with man. It is through her that Shakib throws light on the status of women in patriarchal Afghan society and the Hazara tribe. Though she remains silent in front of her father which represents patriarchal domination t home but she talks a lot and sensibly when she is with Samira -for her Samir. In *Samira and Samir*, a strong relation develops between Gol-Sar and Samira although for the former Samira is a man with whom she is going to marry. Due to her bringing up as a boy and the 'Samir' in her feels attracted towards Gol-Sar and the Samira towards Bashir. Samira who can neither find friends in men nor in women finds comfort in both Bashir and Gol-Sar.

While talking to Samira she says, "*That is not fair. You must know that girls understand much more than you men think*" (Shakib, 2005). These lines spoken by her forms a very important base in the novel and is in a way a memorandum to the men like the Commander, Olfat, Bashir and Commander Rashid who perceive women as dumb creatures and think that they are just an object of desire. These men are actually the representatives of the tribal culture of the Hazaras. She asks an important question to Samir "*Am I not a human being? Does the same blood not flow through my veins as flows through my brother's veins? What is different about me?*" (Shakib, 2005). She openly reveals an intrinsic truth to her Samir: "*We have no responsibility, we do Nothing. And one day, when some man comes along and marries us, we have children and again we do nothing, again we have no responsibility . . . Do you think it is easy to see my brother being able to do whatever he wants? He does Everything. Yet I am allowed to do Nothing*" (Shakib, 2005).

Samira finds a good friend and companion in Gol-Sar with whom she brings a revolution of its own kind in the field of woman education by inspiring commander Rasheed

to permit them to open a school for women. In fact, Samira puts this as a prerequisite when he asks her to marry Gol-Sar. On Gol-Sar's part, she was already well versed in reading and writing as she had learned it secretly from Bashir. Her views represent modernity and actually she is the only character besides Samira who questions male hegemony and the inferior position of women in the novel. Though her way of confrontation is quite different from Samira's and it hardly has any influence, yet her dialogue puts a more philosophical and weighty question marks on the position of women.

The novel thoroughly depicts women's helplessness, sufferings and endurance in the patriarchal Afghan society. After numerous emotional turmoil's Daria and Gol-Sar successfully bonded themselves which appeared highly unconditional in this tangible world. The issues of feminism and gender equality have been raised through these characters. The novel stresses upon the rights that were not given along with the restrictions to education, choices and liberation that restrict their great potentials in the patriarchal society.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, we can conclude that Afghanistan is one of the most challenging places in the world for a woman to live. I intend to bring out this notion to light that woman suffered patriarchal dominance, gender discrimination, political subjugation and were forced into the practices like *bacha posh* in Siba Shakib's *Samira and Samir*. Shakib has presented a moving tale of the hardship of being woman under patriarchy. It focuses on the heart-breaking truth of many women and children in the war-struck Afghanistan. The women characters are muted or have a voice which is timid and thus inaudible. They speak but their stance or voice has no value and is usually laughed at or go completely ignored. Although Samira has a strong voice but the vital thing to be marked is that she is heard only when she lives in the guise of a man. Once her sexual identity is exposed, she experiences sudden inaudibility.

Shakib has drawn a vivid character of Samira, the *bacha posh* in the context of Afghanistan which is complex and rebellious. She destabilizes the accounts of hegemonic gender and patriarchal discourse by re-creating her own center. A center that is subversive and realistic. She tried to moves away from the discourse of androcentric *Pashtunwali* to create micronarratives of gender that are more accepting and redeeming for women in Afghanistan. A simple change in clothing opened up a whole new ground of dialogues and power. It gave her the freedom to re-define the definition of their subalternity. It allowed her to venture in to the areas that were otherwise restricted to women. Thus, after being a *bacha posh* she was unable to fit into the totalizing narratives of gender and gender roles. The writer portrayed her

as an extraordinary Afghan woman who defied her culture and becomes a symbol of hope and progress for the advancing women's rights in Afghanistan.

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