

Bloom amidst Gloom: Delineation of Afghan Women in *We are Afghan Women – Voices of Hope*

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Abstract: *Women in Afghanistan endured extreme forms of subjugation, violence and cruelty especially during the rule of the Soviets, the Mujahedeen and the Taliban. They were relegated to the position of 'hopeless women', 'illiterate women' or 'worthless women' by the Afghan men to preserve the male hegemony. That has been prevalent over the centuries in most parts of Afghanistan. Though women endeavoured to elevate themselves and many other women to a better position, they were condemned severely. To the illiterate women community, men would use religion as a device to instill the belief that women are not supposed to take up certain tasks. Many illiterate minds would accept the inequality as part of their life. However, a few spirited and resilient women, even amidst severe opposition and dangers involved, endeavoured in getting education, taking up jobs or starting a new business. They paved their way to emerge triumphant in the gloomy world of patriarchal system in Afghanistan. Interestingly, Afghan women found several ways to bring themselves to the fore and became a part of the nation building process. The study proposes to probe deeper into the real stories shared by Afghan women in *We are Afghan Women – Voices of Hope* and explore the manifold schemes employed by women to create a 'visible space' for thousands of women.*

Key words: patriarchal, women, elevate, hegemony and education.

Women around the world have enormous capacity to take lead roles and elevate the status of women to a much higher level educationally, socially, familiarly, religiously, economically nationally and internationally. However, with reference to Afghan women, it is possible only when women start believing in themselves and strive towards the enhancement of their present pathetic condition. Though there are few privileged women who enjoy the luxury of freedom in many societal aspects, large number of them struggle under the reins of stringent patriarchal infrastructure. Investing time, energy and money towards educating the girls and initiating projects to uplift the status of women would certainly result in a scenario where the percentage of proficient personnel, especially women would increase. Undoubtedly, in such a scenario, the nation can excel at par with other nations.

As Manizha Naderi expresses in *We are Afghan Women – Voices of Hope*, she had to migrate from Afghanistan to a foreign country during Soviet invasion. When she returned to her native country, she first visited a women's prison in Kandahar. She was shocked to see the appalling living conditions of women. Even more shocking was to know the reasons for being jailed – running away from forced marriages, rape victims, escaping from domestic abuse, and such moral crimes. Ironically, instead of giving security to such battered women, they were imprisoned during the Taliban regime. Women who ran away from terrible situations were often accused of *zina* (sexual relations outside marriage) and were severely punished for that. Realising the terrible conditions of women in Afghanistan, she started to work for the cause of troubled girls and young women. She was one of the founding members of a movement 'Women for Afghan Women' which was dedicated to curb violence against women and had reached out to almost fifteen thousand women. In another outreach programme called Women's Rights ARE Human Rights, she worked with community leaders, mullahs, teachers and government officials to make them understand the significance

of women's rights under Islam and civil law. Even women were made to become conscious that Islam and legal system had rules in favour of women too. However as Mehta remarks in *Women for Afghan Women: Shattering Myths and Claiming the Future*,

Although theoretically every Afghan woman had a chance at an education, not all women could seize that precious opportunity. Islam wasn't keeping these women from moving forward; the traditionalists and their cultures were women's greatest obstacles in their quest for equality. It was patriarchy, threatened by the prospect of women's empowerment that hindered women's use of their legal rights. (106).

It is to be noted that to perpetuate the superiority of men and inferiority of women, the latter were made to grow up as illiterate, inefficient and incapable section of the society. Some women accepted those assumptions and supported to put down women. However, it is overwhelming to note that Manizha Naderi and her team members were able to reach out to almost up to 2, 50,000 Afghan people through their rigorous and effective trainings This is a true achievement for Manizha Naderi as she risked many odds being a woman in the rigid patriarchal society of Afghanistan in her journey of empowering several dejected women and changing the attitude of Afghan men towards women in the society. Similarly in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Laila emerges victorious by coming back to her country and involving herself in educating the young Afghan population. In majority of the cases, it becomes very difficult for Afghan women who do not have the exposure to the outside world in different countries to be courageous enough to lead any programmes in support of women's empowerment. For this reason, Afghan women diaspora should involve themselves in initiating projects or programmes related to enhance the most deplorable state of Afghan women.

