

Domestic Violence against Women in Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone*

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence against women is a common social ill that destroys thousands of women's lives worldwide (Khan, 2000). However, the growth of this concern, particularly in developing countries such as Afghanistan, requires more scholarly attention not only because the lives of many Afghan women are affected by it, but also because it remains overlooked due to socio-cultural norms that consider discussions about it as taboo. Of late, however, there is a rising trend among members of the Afghan Diaspora in portraying domestic violence against their womenfolk back home through such artistic mediums as fiction (Parveen, 2015). Therefore, in this paper, we shall examine the manifestations of domestic violence against women in the Afghan context through a textual analysis of *The Patience Stone* by Atiq Rahimi, an author belonging to the Afghan Diaspora. Originally written in French, this breakthrough novella highlights the harsh reality of the misery suffered by many Afghan women on a regular basis, notably the various forms of domestic violence that they have to endure in the poverty-stricken, war-torn and staunchly patriarchal environment of their homeland. Through a feminist reading of *The Patience Stone* (2011), we shall examine Rahimi's depictions of domestic violence against women in the novella as a highly engendered phenomenon resulting from gender inequality and a sexist hierarchy of power prevalent in Afghan society. Furthermore, this paper is outlined based on three main forms of domestic violence, namely physical, sexual and emotional abuse, which are depicted in *The Patience Stone* through the novella's female characters, notably the main protagonist.

Keywords: domestic abuse against women; Atiq Rahimi; *The Patience Stone*; Afghan fiction; patriarchy; gender-based violence

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence against women, a universal phenomenon that transcends all cultural, social, economic, racial, and ethnic strata, is "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (UNICEF, 2000). Although violence against women is a global phenomenon, it is more prevalent and profound in third-world countries, especially those in which religious principles and patriarchal values are upheld as rules of governance. It is

therefore in a conservative patriarchal society that gender inequality, manifested as male dominance, subsequently leads to violence against women (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2005, p. 3). Afghanistan is one such country. Hatfield, Thurston and Basiri (2008, p. 3) argue that “although no reliable statistics exist regarding the incidence of violence against women in Afghanistan, international human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International and the United Nations (UN), and national human rights organisations, such as the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, all state that the situation for women is desperate”. Therefore, the issue of domestic violence against women is not a product of Rahimi’s imagination, but rather a truth realistically depicted in *The Patience Stone*.

Women in Afghanistan inhabit a world “structured by strict religious, family and tribal customs...subjected to discrimination and violence on a daily basis” (Babur, 2007, p. 4). Moreover, “the violence which scars the lives of a huge proportion of Afghan women and girls is rooted in Afghan culture, customs, attitudes and practices” (UNAMA, OHCHR, 2009, p. 1). As a result, Afghan women have a restricted liberty to escape the cultural norms and traditions that dictate a submissive and subordinate position for females. A large part of this dilemma can be traced back to Afghan society’s misinterpretation of Islam in which women are viewed as weak and vulnerable, and subsequently relegated to the bottom rung of the socio-cultural hierarchy. Given the overwhelmingly patriarchal nature of Afghan society, Afghan women are thus subjected to various restrictions, hardships and atrocities in their everyday lives (Rubin, 2010). In a country like Afghanistan, acts of violence against women are “not openly condoned but neither is it challenged nor condemned by society at large or by state institutions” (UNAMA, OHCHR, 2009, p. 1). As such, it does not come as a surprise that this state of affairs is hardly treated as a disregard for the most basic of human rights in Afghanistan. Rather, many Afghans consider it so commonplace to the extent that bringing it up in public is treated as a petty matter.

In the hope of transforming gender attitudes and subsequently altering the pitiful conditions of Afghan women, a handful of literary figures, notably those of the Afghan Diaspora such as Rahimi, have attempted to employ fiction as a medium to foreground the misery suffered by his womenfolk. With the propaganda of eliminating gender-based violence and advocacy for an egalitarian society as his platforms, he has through his fourth book *The Patience Stone* successfully depicted the actual day-to-day lives of ordinary Afghan women. His first literary work in French, *The Patience Stone* has been regarded as explosive, moving, controversial and heartbreaking upon its release. Set in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, it is notable for looking behind the veil and daring to challenge and question the prevalence and taboo of female oppression and woman’s sexuality respectively. Its title is a metaphor that alludes to the Persian myth of Sang-e-Saboor (patience stone), a magical black stone capable of absorbing the confessions and plight of the penitent until the Day of Judgment, when it will eventually explode from all the grief and pain. The novella centres on an unnamed Afghan woman tending to her comatose husband, a soldier suffering from a gunshot in the neck. Convinced of his unconsciousness, she starts to confide to her comatose confessor after a lifetime of suppression, silence and neglect. Encouraged by his enforced silence, she continues her dramatic monologues about her sorrows and miseries. However, it is only towards the end of her shocking revelations that she unveils her most horrible secrets, involving self-prostitution, a sexual affair with a teenage boy as well as her hypocritical yet unwilling act of consummating her passion with an unknown man in order to conceive a child, which she is unable to do with her husband. Through his anonymous heroine, Rahimi has presented a harsh critique on the codes and prejudices as well as female oppression and gender inequality prevalent in Afghanistan’s patriarchal society.

