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**MARRIAGE: AN INSTITUTION OF GENDER APARTHEID IN AFGHANISTAN, WHERE
GOD ONLY COMES TO WEEP**

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ABSTRACT

Although considered an Islamic country and most of the past governments crowed that the rule of the land had been based on the Islamic *Sharia* but tradition and custom has always played a more important role in influencing the legal systems than the *Sharia*. The rural Afghan society is governed more by customary law combined with ethnic and male dominated interpretations of *Sharia* than the legislated laws. In fact the social structure of Afghanistan is based on, what Valentine Moghadam says in her book *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, “*gawm* (communal group) and *gabilla* (tribe). In Afghanistan moral standards are closely linked to sexuality, therefore mobility, expression, and social interactions are not considered a woman’s domain. A typical rural Afghan woman marries young and hardly has a say in the decision of marriage or in the selection of her marriage partner. With this backdrop, the paper attempts to analyze the novel *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* written by Iranian born Siba Shakib to highlight the institution of marriage as a tool in the hands of patriarchy to suppress women. The attempt is to underline through the stories of the protagonist Shirin-Gol and other women characters the gender apartheid faced by them.

Key words: Afghanistan, women, marriage, patriarchy, gender

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Afghanistan has been the centre of attraction of world politics after the USSR got pushed out of the country. The country has been an experimental ground to the worst politics and violence ever witnessed in human history. After the USSR, Mujahiden ruled over the majority of the country followed by the Taliban. The USA under the guise of a guardian too attempted to rule the country but in the year 2019 it started its gradual exit from Afghanistan. Afghanistan has thus proved to be an invincible entity. As far as literature of the country is concerned, a lot of novels and poetry have been written in the two major languages of Afghanistan i.e. Pashto and Dari, but they are mostly unknown to the outside world. Novels in English started pouring out once the country came into international headlines after the Taliban were flushed out.

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country. “A look at the cultural history of Afghanistan reveals the strict ethnic demarcations in Afghan society which lead to serious political, social and geographical repercussions in the country” (Ahmad 42). In Afghanistan for girls modesty is the most essential element of good breeding and they are required to keep their heads down in public, to cover their heads in front of males, and to avoid interaction with boys. Girls are slated if they did not follow these norms. These expectations grow with the age of a girl. Moral standards are closely linked to sexuality, therefore mobility, expression, and social interactions

are not considered a woman's domain. A typical rural Afghan woman marries young and has many children and hardly has a say in the decision of marriage or in the selection of her marriage partner. Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites write, "Countrywide, 16 percent of girls are married under the age of fifteen, while 52 percent are married by the time they turn eighteen years old" (74). This has its impact on their future married life as they do not have access to proper health care, making Afghanistan one among the countries with the highest maternal mortality rate.

A recent report by UNICEF on global indicators estimates that 1,900 women die for every 100,000 births in Afghanistan. Other Afghanistan-specific studies provide a more nuanced picture of these statistics. For instance, a 2002 study conducted by UNICEF, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Afghan Ministry of Public Health (now the Ministry of Health) estimates Afghanistan's maternal mortality rate (MMR) to be 1,600 for every 100,000 live births and shows extreme discrepancies from one part of the country to the next, as well as between urban and rural areas. To illustrate, in Kabul city the MMR was only 400, but rose to 2,200 in Kandahar. (Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites 74)

There are some women who wish for greater participation in public life but the centuries old male monopoly in public life has made them feel that they are in their correct role as dictated by tradition, culture, and society. Most Afghan women perceive their position and role in society as adhering to custom and tradition and do not seek to alter this role.

Although considered an Islamic country and most of the past governments crowed that the rule of the land had been based on the Islamic *Sharia* but tradition and custom has always played a more important role in influencing the legal systems than the *Sharia*. Thus "much of Afghan society is governed not by legislated laws but by customary law combined with local and male dominated interpretations of *Sharia*. These interpretations may vary based on the judicial body hearing the case, the nature of the offense or claim, and the standing of the parties within the community" (Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites 93). In fact the social structure of Afghanistan is based on "*gawm* (communal group) and *gabilla* (tribe) (Moghadam 208).

The liberal and bold women who can raise questions on the social set-up dominated by patriarchy are suppressed to remain mute. We see Azadine is forced by the Taliban to get married so that "she would not be rebellious, so that there would be someone keeping an eye on her" (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 259). In Afghanistan a man can acquire a wife in one of four ways:

He can pay a bride price, gain a bride in marriage, inherit a widow, or receive a bride as compensation for a crime committed against him or a relative. The first method is the most common and the other means of acquiring a bride usually involve variations on the payment and receipt of bride price (Kamali 84–85).

Nojumi, Mazurana, Stites write, "For many Afghans, marriage is a pact between families, not between individuals. Marriage often involves complex sets of tribal and familial relations, financial exchanges, and, at times, compensation for crimes" (104). In *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* Shirin Gol who is too young to understand the true meaning of marriage submits to Morad's wish without any protest. When she says, "I don't know whether I want to get married" (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 40), Morad insists, "your brother decided you would" (40). The commoditization of women achieves its height when Morad gives her the reason behind their marriage:

Your brother and I play cards, he lost, he had no money to pay the debts he had with me, he said, you want to get married, I have lot of sisters. And then he said that instead of getting the money I should marry one of his sisters. And I asked which of his sisters he liked best, and then he said he liked Sweet Flower best, and I said, then I'll marry Sweet Flower (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 40).

