

Patriarchy and Gender Power Dynamics in ‘The Secret Sky’ by Atia Abawi: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Abstract

The research study examined depiction of the gender power dynamics and the role of patriarchy in the production, reproduction and maintenance of the gender based power asymmetries in the novel, ‘The Secret Sky’ by Abawi. The selected text was critically analyzed in terms of the theoretical postulates presented by Michelle Lazar in her theoretical framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (2005, 2007). Textual Analysis as a research method was incorporated and the analytical framework of the research was grounded in the feminist perspectives of the Muslim Feminist writers, Laila Abu Lughod, (1986, 2002) and Nawal El Saadawi, (1999, 2002). Though the research study was delimited to the portrayal of the gender power dynamics in the selected novel through the lens of FCDA, yet it would serve to be a small academic contribution to the existing discourse of the gender power dynamics and also to the investigation of the image of Afghan woman in the Anglophonic Afghan novels. The research study would recommend the future researcher to explore the works of the female Anglophonic Afghan writers.

Keywords: *Androcentrism, Patriarchy, Power Dynamics, Features, Atia Abawi*

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan, a landlocked country with rugged mountainous geography is home to a multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi ethnic population of over 37 million people. The Pashtuns being the largest ethnic group comprise 40 percent of the total population. (Huma, 2003) Owing to the unending wars, ethnic clashes and internecine conflicts the Afghanis have suffered unprecedentedly; however, the most grievous sufferers of the dilemma are the women of Afghanistan. Huma (2003) believes that the history of the suffering and pangs of Afghan women is very long because of the antagonism among the varying ethnic and tribal groups living there. She adds that, the tribal laws in Afghanistan are prioritized over constitutional laws and religious teachings. Women’s lives are exploited for the sake of inter-tribal superiority and honour is attached with the body of women which make them more vulnerable. Marriage is used as a contract between different groups for the purpose of making alliances and women are expected to have a total submission towards their husbands and are denied the right of divorce. They are also kept away from getting education. According to Huma (2003) women of Afghanistan are treated as mere commodity. They are confined inside their homes and under the burqa and they do not have any say in the creation of their identities. However, Saadawi (2007) attributes the oppression of women to patriarchy, which always empowers men over women by making women vulnerable. She suggests

Khalid Zafar

MPhil Scholar, Department of English, AIOU

Dr. Rashida Imran

Assistant Professor, Department of English, AIOU

abolition of patriarchy and the patrilineal system for the true emancipation of women. Moreover, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis presented by Michelle Lazar (2005) discusses how patriarchal ideologies are formed, propagated and disseminated discursively, which once produced are practiced in societies and make the male members of society dominant over the female members. The dominated faction is then conventionalized to adopt the set ideologies whether they accept them or not.

Statement of the Problem

Lazar (2007) unlike the postfeminists does not believe feminism to be an irrelevant subject. She argues that the gender based disparities not only exist but have also taken more complex forms with their varying nature according to different contexts. She says that the disparities change with the change in context and are not the same everywhere. As Huma (2003) states that Afghanistan is ruled under a very traditional patriarchal setup for a very long span of time owing to the long history of wars and internecine conflicts, the predicament of the Afghan women is unprecedented. While great scholarly focus has been paid on the suffering of the women of Afghanistan, the works of the female Anglophonic Afghan writers, specifically, the works of Atia Abawi are relatively underexplored. The study was thus an attempt to investigate the depiction of the gender power dynamics portrayed by Atia Abawi.

Research Objective

- I. To assess the portrayal of gender power dynamics in the ‘Secret Sky’ by Abawi.
- II. To investigate the effect of patriarchy and patriarchal structures on the female characters of the selected novel.