CONCEPTUAL THEORY

Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies that advocates equal political, economic, legal and social rights for women in various fields ranging from education to employment. It attempts to establish equal opportunities for women in society so they can confront and eradicate every form of violence directed towards them as a result of gender inequality. Feminism thus provides a vast area of exploration and investigation on violence against women by highlighting “the basis and justifications for the existence of domestic violence throughout history” (McCue, 2008, p. 15). Furthermore, feminist literary criticism “examines the way in which literature reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women” (Tyson, 1999, p. 90). That being said, feminism as a literary theory examines “the silencing and marginalisations of women in a patriarchal culture, a culture organised in favour of men” (Guerin et al, 2005, p. 222).

From a feminist perspective, the most significant concept related to the issue of domestic violence is gender inequality and discrimination, which advocates prescribed and stereotypical gender roles and subsequently justifies patriarchy. However, feminism seeks to provide equal opportunities for women in society to eliminate every form of violence against them, particularly those that are engendered in nature. Engendered violence “encompasses a wide range of human rights violations, including sexual abuse, rape, domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment, trafficking of women and girls and several harmful traditional practices. It is the most pervasive yet least-recognised human rights abuse in the world” (Harne & Radford, 2008, p. 18). The recognition of violence against women as a form of gender-based discrimination and deprivation of human rights provides a platform for addressing the issue as well the reasons behind its emergence and prevalence in all societies regardless of the boundaries of race, culture and religion.

From a feminist viewpoint, domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence, domestic abuse and spousal abuse, can be defined as “a pattern of coercive behaviour used by one person to control and subordinate another in an intimate relationship. These behaviours include physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse. Tactics of coercion, terrorism, degradation, exploitation and violence are used to engender fear in the victim in order to enforce compliance” (Oregon Domestic Violence Council, 1995, p. 3). In this paper, the targets or victims of violence are Afghan women who are considered as inferior, subordinated, oppressed and marginalised in both social and domestic spheres. They suffer from unequal institutional and legal power, as well as “cultural imperialism (e.g. the absence of information about women’s achievements and contributions in history books)” (McCue, 2008, p. 5), which turns them into targets of violence within both family and society.

As a form of gender-based violence, domestic violence against women therefore refers to any act of violence towards woman, which causes psychological, mental, sexual, physical and emotional suffering, apart from restricting and depriving her of her basic rights and freedom. It is not “an isolated, individual event but rather a pattern of repeated behaviours that the abuser uses to gain power and control over the victim” (Leanage, 2010, p. 60). As Leanage further explains, within the domestic sphere, it is mostly “perpetrated by males who are, or have been in position of trust, intimacy or power for example a husband, boyfriend, father, or anyone in the position of power” (p. 61). She adds that domestic violence has many forms and manifestations which vary from “mild repetitive verbal abuse (psychological abuse) over the years to extreme forms of injury (physical abuse) or violence” (p. 60).

Common occurrence and extensive incidence of domestic violence turned it to a global issue without any cultural, racial, economic or social frontiers and a “typical an accepted behaviour by society” (Leanage, 2010, p. 60). This cycle of abuse against women

with its diverse manifestations and forms appearing in every stage of a woman/girl's life, ranges from sex-selective abortion to murder. It has several displays "including, but not limited to, battering, sexual harassment, and rape" (Koss et al, 1994, p. 3). However, the scope of this controversial phenomenon increases in conservative and traditional societies such as Afghanistan, in which Rahimi's novella is set. In the following section, three prominent forms of domestic violence against women, namely physical, emotional and sexual abuse shall be highlighted and discussed briefly.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON *THE PATIENCE STONE* AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN FICTION

In their 2014 study *Confession without Borders: 1st Wave Feminism against Woman's Right Disproportion in Atiq Rahimi's The Patience Stone*, Pangestu and Darma not only reaffirm the fact that, based on Rahimi's depiction of the heroine's plight in the narrative, the social structure in Afghanistan is deeply patriarchal by nature, but also the role of the institution of family in nurturing and upholding it. More importantly, however, they further postulate that Rahimi's depiction of the anonymous heroine reflects the harsh reality of Afghan women, who are viewed by their own kin and community as sub-humans who not only lack emotions and intellect, but are also reduced to a carrier for men's seed on unequal social standing with men (p. 6). Pangestu and Darma have also highlighted the myriad of practices unique to Afghan society depicted by Rahimi in *The Patience Stone* in which women are victimized, notably the role of marriage as a form of transaction as well as the tendency to place the blame on the wife in the case of a childless marriage, even when it is the husband who is sterile. According to Pangestu and Darma, it is due to the patriarchal overtones in Afghan culture, which they attribute to influences from Arab culture and Islamic teachings, that men are perceived to be created by God as superiors of the human race, thereby granting them the right to assert their control over women which means that they are allowed to deprive and abuse their womenfolk without fear of being prosecuted. This, in their view, is apparent in Rahimi's novella, when the anonymous heroine voices out her pent-up frustrations and secrets to her comatose husband, which in ordinary circumstances, would have remained locked within her.

