
**‘A Voiceless Cry’ of Defiance and Diligence in the Face of War & Violence by Afghan Women with Special Reference to Atiq Rahimi’s
*The Patience Stone***

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Abstract

"Afghan women" is now a boxed phrase. Women must be victims to fit into this category; they must have suffered abuse at the hands of men, appear desperate for assistance, wear particular apparel, and most crucially, have the ambition to be rescued by Westerners. In other words, Afghan women have consistently been business prospects. The re-emergence of the trauma-infused happenstances, i.e., the Taliban takeover for the second time in 2021, has once again put the freedom and rights of women in jeopardy. Their congruous fight since the first takeover of the Taliban has come down to the same loophole from where they started. In this paper, with comprehensive reference to Atiq Rahimi's novel *The Patience Stone*, the unfolding of the Afghan women's silenced/suppressed fury and rage will be elaborated. The power of female narrative, even through forced silence, in the face of totalitarianism and the crushing of spirit, seems more necessary to articulate now, more than ever.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Women, Female Agency, Silence, Fury.

Introduction:

“They made me invisible, shrouded and non-being A shadow, no existence, made silent and unseeing Denied of freedom, confined to my cage Tell me how to handle my anger and my rage?” (Shorish-Shamley, *Look into My World*)

Afghanistan has been in a severe economic and humanitarian crisis for the past year, ever since the Pashtun Islamic fundamentalist group Taliban seized power there for the second time in 2021 after an almost twenty-year-long insurgency. After the previous government had been toppled in 2001 by an operation spearheaded by the United States, the Taliban reestablished in Pakistan across the border. They started regaining territory in less than a decade. By August 2021, the Taliban had reclaimed sovereignty. In compliance with the terms of a 2020 peace deal with the organization, the U.S. withdrew its last remaining forces from Afghanistan during their rapid onslaught.

Despite promises to uphold the rights of women and communities of religious and ethnic minorities, the Taliban have imposed an uncompromising interpretation of Islamic law. The Taliban have had a hard time giving Afghans enough food and employment prospects as they gradually transformed from an insurgent organization to a functioning government. An estimated 95% of the population, including nearly all households with a female head of household, do not have enough food due to rising food and fuel prices.

Afghan women and girls have witnessed a steady decline in their rights. Girls are no longer allowed to attend secondary schools, which violates their fundamental right to an education, prevents them from reaching their full potential, and is terrible for the nation's economic growth. Girls are also more likely to experience early pregnancy, early marriage, violence, and abuse as a result. Since assuming power, the Taliban have imposed a long and growing list of rules and policies that comprehensively prevent women and girls from exercising their fundamental rights, including the right to express themselves, move freely, work, and educate themselves, affecting virtually all of their rights, including the right to life, livelihood, shelter, health care, food, and water.

The Taliban announced in March 2022 that women and girls would continue to be barred from secondary education, prompting widespread condemnation and statements of concern from around the world. The Taliban's leadership, which is entirely made up of men, has never allowed women to participate in governance. Authorities announced and frequently enforced regulations that forbade women from traveling or leaving their homes, including going to work without a male family member accompanying them—a requirement that was impractical for almost all families—and prohibited women from holding the majority of jobs. In addition, authorities announced rules mandating that women's faces be covered in public, including by female T.V. newsreaders, and they stated that male family members would be held accountable for a woman's violations of the laws governing her movement and attire. Taliban forces allegedly subjected some protesters and their family members to torture or beatings, arbitrarily detained some protesters and their family members, and, in several instances, used excessive force to disperse women participating in public demonstrations against Taliban policies or rules.

The re-emergence of these trauma-infused happenstances has once again put the freedom and rights of women in jeopardy. Their congruous fight since the first takeover of the Taliban has come down to the same loophole from where they started. The repetition of history and the violence sustained and resisted by the Afghan women have been again silenced and mutilated. But their rage and fury are still afresh and fiercer than ever. With comprehensive reference to Atiq Rahimi's novel *The Patience Stone*, the unfolding of the Afghan women's silenced/suppressed fury and rage will be elaborated. The power of the female narrative, even through forced silence in the face of totalitarian crushing of spirit, seems more necessary to articulate now than ever.

