

Landscape vis-à-vis Mindscape: Women in Atiq Rahimi's The Patience Stone

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Abstract

This paper examines Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* (2008) through the conceptual pairing of landscape and mindscape, arguing that the devastated physical terrain of war-torn Afghanistan and the interior psychological terrain of its unnamed female protagonist are mutually constitutive rather than separately rendered. Drawing on landscape theory (Hartshorne, Cosgrove, Mitchell, Tuan), feminist geography (Massey), postcolonial criticism (Said, Bhabha), and trauma theory (Herman, Caruth), the paper traces how a single confined room becomes the site through which national conflict, patriarchal control, and one woman's reclamation of voice are simultaneously played out. It argues that Rahimi's novel stages a paradoxical liberation: the collapse of the husband's authority, occasioned by his catatonic wound, opens a narrow but decisive space in which the protagonist reconstructs her own subjectivity through confession, memory, and the assertion of bodily and sexual agency. The paper further situates the novel within the broader historical record of Taliban-era and post-Taliban restrictions on Afghan women, arguing that Rahimi's formal choice to confine nearly the entire narrative to one room allegorises the spatial confinement historically imposed on Afghan women, even as the protagonist's voice exceeds and ultimately unsettles that confinement.

Keywords: Landscape, Mindscape, Atiq Rahimi, *The Patience Stone*, Afghan Literature, Gender and Space, Postcolonial Feminism, Trauma, War and Women, Body and Voice

Introduction: Landscape as Discursive Space

Landscape occupies a foundational place in literary narrative: stories are set somewhere, and that somewhere — whether urban or rural, real or imagined — carries meaning beyond mere backdrop. Geographers and cultural theorists have long disagreed about what, precisely, landscape is. Richard Hartshorne, writing within the tradition of regional geography, treated landscape with some scepticism as an organising principle, preferring instead to think of geographical space as a set of mental constructions rather than a stable physical given (Hartshorne 1939). Kenneth Olwig, by contrast, has argued for landscape's material reality, insisting that it is bound up with lived questions of environment, law, economy, and custom rather than being merely a way of seeing (Olwig 1996). Between these positions lies the recognition, central to this paper, that landscape is never simply scenery: it is a category shaped by ideology, encoding relationships of power, belonging, and exclusion that are not always visible on the surface.

This paper takes up that recognition to argue that landscape and mindscape — the internal, psychological geography of a subject — cannot be studied in isolation from one another, particularly in literature emerging from contexts of prolonged war. Where a landscape becomes a battlefield, control over territory inevitably extends beyond the physical terrain to encompass the culture, traditions, and emotional lives of the people who inhabit it. Within this dynamic, women are frequently doubly exposed: subject both to the violence directed at the wider population and to forms of control specific to their gender. Afghan literature, and Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* in particular, offers a sustained meditation on this doubled vulnerability.

Afghanistan: Landscape, History, and the Situation of Women

Afghanistan's geography has long placed it at the crossroads of empire. Its location linking the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent has made it, across centuries, a site of contested passage and conquest, populated by diverse ethnic, linguistic, and tribal communities. This strategic significance produced a long history of external invasion and internal fragmentation, compounded by decades of war that have damaged not only the country's

physical infrastructure but what this paper terms its collective mindscape — the shared psychological and cultural terrain of its people.

Successive regimes and factions in Afghanistan have repeatedly consolidated power through the regulation of women's lives, a pattern that intensified dramatically under Taliban rule. Having gained control of the physical landscape, the Taliban moved swiftly to control the mindscape of the population, instituting a regime of gender segregation that amounted to effective house arrest for many women. Restrictions extended to visibility itself: windows facing public streets were required to be painted over, and women could not leave their homes without a burqa. Access to healthcare narrowed sharply, since women were barred from being examined by male physicians even as most female doctors were forced out of practice. Marriage below the age of sixteen was common, often coerced, and a religious police force was empowered to publicly punish infractions as minor as visible ankles or laughter deemed too loud, frequently through immediate, undocumented violence (Human Rights Watch, cited in Kufi).

