

Telling Tales as a Counter Hegemonic Act: The Afghan Experience

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Abstract

Women in Afghanistan have always been the victims of patriarchal oppression. They have been prevented from exercising many of their fundamental rights. Apart from the gender violence and economic deprivation, their illiteracy has compounded the magnitude of their sufferings and miseries. The patriarchal norms of the society make the Afghan women not to enter the structure of language and to give an adequate representation of their woes. Afghan Women Writers Project (AWWP) is a media initiative for making the voice of the women heard. This unmediated representation of women's stories gives them courage, confidence and mettle to withstand the harshness of the society. Under the 'Oral Stories Project', AWWP writers collect oral stories from women who are illiterate and the same is recorded, transcribed and translated into English. The paper analyses the role played by this media initiative in instilling confidence and courage in women in Afghanistan to speak against the injustices of the society. The paper further makes an analysis of the role of the new media in making people and their pressing issues heard louder and how they become a potential counter hegemonic narrative.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Gender Violence, Oral Stories, Counter Hegemonic Narratives

Introduction

The history of Afghanistan has always been mired in sectarian wars and brutal blood lettings. Women have always been the hapless victims of these socio-political and religious upheavals and brutalities. Their predicament was more aggravated by the patriarchal oppression and other injustices and gender violence meted out to them. As they were being provided a diminutive role in the socio political and cultural spheres of the society, they had to largely compromise on their various roles in the society. All severities of war with gender violence were inflicted upon them which caused for the large scale violations of human rights. Their plight was compounded by their illiteracy and lack of education. Thus they had become a symbol of oppression and gender violence everywhere in the world. Their vision was permanently blurred by the veil which they were forced to wear by the unforgiving extremist religious dictums practiced in Afghanistan. . They were denied their basic rights like right to vote, right to get education, right to food and shelter, right to dignity in family and social life, right to employment and the right to receive healthcare facilities. More than their predicament, the mainstream media present the facts regarding the plight and predicament of Afghan women in a largely distorted fashion. Instead of shedding light on

their woes and miseries and help them to lighten their burden and make them grapple with those miseries, the West dominated mainstream media have always made a distorted picture of them. The distorted notions regarding the gender dichotomy and the historical exclusion of the Afghan women from the public sphere have dominated the public discourses. The resilience and courage exhibited by the women of Afghanistan for countering the oppressive patriarchal system prevail there are seldom noticed or reported by this media. This paper discusses how a group of women in Afghanistan, through their media interventions, particularly the social media, can play a crucial role in giving true and factual representation to the plight of them and how it can be used as an effective social tool for educating the women of their varied social and political issues and teach them strategies for countering the gender violence and patriarchal oppression. Moreover, these women have shown how the media can be proactive in countering the hegemonic discourses in the society regarding the oppression of women and play a pivotal role in bringing positive changes in their lives.

Discourses on the situation of women in Afghanistan are marked with a complex web of problems that range from the political, economical and social problems towards religious and cultural issues. The poor records of the Afghan women in socio-developmental indices abet their cultural issues. The socio-political upheavals that the country has witnessed in the post 9/11 have significantly contributed to the further marginalisation and for them being relegated to the position of victimhood. The debate on gender equality all over the world has always been done by positioning the Afghan woman at the centre of all discourses. Assuming such a significant role in the whole discourse has often caused for producing the reductive images of the people, spaces and their cultural practices.

Oral Stories Project

Afghan Women Writers Project (AWWP) is such a media initiative started with the sole objective of empowering the Afghan women by making them articulating their concerns and issues in their own voices without the mediation of their men or even the mainstream media. They are letting to speak for themselves. The sole objective of this project is to support the voices of women with the belief that 'to tell one's story is a human right'. This project was started as a kitchen table idea in the wake of the brutal killing of Zarmeena, a mother of seven for allegedly killing her husband. The activists of this project have the conviction that telling one's own story is as important as the basic necessities like having food and shelter. Telling their stories from their own perspective has been employed by these women as a technology of the self that help them to attain their individuality and reposition their identity and thus, they gain the power of agency that helps them countering the oppressive patriarchal system. The volunteers of AWWP realize this as a pivotal and decisive step they take in making the Afghan women empowered. Telling one's own story is an act of self expression, particularly in a country where women are told their story doesn't matter much. This empowerment makes them conscious of acquiring necessary education like computer literacy, skills of language and critical thinking. This, the organizers believe, will eventually pave the way for a comprehensive societal transformation. The organizers of this project also believe that the voices of women thus made heard louder will become part of the national dialogue and become moderating influences on the national discourses regarding the major issues that ultimately pave the way for forming a women centric perspective in such discourses and narratives.

