

ISSN : 2454-3365

# THE LITERARY HERALD

AN INTERNATIONAL REFEREED ENGLISH E-JOURNAL

---

*A Quarterly Indexed Open-access Online JOURNAL*

---

Vol.1, Issue 2 (September 2015)

---

Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Siddhartha Sharma

---

[www.TLHjournal.com](http://www.TLHjournal.com)

[sharmasiddhartha67@gmail.com](mailto:sharmasiddhartha67@gmail.com)

## “Womanhood”: Images in Post 9/11 Afghan Fictional Narratives

**Dona Elizabeth Sam**  
**PhD Research Scholar**  
**Department of Indian and World Literatures**  
**The English and Foreign Languages University**

### Abstract

Beginning from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), there emerged an unending attempt to define “woman” and her rights. The endeavours to define a woman and her state of being have always been conditioned culturally with respect to one's geographical positioning. Keeping the multiple political facets intact, it becomes notable that the representation of life, in general of the East has come to bring about major concerns post 9/11, witnessing a sudden emergence of literature which rendered voice to Afghani(Muslim) women. As a burqa-clad community, the preconceived notion of their oppressed and suppressed state came to reflect itself in literature. The veil, rightly called the burqa in Afghanistan has contributed largely to their image; not just pertaining to their submissiveness but as a mark of their individuality. Remarkably, authors like Siba Shakib, Deborah Rodriguez, Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini through their stories portray numerable women characters delineating on their struggles and the subsequent images created.

[**Keywords:** freedom, identity, image, Muslim women, post 9/11, representation]

## “Womanhood”: Images in Post 9/11 Afghan Fictional Narratives

**Dona Elizabeth Sam**

**PhD Research Scholar**

**Department of Indian and World Literatures  
The English and Foreign Languages University**

“The impact of any crisis on a nation, initiated by internal or external forces, always exerts a significant toll on the general populace, most often women and children. Images of women during any crisis can be reshaped to project various identities. Especially in the post-9/11 era, images of Muslim women have been used to further radical policies, as a means of regulating society”. Mariam Cooke in *Women Claim Islam* views it as such: “The image of Muslim women as passive and oppressed has gained currency because it signifies beyond itself to a general category, such as a faith and a culture. In both cases their look is the same: they are more or less exotic, more or less veiled, more or less available, more or less oppressed. This is the image with which they will always have to contend”. She supports her statement with Homi Bhaba's perspective on identity in general which states that images give access to an 'identity'. The so called identity which is created by the image becomes quite evident in different genres of writing, especially fictional narratives. The representation of Afghan women in post 9/11 fiction has paved the way for multiple perceptions which predominantly takes into consideration the “subaltern” status.

Quite convincingly, it is visible that women are often forced into that status but at the same time, it is noticeable that they become submissive and accept their position without much resentment. The authorial voice in this respect is important as it posits a difference in representation of women, taking into consideration their geographical location, education and above all, experience. Most often, one witnesses writers who seek to create a narrative as close to reality, but strikingly there emerges a stark contrast between the representation and reality. How and why did a sudden resurgence of attention towards Afghan women grow? Through the works of many Afghan writers (both diasporic as well as those from other nations writing based on their experience in Afghanistan) one receives an essence of 'womanhood' in that nation along with varying perceptions and notions of the 'burqa-clad' Afghan women. The war torn land of Afghanistan has provided for these authors', narratives which delve into the trauma and aftermath of a bruised world especially under the Taliban.

There has always been an existing monolithic homogeneity for the category of Muslim women/Afghan women, most often erasing their religious, ethnic, class and educational differences. Post 9/11 contributed to this in amplifying the conditions of Afghan women and thus becoming an intriguing topic for the West. Rescuing the Afghan women, being one of the major justifications for war against Afghanistan, there emerged a time when, gradually the whole world reduced the Afghan women to be encompassed by a single piece of clothing, the burqa. With much introspection, proving contrary, some authors have presented kaleidoscopic women characters- diverse, flexible and hybrid.