Research Question

- I. How does Abawi portray gender power dynamics in the selected novels?
- II. In what way does Abawi portray the effect of patriarchy and patriarchal structures on the female characters of the selected novel?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The early 19th century witnessed emergence of a movement which became famous as the Feminist movement. The movement aimed at bringing a just society which should provide equal status to men and women, so that, women are not marginalized and placed at disadvantageous positions. The main focus of the movement was to emancipate women from the injustices and the overt and covert oppressions practiced in societies with the aim to empower women (Jackson, R. M., 1998). Feminism was a movement to end sexism and to end the sexist exploitation and oppression. So, the feminists are of the belief that due to the unequal power distribution among the sexes, (male and female) females as one of the segments of society are suppressed and subjugated resulting in deterioration of the wellbeing and smooth running of the society. Therefore, the problem is of serious nature and needs to be addressed accordingly. (Hooks, 2000)

The movement got diverse when it went beyond the western boundaries. With the inclusion of women of colour and women belonging to diverse contexts, its basic aim of emancipation of women from the asymmetries also changed. As, women living around the globe do not face the same asymmetries, their problems also vary. Thus, with the passage of time

feminists from varying social, societal, religious and cultural backgrounds emerged with different opinions regarding the issues faced by women and the emancipation of woman from the bondage of androcentrism. These different views are studied under various sub categories like: Liberal Feminism, Black Feminism, Radical Feminism, Social Feminism, Post- Feminism and Anti Feminism. Thus the liberal feminists according to Tong (2009) believe that the human society has a false belief that women are by nature less capable intellectually and physically as compared to men. They rather believe that all human beings possess equal rational and intellectual capacities to perform any sort of job. It is because of some outdated beliefs that women are considered less capable and are kept subordinated.

On the other hand, the radical feminists are of the belief that sexism and patriarchy are the root causes behind the oppression, discrimination and subjugation of women race. They ignore rest of the causes like, gender, religion, culture, disability, social and economic status etc... as the fundamental causes behind the subjugation and segregation of women. They believe that patriarchy is psychologically rooted in the society and is the very preliminary factor behind the oppression of women (Nachescu, 2009). And the movement, post feminism is often referred to as the demise of feminism or the irrelevance of feminism in the western societies. Susan (1992) in her book "Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women" coins the term Post Feminism by explaining the indifference towards the second wave of feminism. The indifferent attitude towards feminism in the western societies according to her is not because the women have achieved all the objectives of equity and equality but because of the advancement of popular culture and advancement, women do not seem concerned about the goals of the previous waves of feminism or rather the women in the west do not even pretend to care about them. (Robinson, Penelope, 2008)

Coinciding with the views, Saadawi (2007) in her book 'The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World' presents very disturbing and distressing images of the hidden faces of the girls and women of Muslim world. She thinks all the adversities faced by women are not because of the religion but because of the political and economic systems which tend to prevail and maintain the hegemony of men over women. She proposes matrilineal system in place of patrilineal, so that women could attain true emancipation. (Saadawi, 2007). In the same way Parveen (2021) in her research work titled: 'Gender Resistance: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Qaisra Shahraz's 'A Pair of Jeans & Other Stories,' discusses that Qaisara Sharaz has portrayed a very different image of women in her stories. The women characters in the fictions in contrary to the stereotypical roles in the society struggle to liberate themselves from the hegemonic gender constrains and try to redefine their identities and reclaim their unheard voices. In the process of unlearning the social and societal schemata the females have to go through, emotional, psychological and physical suffering. As the process of emancipation from the embedded norms is not an easy task, their efforts often pose dire threat to them owing to the androcentric communities. (Parveen, 2021). As the gender based asymmetries are not the same everywhere, they vary with the varying social, societal, cultural and financial contexts, the asymmetries faced by women living in strong and oppressive androcentric setups would differ from those who live in egalitarian societies.

Research Gap

The thorough survey of the relevant literature revealed that the gender based disparities have been examined by various authors and research studies have been conducted on both long and short fictions to portray the gender power dynamics, however, Feminist CDA of the Anglophonic Afghan novels, specifically authored by the female Afghan authors was a relatively less explored field. The thorough investigation of the existing literature could not provide the analysis of “The Secret Sky” under the theoretical lens of FCDA.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research paradigm was adopted in the research study to analyze the novel, ‘The Secret Sky’ by Abawi. The qualitative method of analysis helped the researcher in having an in-depth understanding and interpretation of the novel through the theoretical postulates presented by Michelle Lazar in her theoretical framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (2005, 2007). The feministic notions of the Muslim Feminist Saadawi (1999, 2002) were followed as the analytical framework of the research study and textual analysis presented by McKee (2003) was adopted for the analysis of the selected text.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Role of Patriarchy in Gender Power Dynamics