In *We are Afghan Women – Voices of Hope*, Naheed Esar shares her experiences as a social activist. She proudly talks about her grandmother who was the commander in the mujahedeen group and fought with valour against Russians. Being a nationalistic woman, she was a voice for the female mujahedeen. Esar recounts few terrible narratives of Afghan women. In one of her interviews, a woman tells her how she was forced into prostitution and sadly, even her three and half year old innocent daughter was dragged into the quagmire of unethical and illegal sexual activities. When Esar took them to the hospital, the child was still bleeding. This speaks tremendously about the situation women and children are forced to due to poverty and also the unpardonable nature of few Afghan men. The trauma of this supposedly inferior section of the society is not considered as a grave problem and men do not bother to address such issues. Women suffer from abuse and violence in the cruel world of Afghanistan due to irrational and ridiculous behaviour of the men. Jenny Nordberg in her popular book, *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys*, mentions about the report on abuse in Afghanistan in an article titled, “Living with Violence: A National Report on Domestic Abuse in Afghanistan” in March 2008 on www.globalrights.org. According to that report, “an overwhelming majority of women, 87.2%, experienced at least one form of physical, sexual or psychological violence or forced marriage, and most, 62.0%, experienced multiple forms of violence.” (322) The gravity of the situation cannot be overlooked as almost nine out of every ten Afghan women suffered from either of the different forms of violence on women. It is essential that the women should be made aware of the several rights the law sanctions for them. Also, how women as a collective force should fight against the vicious acts of majority of the men in Afghanistan. They should reasonably figure out whether the age old customs are still relevant. If women feel that certain customs hinder the progress of women and subsequently the advancement of the nation, they need to come out of their cloistered shelters and embrace the change. .

Incidentally, in Afghanistan, a very few women have an identity of their own. They are either, daughter, wife, mother, sister or aunt. Their identity is defined in terms of men in the society which needs to be addressed to build a nation with gender equality or gender sensitivity. In Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Nana, the protagonist's mother never had an identity. Even worse, being a servant and having a child out of marriage, she did not get the identity at the familial level as a 'wife'. Jalil abandoned her and she had to stay in a remote place, far away from Jalil, who had sexual relation with her. Ultimately, unable to bear the insult and humiliation in the society, she ends her life adding to the several heart wrenching stories of Afghan women who end their life amidst culturally, politically and socially stringent norms in the country. The legal, religious and the political system should work in tandem to give equal opportunities to both men and women. However, if the Afghan women do not get support from the authorised sources, they should not wait for the men to liberate them or foreign agencies to help them in times of distress. Rather, women should take charge of their lives to unshackle them from the atrocities meted out to them. As Sunita Mehta quotes Sanaa Nadim:

The women of Afghanistan must continue to struggle to find their place in the world according to their own moral convictions. Afghan women must find their path according to their own spiritual and intellectual vision. They must come to terms with their choices and struggle for their coexistence... They must work toward their own peace accord. (45).

As Nadim says, women should find their way in the journey of life to better themselves with the limited resources or opportunities at their disposal. If they are not getting the support or encouragement from the men, there is no point waiting for the men force to come to the rescue of women. Such conditions are similar to a fairy tale theme of 'damsel in distress'. Instead, women should emerge stronger and wiser to take charge of the

responsibilities to take the nation forward with great advancement. Unfortunately, in some cases, women become the greatest enemies to other girls or women. From their young age, their minds have been trained to accept the atrocities or indifferences or inequality with regard to men and women as something normal or a way of life. Sometimes, though women are aware of the dire need of educating the girls, they do not send the girls to school due to extreme fear because of the prevalent social conditions which threaten the girls' life. It is mainly with good education, women realise that the discrimination which exists in the country should be retaliated for the peaceful coexistence of both men and women in Afghan society. However, it should be noted that there were illiterate women too who were extremely wise to understand the need of good education for the young Afghan girls and trod the path of encouraging Afghan girls to study.