It is important to note that this violence did not originate solely with the Taliban, nor did it end with the fall of their regime. Even years after the international intervention that displaced Taliban rule, Human Rights Watch documented that Afghan women continued to be arrested for the perceived offence of fleeing abusive marriages, that marital rape remained largely unrecognised in law, and that a substantial majority of marriages were contracted under some degree of coercion. Fauzia Kufi, a member of the Afghan parliament, observed that women who speak out publicly on political or social issues routinely face threats, violence, or assassination, noting the disproportionate representation of women among such targeted killings (qtd. in Human Rights Watch). This is the historical and political landscape against which Rahimi's novel must be read.

The Patience Stone: Narrative, Myth, and the Confined Room

Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* gives voice to a woman who otherwise remains nameless throughout the novel, and in doing so, as Khaled Hosseini writes in his introduction to the English edition, offers her as a kind of proxy for the collective grievance of Afghan women more broadly (Hosseini). The novel draws its title and its central conceit from a figure in Persian folklore: the *syngue sabour*, a black stone to which one confides one's sorrows, and which is said to explode on the day it has absorbed more suffering than it can hold, releasing its listener from

pain. Rahimi transforms this stone into a man — the protagonist's husband, left brain-dead by a bullet lodged in his neck during a factional skirmish.

The novel's action is confined almost entirely to the room in which the woman tends her comatose husband: cleaning him, administering fluids through a drip, and, increasingly, speaking to him without any expectation of reply. Outside, the sounds of factional warfare — gunfire, explosions, looters moving through the streets — intrude intermittently on this enclosed space, but the room itself becomes the novel's true landscape, standing in for the wider confinement historically imposed on Afghan women's bodies and voices.

This spatial confinement should be read alongside Rahimi's own biography and formal choices as a diasporic writer. Having fled Afghanistan for France in 1984, Rahimi wrote *The Patience Stone* in French rather than Persian, a decision he has described as freeing him from an internalised self-censorship that his native tongue would have carried (Rahimi, cited in interviews). The novel's setting — described only as 'somewhere in Afghanistan or elsewhere' — further unsettles any straightforward mapping of fiction onto geography, gesturing instead toward what this paper terms the in-between spaces of literary landscape: settings that remain tethered to real geospatial referents even as they resist full correspondence with any single, locatable place (Piatti and Hurni 219).

Landscape, Power, and the Politics of Space

W. J. T. Mitchell's influential account of landscape offers a useful frame for reading the room in which the novel's action unfolds. Mitchell argues that landscape should be understood not as an inert scene to be looked at, nor as a text simply to be read, but as an active process through which social and subjective identities are produced; landscape, in his phrase, functions as 'an instrument of cultural power' (Mitchell 1-2). Read through this lens, the room the protagonist inhabits is never a neutral container for the plot: it actively produces her identity, first as the enclosed and dutiful wife, and gradually, as the narrative proceeds, as a speaking subject who reshapes the meaning of that same enclosed space through the act of confession.

Yi-Fu Tuan's foundational distinction between space and place adds a further dimension to this reading. For Tuan, place is associated with security and stability, while space signifies openness

and freedom, and human experience is characterised by a constant, dialectical movement between the two (Tuan 3). The protagonist's room initially functions as place in Tuan's sense — a site of enforced stability, tied to her role as wife and caretaker — but the novel gradually converts it into something closer to space, an arena of psychological freedom precisely because her husband's incapacity removes his capacity to interrupt, judge, or punish her speech. The irony Rahimi constructs is that the room's physical boundaries remain unchanged throughout the novel; what changes is the meaning the protagonist is able to make within them.

