

Feminist Traits In Nila And Pari In *And The Mountains Echoed*



Uzma Malik

M.Phil English Qurataba University of Science and Information Technology
Peshawar uzmam2211@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article provides an in-depth analysis of the complexities of human relationships and identity in Khaled Hosseini's novel "And the Mountains Echoed". Through a multigenerational narrative, the study examines the feminist characteristics exhibited by Nila Wahdat and Pari Wahdat as they navigate a patriarchal society. Using a qualitative approach grounded in feminist theory, this research investigates how these women resist and challenge the oppressive nature of patriarchy. The findings highlight the significance of female solidarity and the ways in which Nila and Pari subvert traditional power structures. This study aims to explore the feminist traits displayed by these characters and analyze their experiences within the broader context of feminist discourse. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersections between patriarchy and female agency, offering valuable insights into the resilience and strength of women in the face of oppression. By shedding light on the experiences of Nila and Pari, this study seeks to enrich feminist literary scholarship and inspire further exploration of the complex dynamics between gender, power, and identity.*

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Identity Crisis, Resilience, Afghan women, Family Dynamics

Introduction

The term “feminism” in technical jargon is inextricably linked to ‘women’ and literally addresses concerns related to their equality and rights movements. It explicitly incorporates cultural, political, and economic dimensions, focusing on two primary concerns, viz. highlighting the hardships encountered by the women in society and advocating for change by securing legal rights and protections, thereby dismantling the oppressive constraints (Beavoir, 2011).

Historically speaking, the first wave of feminism emerged between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Its primary objective had been to achieve political equality, notably the due rights to suffrages, earning it the alternative label of the women suffrage movement. In the same vein, the second wave of feminism emerged in the 1960s and went to oblivion in the 1980s. Its

primary objective had been the liberation of womenfolk from the deep-rooted cultural, social, and political bondages, compelling them to remain dispossessed throughout their lives. The third wave of feminism began in the 1980s and persists till this day (Dolan, 1991).

The core aim duly cherished by this wave has been to grant women complete autonomy to live their lives as they opt for. During this period, women also started challenging the male chauvinism, suppressing women to categorically subscribe to the patriarchal narratives (Hedges, 1998). Many feminist thinkers have categorically expressed their opposition to the suffering of women through then agency of writing. One notable example is Khaled Hosseini who has written about the sufferings of women in all three of his novels: *The Kite Runner*, *The Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And The Mountains Echoed*. It highlights that each

novel literally deals with various motifs, viz. war, Talibanization, depression, suppression, gender-based discrimination, patriarchy, and feminism via the representation of different female characters. The passage concludes by elucidating that Hosseini is successful in presenting the ongoing suffering of females in Afghan society through his magnum opus three novels (Wilfred, 1966).

The novel “And the Mountain Echoed” provides a poignant portrayal of the hardships faced by the Afghan women, shedding light on the diverse struggles they encounter due to their gender. The narrative delves deep into the lives of various female characters, each navigating distinct obstacles within a patriarchal society (Bhasin, 1993). Two characters, Nila Wahdati and Pari, stand out for their resilience and feminist inclinations, exemplifying the profound suffering endured by women in Afghanistan. Nila Wahdati, a young Afghani woman, is constrained by her father’s traditional perspectives from a young age. Contextually speaking, different reasons behind the suffering of women in Afghan society have been predominantly described, viz. patriarchal society, weak and fragile political system, and Talibanization in the country (Khan, 2020).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Afghanistan stands as one of the most perilous and unstable nations for women in the comity of global nations, where a deeply ingrained system of gender oppression and discrimination prevails. This systemic inequality has potentially led to the severe curtailment of women’s fundamental rights, viz. their right to freedom of speech, education, and the ability to express their opinions and viewpoints. They have no control over their lives. Their lives are viciously manipulated and controlled from childhood till death by the patriarchal clique of Afghan society. In short, the country has adopted a typical Tennyson approach towards women:

Man is the hunter, women is his game.

Man for the field and women for the hearth.

Man with the head and women with the heart.

Man to command women to obey. (Tennyson, “The Princes”)

Contextually speaking, many female characters have been subjected to patriarchal oppression in Afghan society. Putting in specific context, in this research, two female characters, viz. Nila and Pari, have been taken from the novel and have been analyzed to show how women are suffering and become voiceless in Afghan society. A plethora of reasons behind this vicious suffering in Afghan society, as shown in the novel, are determined by a weak central government, talibanization, and the patriarchal clutches operating in this society.

Owing to incompetent central government, the Afghan parliament is incapable of devising and implementing laws in both letter and spirit, advocating the female members of the country. The Afghan governments cannot strictly implement rules and laws for granting equal rights to women. Putting in historical context, whenever any government member has attempted to advocate women basic rights, a group of mullahs and tribal chieftains has gone for a revolt against him. As Nila says in her interview that one-day king Amanullah announced his plan to restructure the country into a new and a more glorifying country. He says, “*No more wearing of the veil, for one*” (Hosseini, 181). The king further said that there would be “*no more polygamy*” in this country (Hosseini, 181). “When the king literally proclaimed all these basic rights for women and his wife, queen Soraya appeared before the subject without covering her face. In response, they declared jihad on him, the mullahs and the tribal chiefs” (Hosseini, 181). Moreover, the mullahs and tribal leaders proclaimed jihad to be waged against the king, leading to a tsunami of upheaval impinged upon the miserable king and at the end, the king died as a *disillusioned old man* in excel (Hosseini, 182).

