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A Study of Female Sufferings in *Batya Swift Yasgur's Behind the Burqa* and Sharon E. McKay's *Thunder over Kandahar*

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Abstract

The persistent condition of conflict and violence in Afghanistan, continuing for almost fifty years, has caused huge destruction in terms of human and material losses. It has also led to a radical transformation in its socio-cultural fabric almost irreversibly. Because of their vulnerable position in its society, the Afghan women have endured a tough existence as they came to grips with a double subjugation in the form of patriarchal authority and the oppression emanating from the persistent conditions of the conflict. This paper studies the vital subject of Afghan women's experience as narrated in *Batya Swift Yasgur's Behind the Burqa* and Sharon E. McKay's *Thunder over Kandahar*. In the light of these novels, this paper argues how during a critical phase in Afghanistan's history, the conditions of violence and conflict magnified the oppression on its women. By contextualising the Afghan women's experience in a specific set of historical, political and social factors, this would

hopefully offer an alternative view of the condition of Afghan women rather than the usual stereotyped descriptions.

Keywords

Conflict; Violence; Patriarchy.

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The prolonged era of conflict and violence in Afghanistan seems to have aggravated the gender inequality and women's subordination because the conflict is rooted in structures which are exclusively defined by males. As Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman argue, "gender relations and identities are first deployed in sites of militarized conflict to incite, exacerbate, and fuel violence" (4). Since gender is central to the construction of national, ethnic and religious identities, women's behaviour is perceived as a "cultural marker" of "their" communities (4). After the fall of Communists in Afghanistan, the Jihadi warlords, and later, the Taliban, articulated identities which were highly masculinized in which women suffered immense oppression.

The novels *Behind the Burqa* and *Thunder over Kandahar* by *Batya Swift Yasgur* and Sharon E. McKay, respectively, are significant narratives which brings to fore the predicament of Afghan women who have lived under the debilitating shadows of patriarchal oppression and war. This paper attempts to argue, in the light of Yasgur and McKay's novels, how the patriarchy and persistent conditions of conflict have multiplied the oppression on women in Afghanistan.

The women in these novels genuinely appear as suffering beings. The prolonged conditions of the conflict in Afghanistan have taken heavy toll on human life and brought enormous suffering and devastation for the country. In any conflict children and women, in any case, are always the worst sufferers because of their vulnerable position in the society. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, "Women have never been secure within (or without) the

nation state—they are always disproportionately affected by war, forced migration, famine, and other forms of social, political, and economic turmoil” (514). In a society like Afghanistan where, in some instances, patriarchal customs come into view as hard and as rigid as its landscape, one is only left to wonder about the conditions of women when these customs are further entrenched by a prolonged conflict. Marginalisation creeps into the minds of people of various nations due to various reasons in different periods, as the Africans were marginalized by the Americans because of their colour while the Indians were discriminated among themselves based on the caste they were born into. Likewise the women of Afghan were marginalized by the opposite gender of their own nation because of the eccentric prevalence of the patriarchal attitude in all walks of normal life. It appears from the narrative of *Batya Swift Yasgur* and Sharon E. Mc Kay’s novels that women in Afghanistan have been victims both of patriarchy and the brutal situation of conflict that has now ravaged Afghanistan for the duration of almost a half of century.

Every Afghan woman’s life is like an adventure. They have to endure the domination of father, brother, uncle, sons and also their brutal beatings. They are treated like a passive inanimate object that has to fulfil the needs of male persons in their family. They faced the denial of educational opportunities, and choosing bride grooms. In Afghanistan most of the families make their daughters married to elder persons to pay their family debt. Because of war people faced forced migration, loss of family members and separation of family.

Behind the Burqa, written by Batya Swift Yasgur, is the story of two sisters and their journey from horrible oppression in the home towards the goal of freedom. The novel is divided into two parts, first part where Sulima, the older sister, tells her story about growing up in a home marked by fear, oppression and abuse. Sulima grows up during the communist period in Afghanistan and becomes an important member of the first women’s rights movement in 1970s. During her fight for women’s rights she experiences

betrayal from her own brother and is forced to make a choice between going to prison and leaving Afghanistan forever. Sulima leaves Afghanistan in 1979.

Hala is sixteen years younger than Sulima and grows up during a period when the Taliban regime was in power. Hala the younger sister faced threat for her life for running school secretly. She got migrated to America without any proper legal document and got imprisoned in America for six months to clear her legal formalities.

Sharon. E. McKay's *Thunder over Kandahar* is the story of two Afghani girls, Tamana and Yasmine, Who have been brought together by circumstances beyond their control and who forge an enduring friendship that survives class differences, illness, war and separation. The novel portrays the true essence of the lives of Afghani women and children.