As for academic scholarship of domestic violence against women in fiction, there is a substantial amount of previous studies on the said topic, although only a handful have been selected for our literature review. In her 2005 study of how verbal abuse against women is depicted in Roddy Doyle's 1997 novel *The Woman who walked into Doors*, Mildorf asserts that works of fiction provide a platform to create among readers an awareness of the volatile interplay involving gender, language and power outside the realm of fiction (p. 108). Through Doyle's depiction of Paula as a victim of verbal abuse as a form of engendered domestic violence, Mildorf suggests that victims of such violence like Paula gradually define themselves as the essence of whatever hurtful monikers that have been used by their tormentors to label them, thereby causing victims to construct a deviant and warped view of their respective identities. Mildorf also posits the view that Doyle's narrative reveals yet another harsh reality, namely the fact that 'there are by far more negatively connoted expressions to denote women in sexual terms than there are for men' (p. 110).

In contrast, in their 2014 study on how spousal abuse is depicted in Nicholas Sparks' 2010 novel *Safe Haven*, Sudargo and Riyanto (2014) offer a wider insight into how domestic violence can be deconstructed into such categories as physical, sexual, verbal, economic and psychological abuse, among others. More distinctively, however, they have also introduced other categories of abuse, such as destruction of property and social isolation. While not all seven of the aforementioned forms of spousal abuse or domestic violence are depicted by

Rahimi in *The Patience Stone*, it nevertheless shares a common ground with our study, in which there is, to a certain extent, a sense of universality in the woes faced by women from different corners of the world in the hands of men who intend to subjugate them through various violent means.

PHYSICAL ABUSE

Physical abuse against women as the most controversial, visible and obvious forms of domestic violence can be simply defined as any act or behaviour that causes actual physical pain or harm to the victim, leaving behind severe consequences that are not just physical in nature, but mental as well. “Despite all the laws, programmes, and shelters developed to address wife abuse still several pretexts and excuses are made by the abusers who hit their wives, thereby presumable reframing their violence as non-abusive” (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2005, p. 39). Women regardless of their race, colour, culture, age and social strata are the targets of physical violence as they suffer by means of “being slapped, punched, kicked or thrown, to being scalded, cut, choked, smothered or bitten” (Koss et al, 1994, p. 42).

Physical abuse, also known as battery, usually begins with small and minor acts of abuse such as a squeeze or pinch but gradually intensifies in severity, taking more fatal and lethal forms over time. “Despite the growing recognition that physical abuse affects physical and mental health, events of abuse usually remain unreported by women and unrecognised by medical professionals” (Scholle, Rost & Golding, 1998, p. 607). According to Echeburua, Sarasua and Zubizarreta’s (2014) paper on comparative therapies for battered women, “the severity and frequency of the aggression are related to increases in depression” (Echeburua, Sarasua and Zubizarreta, 2014, p. 1785). Their findings have further revealed that approximately half of women who have been subjected to battery or physical abuse in the past tend to “experience high levels of depression and lower self-esteem” (p. 1785), too. Given that battery or physical abuse plays a role in the deterioration of an individual’s self-esteem and mental health, this clearly indicates that physical violence in its various degrees and manifestations is often regarded as the most direct show of power for man to exert his dominance on woman. This perhaps explains the high occurrence of physical abuse against women by men in societies where poverty, illiteracy and deeply-rooted patriarchal norms hold sway, such as Afghan society.

Coming back to physical abuse in general, McCue (2008, pp. 8-9) defines a typical pattern for the common forms of physical abuse which occurs when the intimate partner pinches or squeezes the victim to inflict pain before proceeding to more severe acts such as pushing, pulling, jerking, shaking, shoving, biting, slapping, hitting, kicking, striking and punching. Moreover, McCue (2008) considers throwing the victim or throwing objects such as household utensils at the victim, inflicting a constant series of blows and injuries, breaking her bones, causing miscarriages or injuries requiring a therapeutic abortion as well as various other internal injuries, depriving the victim of medical treatment, threatening with conventional weapons such as guns and knives, causing permanent disability or disfigurement and finally, murder, all as forms of physical abuse inflicted upon female victims by their male partners.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Emotional abuse as a form of destructive behaviour refers to any emotionally abusive behaviour that is designed to subjugate and control women through sexism and gender-based power imbalances. It ranges from verbal abuse and constant criticism to more subtle tactics, such as intimidation, manipulation and refusal to ever be pleased (Counseling Center,

University of Tennessee, 2012). This emotional form of violence annihilates woman's self-confidence and self-worth, reducing her to a state of self-blame. It may happen through the belittling and minimising of her abilities as well as through intimidation and repeated reminding of her sense of worthlessness and lowliness. All forms of emotional abuse eventually "cuts to the very core of a person, creating scars that may be far deeper and more lasting than physical ones" (Engel, 1992, p. 10).

Brassard, Hart and Hardy (1993) describe emotional maltreatment as "a repeated pattern of behaviour that conveys to women that they are worthless, unloved, unwanted, or only of value in meeting another's needs" (p. 715). Emotional abusers simply manipulate and humiliate their victims' emotions through various patterns. According to McCue (2008), manifestations of emotional abuse which leave psychological scars in woman's mind and heart may appear in various forms, ranging from mockery in a general sense to hostile "jokes" about the habits and faults of her gender. Specifically, these include insulting her repeatedly, ignoring her emotional needs, withholding approval and support as a form of punishment, yelling at her, addressing her with derogatory terms such as "crazy", "bitch" and "stupid", degrading and humiliating her in front of others particularly her own family and relatives, blaming her for any trouble or failures in the abuser's life, questioning and minimising her abilities as a wife, mother, partner and worker, blackmailing her with threats of abusing her children and separating her from them by means of custody as well as threatening her with physical and sexual abuse as retaliation against her perceived insubordination. Furthermore, McCue (2008) mentions that demanding the victim's full attention and resenting the children, bragging about his affairs with other women, imprisoning the victim and minimising her abilities by telling her that she must stay with him because of her overdependence on him and finally accusing the victim of being aggressive and violent whenever she attempts to protect herself or her children from him are some other manifestations of emotional abuse inflicted by man upon woman.

