

# THE PORTRAYAL OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN THE "DANCING IN THE MOSQUE: AN AFGHAN MOTHER'S LETTER TO HER SON"

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## **Abstract**

Dancing in the Masque is one of the masterpieces of feminist critic, activist and Afghan writer Homeira Qadari, which is an effort toward the emergence of liberal feminism as a collection of searing letters to her son. Through her moving and aching narrative the author challenges the reinterpretation of the concepts of immolation, sacrifice, survival, motherhood and womanhood. This paper analyzes the portrayal of Afghan women in "Dancing in the Mosque". It also examines the herculean life of Afghan women in a theocratic and patriarchal society like Afghanistan. The miserable narrative of Afghan women has been reflected in various parts of the memoir through different characters, and even the writer herself as a symbolic representation of the Afghan women. The objective nature of Afghan women has been interpreted into multilayers with the strictures of a misogynistic social hierarchy where in many cases women are excluded and intentionally deprived of the basic rights. This paper contributes to the critical studies and analysis of upcoming researches in this regard. This piece of literary work is qualitative in nature so it is an outcome of common reflections of the memoir and her relevant works.

**Key words:** Afghan Women, Mosque, Dancing, Homeira Qadari, Feminism.

## **Introduction**

Homeira Qadari is an Afghan acclaimed postmodern feminist, writer, women's right activist and an educator, who was born in Kabul during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan to an enlightened and educated family in 1980s. She has completed her primary education in the challenging and risky Taliban regime, whereas, she has accomplished her higher education in Iran and India up to Ph.D. degree in Persian Language and Literature that established her professional career and writing occupation. Then, she worked in different governmental entities and wrote at the same time in which she has received many prestigious awards for some of her literary works. Her literary achievements are including seven books in different genres such as novel, short story, essay, and autobiographical memoir which are as following: Anis's Earring-A Collection of short stories (2008), Silver, Kabul River Girl (2009), 100 Years of Story Writing in Afghanistan (2009), Painting of Deer Hunt- A Fable of Women and Men (2010), Aqlema (2015), Reflection of War and Exile in Stories of Afghanistan (2015), and the last one Dancing in the Mosque: An Afghan Mother's Letter to Her Son (2020) which is her first literary work translated into English.

Ms. Qadari is originally from Herat province where she has spent her childhood in, and was witness of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, their existence in Herat, the civil wars following the soviet withdrawal, and then the emergence of Taliban in Herat. Therefore, the aforesaid consequences deprived Homeira and her coevals from the merits of attending school and cloistered them in the house. But, her interest to education made her resist and find the alternate ways for learning. At the meantime she did not only seek the ways for her own schooling, but at a very young adolescence age she was an outspoken advocate for the girls and women's right to education. Therefore, she secretly started homeschooling for the young girls and boys, and she also wrote and published her very first short story "Zire Gunbadeh Kabood" when she was still a teenager, and the Taliban were still ruling Herat which even caused her to be threatened by the Taliban to death.

## **Portrayal of Afghan Women in the "Dancing in the Mosque"**

Women are portrayed as powerless, submissive, oppressed, voiceless, victimized and as passive victims of war, domestic violence and political repression in this very memoir. But in the very recent after the collapse of Taliban women typically shifted from the passive to reflective and active status, and they have emerged more active and participative in terms of political and social arenas. Dr. Qadari and dozens of other women rights activists and feminists are the active side of women advocacy movements. Since the work is an actual work has written by the insider writer, so it has not dealt with the so-called portrayal of Afghan women by the western media and Afghan European writers who have not even stepped a day in Afghanistan.

As a feminist critique, "Dancing in the Mosque" is typically actual representation of the women who is depicted and explored by an Afghan women writer who herself was a victim. It reflects the sufferings and the so-called life of Afghan women. In terms of literary orientation, it is a postcolonial work, because the writer herself was the witness of the Russian Colonialism, civil war and even the American Colonialism which is not touched by the writer in the book. The writer can be counted as a postcolonial writer, because she wrote about the colonial war and therefore, she has truly addressed women position. As Spivak stated that, the subaltern should speak for himself or herself because their writing is reliable not the colonial writer and it cannot be a true image because the others cannot portray as the insider himself or herself can truly reflect and response to the situation.