Shirin-Gol is given away as compensation for her brother's loss in a game. Sanctity of marriage is thrown to winds in the story of "girl-woman" (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 58) whom Shirin-Gol meets on the Pakistani side of the border. She is inherited by men of a family in succession as they die one by one. She is first married to a man who dies after sometime. She is then married to her father-in-law who too

dies after a short time. At the end she is married to one of his first husband's brothers. The custom of 'bride-price' has been introduced in this novel. The Talib named Sher-Dil who wants to marry Noor-Aftab offers a huge sum of money to her parents who take it as they are extremely poor. However the point to be noted is that Shirin-Gol too is willing to take the money and send her daughter off with the Talib. She says to Morad, "Let's take the money and see what happens. We'll see" (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 170). It reflects that somewhere Shirin-Gol too acknowledges this custom which they call "*Sheerbaha*" in Afghanistan. In an exclusive interview with the author of this paper, Shahira Shahir, an Afghan student studying in Aligarh Muslim University India too like other Afghan women takes pride in this custom as she believes that this adds to the value of a woman. She confirms that more a girl is educated, more she will get the *Sheerbaha*. Any attempt to change this custom is not acceptable to Afghans as has been witnessed during the communist regime. The communist government constitution in one of its articles (Decree 7) "forbade the exchange of a woman in marriage for cash or kind" (Moghadam 92) which later became one of the reasons behind its collapse as it "deeply angered rural tribesman and the traditional power structure" (Moghadam 93). Actually the roots of '*Sheerbaha*' can be traced to the concept of '*Mahr*' in Islam. *Mahr*, one of the basic conditions of Muslim marriage, is an amount of money "paid directly to the woman, not to her family" (Brodsky, *With All our Strength* 38) by the groom as a security for wife in case of widowhood or divorce. The base behind this practice is empowerment of woman as it acts as a kind of financial back up for her. Valentine M. Moghadam writes, "But in tribal Afghanistan, *walwar* [a Pashto word for *mahr*] is understood to be compensation to the bride's father for the loss of his daughter's labour in the household and is a part of groom's ownership claim over his wife" (210). Thus as already asserted in this paper, it is the combination of religion and tribal culture which accounts for the colonization of women.

It is true that Islam challenged many of the pre-Islamic tribal traditions of the Arabs and introduced reforms that raised the sociolegal status of women to a level hitherto unattainable, given the patriarchal customs of the Arabs. Yet Islam nevertheless left many aspects of the prevailing tribal traditions unchanged; the religion was superimposed on a patriarchal society but did not radically change many of its institutions. Tribalism, therefore survived under Islam, tribal customs continued to exist- sometimes violating the laws of Islam itself. (Moghadam 210)

Thinking the other way round, the custom of *Mahr* and *Sheerbaha* adds to the objectification of women as they are bought and sold like livestock. This can be termed as honourable prostitution as it depicts a kind of paid rape through a socially accepted institution of marriage. It is reminiscent of primitive times when women were sold to rich men as sex slaves. The prices of young girls belonging to poor families are negotiated and they are married to old men. A recent incident narrated by Heidi Kingstone throws some light on the legal aspect of bride price. He writes, "A young girl in Afghanistan was sold twice, once for US\$2,000 and again for US\$5,000. The case came before a judge. He ruled that the man who bought the girl for US\$5,000 was her husband and so the girl should stay with him. In other countries and in other contexts, this would clearly be seen as slavery" (37). In the novel one Talib comes to Shirin-Gol and Morad and tries to pay them more money than agreed by Sher-Dil to get hold of Noor-Aftab thereby substantiating the objectification of women.

Due to poverty in the war ridden Afghanistan, families gave their daughters in marriage in order to pay off their debts. Sometimes young girls were married to much older men due to financial reasons and this practice violated the basic human right of these girls. Despite some attempts by many rulers to abolish these marriages and bridal dowries as well as increase the minimum age for marriage, most of the Afghans largely ignored these reforms. From a patriarchal perspective, marriage and bride price represent an economic exchange between two families and a way to gain social status. In Afghan culture, marriage usually serves as a way to build political alliances or gain wealth. In some regions, families exchange cows, bull, sheep, goats, or furniture in an exchange for the bride (Emadi 39). Forced marriages also serve as settlement of family feuds. Sometimes women were exchanged to settle the crimes committed by the male members of a family. Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites talk about this *Pashtun* custom called *Bad* or *Badal* which is more prevalent in rural Afghanistan. They define it as "a practice among *Pashtun* tribes to resolve serious crimes such as murder. This legal custom mandates that the family of the perpetrator gives a young girl in marriage to the family of the victim. (She may be married later if

she is very young at the time of the exchange)" (108). Although this practice has no place in Afghan law, it goes on especially in those rural parts.

The sociocultural foundation of *badal* developed in response to the custom of revenge killings. Afghan tribal communities have suffered continuous bloodshed from cycles of revenge killings that may continue for generations. The custom of *badal* was designed to convert the two opposing families into one family and to stop the killing of young men. (108)

However the irony is that in such a practice a woman is denied the basic right of dignity and is never given the option of rejecting the deal.

As money is one of the most decisive factors for the social structures so in a society like Afghanistan which is ethnic and caste conscious, gender intertwines with the class and economic status of a person to decide his/her worth. The result is bias against a particular class, mostly the weaker one in terms of material. Moreover being a woman and then being poor comes as a catastrophe as we see in the novel.

Note: The paper has been formatted according to OWL's MLA 2009 and Style Guide 7th Edition.

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