Doreen Massey's feminist geography clarifies why this shift matters so profoundly for a female protagonist specifically. Massey has argued that women's mobility across both public and private space has historically been constrained in ways that have no equivalent for men, curtailed not by economic constraint alone but by the constant threat of violence, scrutiny, and social judgement that renders certain spaces effectively off-limits to women regardless of formal law (Massey 148). Under Taliban rule, as documented above, this restriction became codified and enforced with particular severity in Afghanistan. Rahimi's protagonist, confined to a single room by both social custom and the immediate demands of caretaking, embodies this history of spatial restriction in especially concentrated form — yet the novel's central irony is that her most expansive assertion of selfhood occurs precisely within, and because of, that same confinement.

Confession, Body, and the Reclamation of Voice

The novel's central drama unfolds through the protagonist's escalating confessions to her incapacitated husband. Freed by his enforced silence, she tells him what a decade of marriage never permitted her to say: her resentment at having been sacrificed to his ambitions of wartime heroism, her frustration at his sexual failures, and eventually, memories of a rape he committed against her while she slept, for which he later blamed her for having concealed that she was menstruating. She recalls this history in visceral, bodily terms, at one point marking his beard with her own menstrual blood and declaring it 'cleaner than the blood of your own body,' a moment that inverts the logic by which Islamist codes in the novel treat menstrual blood as impure while sanctifying the blood of war and of a bride's lost virginity (Rahimi).

This inversion exposes what the protagonist repeatedly identifies as a central hypocrisy: a system of honour in which men's pride is bound tightly to blood — the blood of battle, the blood of a

wedding night — while women's own bodily realities are treated as shameful. She reflects that she has 'never understood why, for you men, pride is so much linked to blood' (Rahimi), a line that condenses the novel's broader critique of a social order organised around masculine honour at women's expense. It is worth noting the formal detail, observed by several critics, that her husband's neck wound never bleeds — an absence of blood that stands in pointed contrast to the protagonist's own bodily assertions, and that plays on a further irony available in the French title, since sang, the French word for blood, sits inside the very word sang-e saboor.

Sexuality functions throughout the novel as a further register of this reclamation. The protagonist confesses to an affair conducted with a young soldier, describing desire and pleasure in language rarely afforded Afghan women in either public discourse or earlier Western representations of them. Her declaration that 'the voice coming out of my throat is a voice buried for thousands of years' (Rahimi) casts her confession as an act of historical retrieval as much as personal release — the recovery of something suppressed across generations rather than merely across the span of her own marriage.

Judith Herman's account of psychological trauma offers a useful frame for understanding what makes this confession possible at all. Herman characterises trauma as fundamentally a condition of powerlessness, in which the structures that would ordinarily give a person a sense of control, connection, and meaning have been overwhelmed by force (Herman 33). For most of her marriage, the protagonist has had no audience for her experience who would not judge, punish, or silence her; her husband's incapacitation, paradoxically, supplies exactly such an audience for the first time. Cathy Caruth's related observation that trauma's impact often lies in its 'belatedness' — its refusal to be resolved or spoken at the moment it occurs (Caruth) — illuminates why the protagonist's confession arrives only now, years after many of the events she describes, rather than at the time of their occurrence. The novel thus stages trauma's characteristic delay, and suggests that a form of healing, however partial, becomes possible only once a space — literal and psychological — opens for its telling.

Mindscape, War, and the Erosion of Certainty

Mindscape, as this paper uses the term, denotes something more fluid than a fixed psychological state: a shifting internal geography of belonging, memory, and self-perception shaped less by

lineage or birthplace than by ongoing individual experience. War accelerates and destabilises this internal geography throughout the novel. The protagonist repeatedly links her own domestic suffering to the wider collapse of Afghan civil society, observing to her husband that his own father's pride in his fighting curdled into resentment once the initial cause — resistance, freedom — dissolved into factional struggles over power alone (Rahimi). This collapse of any coherent political cause into what the novel frames as meaningless fratricide mirrors the protagonist's own disillusionment with the narratives of honour and heroism that had structured her marriage.