As such, by appearing in the various forms as listed above, "emotional abuse is behaviour that does violence to the very heart of a relationship – to the emotional connection between the victim and her abuser" (Thompson, 1993, p. 1). Although emotional abuse is not physically violent, it wounds and offends the victim. This worsens the situation because according to Thompson, "the wounds of emotionally abusive relationships are not repaired, and their damage accumulates over time" (p. 1).

SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse can be defined as any sort of undesired, unwanted and non-consensual contact or sexual behaviour perpetrated by men against their female partners. It is committed by men to engage women in an unwanted sexual act through the use of force, coercion and threats. It appears in commonly-used terms such as rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment and sexual offences. Generally, sexual abuse refers to "crimes against one's dignity, which affect a victim in a multi-dimensional way. Besides depriving one's privacy, they subject the victims to depression and personality disorders such as psychosocial maladjustment and irreparable trauma" (Wamue-Ngar, 2007, p. 3). However, most cases of sexual abuse unfortunately remain unreported as it is believed to endanger family's honour and status quo. "Victims of sexual abuse experience feelings of shame and self-blame. This condition is associated with higher levels of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and low self-esteem" (Nasir, Zamani, Khairuddin and Ismail, 2010, p. 53).

However, "sexually violated women become victims not only of the crime, but also of the society" (Wamue-Ngar, 2007, p. 3). To preserve family honour, dignity and status quo, sexually molested women and girls suffer privately and silently. As victims of marital sexual

abuse, married women in particular encounter a very serious crisis as “speaking against the crime and therefore, seeking justice jeopardises their marriages” (Wamue-Ngar, 2007, p. 3). As such, they prefer to remain silent, which further compounds their sorrows and causes their precarious situation to deteriorate even more. Shayegan (2014) in his paper *The Invisible Trauma in Afghanistan* reveals that many instances of sexual abuse “are intentionally kept hidden by the victims” (p. 28) out of fear that their testimonies will not only lead to family dishonour but also to them being sentenced to honour killings. This is partly reflected within the androcentric framework of Afghan society, where Shayegan (2014) affirms that “sex...embodies mainly the social and cultural sense rather than physical or biological character” (p. 28), and women are traditionally confined to the domestic sphere. This means that they are obliged to succumb to their husbands or other male individuals in their lives and obey them. Speaking about their experiences of sexual abuse, especially marital sexual violence can potentially jeopardise a woman’s precarious socioeconomic standing. As marital sexual abuse in general as well as rape are not regarded as crimes in several developing or underdeveloped countries such as Afghanistan, women there are doomed to accept their inescapable and vicious destinies and thus cope with every kind of sexual violence perpetrated against them. Nevertheless, this acceptance on their part ironically frees them from guilt, self-blame, disillusionment and stress, albeit ultimately leading to depression and psychological trauma.

Engendered sexual violence against women in Afghanistan is both inevitable and unavoidable as Afghan society itself is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms and male supremacy that shape its socio-cultural structures. “Compounded with the loopholes in the existing laws, these reinforce male supremacy, thereby disadvantaging women and girls” (Wamue-Ngar, 2007, p. 3). Similarly, Wolf (2012) in his article *Forgotten Promises in Afghanistan* laments that “the lifeline for many women is still formed by an absolute dependence on the support of their male-dominated families and communities, which avoids any empowerment of their female members” (p. 14). Based on patriarchal ideologies, women are wrongly considered as objects to fulfil and satisfy men’s sexual desires and needs. Shayegan (2014) hypothesises that “in Afghanistan’s cultural context, sex-based identification of woman is a social reality”, thereby confirming that “sex service for men are considered coercive” and a “culturally-expected role of a woman” “which is a kind of sex-based identity creation” (p. 29). This is supported by Wamue-Ngar (2007), who affirms that “once a woman enters into any form of marital contract, be it legal or illegal, permanent or temporary, the male partner has access to unlimited sexual control over her” (pp. 3-4), adding that it is clearly impossible and unattainable for victims of sexual violence to accuse and press any charges against their abusers “because of evidential rules concerning sexual crimes” (pp. 3-4).

