



Gender Inequality in Homeira Qaderi's *Dancing in the Mosque*

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Abstract

Gender inequality is a basic problem, a social fact, and a situation that women and men are not equal. It has been a controversial argument in Afghanistan since many centuries so far. Over two decades, under the Republic State of Afghanistan, attempts to empower women and achieve gender equality have been made, but it has not been sufficient. The Republic State of Afghanistan joined all international conventions and declarations and pledged to uphold gender equality and women's rights in this regard. Similarly, gender equality was theoretically supported in Afghanistan's official laws, particular departments were established in the majority of governmental organisations, but women had a relatively low participation rate in official authorities in 2021, just before the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's government was overthrown. Furthermore, radical Islamists were actively spreading misinformation about women's rights and gender equality in mosques, schools, and academic institutions. Homeira Qaderi, an advocate for gender equality and women rights, published her autobiographical book, *Dancing in the Mosque* in 2020. The concerns that Qaderi focuses on are crucial and significant for Afghan women. She writes on immigration, polygamy, Islamic extremism, tribal culture of Afghan society and approaches these topics from a critical stance. The primary theme of this book is gender equality and women's rights in Afghanistan. She suggests civil rights, gender equality and activism for women of Afghanistan in her writings. This paper will examine gender equality, social justice, and women rights in her named autobiographical work. It will increase expectation for equality and end gender discriminations.

Keywords: Gender equality, Feminism, Fundamentalism, Afghanistan.

Introduction

Gender inequality is referred to a situation in which men and women do not have equal rights and status in society. The roots of gender inequality are found in constitutions, laws, religions, politics, and other facets of contemporary life. Cambridge Dictionary defines gender equality as 'the act of treating women and men equally'. It explains that 'gender equality does not imply that women and men are the same, but that they have equal value and should be accorded equal treatment.' Afghanistan is one of those countries that couldn't take any step to guaranty gender equality and justice so far. Despite the critical situation, women rights activists, authors, poets and lawmakers have struggled to erase gender inequality, male-made restrictions against women and anti-female social facts in patriarchal society of Afghanistan.

Homeira Qaderi is a novelist, a Persian language educator, and in the vanguard of women advocacy in Afghanistan. She lived in western Afghanistan, Herat, and migrated for many years to Iran. She completed her undergraduate studies in Iran and did her PhD in Literary Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), India. She worked as advisor of Minister of Education, and as a lecturer at Gharjistan University, Kabul. Her first marriage led to divorce as she discusses in the last chapter of *Dancing in the Mosque* (2020). She is winner of Sadegh Hedayat award in Iran for her short story titled “*If It Is Going to Rain Again* (2003)”. She is a feminist author, gives moral, pluralist and secular inspiration to her readers.

Dancing in the Mosque is an autobiographical work, story of realities in daily life of Afghan woman. It is a narrative of a woman suffering from gender discrimination, inequality and suppression in a misogynist society. In *Dancing in the Mosque*, Homeira Qaderi delineates war, patriarchy, fundamentalism, and polygyny as relevant issues to gender inequality in Afghanistan. It is narrated from author’s point of view, published in 13 chapters, 133 pages. The narrator is a mother, a feminist critic, risk-taking, divorced lady, suffering from the absence of her only adored child, Siavash. She is dynamically involved in conflicts of the plot from the beginning to the end. She fights against the anti-female traditions and male-made social norms in a religious and patriarchal society. She lives her life according to feminist, secular and anti-fundamentalist principles. As mentioned, *Dancing in the Mosque* is an autobiographical piece, so the events take place as hurdles against her. She struggles to resist against denunciations, challenges, traditionalism, and religious fundamentalism.