The main focus of the researchers in the current research work was on the female characters of the novel, “The Secret Sky” The story revolves round the female protagonist who lives in strong patriarchal environments and face both the latent and blatant societal oppression. The writer has depicted the living conditions of women in the strong patriarchal set up of Afghanistan where both men and women have to adopt the strict norms imposed upon them by ethnicity and patriarchy. The novel “The Secret Sky,” (2014), starts with the description of a small village inhabited by both Pashtun and Hazara community. With the progress in the story the readers come to know that the lands are owned by the Pashtun community and the Hazaras are their peasants. However, they live together peacefully and without any overt antagonism. Some of the kids play together however some others are not allowed to mingle with the Hazara kids.

Saadawi (1999) holds patriarchal system responsible against all the exploitations and oppressions faced by women. She is of the opinion that the patriarchal system empowers men over women in every field of life because of which women are exploited. The rules, norms, values and taboos are made by men to maintain their authority which weakens the women on the other hand. They become valueless and their efforts are not acknowledged. She coins various exploitations of women like economic exploitation, social exploitation, sexual exploitation and sexual harassment within family. She even talks about share in hereditary and the names given to kids. All according to her show the asymmetrical power distribution among men and women. She is of the view that true emancipation of women is not possible as long as patriarchy reigns in the societies. She believes that mere economic empowerment and getting equal wage do not mean that women have attained their freedom. She wants freedom for women in every aspect of life; social, political, economic and sexual.

Michelle Lazar (2005) while discussing the concerns of a Feminist Critical Discourse Analyst states that:

As feminist critical discourse analysts, our central concern is with critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group. (Lazar, 2005, p.5) . She elaborates her point by stating that the discourses which are made discursively both through written and spoken language maintain the patriarchal order hence empower men over women resulting in the asymmetrical power distribution in societies.

Foucault (1977) states, "Power relations are a struggle over interests, which are exercised, reflected, maintained and resisted through a variety of modalities, extents and degrees of explicitness." (p.1-28). According to the above mentioned texts, Atia Abawi has portrayed a very strong patriarchal setup in her novel, "The Secret Sky." Women face subjugation under the strong patriarchal setup. The central character of the novel, Fatima goes through both physical and verbal sexism and even endangers her life when she goes against the set norms of the society. Many an instances in the novel testify that how deeply the patriarchy is rooted in the society and how it has been ritualized and conventionalized so that not only men but women consider following the brutal norms to be binding on them and a part of their life.

Millet (1977) observes that, "Patriarchal ideology exaggerates biological differences between men and women, making certain that men always have the dominant, or masculine, roles and women always have the subordinate or feminine ones." (Millet, 1977, p. 35) How women are made to think that they are different from men from the very early years of their lives is apparent from the novel "The Secret Sky" as the central character of the novel "Fatima" is told by her mother to behave in a certain way as she belongs to a different gender. Not only she, but also other girls of her age have been told not to go out like boys, as, for girls it would not be decent to go out of their homes and play as the boys do. Fatima for instance says, "My mother says that it's no longer proper for a girl of my shape to go out and play with boys, that it will be seen as indecent." (Abawi, P.18). The instance shows us in the same way as Millet (1977) has observed that patriarchy is maintained through institutions like academy, family church etc. in case of Fatima, her family, most specifically her mother is involved in educating her norms of the society. As, the very system, its norms, values, roles and taboos are systematized and conventionalized, the very oppressed beings consider them to be the best way for them to spend their lives. Or, if they have some reservations regarding the accepted norms being cruel, they accept them to be a part of their fate so; they tend to live with them. Abawi (2014) says, those who tend to go against the accepted norms are often "threatened, ostracized or even killed."