The Oral Stories Project of AWWP has helped to bring out into light the brutalities and oppression happen against women inside the families and communities in Afghanistan. The collection of stories published in their website under various titles is an evidence for that. The stories also make an exposition of the stories of individual successes and achievements as well. The stories are classified as ‘widows’, ‘education’, ‘women in business’, ‘love and forgiveness’, ‘maternity and childbirth, Ramadan, gender violence, human rights, daily lives and ‘women under burqa talk about human rights’. This is quite evident of the fact that this project touches upon all aspects of the social, political and cultural lives of Afghan women.

In the section ‘Widows’, the editor notes that plights and miserable life of illiterate women are first recorded and then transcribed and translated into English without any politics of mediation or interruption from the part of the person who record it. In an interview with Mena, whose husband went to the war twenty four years back, she relates her story of struggle and survival and how with great difficulty she brought up her four children. She says: “I was pregnant at the time and I had my three other small children. The war was hard. The rockets and bullets were coming like rain from every side. No one could go to school. No one could live. People were hiding themselves underground” (Mena). Then she speaks of her husband:

When my husband went to war, it was the last time I saw him. He disappeared and we did not know what had happened to him. We did not have anyone to search for him. My brothers never did anything and I couldn’t do anything; since I was a young woman I was not allowed. Still today, we do not know if he is alive or not (Mena).

She also bluntly speaks of the oppression and harassment she had to face from the other women in her family:

I had lots of difficulties. Whenever I would go to the home of any of my sisters-in-law, they wouldn’t let me into their homes, thinking that I would marry their husbands. I was miserable because of my brother-in-law and his wife. Every day they were putting their hands in my hair and threatening me, saying, “We will hit you and make your face turn from the world (Mena).

Then asked about violence, she answers like this:

Yes, a lot. When one of my brothers-in-law helped me, his wife complained to people that I was trying to marry her husband. When he would leave the house, she would hit me and threaten me. Her son would hit me too and they didn’t let me eat with them. This woman would tell her children to go annoy me and my children, to hit my sons and daughters, and to throw out our shoes and clothes. When my brother-in-law would come home, she would tell him and he would hit me also. Another sister-in-law of mine was like that too. They both said, “We are hitting until her face becomes awful and she won’t be able to take a husband from elsewhere!” Every year passed with hitting. I could not ask anyone for help. Whenever I tried to put one step out of the door they would stop me. My brother-in-law had total

power over me. I developed a nervous condition. I did not know what I could say and what I shouldn't say (Mena).

The story of Mena is a story of extra ordinary courage and resilience shown by an Afghan woman at the face of brutal violence and gender oppression. Her story makes an exposition of the violence and gender inequalities that dominate the society and permeate into the basic structure of families. In another story, Friba, very beautiful and attractive, got married when she was twenty four, now being a second wife, tells us her harrowing story and gives the readers a factual representation of the gender violence that exist inside the structure of the family:

From the time I married, I suffered cruelty. I had a cruel mother-in-law and six sisters-in-law who were cruel to me as well. They made my life insufferable with pain and injustice. They made my life like a prison. My husband treated me poorly. He would often fight with me and punish me for nothing. Even though he had me as a wife he soon married a second woman. She too treated me with cruelty.

....

All of my husband's family, his mother and sisters, his second wife and her children, had hearts like stone and they would beat me, pull my hair, and burn me with hot water. I wanted to go to my brother's house and tell my brother about how I am suffering violence, but I didn't. I continued to live in my house. I said to myself that life is like this.

Even though they treated me like one of the animals, I continued to behave with respect for all of them. I prayed that I wouldn't be hurt, and continued to do all of their work. I had no rights and no one to care for me.

My life today is very bad still. I live with my husband and his second wife and their children, and work for them as a servant.

I want to know why the violence against women has not ended in Afghanistan. Why is it that I should live with no rights, and be so unhappy? (Friba).

In the stories narrated by Mena and Friba, the women were oppressed by their own kin in their families. This is quite evident of the fact that family and close relatives inside the family become the oppressors and all lopsided gender views are first practiced against the women folk inside the families without any iota of kindness and thus, the family structure become very much patriarchal and a replica of the true state of women in the Afghan society.