Dancing in the Mosque is dedicated to those who value and respect equality. The author depicts the worst circumstances and unfavourable situation of women in Afghanistan. She describes her challenges, struggles and failures, suggests the reader to resist against the patriarchal culture and to advocate for the women of Afghanistan. She inspires liberal feminism, attributes to open her long way forward for a achieving her big ambitions: gender equality, social justice, open society and freedom. Moreover, anti-female bias, misogynist manners such as domestic violence, Islamic fundamentalism, paternalistic culture and restrictions on women are strafed in this story. In *Dancing in the Mosque*, Homeira Qaderi delineates war, patriarchy, fundamentalism, and polygyny as relevant issues to gender inequality in Afghanistan. Her writing is gripping and realistic. It is a monologue, a bildungsroman written in epistolary style, and a narrative about life. The tone of the story is prosaic. She uses short and simple sentences with appropriate elegance to preserve the sense of femininity in the correspondence of the events. She represents her feelings of loss for her one and only adored kid. The narrator begins the story with the introductory expressions of Salman Rushdi’s *The Midnight Children*, “Once upon a time,…” (Rushdi, 1987, p. 1). Qaderi writes “Once upon a time, when there lived a Merciful God, behind the mountains in a distant city a family was given a son with the nickname Shah-Pesar, One of Regal Descent. His real name was Mushtaq” (Qaderi, 2020, p. 1). A summary of Shah Pesar story is told in the prologue of the book to evoke the famous sentence of Simon de Beauvoir, in her famous work *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir says, “One is not born a woman, but becomes woman” (De Beuvoura, 1959, p. 379). Qaderi illustrates that female and male identities are deeply embedded in the social cultural traditions of Afghan society. In a country like Afghanistan, the most difficult experience for a human being might be, being a woman. She says, the identity, fate and future of an Afghan woman are modified before her birth. Based on the legends of Baba Ghor-ghori, Barzanghi, Mard-azma and Dokhtarkhor the destiny of Afghan women is tied to the same demons and scarecrows. Shah Pesar is the nickname of her brother who has special position

and privileges among the family members. Homeira plays the same role of Nawal El-Saadawi, a famous feminist author, in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1977). Saadawi shocked the world by publishing her autobiographical account as a Muslim woman who experienced violence and suppression in her life. Compared her, Qaderi as well faces challenges because of her fair identity. She faces gender restrictions, experiences harassments and finally gets divorced and victimized for being a mother. As mentioned above, she remembers gender discrimination at home, modifies some legendary enemies for women and conflicts for justice and liberty of women in Afghanistan. As a liberal feminist, she believes that male and female have equal rights and privileges at home and in society. She writes to her son, "Trust me and believe in the history that I'm trying to make. Try not to be angry at me for this separation. Instead believe in yourself, for it is you and I together who must create a new Afghanistan. I look forward to the day when the two of us will live in a society of equals" (Qaderi, 2020, p. 17). She underlines that gender equality would be achieved through struggles and gradual reforms. Some anti-female regulations and customs that are still valid in the society and family sphere should be terminated gradually. Homeira has struggled for equality since her childhood. Once she asked the same portion of dinner with her brother, while her mother believed that the girls and boys are not equal. "He would be given a bigger share of meat at dinner. When I would say to Nanahjan, "I want the same size piece as Mushtaq," she would look at and say, "Since when has a girl's share become equal to a boy's?" (Qaderi, 2020, p. 27). In order to promote life condition of women, she suggests that cultural changes should be made and some proper roles should be given to women. Compared to Afghanistan, she appreciates Iran society regarding the gender equality and women rights: "On the long, tree-lined boulevards, women walked side by side with men or even ahead of them-here, women did not have to walk behind their husbands. It was no longer necessary to exhaust myself looking for a mahram when I had to leave the house. The city was shared equally between men and women" (Qaderi, 2020, p. 123). She admires women of Iran for fighting for gender equality. "Women in Iran were more empowered; they had fought for equal opportunity to attend university, and that thrilled me. There was so much to live for" (Qaderi, 2020, p. 123). She seems pleased for the influence of the host nation on her spouse concerning the gender role in society. She writes, "The lifestyle in Iran and the sensibility of gender equality in that country had a positive effect on him" (Qaderi, 2020, p. 127). Homeira respects her friends and vanguards who struggled for gender equality and had a prominent role in civil rights advocacy, "I owe much to the young girls of Herat, many of whom fought for their rights and for their lives. Some became martyrs, succumbing to patriarchal order; others are still fighting for gender equality, social justice, and civil rights." (Qaderi, 2020, p. 139)