When Zohra tells Fatima that there is nothing for women in the country and they have to accept it as their destiny, Fatima gives a very bold answer and says, may be they could change their destiny and upon asked by Zohra that how would she change her destiny and what else would she do? Fatima says, "I hear there are universities in Kabul—universities that girls can go to. They can become doctors, lawyers, midwives and even artists! They can

read as many books as they want, and no one is jealous.” (Abawi, p.31). Zohra is stunned to hear that and states, “Women on radio and television? They must be orphans! Their mothers and fathers would never let them be so exposed.” (Abawi, p.31). We have got two voices here in these excerpts. For Zohra there is no escape from the system and she has accepted the patriarchal system as something written or a part of her destiny. For Zohra, getting education and learning to read and write would make no difference as, at the end women have to get married and that is the end of their endeavors. Whatever they do or learn would not ease them from the traditional roles which have been ascribed to women. Zohra has got only one wish which is about the person whom she will marry. She says they should only pray that the men who are in their fate may not be too old. On the other hand Fatima does not acknowledge the traditional roles and she thinks of a brighter future. She thinks of different possibilities as opting of careers beyond the traditional duty of housewifery.

When Fatima tells Zohra about the women who work on radio or television, Zohra says that those women who are allowed to careers such jobs where they can go out and disclose themselves must be orphans as parents of women in Afghanistan would not allow women to go out of their homes. When Fatima objects to her statement regarding the women who work out of the confinements of their homes she says, she does not believe that women who work outside are not honourable women but in the society where they are living no women who go out of their houses and disclose themselves would be treated as honourable women.

Lazar (2005) observes that the gender based power asymmetries have become more subtle and nuanced. Now, to apply the theory of Michelle Lazar (2005) on the instance taken we can say that Fatima, educated about the world beyond her village by her father and Bibi’s lessons thinks of a more just world. She is being told that women are inferior to men and should be acquainted with certain tasks which have been ascribed to them by the society. However, Fatima believes that the women have got the right to aspire for positive change in their lives and they should be given the right to have the power for the decisions about their own lives. Saadawi (2002) considers patriarchy to be behind all the oppressions faced by women and believes that the emancipation of women is not possible till the abolishment of the patriarchal system. The patriarchal system empowers men as a group over women so to maintain their power and authority and the empowered men then exploit women in every sphere of life. The ideology is produced, reproduced and maintained with institutions like family, society, cultures, traditions, religion and education.

Sultana (2011) notes that, “The norms and practices that define women as inferior to men, impose controls on-them, are present everywhere in our families, social relations, religious, laws, schools, textbooks, media, factories, offices.” (Sultana, 2011, p.1-18) Fatima is stunned at the news that Zohra is going to be married to a man, who is older than her and accepted by her parents because the man owns a motorcycle. Zohra tells her that, “He’s a distant relative of my father’s. They say that he’s looking for a wife, and he could take care of me. They’re well- off too—they own a motorcycle.” (Abawi, p. 31. Women living in patriarchal setup do not have a say even in the very vital decisions about their own lives. The parents only have the power to decide that whom they should marry, when they should marry and where they should marry. In Zohra’s case the parents have decided that she

should marry a man who is well off as he owns a motor-cycle. When Zohra tells the development to Fatima that she is going to get married, she seems to justify her parents that they have chosen a right man for her. If a person owns a motor-cycle, it means the person can guarantee her bread and shelter. Only the provision of bread and shelter is regarded important to give away the daughter to a man. The discourse is built that there is no need of anything else if a woman has got shelter and is provided with a square meal. How she would be treated, would she be exploited, face any troubles or would she be able to have a loving relationship with the person to whom she is being betrothed is not kept under consideration.

Sultana (2011) has observed that the exploitation of girls, starts from their very family, as girls are regarded a burden, on the other hand, boys are considered to be assets and bread winners. The girls when betrothed enter the next phase of their exploitation as the men they are betrothed to regard them subordinates and exploit them. The subordination, exploitation and discrimination which girls face after their marriage deprive them of their self-esteem and their aspirations. Besides, girls from the very early age are told to act in a certain way. They are told every time that, girls are different from boys. Saadawi (2007) gives her own example as how she was told to behave differently as compared to her brother. When she protested for about the privileges her brother got instead of the fact that she was more talented than him, she would often get the answer that she was a girl and her brother was a boy. The central character of Atia Abawi’s novel “The Secret Sky” says that she was very often told by her mother to behave like a girl and not like a boy.