Traditional societies plagued by poverty, illiteracy and conservatism such as Afghan society tend to place in high regard some unalterable cultural practices which validate sexism and gender-based violence through which women are considered as subordinate to men. According to Wolf (2012), apart from domestic violence, rape, abduction and forced marriage, “women have to suffer from traditional practices like baad and baadal” (p. 14), baad being a way of “solving conflicts between two parties...by trading a girl as a compensation for a crime” that usually concludes “with the death of the traded woman/girl or she gets forced into slavery and/or marriage”, while baadal “consists of the exchange of daughters between two families for marriage” whereby such exchange is based on mutual arrangement as well as commitments, if one in-law is treated badly, her exchanged counterpart will be too” (p. 14). Undeniably, such culturally-institutionalised and widespread traditional customs and beliefs tend to deprive women of many rights and liberties. This is why sexual abuse, described by Wamue-Ngar (2007) as a prevalent form of engendered

violence that “transcends socioeconomic and demographic characteristics including education and employment” (p. 7) destroys woman’s self-confidence, making her delicate, vulnerable and susceptible to and dependent on her abuser. Shayegan (2014) paints an equally grim picture of the position of women in Afghan society, in which he states that sexual abuse “increases the risk of objectifying women as commodity of man’s leisure, irrespective of their will” (p. 29), “especially in forced marriage...which is oriented to desire to hurt, humiliate and dominate through sex” (p. 29). This undoubtedly leads to a violent and cruel cycle of self-blame, guilt, shame and embarrassment.

According to McCue (2008), manifestations of sexual abuse include but are not limited to telling dirty jokes about women in the presence of the victim; treating/considering the victim and women in general as sex objects; ignoring the victim’s sexual feelings and needs; denying sex and affection; touching the victim against her will in uncomfortable and unpleasant ways; constant demanding of sex regardless of the victim’s mood; insulting, criticising and labelling the victim with sexually derogatory terms such as “whore” or “frigid” as well as obliging the victim to strip and flirt as a form of humiliation even in the presence of her own children. Furthermore, as a means of maintaining his power, man also uses other more subtle forms of sexual violence such as expressing extreme jealousy, using intimidations to fulfil his sexual demands, resorting to promiscuity and intimacy with other sexual partners as a means of betraying the victim, forcing the victim to witness his sexual encounters or affairs with other women, forcing the victim to copulate and have sex with him or with others against her will, beating the victim even after she has fulfilled his sexual needs or forcing her to have sex after subjecting her to physical abuse as well as forcing her to engage in rough sex in order to hurt her with sex objects and sometimes weapons, to the extent of mutilating her (McCue, 2008).

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

PHYSICAL ABUSE IN *THE PATIENCE STONE*

Physical abuse has always been considered as one of the most severe forms of abuse, mostly because so many women suffer from its chronic after-effects to the point that they cannot even continue their social lives normally. According to McCue (2008), physical abuse is defined as any sort of hitting either with an object or with one’s body parts as well as pinching, shoving or violent shaking to inflict pain. It is also defined as serious physical or physiological mistreatment that can potentially cause death or severe harm to the victims. As explained earlier, besides the physical injuries and pain of battery, victims of physical abuse also suffer from psychological wounds and consequences of violence in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and fear.

The Patience Stone is the story of an Afghan woman who spends her days tending to her supposedly comatose husband paralysed by a bullet lodged in his neck. The woman, in the course of the story, reveals her loneliness as well as her resentment and hatred towards her husband for sacrificing her to the war. The longer she talks to him, the bolder she becomes, opening up to him her deepest desires as well as the pains and afflictions she has gone through. The woman revisits her past and unearths many bitter stories involving her father and husband, who have both abused her physically. Her past, right from the time of her childhood and adolescence to her marital life, stereotypically stands for the lives of countless Afghan women who experience violence in the hands of their male kin at home. Having found her voice, the woman freely recalls and talks about her father’s brutality towards her as well as her mother and sisters, about how he would beat them whenever he gets in debt from

gambling. The following excerpt clearly portrays the physical violence endured by the female characters in the story:

Sometimes he won, sometimes he lost. When he lost, he would get upset, and nasty. He would come home in a rage and find any pretext to beat us...and also my mother. (p. 58)

The anonymous heroine of the story explains that she, along with her mother and sisters, were beaten by her father. An implied permission from patriarchal culture allows man to use force as a means of controlling his family. Therefore, this explains why the father resorts to physical violence to remind his wife and daughters of his superiority and hegemony within the family. Rahimi offers readers an invaluable insight into physical abuse in various parts of the story. In this context, the anonymous heroine of the novella states many instances of physical abuse in her father's house, notably the incident in which she was subjected to a beating simply because the cat had eaten his quail.

He beat up my mother, my sisters and me, because we hadn't kept watch over his quail. (p. 60)

As stated earlier, women, regardless of their age and stratum, are victims of physical abuse. The female characters of *The Patience Stone* suffer indiscriminately from the physical violence inflicted upon them by the heroine's father simply because of their gender roles as wife and daughters. Indeed, the evidence of physical abuse in the aforementioned novella is not solely confined to the anonymous heroine. It can also be seen in her mother and sisters. The fact that women of any position in the family, whether as daughters or newlywed wives suffer from the brutality of their male family members can be extracted easily from the novella. This particularly rings true in the scene where the novella's anonymous heroine recalls her father's senseless rage as an outlet for him to vent his frustration over the losses he has suffered from gambling.

Apart from recalling the traumatic experiences she has suffered in her family home, Rahimi's anonymous protagonist is subjected to harsher, more severe and crueller forms of physical violence in her husband's home. In the story, she narrates bitterly on the moments of intimacy shared between her and her husband, which she reveals is often accompanied by battery. The story further reveals that for the husband, sex was more a matter of need than that of love or companionship. The animalistic nature of bodily fulfilment inflicted upon her by her husband in the middle of the night is almost akin to rape. He never seeks her consent and has his way with her whenever the occasion suits him. This symbolically reduces her status within her own marriage to that of an automaton that only serves to please him even when she is not in the mood to do so. This also accounts for the repressed anger and frustration that she spills out as the story progresses on, as can be seen in the extract below.