The Patience Stone, a thin, tragic examination of one woman's anguished inner life, was written and directed by Afghan novelist and filmmaker Atiq Rahimi and received the 2008 Prix Goncourt in France. In his laudatory introduction, another eminent Afghan writer, Khaled Hosseini, claims that the book finally gives the complaints of millions of people a sophisticated, nuanced, and ferocious voice. In Persian tradition, a magical black stone known as a Patience Stone by the name of 'Syngue Sabour' absorbs the woes of people who confide in it. It is said that the end of the world will occur on the day it explodes from having endured too much suffering and misery. The reader's sympathies and emotions are eroded by this book's characters, especially the woman who serves as the protagonist. The woman cannot change the system of men she is subjected to; all she can do is convey it to her husband, which has no impact on her fair existence. In *The Patience Stone* by Atiq Rahimi, it is revealed that a woman sits in front of her comatose husband. Due to several factors, she divulges everything she has never previously admitted. She uses The Patience Stone, also known as 'Sang-e Saboor,' to reach her husband, who was a soldier and now is comatose with a bullet in his neck. Rahimi's specific narrative style gives the novel an edge that pinpoints to its maximum effect through its protagonist. "Rahimi's sparse prose complements his simple yet powerful storytelling prowess. This unique story is both enthralling and disturbing" (*The Associated Press*). The man has been unconscious for more than two weeks at the start of the book and exhibits no indications of awakening. The woman's frustration and sorrow progressively increase, and gradually, that frustration evolves to enraged defiance. as she accumulates during their ten-year marriage, she grows more vocal and extroverted as she wonders if he can hear her. It's crucial to understand that because he was abroad fighting, the pair didn't even meet before their wedding. Instead, a wedding was arranged between the teen bride (the Woman) and a picture, and she thereafter lived as a wedded virgin for three years. She is prohibited from leaving the house or visiting friends and family. When the husband comes home, she learns that she is married to a violent man because he brutally assaults her at the first sexual encounter.

The woman tells him things that she wouldn't dare to say otherwise by taking advantage of his inability to understand and respond. Due to his infirmity, she is now responsible for providing for her two children as well as herself and her husband's medical needs. It appears like prostitution is the only employment option for an Afghan woman in her precarious condition. The utter helplessness and oppression she faces both internally and externally turn her silence into fury, and she turns her husband into the 'Sang-e-Saboor.' This double force of silence and fury inculcates the resistance she has been looking for all over her life.

Bronwyn Davies asserts in his *The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis*: "The experience of being a person is captured in the notion of subjectivity... One discourse that contradicts another does not undo one's constitution in terms of the original discourse. One's subjectivity is, therefore, necessarily contradictory. It is also to some extent outside of or larger than those

aspects of being which come under rational or conscious control" (43). If the specific female agency part is taken into consideration, Davies illustrates the idea of Helene Cixous from *The Laugh of the Medusa*, which goes something like this, "Because of their otherness to masculinity, women are also constituted as other to conscious, rational thought, even though they have had access to this form of thought through their schooling. They are thus competent but not wholly identified with conscious/rational thought and are able to include in the range of their considerations the emotions, feelings, and other "irrational" elements of their being that have been relegated to the unconscious by men (these being made oppositional to "good thought and to rational decision making). The willingness of women to tap those elements of their being that men have made, by definition, untappable, at least by the conscious mind, is a major source of the irritation that men feel with women and is often used as a source of justification for their marginalization in the public world" (44). The reflection of these 'irrational' or 'untappable' thoughts finds the best articulation in the novel mentioned above through its nuanced and raw occurrence of the female protagonist's thoughts. Her thoughts about finding the necessary space and medium between an external war and an internal helpless silence followed by the helplessness of the situation she's in puts the resistance of the woman into a crucial and important position. The woman basically utters the rage-infused cry for her basic feminine existence. In an instance, the woman complains to her comatose husband about her own father, who she claims preferred quail to his daughters and wife. The woman's mother, all seven of her female sisters, and herself have never been kissed. Over his daughters and wife, her father preferred to kiss his quail. Even when her father loses the quail war, he buys back his loss by selling her sister to the victor. She expresses her anguish over her father's treatment of women in the following quotation: "Dad had no money left to pay his bet, so he gave my sister, instead" (Rahimi 58). Pangestu and Darma's 2014 study "Confession without Borders: 1st Wave Feminism against Woman's Right Disproportion in Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone*" not only confirms that Afghanistan's social structure is firmly patriarchal by nature based on Rahimi's portrayal of the heroine's plight in the story but also the role of the institution of family in fostering and upholding it. But more importantly, they assert that Rahimi's portrayal of the unnamed heroine captures the harsh reality of Afghan women, who are perceived by their own family and community as inferior beings who not only lack emotions and intelligence but are also reduced to serving as carriers for men's seed in a society where men and women are treated on an even footing (6). They further illustrate the numerous customs specific to Afghan society that Rahimi depicts and that victimize women. These customs include the importance of marriage as a business transaction and the propensity to blame the wife in childless marriages, even when the husband is infertile. According to Pangestu and Darma, men in Afghan culture are perceived as God's superior creations, which gives them the right to assert their control over women, which means that they are permitted to enslave and otherwise harm them. But when the circumstances under which the women have been mutilated, i.e., war and patriarchy, paralyze the husband in the novella, the

anonymous woman regains her strength and releases her pent-up frustrations and anger, which under different circumstances would have literally killed her.