In the very first paragraph of the book, her grandmother narrated an uncertain fate and a doomed destinies of the women in the land of a death foretold. Here, women are represented as mere objects for the uncontrollable and unmanageable future and life with no hope and a life in hell. Next, it can also be a piece of pessimism and nihilism, "waiting forever for dreams that will never come true" (Qaderi 4). To compare this with the life of women in twenty first century in Afghanistan, there is a common and shared image of experience that today's women practice is nearly similar as the women from the age of the writer's grandma. But there has been a paradigm shift happened regarding the life of women and it is not the women across the country, it is not the women from the suburbs and remotes to enjoy this paradigm shift, so they will be doomed the same fate as their grandmother had a life of miseries. Hence, women in many areas of the country except the cities and the urban areas still share the feeling of no hope and life for the sake of undermined destiny. A good girl should be shy (in terms of positive interpretation) fearful indeed. Nanah-jan always said, "A girl should have fear in her eyes" (4). She kept discovering the mystery to find his goodness in terms of having fear in eye. To the writer, this means literal fear, but actually it was the hidden fear that drives the potential of being silent against any decision that will make regarding any girl of the country. Aunt Zahra told me, "A girl's fear is right on her eyelid" (4). Through the extent of the story she still keeps finding the hidden fear in the eyes of a girl, but it was nothing a stereotypical kinds of notion instilling by the grandmother that her future daughter (Qaderi) won't rebel. Further, it shows how a girl should be particularly a good girl in the fixed and conservative society. Her grandmother was trying to teach this un-fearful girl how to fix with the dominant norms.

People used to say good and bad about the Russian soldiers, and it is not just to claim all Russians were bad or good; but apparently they were the colonizers, they were killing the Afghans, they destroyed our homes, they bombarded our houses and buildings, and except their communist government employees, the rest were their enemies. The writer of "Dancing in the Mosque" has highlighted the other harsh side of the Russian invasion, it is not only a single case, but hundreds of such cases have added to the complex nature of Soviet invasion. The writer barely narrates a story of the neighbor girl; she adds:

Once, in one of the houses that had been destroyed three or four days earlier, I saw a Russian soldier with his pants down; he was pressing his hand on the mouth of a neighbor's daughter. From behind the wall I laughed at the Russian soldier's bare bottom. He heard my laughter. He quickly got up, put one hand between his legs, and with his other hand he slapped me on my face until it burned. Then he spat in front of me. The girl used the moment to get up, put on her head scarf, and run away through the ruins." (6)

A victimized representation of being a women equivalent to static stone which means women place and role in our society in terms of rights and social justice is similar to a stone. If a woman prefers to be good so a good woman is the one who should not quarrel and shall not advocate any kind of rights. The author explained the conditionalized depiction of women through her grandmother's saying, "In this land, it is better to be a stone than a girl" (103). This is a mere representation of women in our culture and society. Women are destined to violence and confined to the four walls of a house. I intentionally used the word house for women, because women in Afghanistan don't have home of own they have considered temporal creature of the father house and then the husband house too.