And remember the night – it was when we were first living together – that you came home late. Dead drunk. You'd been smoking. I had fallen asleep. You pulled down my knickers without saying a word. I woke up. But I pretended to be deeply asleep. You ...penetrated me... you had a great time... but when you stood up to go and wash yourself, you noticed blood on your dick. You were furious. You came back and beat me, in the middle of the night, just because I hadn't warned you that I was bleeding. (p. 30)

With reference to the extract above, it may be apt to hypothesise that the anonymous heroine's sexual experience as a married woman is a form of rape rather than a consummation of marital unity. Although rape is a cross-cultural notion stemming primarily from patriarchal ideologies

as an engendered imbalance of power, the analysis of its effects on victims from various cultures remains to be unveiled. As for Afghanistan, a stereotype of mating is depicted in the novella, which is equivalent to the definition of marital rape as forced sexual intercourse. However, in the above excerpt, the heroine clearly suffers from both sexual and physical abuse. Her sexual abuse or marital rape, accompanied by a more apparent bout of physical abuse, is evidence of her deteriorating condition in her husband's home. In the extract, her husband batters her simply because of an undeniable and unavoidable biological condition experienced by all women. In this context, the fact that she was mistaken for menstruating at that time by her husband as can be gleaned from "the blood was the proof of my virginity" (p. 29), only serves to make her a victim of his ruthlessness and brutality, especially since husbands are traditionally required to abstain from making love to their wives whenever the latter happen to be menstruating.

At the story's conclusion, the anonymous heroine is subjected to more physical injuries as her husband regains his consciousness after listening to her shocking revelation, including her confession about her illegitimate children, who have been conceived from clandestine affairs with an unknown man in an attempt to escape the scandalous badge of infertility as well as its horrendous consequences upheld by Afghan society's patriarchal and conservative culture. Given her husband's sterility, she was branded as infertile by her in-laws, thereby prompting her to betray her husband by unwillingly engaging in sexual affairs with another man to impregnate herself. The following extract describes the vicious beating endured by the heroine in the hands of her husband as she divulges her secrets.

The man pulls towards her, grabs her hair and dashes her head against the wall. She falls... The man, his face haggard and wan, grabs hold of the woman again, lifts her up and throws her against the wall where the khanjar and the photo are hanging. He moves closer, grabs her again, heaves her up against the wall. (p. 135)

Indeed, the above extract mirrors McCue's (2008) findings on physical abuse, in which the victim is being thrown about, struck and hit.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN *THE PATIENCE STONE*

When domestic abuse comes to mind, people often conjure an image of a physically battered woman. However, the characterisation of abusive relationships is not limited to physical violence. Undeniably, many men and women suffer from emotional abuse as well, which is no less destructive. Sadly, emotional abuse tends to be minimised or overlooked, even by victims themselves.

Brassard, Hart and Hardy (1993) describe emotional abuse as "a repeated pattern of behaviour that conveys to women that they are worthless, unloved, unwanted, or only of value in meeting another's needs" (p. 715). Along with reference to McCue's (2008) description of emotional abuse covered earlier, images of this form of domestic violence can be found in Rahimi's novella, too.

In the story, the anonymous heroine is deprived of her emotional needs by both her husband and family. No-one has paid any attention to her voice nor considered her opinions, as can be gleaned from the scene of her proposal party.

Your mother, with her enormous bust, coming to our place to ask for the hand of my sister. It wasn't her turn to get married. It was my turn, so your mother simply said, "No problem, we'll take her instead!" (p. 53)

As aforementioned at some point earlier in this study, patriarchy has been identified as the root of violence against women, in which men traditionally wield the upper hand and possess the privilege to make decisions for the family, whereas women are excluded from such affairs. It is thanks to this implied inferiority that women constantly suffer from a deprivation of their basic rights, to the extent that they cannot make their own decisions, be they trivial or complex. To be denied an active role in various stages of life is in fact a form of emotional abuse. Take marriage as an example: emotional abuse towards woman in her marriage is evident when her emotions and needs are never taken into consideration. In the story, the father as the patriarchal figure does not hesitate to accept the proposal for his daughter's hand in marriage, marrying her off to a total stranger who has never been seen by anyone within his family. The heroine in the novella is not married off to an actual man, only a photo of him. Hence, it may be right to hypothesise that there is no emotion and love in the marriage. More importantly, the heroine's emotional needs have been completely neglected as she has no say whatsoever in choosing her own husband.

Evidently, the heroine is not only a victim of emotional abuse in her parents' home. As a married woman under her in-laws' roof, she is forbidden to meet her friends and other married women simply because her mother-in-law finds it dangerous to mingle with them. The heroine is also denied the obvious right to communicate with her relatives and loved ones. As such, she feels a gap in her heart due to a dire lack of emotional support and love from her mother-in-law as well as her negligent husband, who is away at war. This clampdown on her freedom is a sort of mental imprisonment imposed on her by her in-laws, which is meant to make her incapable of thinking or pronouncing beyond what is expected of her. In patriarchal societies such as Afghan society, confining a woman within a home is a common practice largely because sociability is considered undesirable for her. As such, she is isolated and left to suffer various forms of abuse in the hands of her husband and in-laws on her own. The situation worsens when Afghan society has always considered domestic violence against women as a private matter, and the very mention of it a cultural taboo. The mention of the aforementioned practices is evident in the novella, too.

