

HOMEIRA QADRI'S *DANCING IN THE MOSQUE* (2020): REPRESENTING CULTURAL NORMS IN CONSTRUCTING GENDER STEREOTYPES

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ABSTRACT. Homeira Qaderi's memoir, *Dancing in the Mosque* (2020), portrays how cultural norms construct gender expectations and perpetuate stereotypes. Using a dual narrative structure that intertwines Shah Pesar's magical adventures with Qaderi's poignant reflections illustrates how Qaderi skillfully employs focalization to shed light on the cultural limitations imposed on Afghan women, blending realistic storytelling elements. This study utilizes Bal's theory of focalization alongside Genette's concept of zero focalization to analyze the narrative shift from an omniscient narrator to a first-person perspective. By applying these theories, we examine how the shift in perspective highlights emotional intricacies and sharp feminist critique, while also revealing the narrative control and the lens through which the characters' experiences are portrayed. We investigate the marginalization of women through the issues of constrained mobility, loss of identity, and legal disenfranchisement. By centering on Qaderi's perspective, the text critiques societal and legal structures that diminish women's value while foregrounding their struggle for agency and self-definition in a patriarchal society. This study underscores the broader ramifications of gender narratives in Afghanistan, highlighting the resilience of women as they resist cultural suppression.

Keywords: Homeira Qaderi; *Dancing in the Mosque*; gender stereotypes; cultural norms

HOMEIRA QADRI'S *DANCING IN THE MOSQUE* (2020): REPRESENTING CULTURAL NORMS IN CONSTRUCTING GENDER STEREOTYPES

ABSTRAK. Memoar Homeira Qaderi, *Dancing in the Mosque* (2020), menggambarkan bagaimana norma budaya membangun ekspektasi gender dan melestarikan stereotip. Dengan menggunakan struktur naratif ganda yang menggabungkan petualangan magis Shah Pesar dengan refleksi Qaderi yang menyentuh hati, menggambarkan bagaimana Qaderi dengan terampil menggunakan fokus untuk menyoroti pembatasan budaya yang dikenakan pada perempuan Afghanistan, memadukan elemen-elemen penceritaan yang realistis. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori fokalikasi Bal bersama dengan konsep nol fokalikasi Genette untuk menganalisis pergeseran narasi dari narator omniscient ke perspektif orang pertama. Dengan menerapkan kedua teori ini, kami menganalisis bagaimana pergeseran perspektif tersebut menyoroti kerumitan emosional dan kritik feminis yang tajam, serta mengungkap kontrol naratif dan lensa melalui mana pengalaman karakter digambarkan. Kami menyelidiki marginalisasi perempuan melalui tema-tema mobilitas terbatas, hilangnya identitas, dan pencabutan hak hukum. Dengan berpusat pada perspektif Qaderi, teks tersebut mengkritik struktur masyarakat dan hukum yang mengurangi nilai perempuan sambil menonjolkan perjuangan mereka untuk mempraktikkan agensi dan definisi diri dalam masyarakat patriarki. Studi ini menggarisbawahi konsekuensi yang lebih luas dari narasi gender di Afghanistan, menyoroti ketahanan perempuan saat mereka melawan penindasan budaya.

Kata kunci: Homeira Qaderi; *Dancing in the Mosque*; stereotip gender; norma budaya

INTRODUCTION

Dancing in the Mosque (2020), Homeira Qaderi's memoir noted as an autobiographical work focusing on the experiences of Homeira Qaderi. Qaderi, an award-winning Afghan author and staunch advocate for women's rights, draws on her lived experiences to provide a compelling narrative that spans four decades of tumultuous history in her homeland (Afary, 2023). In this memoir, she offers a deeply personal account of her life, capturing the socio-political upheavals that have characterized Afghanistan, particularly during the rise of fundamentalism and the Taliban's oppressive regime. In this study, she will be referred to as Qaderi, while in the memoir, she will be addressed as Homeira. Qaderi, a renowned Afghan author, currently works

as a researcher at Yale University (Afary, 2023). Qaderi's work has been the focus of several scholarly articles, covering a range of topics including gender equality (Astuti et al., 2024; Fazil, 2023; Akram et al., 2023; Apriatin et al., 2022).

Dancing in the mosque is a new work; however, it has recently become a primary focus in scholarly studies. These studies highlight the academic significance of Homeira's work and reveal insights that help fill the knowledge gap. Astuti et al. (2024) analyze the patriarchal norms depicted in the memoir, highlighting how societal customs and education contribute to the oppression of Afghan women. On one hand, education is often utilized as a tool to reinforce patriarchal values, such as instilling ideas that support traditional roles for women as wives and mothers. On the other hand, education also holds the

potential to empower women, depending on how access to it and the curriculum are designed. They emphasize that providing women with access to inclusive and critical education can raise awareness of their rights, thereby empowering them to resist oppression. Fazil (2023) examines issues of gender equality, women's rights, and social justice within the context of Afghanistan's patriarchal traditions, underscoring Qaderi's advocacy for education reform. Singh (2022) applies Foucault's discourse analysis to explore how Afghan female authors, including Qaderi, challenge gender roles and identity formation within restrictive environments. Akram et al. (2023) explore *Dancing in the Mosque* through the lens of cultural libertarianism, showing how personal autonomy and feminist ideologies challenge patriarchal systems. Lastly, Apriatin et al. (2022) use ecofeminism to link the themes of gender and nature, illustrating how the memoir depicts nature symbols as metaphors for women's struggles for freedom. Each study offers a unique perspective, yet they collectively highlight the memoir's focus on resisting patriarchy and advocating for women's empowerment in Afghan society.