The second reason of women’s suffering in Afghan society is the arrival of Taliban. The conditions of women were not as despicable before the arrival of Taliban as they turned after the Taliban. The Taliban marginalized women by devising the strict system that was based on discrimination. After Taliban’s arrival, all

people have been severely affected. In the same vein, women have also been despicably affected as compared to other members of this country. It is evident from the letter of Nabi which he wrote to Mr. Markhos. Nabi wrote to Mr. Markhos, that *eventually, the fighting ended with the arrival of Taliban and they saved the bulk of their contempt in zealotry for the young, especially the poor women* (Hosseini, 124). This posits that women have been affected doubly with the arrival of Taliban. Taliban kept enforcing these draconian rules on them, viz. no laughing, wearing a 'burqa' properly, not revealing ankles, not talking to a stranger and not articulate their opinion in any decision-making process.

The third reason, which is responsible for suffering of women in Afghanistan, is the patriarchal mindset dominating society. In such a patriarchal society, women are considered inferior while men are considered superior. Man is the boss of the family while the female is the servant. Male is the priority of family while female holds a secondary or a subsidiary position in the family. Decision-making rests with the male members of the family and female members have to obey the decision of male members of the family. For example, in the case of Pari selling, his father decides to sell her and Pari has no other way except subscribing to her father's decision.

"No one was touting me in Kabul. No one in Kabul considered me a pioneer of anything but of bad taste, debauchery, and an immoral character. Not least of all, my father. He said my writings were ramblings of a whore. He used that word precisely. He said I'd damaged his family name beyond repair. He said I had betrayed him. He kept asking why I found it so hard to be respectable" (Hosseini, 211).

In Afghan patriarchal society, women are expected to be obedient, polite, and honorable. The Afghan patriarchal society expected women to adopt a profession, staying within the boundaries of tradition and culture. Nila, who is an established and liberal poetess is not praised by society. Afghan people, both educated and uneducated, love poetry. They love poetry to such a level that they even spray the quotes of

the poems of Rumi on walls. But Nila being a female is not praised by society. She is not considered as the pioneer of good poetry. She is considered as an immoral woman having bad taste in poetry. She is not only considered as an intimate and immoral woman by society but also by her father. Her father considers her poetry as "the rambling of whore".

"I told him I did not care for his notion of respectable. I told him I had no desire to slip the leash around my own neck" (Hosseini, 211).

Nila is a stylish and liberal French-Afghan poetess who likes to write poetry about love, desire, and sex which is out of the boundaries in Afghan society. She is not acceptable in Afghan society as an admirable poetess because of her ill reputation and bad taste in poetry. When Mr. Suleiman Wahdati and Nila's marriage is announced, it becomes a hot topic of discussion in the city because of the bad and poor character of Nila. Even Mr. Suleiman Wahdati's mother does not approve the marriage and Nila also knows that she does not like her. The city people start discussion that Nila has no "nang" and "namoos" which is used as an acceptable stamp for a woman in Afghan society. They say that she has been known by everyone like Wahdati's car because of her poor character. The interesting part is that she does not deny this intimations but she has written poetry about them. This shows that Nila's poetry and character are against the tradition and norms of Afghan culture and voices out feminism. There is no place for women like Nila in Afghan society. One of the person shares his opinion that if she has been in his village they would kill her. It is common in Afghan society that women are killed in name of pride and honor. At this place, Hosseini show both the strict mindset of a patriarchal society through which women are suffering and the liberal side of Nila which makes her bold and brave to challenge the patriarchal traditions.

"I had never in my life encountered a young woman like Nila. Everything she did-the way she spoke, the way she walked, dressed, smiled-was a novelty to me. Nila pushed against every single notion I had ever had of how a woman was to behave, a trait that I knew met with the

stout disapproval of people like Zahid-and surely Saboor too, and every man in my village, and all the women” (Hosseini, 87).

Nila is different from a young Afghan woman in her way of talking, strolling, outfitting, and laughing. A typical young Afghan woman is not allowed to talk in front of men in loud voice or talk back to them. They have either to remain silent in front of male members of the family or to speak in a low voice. In Afghan society, women are not permitted to go out of their houses. They are kept inbound in their household activities while men have full freedom in internal as well as external affairs of the family. Women are not allowed to wear dresses which are against the norms and traditions of Afghan society. They are also not permitted to walk in front of male members but they have to remain in “parda” from male members of the society. But Nila is a unique character who is totally against the norms and traditions of society which is disapproved by Afghan society male members like Saboor and Zahid and also other Afghan females as Nabi describes. Because her way of life is different from a young Afghan female who is suppressed to behave in a way which the male member of the family order them. With this Nila as a feminist tries to gain the original place of women which Afghan Patriarchal society has changed based on sex.