As an Iranian/German film-maker, Siba Shakib provides an insight into the lives of women in Afghanistan through her *Samira and Samir* (2005). Shakib's narrative, not providing any specific time frame, except for the fact that it is a time of destruction and war, presents the day to day life of a commander's family. Samira, the protagonist of the story is born as the daughter of a brave commander and his wife Daria in a land where the first born is valued only if it is a male. Samira's birth is looked upon with much dismay by her commander father and thus she is brought up as a son; concealing her identity to the world. With no rightful heir to his inheritance and position in the mountains, the commander finds peace in bringing up his daughter as Samir (instead of Samira). Shakib, in her narrative, presents a tribal mountainous area where men rule and women obey. With the commander's death, Samir (Samira) becomes the head of the family and follows her father's steps, riding horses, fighting and shooting. In considering the author's representation, it is striking how Samira is portrayed to be courageous and bold only in the false identity that she procures. Samira's disguise entitles for her to believe in her strength, fight other men and also support her mother. This allows for one's contemplation of whether she would have exercised this freedom if she were brought up in her true identity. Shakib's depiction of Samira highlights the fact that the women of Afghanistan are competent when circumstances demand. Though they are widely viewed as the "colonised" in all respects, it is discernible that women are nevertheless capable of proving themselves. Interestingly, it is this identity "created" which serves as the means for Samira's emancipation; saving herself from danger. The narrative is also suggestive of the fact that other women of the tribe believe in the necessity of a man for a woman's survival. It is exemplified by a woman of the community who suggests marriage for Daria after her husband's death. Daria, as depicted in the narrative is one who is seen performing the household duties and not stepping out. Her initiation in any act is obstructed by her husband's thoughts. At instances in the novel, Shakib through the dialogues of the women characters expose their lack of confidence in themselves which has led to their loss of individuality wherein which they seize to exist. The disparaging lines in the narrative becomes revelatory of the consciousness that the women have of their own plight. Yet, one does not come across cases of aggression or resentment against men in the narrative.

Gol-Sar, the other female character in the narrative becomes an embodiment of the idealised femininity. She celebrates her passion for the opposite gender and finds in Samir something she has never known before. Unlike the other women, she expresses her desire to Samir and playfully engages in a physical relationship with him. Despite the social consequences that a woman like her would have to face, she does not restrain herself. Rather the desire to savour the companionship of Samir grows in her. Although the narrative records a society as one which even dreads education for women, eventually a need to progress is observed in Daria and Gol-Sar who take initiative in tutoring young girls (implying their reception of education and capability of educating). The liberty granted to the young women who came to attend the classes was incomprehensible to them. They were still weighed upon by their scarves which symbolises their compliance to the social order that has been prevailing. The new taste of freedom finds a place in the lives of these young women. What one notices here is how patriarchy has been deeply rooted into the social system; thereby making it difficult for women to accommodate a difference. Knowingly or unknowingly they have come in terms with what has been prevailing. Samira wanting to retain her false identity and sexuality was soon confronted with her affection for Bashir. Eventually, this love compels her to reveal her identity and there exists an evident pride which she takes in revealing her true 'self'.

Samira, though having transformed herself into Samir, does not give up own her valour and dignity. She does not wish to be subdued and therefore abandons her veil, finding it too restrictive. In the village she is said to “behave like a man” (274). Everyone becomes amused by her bravery and the manners which she handles her stallion. Finally, the narrative portrays a liberation of the real self of Samira: “She has been in the real game, beaten a hundred and more men, she knows there is nothing, nothing, that she cannot achieve. Samira knows she has pushed open the door within her” (276). There is an unprecedented victory of a woman which in turn is only faced by the chastisement of her husband. The culmination of the narrative illustrates Samira's withdrawal from acting like a man. Instead she shows the desire to be 'a real woman'. She turns silent and does not wear a gun in public. The pressures which underpin her as a woman, forces her silent inclination to the world of patriarchy wherein she becomes subjected to the choices of a man. Hence, it remains that Shakib's rendition of women especially Samira, in the novel becomes quite elusive.