Dancing in the Mosque contains a series of letters from a mother to her kid. In her first letter, Homeira explains that my destiny compared the Shah Pesar was quite different in the stories that grandmother told us. While telling the stories, Grandmother introduced Barzanghi, Baba Ghor-Ghori, Mard-Azma and Dokhtarkhor as anti-female demons. In fact, these demons are metaphoric names of misogynist individuals, religious missionaries and tribal men in Afghanistan who play antagonistic role in her life. Pessimistic feelings of the author, dominated position of women, and worst situation of girls in the society has been revealed in the story. In a letter, the author writes to his son: "As a child, I did not want to be a girl. I did not even want my dolls to be woman" (Qaderi, 2020, p. 9). Her point of view makes it clear that she is in conflict with traditionalism, stereotypes and social norms. As a liberal feminist, she describes events based on her personal experiences. She rebels against masculine hegemony and strives

for positive changes in a closed society. The author never talks about enthusiasm and happiness in her life. She recalls the times she was living under the Taliban, suffocated of anti-women pressures in a tribal masculine Islamic society. In such a stifling society, dominance of traditionalism, tribalism, and Islamic extremism suppress her. She has repeatedly experienced threats, humiliation and punishment, but never gave up, continued her struggle through the path she has chosen. The themes that the author has critically discussed on will be analyzed below.

1. War

Dancing in the Mosque contains four decades of ethnic conflicts, civil wars, and routines of life in Afghanistan. The first chapter titled “Bread and Bullet” is told on civil wars and USSR invasion of Afghanistan. “I can’t remember a time when my homeland was not at war. My childhood began with jet fighter attacks, bombs falling from the sky, and me trying to count invisible bullets” (Qaderi, 2020, p. 12). The narrator remembers USSR invasion of Afghanistan in 1980s, and problematic days under the Taliban in 1990s. The story is told entirely about the girls and women of Afghanistan, victims of wars. Gender equality, femininity, polygyny, religion, education, warfare and immigration are the keynote terms of the work. The author highlights two controversial concepts: “woman” and “religion” in this autobiographical work than other themes of the story.

As a mother, the author suffers from the pain of separation. Since she was divorced, she was not allowed to foster her real son. She writes to her son, “I wish that neither of us belonged to a society that victimizes mother and motherhood.” (Qaderi, 2020, p. 17) Such a pain, maternal love associates the famous quotation of Shulamith Firestone regarding the male society. Firestone says, in a male society, the child is a tool to punish and suppress the mother with. It will be done in the cruelest way when the child is separated from the mother’s arms. According to her, separation of mother and son is a deadly pressure. In *The Dialectic of Sex* she discusses this issue in details and titled one chapter of her book “Dow with Childhood”. Firestone writes,

The special tie women have with children is recognized by everyone. I submit, however, that the nature of this bond is no more that shared oppression. And that moreover this oppression is intertwined and mutually reinforcing in such complex ways that we will be unable to speak of the liberation women without also discussing the liberation of children, and vice versa. (Firestone, 2012, p. 72)

Qaderi describes a similar sense of agony in her letters to her son, Siavash. It suppresses her severely and makes her to feel maternal nostalgia. It is a fact that the Islamic thoughts imposes an endless grief on an abandoned mother, and deprives her from the right of custody of her child. Qaderi criticizes arranged marriages as a poor tradition in Afghanistan. She recalls her marriage while her role was ignored, her consent was not sought and the ceremony was conducted in a patriarchal custom. As she reveals in her work, most of the time, giving birth to a child causes a women to suffer countless pains and domestic violence along her life.

2. Patriarchy

The author expects motherhood as a significant role in a society. Similarly, there are a dozen of feminist theorists who consider motherhood as a vital role. Nancy Chodorow is a feminist author, considers the role of women as mothers very important and vital in a nation. In the *Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) she considers role of women as a principle in reproduction

of ideas, gender equality, power and distribution of jobs. She states, "Women's mothering is central to the sexual division of labor. Women's maternal role has profound effects on women's lives, on ideology about women, on the reproduction of masculinity and sexual inequality, and on the reproduction of particular forms of labor power. Women as mothers are pivotal actors in the sphere of social reproduction." (Firestone, 1978, p. 11) The author of *Dancing in the Mosque* plays exactly such a role in her autobiographical story. In a letter, Homeira tells Siavash that even my brother (Jabir) attributes you only to your father. He told me to leave his child alone and think about your own life. Homeira writes: "... have repeatedly objected and reminded them that you are my son as well, but my voice must sound weaker than the voice of the law and the traditions. How much can I fight with them?" (Qaderi, 2020, p. 50) As quoted above, she challenges the masculine culture, opposites to her brother and stands against male regulations ignoring women rights. She is dissatisfied with the manners of women of his time and criticizes that they always think about make-up, henna, nail colour, square and round shape of fingers, fashion, marriage, and giving birth to children; never care about the freedom and women rights. In chapter seven, the first movement that Homeira organizes for advocacy takes place in a women's bathhouse in Herat. She pleads for girls' right of education. Taliban responds this strike with repression and violence.