“Fatima,” she told me, for what was probably the millionth time. She has always felt that I needed to act more like a girl instead of yet another son, and never lets me forget it.” (Abawi, p.32). Fatima’s mother never lets her forget that she is a girl and how she should behave. Chaudary (2013) observes that women have to strictly follow the norms and behaviours ascribed to them by the society to become honourable however there is no need for the men to follow the norms as strictly as the women. Fatima’s mother would often tell her to be a good daughter and would often educate her how to impress her husband when she would get marry. It is like educating her to act like a good daughter and then after her marriage like a good wife. The accepted norms for women to make themselves honourable Chaudary (2013) are being good daughters, good wives and to control their sexuality.

Saadawi (2002) coins the Judaic concept of “incomplete being” for women. It was considered that women have been created without head so they were considered to be incomplete. They would only be completed after their marriage as man had been given the status of “head” of women. The concept prevails in today’s patriarchal set-up as well. Being a woman is accomplishment of the status “womanhood” which is only attained after marriage. In the context given Fatima’s mother tells her that she would become a woman and she would like it after she would get marry. About her own self she says that she was lucky that she married her father who treated her as a friend not as a servant. This also endorses the concept that women are considered as subordinates by their husbands as marriage gives them the authority over their women. Whether they like it or not, the women have to abide by their husbands’ commands.

Butler (1993) argues that men and women have to perform according to the societal expectations which have very strictly been imposed upon them. The roles ascribed to both men and women have been decided and accepted by the society and violating the pre-decided and pre-determined norms means going against the expectations of the society, leading to dangerous consequences. Fatima, the protagonist of the novel, “The Secret Sky,” when fails to abide by the societal expectations; the order of the society stirs and the whole community starts up and pose deadly consequences for her. Fatima faces blatant violence and her very existence gets threatened. She escapes death narrowly; however, her family bears the consequences. Her younger sister, Afia gets murdered and she herself is compelled to seek asylum in one of the United Nation’s centers. Exploitation of Fatima starts from her own home, when her loving father, who had never in her life had scolded her decides to marry her to Karim; his own friend and father of Fatima’s friend, Zohra. “Fato, we have something very important to speak with you about, my *baba* says and then lets out a breath. I nod my head. “We’ve decided . . . your mother and I have decided . . . it’s time for you to get married.” (Abawi, p.98)

Atia Abawi in the “Author’s Note” to her novel, ‘the Secret Sky’ says, In most Afghan cultures, a person’s destiny is scripted by others. This is especially true for a woman. Her destiny is written before she is born, formulated by her family and community. She has very little say. This norm is questioned only by a very few. Those who do raise their voices are demonized, ostracized and even killed. (Abawi, p.198). Same happens with Fatima, the very father, who had never scolded her in his entire life and who had snubbed her mother when she had decided to marry his daughter to a Hazara boy sacrifices her to save his own honour, his family’s honour and the honour of his whole clan. More blatant violent physical punishment come from Fatima’s mother who scalds her hands with boiling water and calls her a “whore.” Her mother gets furious when she thinks of the plans she had dreamt about her. She now believes that Fatima has no longer remained an honourable woman so no man would accept her or even woo her. She even thinks that the future life of Afia is also at stake just because of Fatima’s action.

CONCLUSION

The research study aimed at analyzing the novel, ‘The Secret Sky’ by Abawi (2014) under the theoretical postulates of the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) presented by Michelle Lazar (2005) and under the analytical framework of the Feministic notions of Saadawi (1999, 2002) and Lughod (1986, 2002) . For the purpose, the study adopted the qualitative constructivist research paradigm as it was best serving the purpose of finding the truth which could not be statistically proven by going with the quantitative research paradigm. For the interpretation and analysis of the selected novels to find the gender based power dynamics, textual analysis was adopted. The main focus of the research study remained the protagonist of the selected novel, around whom the stories revolves. The study critically analyzed the gender based power asymmetries being produced, reproduced, negotiated and contested constantly in order to maintain and resist the hierarchical ideologies. The study found out that the setting of the selected story was the strong androcentric context of Afghanistan where the society favours men over women and maintains the hegemony of men by giving them the status of head of the family, head of the

clan, religious leader, law enforcer and executioner. On the other hand it was found in the research that women are given lower status as compared to men.

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