*The Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil*(2008) by Deborah Rodriguez is a memoir which narrates the 'beauty adventures' of 'crazy Debbie' from 2002 to 2006. As a venturesome hairdresser from Holland, Michigan, having tried her hand in music, religion and work as a prison guard, culminates in her desire to carry on humanitarian projects for the Third World. Belonging to what I termed as the “post 9/11” era, it is visible that the book presents before the world an unflinching experience of an American woman who in ways become the 'Saviour' of many Afghan women who come to her beauty school. Having started the beauty school at Kabul, Debbie as described by herself was endowed with the gift of befriending Afghan women. Married to a jealous and abusive preacher and a mother of two, she records her travel experience along with her establishment of a beauty school to assist in professionally training women to earn their livelihoods in post-Taliban Afghanistan. During her years of stay in Kabul, she befriends a large number of Afghani women, provides an abode for abused women, marries Samer Mohammad Abdul Khan and graduates two batches of Afghan woman hairdressers.

Though presenting a Third world nation, it is seen that the memoir is filled with Debbie's endeavours as a beautician in ways which she adorns herself as the sole rescuer of these Afghani women. The accounts of different women are very many within the text, but not withstanding the fact that the major part of the narrative comprises of her own occupation in a country which proved itself to be hostile to her, initially. Rodriguez presents before her readers a self which is endearing, making her accommodative in a world which ill treats women. The autobiographical elements within the memoir accounts for a closer scrutiny as she claims her hand in helping a bride fake her virginity on her wedding night, saves the beauty school from a governmental takeover, punches a man who fondles with her in the market and ends up marrying a man who she has known only for twenty days though they do not speak the same language and in spite of the fact that he already has a wife and seven children in Saudi Arabia. The narrator's representation of other women in the memoir becomes quite elusive with the understanding that she becomes oblivious to the circumstances she came from. In presenting characters like Nahida, the rhetoric of liberating women in a Third world country conceals the oppression that women face in the West and hence a reassurance of their own freedom. Rodriguez, is in fact abused and mistreated in her homeland by her husband just as Nahida is in Afghanistan. Nahida is scarred with the beatings from her husband and is tormented by his first wife which in ways evokes sympathy in the minds of the readers. Eventually she forces her husband into divorce and begins

a beauty school of her own. It is perceptible that these incidents resonate with the events in the narrators life. The narrative through the words of the narrator suggests the 'difficulty of being a woman in Afghanistan' and she manifests its through characters like Robina and her sisters. Not only does the narrator explicate the hardship of an Afghan girl like Robina in Iran but also the differences that the women had among each other; the other women looking down on Robina and her sisters for having lived alone and dated a Western man. Rodriguez's narrative technique utilizes itself to present before the world another world (Afghanistan) which needs the hands of 'Saviours' like herself. The text exemplifies the paternalistic stance towards Afghan women and builds sympathy for them.

The French- Afghan writer Atiq Rahimi, in the year 2008 publishes *The Patience Stone*, another novel which depicts the life of an unnamed woman. Despite the very simple plot that Rahimi presents before the readers, the narrative holds within itself multiple layers of meaning. Set in Afghanistan, the war ridden land, the action of the story is confined to a single room where an unnamed woman(the protagonist) tends to her husband in a state of coma. The unnamed husband who lies in his state of coma owes his predicament to 'honour'. Having been shot in a trivial brawl, he lies motionless in this single room, attended by the protagonist, day and night. A mother of two, she is depicted as a woman who performs all her duties as a wife and mother. Centring around the words of this woman, the narrative gains momentum in the expression of her emotions. Not only does this narrative tell the story of this single woman but also of the very many who are in the same slot in Afghanistan. Rahimi has successfully captured the spirit of millions of women through the words and actions of a single woman. Khaled Hosseini in his introduction to this text states that:

Women are the most beleaguered members of Afghan society... What pours out of her(the protagonist) is not only a brave and shocking confession, but a savage indictment of war, the brutality of men, and the religious, marital, and cultural norms that continually assault Afghan women (5).