In the memoir, she represents women are not owner of any value or attachment. "I was irrelevant," she writes this to her son, Siawash, in one of the chapter of the book, "I looked at you and I wanted to hide you back in my womb so that once again you could belong to me, too" (16). Here the author claims that, even the law is against women in Afghanistan, and women have no identity at all, even as a mother who give birth to her children, endure the labor pain, and carrying another body within her body for nine months, bear a lifetime pain and agonies of life because of her children; yet, when the baby is born in her/his birth certificate he is being named by his father's name and the child identity too formed by his father and grandfather's names. "Qaderi's son's birth certificate lists the names of his father and grandfather, but not her name. "I was irrelevant," she writes. "I gave the birth certificate to my mother. As she was reading it, she sighed deeply. Although she was clearly upset, she was not surprised; she had lived as a woman in Afghanistan all her life." (New York Times, 2020). Or when Mrs. Qaderi was invited in an international writing program in USA for she was a writer, in her absence, her husband has used the situation and claimed his son in the court, and the boy was taken from her mother's arms when he was only 19 months old. And the husband declared in the words text message "Divorce, Divorce, Divorce!" when he wanted to take a second wife in the country, and the court too decided to hand on the baby to his father, not mother. "We are together now, but it's temporary. I have his custody". But according to the Sharia law in Afghanistan, after the age of 7, children belong to their fathers. Therefore, the writer believed that Afghanistan is the worst place for women, because they are oppressed and violated against in one way or the other, either physically or mentally. According to her, "For women in Afghanistan, it's no different where you are living or when you are living. It means that when we are Afghan

women, we always carry our history, not our geography." (NPR 2020). After all, as Nana Jan tells young Homeira, "In this Land (Afghanistan), it is better to be a stone than to be a girl" (Qaderi 103).

Domestic violence is another form of oppression for the Afghan women. Mrs. Qaderi in her memoir, attempts to represent the lives of Afghan women back from 1990s to the present that how the oppression concerned to women is a never ending problem in Afghanistan. Despite of all the international donors' efforts in regard to decreasing violence against women and uplifting girls' education, yet women and girls are not enjoying their rights equally. There is still violence going on in different ways. For instance, forced/child marriage is one of the violence instances which is commonly being practiced. It causes high maternal mortality. In short, it is very rare in Afghan families that a girl marries based on her own choice of the husband.

As Virginia Woolf in her landmark work insisted that, women could be allowed to enjoy economic and social freedom to fulfill their dreams and follow their aspiration. So this work is similar to Woolf's claims of economic independence and social liberation of Afghan women as majority of them are now deprived of the right of education and economic freedom. Women are under the authority of different bodies such as father and elder brother in infancy and later on husband. Qaderi had also tried to figure out different forms of women abuse. According to WHO (World Health Organization) report in 2015, 90% of women in Afghanistan had experience at least one form of domestic violence. So, one of those violence type is practicing patriarchy as an old traditions and fixed customs in which men are always superior over women, and women are inferior to them as they kept them deprived of every humanistic rights and roles.

Keeping women intentionally away from education is the other area that the book has paid attention. It is because illiteracy perpetuates the aforesaid problems, and once women get the chance to be educated so by no means they tolerate such rate of violence and harshness. It is worth to state that, certain attitudes made the women to accept certain level of violence because of traditions, being away of their rights and illiteracy caused women to reach the conclusion that their husband and elders in their family have the right to abuse them, exploit them, beat them, and in cases to kill them.

Education is one of the main point of her work in which throughout the book she focuses on. It was education that led her to escape from her mental and psychological pains. On the cost of her life she keeps expanding her intellect which reveals that education plays a crucial role in personal and social growth. Throughout the book she tried to prove that it is education to get rid of the atrocities, agonies and injustices of time and space. For her, the pursuit of education was a survival and staying balanced against the adversaries of her life. Thus, education plays a vital role in her release from the problems, and it became a gate way to the future success. Whether it was Tehran or USA visit, both were the outcomes of her educational pathway she has stepped. But educational situation in Afghanistan concerning to women is still problematic. So Qaderi distressingly tries to express that, there is not only the Taliban who are against the rights and freedom of women, but there are other segments of Afghan society who are fully conservative and accept the doctrine version of sharia blindly. (John R.Allen & VENDIA Felbab Brown 2020). They are largely major barriers that remain in the quest to get all girls into school, and keep them there through secondary school. These include: discriminatory attitudes toward girls by both government officials and community members; it means that, in many families, boys' education is prioritized over girls', or girls' education is seen as wholly undesirable or acceptable only for a few years before puberty. Harmful gender norms, child marriage; acid attacks, sexual harassment; poverty and child labor; lack of schools in many areas; lack of female teachers are among the greater challenges for girls' education and women problems. According to Human Rights Watch 2017, sexual harassment is one of the serious barriers which hinder girl's school attendance, because of the harmful gender norms; it has a bad consequence for the girl's reputation among the society. Even if the school distance is not too far, but the sexual harassment by boys or men forces the girls not to attend school. So, since the families are not sure about their girls' safety on the way to school, they easily decide not to send their girls to school.