Three years! For three years I wasn't allowed to see my friends, or my family... it was not considered proper a young married virgin to spend time with other married women. Such rubbish! (p. 54)

According to McCue (2008), ignoring woman's feelings in a relationship is also an apparent manifestation of emotional abuse. Therefore, by ignoring the anonymous heroine's feelings, her husband is already subjecting her to emotional abuse. This is evident in the heroine's monologue, in which she vents her frustrations at her comatose husband.

Remember all those nights when you fucked me and left me all...all keyed up..." (p. 105)

For three years, I had been trying to imagine what you were like... and then one day you came. You slipped into the bed. Climbed on top of me. Rubbed yourself against me... and couldn't do it! (p. 64)

As one can glean from the above extracts, the heroine's sexual needs that constitute part and parcel of her emotions are not met in her marriage since she, as a woman, is inferior to her husband even where sex is concerned. One must remember that within a patriarchal society, sex is a tool for man to suppress woman, not a mutual interest to be shared or enjoyed together. Various instances within the text show that the husband has grossly neglected the heroine's needs as he copulates with her, which is not just an act of emotional and sexual abuse, but also a demonstration of his dominance in her life. Undeniably, in societies where

poverty and illiteracy prevail and patriarchal norms hold sway, man resorts to assert his perceived superiority over woman by using sex to control her and simultaneously fulfil his lust, thereby causing her emotions to be callously sidelined.

Indifference towards a woman's feelings in marriage is also depicted in the novella through the heroine as well as her sister's forced marriages. In Afghanistan, trading girls for marriage is a common practice and in many cases, girls are married to men whose faces they have never seen. According to McCue (2008), neglecting and ignoring woman's feelings and opinions regarding marriage, especially her choice of husband, is yet another form of emotional abuse. This is evident through the narrative of Rahimi's anonymous heroine, whereby she reveals that her sister had no feelings towards her own marriage because her wedding was set to settle their father's debts with a fellow gambler. In other words, the heroine's sister was traded in an arranged marriage that was more like a transaction carried out to compensate for their father's financial losses.

As fate would have it, he lost. He had no money left to honour his bet,
so he gave my sister instead. (p. 58)

The heroine's aunt is yet another example of the emotionally-deprived Afghan woman trapped in a forced marriage depicted by Rahimi.

I loved her more than my own mother. She was generous. Beautiful.
Very beautiful. Big hearted. She was the one who taught how to read,
how to live ...but then her life took a tragic turn. They married her off
to this terrible rich man. A total bastard. Stuffed with dirty cash.
(p. 85)

As seen in the novella, arranged marriages are common in Afghanistan. This in turn presents a worrisome situation as woman's emotional needs are not considered beforehand and she is often traded instead of being married off. Typical Afghan women as depicted by Rahimi therefore suffer from an emotionally stagnant environment in their respective marriages under the shadow of patriarchy.

SEXUAL ABUSE IN *THE PATIENCE STONE*

According to Allison-Davis (2012, p. 1) "sexual abuse is when someone with less power is tricked, trapped, coerced, or bribed into any type of sexual experience. Abuse may range from inappropriate touching, kissing, all the way up to sexual intercourse". An imbalance in power between perpetrator and victim may stem from such factors as age, physical size, social position, experience and level of authority. It is estimated worldwide that one in five women is vulnerable to rape or attempted rape in her lifetime, which also includes marital sexual abuse (Khan, 2000).

When abuse towards a woman involves forced sex, it is often treated as a rape case in most jurisdictions, and some cases constitute assaults as well. Marital sexual abuse falls under this category. Interestingly enough, a contradictive dichotomy exists in Afghan society, whereby woman is exalted as guardian of society's traditions and upholder of family honour, yet simultaneously and ironically vilified as a source of dishonour for her family and community upon exposure to sexual violence of any form. As such, it is woman as the victim, not man as the perpetrator, who is weighed down with the burden of shame. Hence, it is possible that many cases of rape in Afghanistan remain unreported simply because the victims prefer to avoid ostracism and dishonour.

The anonymous heroine of *The Patience Stone* is best regarded as a mouthpiece of the common plight shared by her womenfolk, as she herself is a victim of sexual abuse. Heldman

and Cahill (2007) argue that “sexual objectification occurs when a woman’s body is treated as an object, especially as an object that exists for pleasure and use” before proceeding to describe women “as mere objects or bodies” in the eyes of their husbands and men in general (p. 3). Heldman and Cahill’s findings go in tandem with Rahimi’s anonymous heroine, who narrates how she is viewed by her husband and society as a sex object whose sole function is to satisfy the lust of the former. She is denied sexual gratification and the emotional aspects of sexual intimacy, as her husband only has his sexual satisfaction in mind. In the story, the heroine describes sex with her husband as loveless and wordless. A failure in meeting her needs for romantic sexual intimacy as well as the lack of compassion is sufficient to classify the heroine’s ordeal as rape. It does not take her long to learn that she is married to a violent and arrogant man with whom she must endure a cruel and detached form of sex, in which she cannot kiss or touch him.