Malcolm Bradbury's observation that a very large portion of literature is fundamentally 'a story of its roots in a place' (Bradbury, Introduction) is instructive here, though Rahimi complicates any simple rootedness. The novel's setting, described only as somewhere in Afghanistan 'or elsewhere,' resists straightforward geographic anchoring even as its details — the burqa, the mesh veil, the specific vocabulary of honour and blood — remain unmistakably tied to Afghan social reality. This tension exemplifies what literary geographers describe as the capacity of fiction to construct spaces only partially referential to real geography, existing in a zone between documentary specificity and allegorical openness (Piatti and Hurni 219). The unnamed protagonist becomes, in this sense, both a particular woman and, as Hosseini's introduction suggests, a figure standing in for many.

Henri Lefebvre's account of space as a category that binds together the mental, the cultural, the social, and the historical (Lefebvre 209) helps explain how a single room in Rahimi's novel can carry such interpretive weight. The room is simultaneously a literal domestic space, a psychological arena for confession, a historical index of the war unfolding outside its walls, and a cultural symbol of the confinement historically imposed on Afghan women. Octavio Paz's observation that landscape is never simply a record of what the eye sees, but a revelation of something beyond visual appearance — a metaphysics, a set of beliefs about humanity (Paz, qtd. in various sources) — applies with equal force to this interior domestic landscape, which likewise reveals far more than its physical dimensions would suggest.

Landscape, Empire, and the Question of Representation

Edward Said's warning that imperialism is, at its core, an act of geographical violence — the exploration, charting, and eventual control of virtually every space in the world (Said 271) —

resonates with the novel's broader historical backdrop of successive invasions and interventions in Afghanistan, from nineteenth-century imperial rivalry through Soviet occupation to the post-2001 international presence. Landscape, in Said's account and in Mitchell's, is never innocent of politics; it is, in Mitchell's words, 'deeply embedded in relations of power and knowledge' (Mitchell, cited in Darby 9). Rahimi's novel does not narrate these geopolitical histories directly, but the war intruding at the edges of the protagonist's room is their direct legacy, and her body becomes, in microcosm, a further territory over which competing forces — her husband, the soldiers outside, the social codes of honour — seek control.

Pierre Bourdieu's analogy of culture as a map, in which an outsider may possess a chart of a landscape yet still lack the practical, embodied mastery of a native inhabitant (Bourdieu), speaks to Rahimi's own position as a diasporic author writing of a homeland he left as a young man. His choice of French as the language of composition can be read through this lens: it grants him the outsider's chart — critical distance, freedom from certain internalised constraints — even as the novel insists on an intimate, embodied familiarity with the landscape and codes it describes.

Robert Tally's suggestion that literature performs a mapping function, offering readers a sense of worlds they have not directly inhabited (Tally), is borne out in the way *The Patience Stone* renders the lived texture of war-time Kabul or its equivalent: the black-turbaned fighters glimpsed through curtains, the looting audible from the next street, the fly that settles on the husband's motionless face. These sensory details do not merely decorate the setting; they perform the mapping Tally describes, allowing readers to inhabit, however briefly, a landscape most will never see directly.

Conclusion

Landscape and mindscape, in *The Patience Stone*, are not parallel tracks but a single, entangled terrain. The physical devastation of war-torn Afghanistan and the psychological confinement historically imposed on its women are shown to be mutually reinforcing, produced by the same structures of power that Mitchell, Said, and Massey each describe from different disciplinary vantage points. Yet Rahimi's novel resists reducing its protagonist to a mere allegory of national suffering. Her confession, however provisional and however contingent on her husband's incapacitation, constitutes a genuine — if narrow — reclamation of voice, body, and selfhood.

Read through Herman's and Caruth's accounts of trauma, her long-delayed speech enacts precisely the kind of belated telling that trauma theory identifies as a necessary, if incomplete, step toward recovery. The room in which she is confined becomes, paradoxically, the one space in which she is finally free to speak; in this paradox lies the novel's most powerful argument about the relationship between landscape, power, and the endurance of women under conditions of prolonged war.

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