Mohamed Hamoud Al-Mahfedi, while critically exploring Helene Cixous and her theory on female agency and its subversive power in "The Laugh of the Medusa and the Ticks of Postmodern Feminism: Helen Cixous and the Poetics of Desire" rightly observes that "Cixous' feminist idea is not a conventional one that deals with a woman from a subversive pattern. Her concern is not only the domination of patriarchy and its associatively constructed politics". The politics of desire and the poetics of supplier, which Cixous claims are the two dominant forces, are included inside the feminine texture, which is superior to the masculine in this regard. She maintains that women should write about their bodies, meaning that their writing should not be subversive or take a defensive stance against patriarchal dominance but rather inwardly self-reflexive and outwardly self-assured, combining incongruously what is sometimes referred to as "prospective inscape." Writing by Cixous about women is "about the representation of the feminine body as a path towards thought, a thought that would question the assumptions of male-centric thinking, that which would "unsilence" the voice of the woman, allowing her to express her unconscious hidden self or "the Other" in androcentric language." (58) Rahimi inserts this 'prospective inscape' to explore the inner world of the woman and lets her unfold, rather unsilence her trauma. Rahimi's nameless protagonist, in addition to recalling the horrible events she has experienced in her family home, is subjected to harsher, more extreme, and crueler types of physical assault at her husband's home. She describes the events of the tale in an acrimonious way. She reveals that she and her husband have an intimate relationship that frequently involves battery. The anecdote also shows that the husband's urge for sex outweighed his desire for love or connection. Her husband's midnight acts of physical gratification were so animalistic that they practically resembled rape. When the situation calls for it, he never asks for her permission and always gets his way with her. This metaphorically lowers her standing in her marriage to that of a machine that exists simply to appease him, even when she has no desire to do so. This also explains her release of suppressed rage and irritation as the story goes on, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

And remember the night – it was when we were first living together that you came home late. Dead drunk. You'd been smoking. I had fallen asleep. You pulled down my knickers without saying a word. I woke up. But I pretended to be deeply asleep. You ...penetrated me...you had a great time... but when you stood up to go and wash yourself, you noticed blood on your dick. You were furious. You came back and beat me in the middle of the night just because I hadn't warned you that I was bleeding (Rahimi 30).

The heroine's husband suffers a battle injury that leaves him unconscious. Because of this, she may express herself and act without worrying about being threatened or subject to his reprisal. She shares her private ideas and laments his lack of interest in love and sex, releasing her suppressed resentments. When she kisses

and touches her immobile husband, she experiences sexual pleasure for the first time in her married life.

She leans right over the man... Then she rests her cheek tenderly on his chest...How strange this all is! I've never felt as close to you as I do right now. We've been married for ten years. Ten years! And it's only these last three weeks that I'm finally sharing something with you. " Her hand strokes the man's hair. ",I can touch you... You never let me touch you, never! She moves towards the man's mouth. I have never kissed you. She kissed him. The first time I went to kiss you on the lips, you pushed me away (66).

In the excerpt above, it is clear that the husband's comatose state has reduced him to a worthless physical being devoid of any sense of dignity. While this represents the demise of patriarchy within the tiny framework of the family, it also gives the heroine the confidence to assert herself in front of her husband and air her repressed grievances and traumatic memories. An important example would be how her brothers-in-law followed her about and gawked at her while her husband was at war. They have never treated her as a sister-in-law by them since her arrival. All these incidents, in bits and pieces, highlight the many deformities and crucial conditions of Afghan Society, which remain perpetually torn by the war cry and the subsequent violence of the Patriarchal society, and how women find multifarious ways to fight through them.

Since Cixous's ideas regarding female agency have been discussed earlier, it is necessary to focus on the Gynocriticism of Elaine Showalter and Adrienne Rich. Soghra Nodeh and Farideh Pourgivi delineate how Showalter and Rich distinguish and reassert the female space in their specific ideas. A gynocritic initiates feminist research in "history, anthropology, psychology, and sociology," all of which have developed and supported the premise of a "female subculture including not only the ascribed status, and the internalized constructs of femininity, but also the occupations, interactions, and consciousness of women." Showalter contends that one would either completely miss or just misread the themes, motifs, and forms of female literature without understanding the framework of female subculture, thus failing to make the required connections within a tradition. Showalter emphasizes that "the reclamation of suffering is only the beginning; its purpose is to discover the new world," using the motif of female suffering as an example of one of the major themes in women's writing. ("Showalter's Gynocriticism: Female Wild Zone of Experience in Adrienne Rich's A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far," 4). According to Adrienne Rich, attaining greater political agency went hand in hand with the emerging demand for active female self-construction, which involves being able to define and engrave versions of womanhood creatively and independently. According to Rich, "the imagination must question, confront, and think of alternatives if it is to transcend and transform experience" (171). In order to envision new ways for women to exist in the world, Rich taps into the boundless potential of the imagination. Her feminist poetics of intervention help to re-imagine the concrete circumstances in which women's lives

are lived. Rich makes it possible for an exigent and unique, symbolic place by exposing the gap in female self-hood.