Belquis Gavagan shares her heart wrenching early experiences in Afghanistan and Pakistan in *We are Afghan Women – Voices of Hope*. Her story is a story of millions of traumatised Afghan girls/women. Her narrative of vigour and toughness throughout her stay in her native country and Pakistan makes the readers and especially sensible men to go a way forward in involving themselves in multifarious projects which are designed to uplift the status of Afghan women. She casted her mind back to her childhood experiences during the Soviet rule in Afghanistan. She and her family did not have a politically and socially safe place for their survival. She shares the brutal behaviour of Russian soldiers who would visit any house looking for Afghan girls to gratify their sexual desires. Sadly, even the seven year old, Belquis Gavagan fell victim to their heinous deeds and very painfully she articulates, “So that was my childhood.”(17) It should also be noted that during the Soviet regime, there was lot of emphasis on girls' education and emancipation of women. Many girls joined school even amidst war and violence. Nevertheless, as As Nushin Arbabzadah mentions in her book, *Afghan Rumour Bazaar - Secret Sub-cultures, Hidden Worlds and the Everyday Life of the*

Absurd, “On the one hand, they bang on about women’s rights and help for widows. On the other hand, every time there’s an air raid, Afghan women become widows. It doesn’t make sense.”(159) Even though there were many progressive measures in favour of women, due to heavy bombings and air raids, many women lost their husbands which accounted for the double edged sword

Even amidst such chaotic situation due to Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Belquis Gavagan chose to continue her education. Along with her degree in law and Political Science, she pursued nursing. In 1990s during the Mujahedeen time, having joined as a nurse in a hospital run by a big international aid group, she got accustomed to witness brutality every day. Even the hospital was not safe as they had rockets landing in operation theatres or emergency areas. The Mujahedeen fought among themselves to achieve power and wealth for themselves. Also, women had to go through drudgery due to the stringent rules imposed on women. The civilians paid a very heavy price as the Mujahedeen “raped women. They looted people’s houses.” (19) Undoubtedly, the Afghan women suffered from a sense of fear and insecurity which had engulfed the entire nation.

During the Mujahedeen rule in Afghanistan, women were forced to wear long scarves and were supposed to be accompanied by a *mahram* while going out. However, Gavagan faced several challenges in her journey as a nurse. As part of her job, she had to go with a male driver and a male colleague in ambulance during any emergencies. But she had to face severe rebuke from the Mujahedeen officials. But her undivided focus on her work did not deter her from repeating such acts in future also. Her narrative is an enough testimony that if the person decides to achieve something positive, if the willpower of an individual is very strong even amidst dark surroundings, one can emerge triumphant.

It is interesting to note that, in spite of conspicuous unfairness which was shown towards the Afghan women populace, they did not hesitate to pick up the cudgels of determination, confidence, fearlessness and perseverance to fight against the harsh authoritarian internal or external rulers. The women were oppressed doubly as they had to follow illogical and disgusting rules under the Mujahedeen regime.

To conclude, if the contribution of both men and women is asymmetrical, the growth or making headway in major fields becomes extremely difficult. It is dire need for Afghan people to shed their age old customs which are detrimental to the advancement of the country. Afghan men should rise above their trivial ego and domination and accept women as their equals whose participation in the reconstruction of the battered country is almost inevitable. Women should be trained to become self-reliant and self-sufficient. Realising the importance of women workforce in all – family, politics, religion, education, law and order, business - the sectors, Afghan men should give a free rein to the women folk from the manacles of patriarchy. The onus lies on every Afghan woman to bloom amidst gloom that is to flourish amidst deceitful social system.

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