“Now, I knew from the start that the marriage was an unhappy one. Rarely did I see a tender look pass between the couple or hear an affectionate word uttered. There were two to people were occupying whose paths rarely seemed to intersect at all” (Hosseini, 82).

Nila also suffers in her married life. When she gets married to Suleiman Wahdati in 1949, at the age of twenty, she is not happy with him. The marriage is an unhappy one from the start as has been described by her servant, Nabi. There is neither a spiritual attraction nor an exchange of affectionate words between the two. They seem like two people living in the same house but having different paths and directions. This shows that Afghan society is gender biased where the male is considered superior and free from any social restriction while females are

considered inferior and are under social restrictions.

“It was not altogether surprised to learn that she has taken her own life” (Hosseini, 130).

Females are considered as a burden on family while males are considered bread earners in the future. That’s why Saboor sells Pari and does not sell Abdullah because he understands that Abdullah will be the source of earning and financial support system of the family in the future. Parwana, Pari's stepmother also tells Abdullah that she is the one that has to be sold because she also knows that Abdullah is an economic source for the family in the future. Saboor and Parwana think that selling Pari can bring them a great deal of money which can remove the starvation and poverty of family and can help in the improvement of the family economic situation. This shows that men are the priority in patriarchal society while females are considered secondary and worthless in Afghan society. This also shows that how females are deprived of their basic rights of freedom.

“Nila set teaching her French, which had been her own mother’s tongue” (Hosseini, 102).

“She studies mathematics at the Sorbonne” (Hosseini, 194).

Nila leaves Afghanistan just for her daughter, Pari. She wants to educate and aware Pari like herself from her basic rights which are not available to Afghan women. She wants to give Pari freedom and allow her to live her life according to her will which is not provided for a female in Afghan society. During her interview with Monsieur Boustouler, she describes all the suffering which a woman undergoes during her life in Afghan society. She says that she does not want that her daughter goes against her will and live life which is against her nature. Nila wants to protect her daughter from the life of females who provide double labor as compared to men because they work hard in homes as well as in fields. These sad Afghan women provide labor and service to the family without any objection all her life. Afghan women are always in fear of expressing their opinions because they are prohibited to share their decision and opinion in front of male members of family. They are also

forbidden to meet to unrelated men. Afghan women always worry, if something wrong commit from them because they are not forgiven by the society even if it is done unintentionally. In spite of working hard and double as compared to men, they are not praised by the society like West society, for example in France where women are praised for their hard work. They are made heroines for their hard work by the society. These women live such a hard life that no one will be able to pass a day like their lives. Afghan women's wishes are drowned and their ambitions in life are rejected in front of their eyes and they cannot do anything. The bad part is when someone meets them; they smile gladly without showing their helplessness. They show as nothing bad has happened to them. However, if someone goes close to them and analyzes their private life, they would come to know that how powerless, incapable, dependent, and hopeless life they live. To cover such a pathetic life, they pretend that they are living happy life due to various reasons. They are dependent on male members of the family for their needs. They have no education or awareness that they can challenge such kind of life. They accept such an oppressive life because of fear. So to free her daughter from such type of life, Nila goes to France to provide every opportunity and freedom to her daughter in her life, from which a female is deprived in Afghan society.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of Nila and Pari Wahdati's characters in *And the Mountains Echoed* explicitly reveals the epochal repercussions unleashed by the patriarchal societies on women's lives in Afghanistan. Through their stories and traditional narratives, Khalid Hosseini sheds light on the intricacies on part of the women's experiences, spotlighting their struggles, resilience, and determination. The feminist attributes exhibited by Nila and Pari serves as a potent aspersion on the societal norms that restrict women's autonomy, agency, and freedom from ever lurking social clutches. Their narratives underscores the importance of promoting gender equality, challenging patriarchal oppression, and empowering women to claim their rights.

Summing up, this research study categorically demonstrates that Hosseini's portrayal of women in "And the Mountains Echoed" is a testament to the strength and resilience of Afghan women, offering a refined and thought-provoking exploration of the human experiences.

References

- Beavoir, S. D. (2011). *The second Sex*. New York: Vintage publisher New Yourk.
- Bhasin, K. (1993, September 10). What is Patriarchy. *What is Patriarchy*. New Dehli, Dehli, India: PRIA New Dehli.
- Dolan, J. (1991). *The feminist spectator as Critic*. Michigan: University of Michigan press.
- Hedges, E. (1998). Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist criticism. *Oxford Journal*, 193-195.
- Khan, A. (2020). Conflicting and Challenging Patriral and Liberal Feminest; Ideologies and norms in Afghanistan. *Arab World English Journal*, 154-167.
- Wilfred, G. (1966). *A hand book of Critical Approaches to Literature*. Newyork: Newyork publisher.