3. Religion

In this story, religion is one of the main sources of difficulties and challenges appeared against women and intensified gender inequality in Afghan society. The worst situation of women, subjugation of housewives, and sexual harassment of the girls in the mosque are quite relevant to religious issues. One of the scenes of sexual harassment of the girls by a Mullah is depicted as follows:

He'd tucked his shirt beneath his chin. His pants were around his knees. His hand was between his legs, rubbing himself. Staring straight at me, the maulawi rubbed himself, grunting and sighing. I turned to run away. My feet slipped out beneath me. I fell into the water. The red plastic pitcher dropped from my hands and sank. My sodden dress stuck to my body. (Qaderi, 2020, p. 32)

The author uses a slight irony to religion and priests. One of these satires is representation of parents or siblings in marriage recitation on behalf of the bride. She believes that the girls are very passive and do not play any role for cancellation of such a laughable social norm.

The nekah matrimonial ceremony is the recitation of some verses in Arabic by a maulawi that, in an instant, allows a total stranger to become your master. With just a few verses, a man can touch your hands, your body, and your feet. With a few short verses recited in our guest quarters, verses that I didn't even hear, I became the property of the groom. A property for which the groom had paid a good price. I don't remember what the wording of the verses was, but whatever it was, it apparently made everyone else very happy. (Qaderi, 2020, p. 11)

As a secular writer, she doubts alienation of individuals by religious teachings and religionization of society by extremist bands in Afghanistan. She makes a complicated judgement on religious leaders regarding females' restrictions. It is assumed that she has a pessimistic notion about those who are believers. She writes: "And when I heard *Baba-jan*

reading *Surah Yaseen*, the chapter on God's sovereignty, the Day of Judgment, and a warning to nonbelievers, I knew that another bombing attack was coming." (Qaderi, 2020, p. 12)

4. Education

Advocacy for women's right of education have been ongoing since the 18th century. Such a basic right of human beings is still violated by fundamentalist in Afghanistan. Qaderi writes to her son: "I know that, in some countries, getting an education is a woman's right, but from where I came, it was not. I was still an Afghan woman and was expecting to be beaten, insulted, and rebuked by society." (Qaderi, 2020, p. 124) Qaderi has fought for civil rights, right of education and women rights since she was very young. She taught a group of girls covertly at home, instructed tens of displaced girls and boys in the camp's mosque, and took an active part in Professor Rahyab's story writing classes. Practically, she organized demonstrations against the Taliban for rights of education and opening the educational institutions in Herat. She describes the syllabus and system of education of Afghanistan out of date and useless for young generation of Afghanistan: "Never mind that the schools were piles of rubble, the tombs of thousands of children. If they had gates, they lacked walls. If they had walls, they didn't have windows. Tents were set up in the school yards, steamy saunas under the blazing sun" (Qaderi, 2020, p. 30). In addition, she blames those female who have excessive desire for religious studies, objects the worst situation in the schools and universities. She blames mullahs for misleading of society and poor educational conditions in the mosque and home learning in villages. She says, "Both in times of peace and times of war, reading the Qur'an has always been more important than a general education in Afghanistan, especially for girls." (Qaderi, 2020, p. 30)

5. Polygyny

In her perspective, polygyny is violation of gender equality, an example of unjustness against the women in Afghanistan and all over the Muslim communities. She believes that polygyny is accepted as a popular custom in Afghanistan. She writes in a letter to Siavash: "Not only did your father resemble Commander Moosa, but his lifestyle was also like a Talib's. He was born in a family and culture that prized polygyny and thought women were to be bargained for with money." (Qaderi, 2020, p. 119) Qaderi believes that polygyny is degradation of women, giving a numerical identity such as (first wife, second wife, third wife, and fourth wife) insults women's human values and social status. Polygyny is gender inequality, a social cultural fact that is very popular in Afghanistan. It is propagated by religious fundamentalists for the aim of the plurality of the Muslim Ummah (population). Homeira condemns polygyny in the following quotation,

Polygamy is still very common in Afghanistan, and what it requires of women is the willingness to accept that your husband has other wives, but even more, to accept that you have become just a number in the family and in the world. I would always be my husband's wife number one, but of what value is that? A number is a number and my dignity is lost. (Qaderi, 2020, p. 132)

She criticizes life style of Afghans for living in extended family including grandfathers and grandmothers. She dislikes role of parents and grandparents in arranged marriage and family planning in Afghan society. She says,