In both the novels war topples the life of female characters invariably. In addition to this they have faced male domination, oppression, forced migration, brutal physical attack. Sulima, Hala, Yasmine, Yasmine's mother, Tamana and her mother all these female characters from these two novels are invariably affected by war. Sulima and Hala from *Behind the Burqa* migrated to foreign countries to save their lives. Sulima the eldest sister is a strong willed woman who worked as activist in communist regime and took a bold decision to escape from forced marriage by secretly marrying her cousin who loved her madly. Due to her participation in woman activism she got arrested and faced threat for her life so she got migrated to Germany and then America.

In *Thunder over Kandahar*, due to war Tamana and her mother came under the custody of her uncle Zaman. Tamana's father has gone to fight in war. Tamana's twin brother is separated from his family to save him from the eyes of Taliban's who take the young boys to tutor the Taliban principles and make them involve in war.

When Talibans took control in 1996, the Taliban initially imposed strict edicts that include the banishment of women from the work force, prohibited

schools to girls and women, which expelled women from universities, prohibited women from leaving their homes unless accompanied by a close male relative. It strictly ordered that the publicly visible windows of women's rooms be painted black and forced women to wear the *burqa* or *chadari* which completely shrouded the body, leaving only a small mesh-covered opening through which to see. It greatly prohibited women and girls from being examined by male physicians while at the same time prohibited female doctors and nurses from working.

The violent Taliban regime misinterpreted religious dictums to further strengthen the oppressive practices on women. Consequently, women in Afghanistan suffered a lot during the Taliban rule. All the above mentioned brutal activities of Taliban is evident in the novels

As described in the novel, *Behind the Burqa*, Hala is beaten to death by Taliban's religious police for running school, as Hala says,

I do not remember all the rest. I remember the pain. I remember the blows. I remember the feeling of fist against my cheek. Of hair being wrenched from my scalp. The sound of a woman crying. The sound of children shrieking. The sound of men shouting. "Children , go home . If we ever catch any one of you in this house again, we will burn down the house with you in it." (215)

In *Thunder over Kandahar*, Taliban's attacked the newly started school and tried to murder the teacher for taking class with both male and female children together. When Yasmine tried to escape through the window, she was caught by a Taliban. She might have lost her life if Tamana didn't rescue her with the help of her twin brother, who is one among the Taliban.

Yasmine's mother is attacked by group of Taliban's for singing song in park. Men refused to lift her mother into ambulance. When her mother is taken to hospital, male doctors refused to treat her mother and suggested to get

treatment from the only female doctor who stopped practising on the demand of her husband.

One cannot escape from the fact that it is a terrifying story about two young women living in fear of practically everything. Their own father, brother and uncles are controlling almost every minute of their lives, and freedom is certainly something they both long for.

Sulima introduces the hidden concept of oppression by explaining the role of a man but also the concept of freedom. The individual man is seen as a ticket to freedom for women. By getting married, a woman can work and attend meetings, that is, if she is “lucky” enough to find a supportive man. Freedom for Sulima is being able to work, to attend a simple party and go out by herself. An interesting question to discuss is if a ‘third world’ woman would move to a Western country, would she still be oppressed?

Someone is praising me. A neighbour. “Your wife speaks such good German. You must be proud. “Later, a fist. Another black eye. Another lie to Gretchen, my friend who works with me at the lab. This time, I have bumped into the dresser corner. She looks at me, and I know she has figured out the truth. I hide my face in shame.
(Yasgur 122)

The passage is taken from *Behind the Burqa*, where Sulima has moved from Afghanistan and lives with her husband and daughter in Germany. It did not matter that Germany is a country in Europe where women have equal rights. To the contrary, oppression for Sulima did not end in Germany, it still remained. It did not matter if Sulima ran away from Afghanistan, her fight against male domination and female oppression continued in her home. Oppression comes from a specific culture or family situation. If one is taught that female oppression is acceptable, it does not really matter where one lives, the wrong treatment of women will remain. At least it did for Sulima; her husband abused her regardless where they lived. Thus, a woman living in the

West could be treated just like Sulima if she has a husband, father or brother who is taught that abusing women is acceptable within their culture or home.

Sulima's husband treated her like a doll, he nursed her, beat her at his wish. Sulima's husband Ibrahim's brother Yasin looks her with an ill eye, with the help of Yasin they got settled in Germany. He pollutes Ibrahim and advised him to control Sulima. In Germany luckily Sulima gets job in her discipline of biology as a researcher in university after working for a while as a menial worker. Sulima is frequently beaten by her husband.