Another woman named Beheshta gives us a true account of the oppression and harassment takes place in the society against women. This story is published in the category of 'gender violence':

In our society, despite the long years of war and the ongoing bomb attacks in our streets, it is our own people who are the main cause of violence against women.

Whether they are young, teenage, or old, people in our society bother women in various ways. My society imposes so many limits, it looks

like a jail to me. I am a prisoner day and night. In my society a woman doesn't even have the right to wear her favorite dress. She can't wear the outfit she most enjoys. If it is colorful, stylish or graceful, people stare at her and make fun of her, using their bad language. It's very hurtful to us to have to endure this.

We don't have the right to advocate for ourselves. We are not supposed to speak or laugh loudly even among our women friends. If we laugh or talk loudly people call us whores and say we are calling attention to ourselves by being loud. They think women should speak softly and just smile.

Our women are not safe from being bothered when they go outside. We are afraid day-by-day of what new event will happen. Sometimes a man will come up and walk beside me, or he will block my way and annoy me by hand or his tongue. He tries to make me his victim, physically and spiritually. He harasses me with his jokes and tries to touch my body in crowded places.

These are shameless people. We women can't prevent them from bothering us. We want to rescue ourselves from these people and society. But I don't know how. I don't know what the solution is.

Day-by-day we get discouraged because we lose our liberty. These situations are the main cause of depression and fear. Women become frightened by our own society.

Most Afghan women suffer from these problems and they resent being in this situation. It is like when a person wants to kill someone with a low dosage of poison for a long time. It kills a person gradually. Women like me are a sacrifice to violence. Society must join hands together and pave the way to end violence against women (Beheshta).

The narrative of Beheshtha is evident of the gender violence and oppression meted out against women in Afghanistan. The harrowing experiences of this woman in Afghanistan tells the readers how the women are shown least respect and dignity by their men folk inside their families and outside in the public spaces. These stories are a testimony to the fact that family becomes a breeding ground for all sorts of violence that women face in the society.

In the section 'Women under Burqa Speaks of Human Rights', 50-year-old Hejera in Mazar-e-Sharif narrates us of how her dream of getting educated was crushed by her own parents. She tells:

I stay home all the time, cooking, baking, laundering, and doing all the house chores. I cannot do anything else because I am an illiterate woman. My parents would not allow me to go to school. They worried about me getting killed or raped. I was not allowed to go outside alone. I am still not allowed to go out alone (Hajera).

Shajan, 47, a mother and housewife in Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan, shares her disillusionments in her story titled as *I Regret Forcing My Daughter at Sixteen*:

I have heard a lot about women's rights in theory, but I never saw it being practiced... I wear the blue burqa and I am not allowed to go alone outside the house. Everyone is illiterate in our house... I always

had a dream of being a literate woman, a teacher, to be like a man without fear of doing what is right for me, to be bold, to help the poor and be an example for my children (Shajan).

Education plays a very significant role in the emancipation of an individual from the humiliating social conditions. It helps the individual for repositioning and renegotiating his subjectivity in the respective societies and gaining agency and selfhood. The victims of social, political and cultural oppressions in all societies in a way have successfully used the potent tool of education for re-crafting their identities and asserting their selfhood. By denying this very tool of education to the Afghan women, they were perpetually put in a hierarchical system which was very oppressive and involved with a lot of violence. The women like Hajera and Shajan, by telling their story of plight and predicament, testify this.

These women who dared to speak out are speaking for their rights, for justice, equality and for means and ways to make their little dreams realized. The wretched lives of women inside the iron wall of patriarchy are unveiled in these stories. In the section “Daily Lives”, women recount the sad tale of how the chances of getting educated and getting liberated are taken away by continuous wars with foreign powers to which their land was plummeted. The forty one year old widow Karima who cleans classrooms and floors at a university tells Zuhail in Kabul how she got the chance to go to school for just a few years when she was young and how it was thwarted by the political upheavals: “when the Russian soldiers came to Afghanistan, my father stopped us from going to school. We respected him and accepted his wishes. I would like to have been educated”(Karima). Shako Riya in Kandahar is twenty two years old and lives with her parents. She tells Fatima, the interviewer:

I want to learn a lot. I like to recite the holy Qur’an because one of the important bases of Islam is the Qur’an. I want to have information about my religious laws and this is not possible if I don’t have education. My illiteracy affects many areas. Even my friends or my family members, they say ‘you are uneducated, you are not important.’ This is the cause of my disadvantages: illiteracy (Riya).