By critically exploring the singular yet intricate interior life of an anonymous Afghan woman along with the notion of female agency and the power of turning silence into fury and finally into a power of resistance contributes to the complex inner loves and the struggles on a daily basis of the Afghan women- a field of study which has remained heavily misconstrued and stereotyped till the present day. "Afghan women" is now a boxed phrase. Women must be victims in order to fit into this category; they must have suffered abuse at the hands of men, appear desperate for assistance, wear particular apparel, and most crucially, have the ambition to be rescued by Westerners. In other words, Afghan women are once again a business prospect. "The name 'Afghan women' suffocates me because it represents pain and refers to a business that its stakeholders benefit from," said Salma Alokzai, a former official in the Afghan government. It doesn't outline Afghan women's characteristics or what they do. While this has been happening, powerful men in Afghanistan, including politicians, tribal chiefs, and even the terrorist Taliban and other mujahideen groups, have been successful in using "Afghan women" as a beneficial trade resource when dealing with the West. For instance, there have been relatively few institutionalized programs for women within the Afghan government at the state level over the past 20 years; those that did exist were solely created to draw donor cash. Since the Taliban came to power last year, "Afghan women" have become one of the main topics of their negotiations with Western governments. They proposed to let girls enroll in primary school in exchange for a seat at the U.N. They demanded that the United States unfreeze aid funds and give women the option of working as cleaning staff in Afghanistan's ministries or enrolling in universities—but only under certain restrictions. In accordance with their view of Islamic law, they have no problem with women beggars on the streets, but they forbid them from working in places of business. Girls are permitted to attend primary schools and, to a lesser extent, further education, but only if they cover their entire body in a black headscarf.

Authors like Rahimi, in particular, are crucial in highlighting the condition of Afghan women and emphasizing the restoration of their fundamental rights through fiction as a forum for greater public discourse and social change. According to Mikkonen (2009), on page 146, "some fictions, and even sub-genres of fiction, have an aim to make truth-claims," Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* can be seen as a vivid depiction of the Afghan woman's troubling situation. The reader can determine that gendered violence against women is a recurrent issue throughout Afghanistan from the narration of the novella's unnamed heroine and the further layers of psychological trials and tribulations and how specific they are in essence and not a generalized box of 'Afghan Women' as mentioned earlier.

Through this detailed analysis, the primary goal remains to refrain from this stereotyping that has been happening ever since the term 'Afghan Women' became a sensation. Of course, this present initiative runs the risk of essentializing and falling

into the same trope. Sulaiman Haqpana and Maria Tsouroufli in “‘Powerless, poor and needy?’: Reproducing colonial discourses of gender and Muslim women through educational interventions by I-NGOs in Afghanistan” instantiates the same point:

The international community, particularly the U.S. and its alliances, had various geopolitical, ideological, and economic objectives for intervening in Afghanistan in the post-9/11 context. In theory, one of their objectives was to liberate Afghans—specifically women and girls—from the brutal Taliban regime (Marsden,2009). However, in reality, the dynamics of such an intervention were multi-faceted, passing from state building to nation and civil society building and from humanitarianism to militarism. Western communities instrumentalized female empowerment discourse through NGOs, not only as a leading strategy but also as a mechanism for 'justifying their interventions'...As a result, it paradoxically leads to the further objectification of Afghan women...reinstates such a reproduction, which not only introduces Afghan women as 'exoticized victims' (Kandiyoti, 2009: 3) but also undermines their resistance and agency whilst dislocating them from their historical context through the (re)production of a colonial discourse of gender (2).

This present paper furthers the goal of illuminating the long history of resistance by Afghan women. This has definitely become the need of the hour since the political and social scenario of present Afghanistan is again marching backward. The end result remains quite open-ended and does not claim to be non-biased. Because the writer chosen for the study is a male expatriate writer who definitely runs the risk of falling into the trap of further misrepresenting Afghan women. Still, the choice has been made pretty consciously to analyze and explore the inner world of a woman through a male perspective and leave it for future studies to determine whether the initiative is successful or not.

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