Fear on the other hand is another important part she focused on. Here, fear does not merely imply on unpleasant feeling of worry regarding any action or danger that is going to be happened, but rather it is a more positive feeling of being shy against occurrences and situation that happens to her. Next, fear in this context means a state of not being reactive to the decisions that will be taken about her fate and future.

The humanized side of women's emotions and happiness is ignored historically. Women feelings should not be considered while a decision is going to be taken regarding their destiny. It is the right of men to take decision about women and womanhood is conditioned to child birth, home chores, children care, household and other house-confined activities. Women in the "Dancing in the Mosque" signify a dehumanized version of Afghan Women. Women in the book are subordinated and are symbolically represented in subordination status. Women are signified as powerless, vulnerable and fully dominated in the Afghan patriarchal society.

The stereotype idea of having a son is somehow depicted in the book. The writer also sees bearing of a baby son as her duty, even she herself see boy as a blessing. Thus, women are conditioned and iconized to certain situation, as the good woman is the one who bears a baby son. On the other hand, when some feminist women strive for their rights so they react even more aggressive and extravagantly. Even the writer of the book forgot the role of a man (husband) in the event of bearing a baby son, she subjectively claimed she has done her job for producing a baby son.

The smell of self-rejection is visible in the book. In many cases, when women were victimized for the interests of the men, they suffer their identity and gender. Therefore, women criticize their identity and even existence as women. There are many situations and places where still women hate their gender and are not agree with the present identity. Self-identity

criticism is evident in the work of the writer of the book "Dancing in the Mosque" as she acknowledged that as a child she did not want to be a girl. Thus, it can be summed as the efforts to condemn and reject self as feminine.

Marriage becomes one of the core themes which play an important part in her temporal liberation. It comes from an arranged marriage and that leads her to Tehran where her life partner was her companion and a reason for her higher education. Mrs. Qaderi was asked in an interview whether she loved her husband, she said "honestly, no! I married him, because he was living in Tehran, and he was a student of law politics. He promised me to take a scholarship for me, and it was like a dream for me to be a student in university. But after marriage, yes I loved him." (NPR 2020). From Mrs. Qaderi's account, it is being elicited that, she herself did not marry by her choice, but it was an arranged marriage and her passion for education/higher education made her blindly accept the man so that she can continue her studies. Similarly, now in Afghanistan most of the girls or women immolate themselves for the forced or arranged marriage for different reasons such as, finding a way or option for their future's success, financial independence, poverty and many other cases. So, they have to accept the forced marriage, otherwise they would be killed, and sometimes they have to accept a man with one or several wives.

Polygamy in Afghanistan is a common practice among rich and famous men of high position or authority. Therefore, most of the girls are being subjugated or forced by their parent's patriarchal practices to marry that man because of his wealth or fame. But if a woman marries another man in a condition when she loses her first husband or become a widow, or being divorced, still she is under pressure of the society, and the society point the blame finger on her as a whore woman. It is an irony that the author's liberation came from an arranged marriage. The author too practiced her husband's polygamy, as her husband married for the second time because he was wealthy, he was well-known and after all he was an Afghan man who became over competitive with his ex-wife's success, education and achievements. "My ex-husband had believed in a great deal in life, as I remember, but he forgot his values as he became over competitive in Kabul with me. My education, my empowerment and social attitudes called his manhood into question." (NPR 2020). It is one of the driving forces which led to the divorce but apparently, in the memoir, she has never accepted polygamy and that caused her separation. She has sacrificed here couple life and even her little son, but has not accepted to live with his husband's second wife. Since, she believed in equality as dedicated her memoir (*Dancing in the Mosque*) to those who values and respect equality. She has considered polygamy as a division to under value women prestige and women position in society. She pointed out it is polygamy that she has even started to write this book.