Interestingly, it may be perceived that Rahimi's depiction of the woman renders her to be the embodiment of two main phases, namely, the phase of service followed by a phase of opposition/reaction and words. Initially, one witnesses in her, a woman of service and devotion. She stays by her husband's side attending to his needs and always indulging in prayer. Not only is she a devout in her prayers, but also a devout wife. Continuously stroking his face, she wipes his eyes and attends to all his needs. She takes heed in owing her complete self in the service of her master, husband. At an instance she even retorts to asking his permission to leave the house, to be reminded by the truth that it is of no use. Though he lies motionless, the woman's respect and obedience seems to stay unchanged. There is a strong desire for him to come back to life. Notwithstanding the fact that she is troubled in spirit and mind, she takes little care of herself. As a true devotee, she loses herself in the process of her service to those around her. Quite often this is what occurs to women of all ages and nations; who become vessels of pain and suffering. The times that she is summoned by her children are very few in the text and become suggestive of her unquestionable devotion to her husband; although it begins to procure a change eventually in the narration. This leads to the second phase of the woman's self; the woman capable of opposition and reaction through her words. As the indomitable service for her husband continues, she starts communicating with him. The husband subsequently transforms into the woman's "sang-e-sabur", the patience stone which listens to everything she has to say. ["Sang-e sabur", in Persian folklore is the name of a black magic stone which absorbs the plight of those who confide in it.

As per belief, the day it explodes with the weight of its pain will be the Apocalypse]. Being the patience stone, the husband listens to all her frustrations, anxieties, desires, pain, joy and even her deepest secrets. Rahimi's narrative with the words of the woman becomes extremely powerful that one sees within her the emotions of all women. Though she questions her motive in speaking out, she does not cease to speak. The agency of the woman in the narrative is mainly portrayed through her words which become a weapon, displaying a simple yet resolute method of level of resistance. Everything which was hitherto concealed seems to emerge from her mouth without much hesitation. She posits herself as the one who suffers and the one who cries distinctly expressing her sexuality with vivid descriptions of her sexual desires and the emotions during the initial stages of their marriage. The language employed by Rahimi in giving voice to the woman is direct and overt. Except for a tinge of self introspectiveness, there is no visible remorse or regret for the words she speaks. The ten years of her marriage went by without her expressing herself and she confesses that it was only after his state of coma that she began sharing her life with him. The woman's existence was not valued much and she was voiceless; incapable of communicating what she intended to or desired to. She compares her previous state of affairs with the present and reveals her existing right to talk due to the absence of her husband's voice: "Now I can do anything I want with you. I can talk to you about anything without being interrupted, or blamed"(37). Its noteworthy how the silence of a man becomes requisite for a woman's free expression; hitherto overpowered by the single dominant male voice. Women often being denied speech, in this narrative, the act of confession becomes a relief for the woman. Following the stream of consciousness technique, the narrative is a monologue which delves deep into a woman's heart. Her words revealing itself (like the unveiling of her self), which was formerly bound by the words of her husband. There is a strong sense of catharsis which overwhelms her after her revelation. Intensely believing in her own voice, she becomes that Afghan woman who finds her own identity through words and emotions, declining to be captivated by the development of their identities by 'others' -framed by family, community and religious beliefs.

As an Afghan born American novelist, Khaled Hosseini is one of the major writers who has been depicting Afghanistan in all its glory and obscurity. *And the Mountains Echoed* (2014), the third novel of Khaled Hosseini captures the essence of familial bonds and the devastation of separation in Afghanistan. The narrative beginning with the Fall of 1952 from the life of Abdullah and Pari, the two children of Saboor culminates in the Winter of 2010 with Pari's understanding of her adoption. Hosseini skilfully employs multiple narratives in the novel with different voices narrating different stories; all connected by the story of Abdullah and Paris. As an impoverished farmer, Saboor, is forced to give up his three year daughter Pari to a wealthy family comprising of Suleiman Wahdati and his half-French wife, Nila. Their inability to have children drives them to adopt Pari(the step-daughter of their chauffeur's sister). This decision of Saboor plunges Abdullah into complete devastation as he was the one who raised her after the death of their mother. The intense bond between the brother and the sister is evident with respect to Abdullah's dismay at having lost his sister for ever. Hosseini illustrates how war and its aftermath transforms the lives of many, and the existence of love and one's yearning to live. Though the narrative presents a very large number of characters, it is visible that each character experiences some form of transformation, not only because of the time frame but also because of their society. The narrative does not completely devote itself to the voice of the female characters as explicated in the above mentioned narratives. Nevertheless, the women characters in Hosseini

have their own stories to tell, each one from a different walk of life; delineating on their experiences. In the narrative, one witnesses the presence of multiple women characters which does not follow any linear method of depiction. Rather each woman's story stands apart giving rise to one's understanding of the different socio-cultural circumstances.