As aforementioned, the heroine’s husband is injured in battle and is rendered comatose. This gives her the chance to talk and act freely without fear of any threats or retaliation from him. She expresses her innermost thoughts, complains about his indifference in sex and love, bringing to light her pent-up frustrations. She tries and tastes sexual pleasure for the first time in her married life when she kisses and touches her immobile husband.

She leans right over the man... Then she rests her cheek tenderly on his chest. ‘How strange this all is! I’ve never felt as close to you as I do right now. We’ve been married ten years. Ten years! And it’s only these last three weeks that I’m finally sharing something with you.’ Her hand strokes the man’s hair. ‘I can touch you... You never let me touch you, never!’ She moves towards the man’s mouth. ‘I have never kissed you.’ She kissed him. ‘The first time I went to kiss you on the lips, you pushed me away.’ (p. 66)

In the above extract, it is evident that the husband’s comatose state has reduced him to an insignificant physical entity without a shred of dignity. While this symbolises the collapse of patriarchy within the microscopic concept of family, it also provides the heroine with the courage to stand up for herself in her husband’s presence, venting out her suppressed grievances and traumatic experiences. A significant example would be that of her brothers-in-law stalking and ogling at her throughout the time her husband was at war. Since her arrival, she has never been respected as a sister-in-law by them.

Your brothers have always wanted to fuck me! They...spied on me... constantly, for the whole three years you were away... spied on me through the little window in the bath house while I was washing myself... and... jerked off. They spied on us too at night... (p. 51)

The above extract in fact reveals another grim reality behind the everyday lives of many Afghan women. In Afghan society, widows are often remarried by force to their brothers-in-law or any of her late husband’s male relatives. This demonstrates women’s lowly status as commodities within the family, where they are perceived to have no self-worth. Based on the above extract, the heroine’s brothers-in-law’s treatment of her as a commodity that indirectly fulfils their sexual needs reflects McCue’s (2008) assertion that the very act of viewing woman as a sex object is also classified as sexual abuse. In this context, the sexual fantasies playing in their minds involving the heroine that stimulate their acts of masturbation serve to highlight her inferior position as a commodity within her husband’s family.

Another significant manifestation of sexual abuse in the novella involves the heroine’s young and beautiful aunt. She is another victim of forced marriage in the story and her married life as a living hell comes full circle when it is discovered that she is infertile.

After two years of marriage, my aunt hadn't been able to bear a child for him. I say for him, because that's how you men see it. Anyway, my aunt was infertile. In other words, no good. So her husband sent her to his parent's place in the countryside to be their servant. As she was both beautiful and infertile, her father-in-law used to fuck her without a care in the world. Day and night. (pp. 85-86)

Aubrey (2006) argues that woman is susceptible of being reduced "to the status of mere instruments" (p. 367) due to a "frequency of viewing and extremity of sexual objectification" (371). In the above extract, the aunt is revealed to be a victim of rape in the hands of her father-in-law. While this highlights the double humiliation she has to face, first as a barren wife and then as a sex slave in her husband's family, it also depicts the sorry state of women in patriarchal communities, where they are in constant danger of being objectified and treated as lesser beings. As the patriarch of the family, the aunt's father-in-law is free to assert his power and dominance over her; the fact that she can never be impregnated seems to encourage his bravado. In the words of the heroine, the aunt's experiences of rape and sexual assault have "cracked" her personality and identity (p. 86).

CONCLUSION

In recent years, close investigations have been carried out to curb the rise of the epidemic and global problem of domestic violence against women by way of identifying its causes and consequences. Sadly, such efforts seem to be in vain as the problem is intensively growing. Disturbing statistics from UNICEF (2000) enunciate that a growing number of women worldwide (20%-50%) continuously suffer from many forms of domestic violence. This requires serious consideration and effective strategies to improve the position of women in contemporary society. In order to eliminate domestic violence against women, various legal and health organisations must come together to work out a solution. Similarly, those in the artistic sector, such as writers, need to foreground this issue more to raise awareness among victims regarding their basic human rights and also to provide a better insight for the public so as to encourage them to rectify this sorry situation.

Indeed, it is authors like Rahimi who play an integral role in addressing the plight of Afghan women and focus on restoring their basic rights through fiction as a platform for further public discussion and social reformation. Based on the fact that "some fictions, and even sub-genres of fiction, have an aim to make truth-claims", (Mikkonen, 2009, p. 146) Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* can be considered as a vivid portrayal of the Afghan woman's worrisome plight. Through the narration of the novella's anonymous heroine, the reader is able to gather sufficient evidence to conclude that domestic violence against women is a persistent problem all over Afghanistan.

Undeniably, Rahimi's novella is capable of foregrounding domestic violence against women in Afghan society as a patriarchal practice that "connotes a denial of autonomy, individuality, and freedom" (Wan Roselezam, 2003, p. 12) in its victims. Works of fiction like *The Patience Stone* has effectively increased the awareness of female abuse victims by shedding new light on Afghan women's everyday lives "exacerbated by the Taliban's rigid policies towards them" (Bezhan, 2008, p. 373). In other words, it is in itself a work of activism that aspires to curb any form of engendered domestic violence by changing Afghan women's views of the violence they endure as a first step to elevate their position in society.

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