One of the very sensitive issues pointed in the memoir is dehumanizing the women/girls' values by ignoring their identities as a girl. Because having a girl or daughter in the conservative and traditional families is a state of shame, and even if some of these families are having girl they try to make her wear boyish cloths. And this very concern is depicted through the character of (Mohammad) who originally was a girl, and her real name was Afsana, but she was being named, dressed and treated as a boy, and he was prohibited to play with girls while she was longing for her girlish interests, plays and playmates. For instance, when Nana Jan was putting henna on our palms on the occasion of 'Eid, Mohammad said. "Please, paint a design on my hand. We all laughed. Or on the day of 'Eid she was traded me her boiled egg for a chance to wear my bracelets" (Qaderi 38). The hidden truth released when she turned to the age of puberty and one day she started to bleed as other girls do. "All these years, the truth had been hidden beneath his cloths"(39). And when Mushtaq was trying to find out his (Mohammad's) wound by pulling up his pant, she turned to Mushtaq out of embrace and said, "My name is Afsana. Only Ranna, my mother and father know"(41). So, through the character of Mohammad (Afsana) the writer tries to portray the realistic obscure identify of women/girls which has been always worthless to the Afghan conservative and patriarchal families.

### **Conclusion**

"Dancing in the Mosque" is a public cry, especially concerning to women that is perhaps one of the central points that the book presumes, it doesn't matter who is in the power, but women lives have not changed enough. "It was the Taliban regime in 1990s when the women have all disappeared from the public view; they have been deprived from going to school, working outside, accessing health care by a male medical doctor, being involved in politics and showing their skin in public" (Amnesty International, 2014). But, distressfully, even today at the age of democracy after 20 years of the Taliban's presence in Afghanistan the picture of Afghan women is still sobering, as they are living in a deep conservative society and families, in which they are being forced to practice traditional and patriarchal norms, they are being subjugated, exploited, and deprived of their humanistic and social rights. Afghan society is a predominantly conservative society. Women are the mere objects to the consumptive social hierarchical norms of Afghanistan. The very role and duty of women is summed up to bear children and do the house chores. In such case, the domination of men cannot be ignored and the patriarchy is at the height of the country's value system. One of the main concerns of many women rights activist is to protect women rights.

Women are expected to be obedient in the book by both grandmother and aunt. It is because when a woman quarrel or advocate for her basic rights, so she would be considered a rebel who apparently break the predominant norms of the society. It was the advice given by grandmother in the book. Women are represented as they are and have been treated so far. Since representing others is not easy, but historically it is a challenging task. It is tried to reflect the actual picture of Afghan women which unveil the media oriented Afghan woman. As far as the fact concerns, there is the positive side of Afghan women, the women who are active, reflective, decisive and raised their voices and shaped their lives per their

choice and interests. It is also found that there is a huge difference between the Afghan women writers and feminists' image of Afghan women and the image of the stereotyped impression of the west. So, there is a contribution in social and political context by the Afghan women, and it implies to remarkable improvement in women life but once again these improvements are confined to the urban areas and cities.

Eventually the despair and infinite dangers cover the various aspects of women's life in Afghanistan. Qaderi's childhood, girlhood and motherhood is a typical reflection of Afghan women and mothers in patriarchal society. Her stories are the vivid portrayal of women tragedies in her home country, but there is also hope for a bit brighter future for the women because such works and other genuine efforts for the women rights are opening a gate for the life of other women.

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