The narrative witnesses only one female character, Pari who persists from the beginning to the end. Tracing her life from the age of three when she is given away to Nila, one sees in the narrative, Pari, a young girl growing up in a village of Afghanistan and then moving to different parts of the world. A feeble child, brought up by the love and protection of her brother is torn apart by her separation. Though Abdullah's sense of loss was immense, in Pari there is a change that takes away her pain. The new world that is introduced to her at Nila's house becomes quite alluring to her. Through her character, Hosseini constructs a woman capable of transforming herself from the life she once had in a war-torn land. One does not see Pari regretting the occurrences but experiencing a life she would never have even dreamed of. On the contrary, it allows for a thought that a woman's escape from Afghanistan was needed for the better prospects in life. Not knowing anything of her past, eventually Pari becomes curious of her family and her belonging. In Pari, Hosseini captures the spirit of a woman's longing for her mother land and her family from which she was uprooted. Her life in France and then in the United States does not take away her yearning. In the voice of young Pari(which is rendered in the last two sections of the narrative), the reunion of Abdullah and his sister is revealed. Young Pari is depicted as one who is brought up by her father's faith. The narrative becomes suggestive of her attachment to her father and her subsequent dependency. Her world being centred on the life of her ill father, is not what she wished for. Strikingly, one finds a submissiveness in her and therefore her anxiety of freedom. The constant restriction which was imposed on her by her father curbed her individuality; creating in her an identity that was "made" by her father and not her true self. Here, Hosseini pictures Pari as a young compliant daughter.

Nila(Mrs.Wahdati) becomes the other major female character in the narrative. Her upbringing describes her to be a forward woman. Hosseini brings out in her a woman of poise, living in Kabul, not bound by any men in her life. The freedom and liberty that she enjoys in her life showcases the other side of Afghanistan, where women are capable of basking in their wealth. Does war affect only the impoverished ones? She does not even feel the necessity to take care of her husband who is becomes ill; rather she departs for Paris along with her daughter, Pari. Hosseini does not create in Nila, an image of a devout wife or a devout mother at the end withdrawing from her life, committing suicide. Nila, thus becomes a symbol of failure in the novel. From not being able to give birth to a child of her own to her ultimate addiction to alcohol, one sees in her a wayward life. The other minor characters that make their place in the narrative are Parwana(the stepmother of Pari and Abudullah) and her sister Masooma. Hosseini's depictions of these two women are completely contrary to those of Nila and Pari. Parwana and Masooma, having built their lives from humble beginnings are shown to be those belonging to the striving class of women. Their lives symbolises the women who are bound by the familial duties of the household. As elucidated above, Hosseini through his novel brings to life women who are embodiments of varying characteristics and circumstances. He does not completely depict the "submissive" kind nor does he depict the "rebellious" kind. Who is the quintessential Afghan women here, is she the quilt wracked Parwana? Or is she the dramatic Kabul socialite turned Parisian poetress? Or is she the war-maimed Roshnai or Pari?

From an analysis of these four narratives, it is evident that Afghan women are depicted not entirely as those suppressed by the weight of their veil or the social situations which limit their agency. Although a large share of women who are illustrated in these novels accept their subservient social status, very few of them take effort in changing their societal roles. Some are forced to be in disguise while others take pride in their Afghan(Muslim) identity which is often defined in terms of their relationship with men. There tends to be a dependency on men inherent in most of the women, which either creates the necessity of disguise or a total dismantling of the system which allows for the free will of women in a nation like Afghan. Strikingly, one finds a disparity between public identification and the individual sense of the self of these Afghan women characters in the 9/11 era, unceasingly questioning their belonging and existence.

### Works Cited

- Cooke, Miriam. *Women Claim Islam*. New York and London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Hosseini, Khaled. *And the Mountains Echoed*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.
- Rahimi, Atiq. *The Patience Stone*. Trans. Polly McLean. New York: Other Press, 2010. Print.
- Rodriguez, Deborah. *The Kabul Beauty School*. New York: Random House, 2007.
- Shakib, Siba. *Samira and Samir*. Great Britain: Arrow, 2005. Print.