Gol Makai, 54, a mother of six who lives in Balkh province, says that the biggest challenge of every mother is bomb attacks. “I start every day with the hope that today there will be no war and no suicide bombs and I will spend my day in peace. I get very sad every time a suicide attack happens and it kills and injures many people” (Makai).

In another section titled as ‘Human Rights’, a woman named Shaaperai boldly reminds the government about their duties and responsibilities in maintaining peace and order in the society and of respecting the human rights:

Kabul— I have heard of human rights from television and by talking to people, but in Afghanistan our rights are not transparent. I don’t know how to get information about my rights and I don’t know what kinds of rights I have.

I expect that human rights were supposed to be given equally to the poor people, the same as the wealthy people. I expect the government to control the rights.

For example, my uncle and his wife had five children—four boys and one girl. My uncle died as a result of a serious illness. His wife was not

able to take him to the hospital or to get medicine for him, and then she also died of the illness.

After that, the brother of my uncle took their land and all of the family's property. He did not give a thought to the five children. No one helped the children when their parents died. The orphaned children try to work to care for themselves, but they are very poor.

My wish is for the government to give women their rights. This could provide opportunities to women. Our laws do not protect the women, and they do not punish the men. I want to fight and take my rights, but I need someone to guide me. We are not educated. Other countries support and guide women. We want our country to be like that (Shaaperai).

As per the data with UNICEF, the literacy rate for adults over fifteen in Afghanistan is at thirty nine percent and the rate for adult women is thirteen percent. Although about half of the girls in Afghanistan attend some years of school, most girls continue to drop out at the age of eleven or twelve. Alham, a nineteen year old graduate in Psychology, tells us the difficulties faced by her in getting educated and the general mindset of men towards the education of women.

I live in a liberal family that supports knowledge for women. I completed twelve years of basic education in Herat and I have now graduated from psychology at Ashraq private university. If I hadn't gone to school, I could not plan my life, or even separate good from bad... In Afghanistan, however, there is a two-sided standard where boys are preferred over girls, and there is a lot of violence against women. This culture blocks education for women. If we have laws, in the future all girls can be educated. We pray for it (Alham).

In the section "Maternity and Childbirth", the women sum up the pangs and pain undergone by the women in giving birth to children continuously and callous and insensitive attitude of the husband in making their wives suffering. Guljan, a 21-year-old mother of three speaks of her life: "I don't know about condoms or birth control or other stuff... Personally I don't want any more children, but my husband wants one after another. I don't know what he is going to do with all these children"(Guljan). The twenty eight-year old mother of six, Zarghona says: "Most men usually want more than six children, but it will be whatever the man wishes... If there is more than one wife, then for sure there will be more children—maybe twelve, but sometimes up to twenty children"(Zarghona).

The Oral Story Project documents the success stories of women in Afghanistan as well. There are stories of women that crafts how these women, making use of their deplorable condition of staying inside the home, turned into entrepreneurship and profit making businesses. Masooma was born in Kabul as the sixth child of a family with eight children, and was forced by Taliban to stay Indoors in 1990. Since then she has been running a home based business. She says:

When the Taliban didn't let women go out of their homes, I worked at home knitting hats and jackets. When my sons were eleven and twelve

years old they used to sell the products I made. Now my sons have their own jobs, but I like being busy so I weave tablecloths and knit jackets. When I was a child I had many nice dreams. I wanted to go to school, become a doctor, and work in hospitals. In those times fathers didn't let their daughters go to school. They said education is not good for girls. When I was fifteen I got married and then I moved to Iran and got some education in reading and writing (Masooma).

Language as a Mode of Action

These stories are given as the first person accounts and are unveiling the true shape and nature of the socio cultural and political life in Afghanistan. As the country is seething under tumultuous problems and issues, which are political, economical and cultural, from the stories given here, it becomes apparent that most of the burden of these problems are put on the shoulders of womenfolk in Afghanistan that make them suffer the most than the men folk there. This scenario has a general acceptability among the hegemonic class in the country. So the voices of Women in Afghanistan are loud and clear and directed at these power centers. They know that they have to speak bolder and louder for the purpose of achieving their targeted goals and to restructure the dominant male centered discourses of the society. Thus, this courageous act of the women in Afghanistan, become an act of counter hegemonic narrative. It aims to restructure and reshape the hegemonic structure of the society and thus, to materialize an egalitarian society with equal respect for men and women.