Afghan tradition demands that a new couple should not live alone, and therefore must live with the husband's family. They must also live according to their household rules. My polygamous father-in-law and his two wives—known mostly as wife number one and wife number two—had left the country for Iran years earlier and we were expected to join them. (Qaderi, 2020, p. 120)

6. Migration

Theme of migration is a central idea in Qaderi's work. She as the main character lived in exile for many years. Because of wars and cultural restrictions, better conditions of living in exile seems comfortable to her than living in her homeland. She says, "To me, Tehran was astonishingly modern in its attitudes toward women." (Qaderi, 2020, p. 122) Despite fervent patriotism, she admires the position of women and her ideal culture in host country, Iran. "In Afghanistan, a good woman was defined as a good mother. In Iran, a good woman could be an independent and educated woman. I vowed to myself that I would not have a baby until after I finished my studies." (Qaderi, 2020, p. 123)

As quoted below, she dislikes being as a refugee in a foreign country: "It means becoming a stranger in a foreign country...It means dying alone." (Qaderi, 2020, p. 21) Chapter two titled, 'Migrating Swallows' is written about war, tragedies, hardship and migration to outside. She says about the risks and challenges of migration to another country. Her family returns to Herat a year after withdrawal of USSR troops from Afghanistan, expecting peace and democracy. Unfortunately, there is no any sign of peace, democracy and equality yet. Another chapter is titled 'Boulevard of the Revolution' name of a street, located in Tehran. In this chapter, the author describes her life in Tehran with a stronger satisfaction. Homeira loves her husband in this part of the story, but never mentioned his name in this book.

7. Love

A marginal character that plays a notable role in this story is Khoshhal, a member of Taliban, originally came from Ghor province. Chapter eight is dedicated to him. Homeira expresses her love to Khoshhal, "The first young man I fell in love with was Khoshhal. It seems as if at this very moment, he is smiling at me from across this room. Khoshhal was a young Talib with a high forehead, dark kohl-lined eyes, and thick black eyebrows." (Qaderi, 2020, p. 76)

Khoshhal is the savior of Homeira and all her students from punishment of Taliban. They danced inside the mosque, committed an action against Sharia and policy of the Taliban regime. An officer of the Taliban entered the mosque for arresting and punishing of the class members. Khoshhal was secretly observing the scene from another corner. Everyone was terrified when the mullah tends to flog them one by one.

My attraction to Khshhal started on the day he and the black bearded Talib nearly caught me and my pupils dancing in the mosque. For it was khoshhal, the young Talib who interpreted in Dari Persian everything that his angry commander was yelling at me in Pashto. His calm presence lessened my fear. He didn't yell, he wasn't angry, in fact he was smiling slightly. (Qaderi, 2020, p. 76)

Khoshhal comes in the middle and stops the Taliban senior commander, saves Homeira and her students. Hence, Khoshhal becomes a home-learning student of Homeira. Finally, he was killed in northern Afghanistan, five days later, his body referred to Herat.

Dancing in the Mosque is a piece of autobiography. The author draws attention to gender inequalities in several spheres of society, including the family, culture, community, constitution, religion, and tradition. Her debate is liberty, women's rights and inclusive society. She argues on gender based violence, victimization of mothers, and abuse culture of the girls in Afghanistan. By reading of *Dancing in the Mosque*, the reader will develop empathy for Afghan women, support pluralism and secular state, and reproach Islamic radicalism. Certainly, in a country like Afghanistan, publication of such an insightful work will be informative and delightful for civil rights and gender equality. Some issues such as hunger, poverty, illiteracy, and dozens of other problems in different layers of society have been given less attention. The author condemns warlords, the Mujahedeen, communists, and Taliban, but she says nothing about the USA invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. She lived under the shadow of wars since her childhood, but never speaks about two decades of war that led to collapse of the republic state of Afghanistan, 2021.

Conclusion

Dancing in the Mosque is an autobiographical literary work. The sequences of the plot are narrated from Herat to the USA, where she eventually relocated. In terms of content, it is very similar to Betty Faridan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), but is a new genre in the line of Michelle Obama's *Becoming* (2018) and Soraya Baha's *Free as the Wind* (2012). The author discusses severe challenges appeared against her, either in her personal life or experienced by most of Afghan women in different levels of society. She argues on gender discrimination, femininity, and subjectivity of women in Afghanistan. She calls for gender equality, reforming misogynistic laws, self-reliance of women, and breaking free from restrictions.

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Bio-note

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