In the dominant patriarchies, women also seem to be internalizing the essentialist patriarchal customs which trap them further in the web of marginalisation. Reflecting on this, Kavita Punjabi argues,

The social demands of the women, the social construction of what a feminine identity should be, make women vulnerable to internalizing guilt, whereas the former, the feminist identity that addresses the needs of women, makes it possible for them to deal with both the superimposed and the internalized guilt. (Aman 2001)

In the novel, women appear to share their part in the male hegemony. They internalise and substantiate the views of the differences in human beings as embedded in the patriarchy dominated culture. Sulima's submission to the will of her husband seems to underlie this essentialist view. Because of her husband's objection Sulima sacrificed her Ph.D. admission first and secondly she sacrificed her chance of going to France as a researcher with the research team of the university, the team which has postponed their journey for six months for Sulima's legal papers to get cleared. Sulima moved to America under the compulsion and also by the false promise of her husband that he will look after her well.

In America, Sulima started her life again by working as a domestic help and reached the level of flower decorator. Ibrahim has become a drunkard and

beat Sulima, frequently. Very often Ibrahim leaves Sulima and moves to his mother's house. Sulima begged his mother many times to send back Ibrahim to her house. Ibrahim moves to Germany without informing Sulima. And to join her husband, Sulima sold her newly bought house by facing hardships and also left her flower decorating job.

Sulima becomes pregnant twice in the midst of her bad times and delivered two more daughters. She comes back to America and starts her own flower shop with the help of a friend. All the money she earns is emptied by her husband. Sulima has many chances to put her husband in jail by using American law but she never does that.

Finally Sulima calls police when she is beaten to death; using this as reason Ibrahim applies for divorce. Sulima unwillingly faces the divorce proceedings and gets her divorce.

In *Thunder over Kandahar* also Tamana and her mother suffer under the tyrannical hands of her uncle. Tamana's uncle Zaman is man who has all sorts of bad habits in the world and he is a wastrel too. Tamana and her mother is under the control of her uncle, they have to get permission from him for everything. Tamana's uncle enjoyed his life by the money earned by Tamana and her mother by *naan* making.

When Tamana's mother advised her uncle to refine his character, he beats her heavily. Tamana became a physically challenged girl by the act of her uncle. "No woman tells me what to do, you *ahmaq!* (Numskull) You woman! I will not be told how to behave in my own house!" (31).

Tamana's life turned upside down with the appearance of Yasmine in her life. In Tamana's life Yasmine came as solace and her family as an educator to Tamana. Tamana's uncle allowed her to work in Yasmine's house to get extra money for his enjoyment. Tamana has learned to read and write with the help of Yasmine and her father secretly.

Tamana is betrothed to an elderly man as second or third wife by her uncle to pay off his debt. When Tamana's bride groom rejected her for her physical deformity, her uncle has beaten her mother severely and was on a look-out for Tamana to murder her. This is the story of most of Afghan girls. Tamana is not in a condition to go to doctor to get prescription for her ailments even though she and her mother earn. Her uncle objects for visiting to doctor.

Tamana and Yasmine undertook a dangerous journey to migrate to Pakistan in a critical moment to save their lives. Their journey to Pakistan is an adventurous, thrilling and a horrible experience. Both Tamana and Yasmine crossed the ruddy roads, hair pin turns, stony paths, and dangerous mountains, hopped rock bridges, roamed by Talibans. Yasmine has given Tamana her name and identity to go to along with her mother to London by making her wear her necklace as an indication.

Yasmine a girl of fourteen year old, daughter of a lawyer mother and professor father who enjoyed good education and peaceful life in London who got suddenly shifted to Afghanistan by her parents. She is not able to cope up with Afghan way of life that women has to wear hijab (burqa) and women should not go out without male relative.

Yasmine's family came to Afghanistan to do their contribution in rebuilding Afghanistan is shattered and they lost their daughter Yasmine in their native land. Yasmine's parents are attacked in their native village suspecting them as informer but luckily they survived after that attack with help of American Khariji soldiers who took them to their camp and treated them. Yasmine's father has lost the left arm permanently; her mother is able to walk after two surgeries in England.

Yasmine lost her parents, education and became amnesia patient due to bomb blast in the border of Pakistan and got the name Famia in camp. Yasmine started a new life in the name of Famia in Pakistan as a sister to

Mina. Mina and Babrak are husband and wife who escaped to Pakistan to protect them from the attack of Talibans.

Tamana's physical deformity is cured by Yasmine's parents and she becomes a doctor. Yasmine becomes the youngest teacher in Pakistan at the age of sixteen. Her dream is to start a school in Afghanistan. Yasmine gets reunited with her family and Tamana. Yasmine starts a school in Kandahar and Tamana becomes a visiting Physician to Afghanistan.

In the light of the analysis of *Batya Swift Yasgur's Behind the Burqa* and Sharon E. McKay's *Thunder over Kandahar*, one may conclude that the prolonged conditions of conflict in Afghanistan have brought adverse impacts on its women by exacerbating the patriarchal oppression on them. Women in burqa of Afghanistan stand as an example for every woman in the world due to their relentless endurance which is the only key to survive in the world of continuous trials and tribulations.

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