Individuals are repositories of memories that contribute to the formation of the collective identities of the nation. In his Memoir titled as *Travels with Herodotus*, Ryszard Kapuscinsky views that "memory tells us who and where we are, yet it is also unreliable, elusive, treacherous"(Perskey188). He points out:

In the world of Herodotus, the only repository of memory was the individual. In order to find out that which has been remembered, one must reach this person. If he lives far away, one has to go to him, to set out on a journey. And after finally encountering him, one must sit down and listen to what he has to say-to listen, remember, perhaps write it down.(Perskey 188)

The true state of women in Afghanistan are corroborated by the individual stories told by the narrators of the Oral Stories Project and they make a representation of the actual state of the socio-political, economical and cultural spheres of the society in which women are relegated to the margins. Thus these individual stories are testimonies to the battered and tormented life of women and a torn social fabric which are tattered by the incessant political and patriarchal violence meted out to them. Sharmila Rege observes that individual's retrieval of traumatic memories are *Testimonios* as they are being used both as therapeutic as well as a mode of resisting the injustices of the present (Rege 14). The retrieving of agonising and horrendous memories of the past help them to reinvent themselves properly in the present and thus, it helps them to make a reconfiguring of their individual and collective selves in the present. The Oral Stories Project serves this purpose of renegotiating their individual and collective identities in the society with that of the patriarchy.

It becomes apparent that Oral Stories Project aims to make the women enter the institution called language. As the authors of these stories are illiterates, they have been denied their entry into this powerful political institution called language and that has become a further reason for their otherisation in the society. Malinowsky has observed that language is a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought and the power of oral words stem from the idea that ‘words to have greater power’ (Malinowsky 451). He observes:

Sounds cannot be sounding without the use of power. A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, and taste and touch a buffalo, he had better watch out: something is going on. In this sense, all sound, and especially oral utterance, which come from inside living organisms, is dynamic (451).

The power of articulating experiences and sound to be dynamic and reaching out at the target is emphasised here. The ‘spoken word’ is ‘power driven’. Writing or chirographic culture and typographic cultures are attempts to ‘distance and denature the human (Ong 42). Through the spoken or sounded words the narrator is getting closer to the humanity or constructs an empathetic relationship with his fellow beings. The orality provides the narrator a subject position that intimately connects the story teller with others who undergo through similar kind of experiences. The authors of the Oral Stories Project achieve this sisterhood. Havelock observes that “an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known” (Havelock 145-6). Writing separates the ‘knower’ from the ‘known’ and it sets up the condition for ‘objectivity’ or ‘personal distancing’. The subjective position of the speaker is eroded in writing. The authors of these oral stories find this close empathetic communal identification through these articulations.

Conclusion

The oral interviews conducted in the Oral Stories Project stitch together the tarnished and tormented lives of the Afghan women and help them perfectly situate themselves in a well knit society that shares their trauma. The collective sharing of the traumatic experiences of the Afghan Women help them to form a close knit group and they acquire courage to make the counter hegemonic advances in the society. The women who were pushed out of the power structures, due to their illiteracy, are brought back to the dominant positions in the society through this platform to utter their experiences. Thus this speech act becomes an empowering act for them.

The spoken or sounded words provide an authenticity or acceptability to the experiences thus shared orally through a mediator which otherwise have been kept out of the cartography of literary world. As writing is an ancillary form of spoken language, gaining the potential to ‘write’, means learning alphabets to encode the experiences. Sowa S Park observes that “the written language becomes an autonomous system independent of the world it represents” (Park 112). The Oral Stories Project makes a group of people entering the structure of language and gaining acceptability and empowerment through the mastering of language. This linguistic empowerment helps them to achieve the power of agency and thus they define and refine their subjectivity. The Afghan women have been systematically disempowered first, by the patriarchal socio-political and cultural systems and then by their inability to enter into the institution called language. Mediating and transcribing their experiences to the written form help them to enter the ‘institutionalised language’. Thus, as

writing is another political institution, the Afghan women, by narrating their traumatic experiences, are politically empowered.

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