This study identifies a gap in the previous discourses, showing that the issue extends beyond gender inequality. This study focuses on how cultural norms shape gender stereotypes within Qaderi's memoir, examining four distinct periods in Afghanistan's history: Russian colonialism, post-colonialism (Mujahideen), the Taliban era, and the contemporary period. These distinctions highlight the specific niche this research seeks to address in the existing literary scholarship.

To further illustrate, Qaderi's memoir is a deeply personal and poignant account framed as a letter to her young son, whom she is forced to leave behind after her divorce. Through this narrative, she recounts her life in Afghanistan under the oppressive constraints of both the Soviet occupation and Taliban rule. The memoir paints a vivid picture of Qaderi's resilience as she navigates the challenges of a deeply patriarchal society.

The story unfolds through her experiences as a girl defying societal expectations, a woman pursuing education against all odds, and a mother whose fight for her rights comes at a great personal cost. Qaderi describes moments of profound courage, such as teaching displaced children in secret schools and using literature as a form of resistance against cultural erasure. She also shares intimate stories of love, loss, and sacrifice, providing insight into how Afghan women resist systemic discrimination while striving to retain their identity and agency.

The memoir intertwines themes of maternal love, personal sacrifice, and feminist defiance. Through its lyrical prose and unflinching honesty, Qaderi not only tells her own story but also gives a voice to countless Afghan women who endure similar struggles in silence. This research shows that cultural factors shape gender in *Dancing in the Mosque*. Since the late 1980s, gender theory has reshaped our understanding of culture and society. Every community separates men and women into distinct categories, offering them different access levels to property, power, and status (Castle, 2009: 102). Gender is crucial in our personal lives, social interactions, and culture. Biological differences between men and women are mirrored in how society is structured across social, political, and economic spheres. Unfortunately, these differences often lead to women being treated as inferior to men. Additionally, many people only understand gender relations through the lens of their own local culture, overlooking the wide variety of gender patterns that exist across different cultures and throughout history (Connell, 2009).

Culture is a multifaceted concept encompassing values, beliefs, thought patterns, emotions, social behaviors, and symbolic systems that shape human actions (Eagleton, 2016; Jenks, 1993; White, 2007; Castle, 2009). At its core, modern cultural literature agrees that values—conceptual ideas that influence choices and actions—are central to culture (Castle, 2009: 73; Williams, 1961: 46). These shared values and customs influence how individuals interact with their environment and relate to one another, including shaping gender relations.

Swidler (1986) highlights that culture influences attitudes and behaviors through ideas, symbols, and metaphors, acting as tools in a "cultural toolkit." These tools help individuals draw symbolic boundaries, identifying themselves as part of an in-group while excluding others viewed as outsiders. Expanding on this, Schnabel (2022) points out that in socially conservative groups, such as Muslims, gender often defines these boundaries, with women positioned as the "other," outside dominant societal frameworks.

In *Dancing in the Mosque*, Homeira Qaderi explores these cultural dynamics, illustrating how societal norms perpetuate gender stereotypes that restrict Afghan women's autonomy. Through the focalization of Qaderi's personal struggles, the narrative sheds light on systemic oppression. For instance, her fight for education—despite the risks of defying patriarchal expectations—illustrates her resistance against cultural norms that prioritize a woman's role as a wife and mother.

Characterization further highlights these issues. Qaderi's portrayal of women in her family, many of whom endure forced marriages and societal pressure to uphold family honor, exemplifies the gendered sacrifices expected within Afghan society. These characters reveal the emotional and physical toll of upholding traditions that marginalize women.

Moreover, the dual narrative structure, contrasting Qaderi's reflections with Shah Pesar's imaginative stories, underscores gender inequality. While Shah Pesar's adventures represent freedom and agency, Qaderi's narrative exposes the constraints imposed on women's lives. This juxtaposition effectively critiques the cultural norms that maintain these disparities.

Through feminist narratological analysis, this study reveals how Qaderi's memoir critiques Afghan traditions that marginalize women. By centering women's voices and experiences, *Dancing in the Mosque* challenges oppressive cultural structures and advocates for greater gender equality. The memoir contributes to ongoing discussions about gender and identity in literature, particularly in contexts where women's rights are heavily restricted.

METHOD

This study employs a feminist narratological analysis of Qaderi's *Dancing in the Mosque* (2020) to examine how cultural norms are represented and how they shape gender stereotypes within the narrative. The focus is on how narrative voice and focalization emphasize the impact of cultural forces on gender roles.

Narratology, the study of narrative structure and its effects on storytelling, is central to this analysis. Gérard Genette's foundational concepts, such as order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice, provide tools for examining the temporal and structural dimensions of the text (Genette, 1980). Building on Genette's framework, Mieke Bal defines narratology as the study of how narrative elements—focalization, actor, time, and space—interact to influence the audience's interpretation of the story (Bal, 2009). Focalization, in particular, refers to the perspective through which a story is presented, determining the lens through which events and characters are perceived (Bal, 2009: 153). By drawing on these theories, this study will conduct a close reading to explore how gender stereotypes are constructed and how the narrative voice and focalization contribute to their portrayal.

A key theoretical underpinning of this analysis is gender theory, which interrogates how cultural and social systems construct gender roles, often

marginalizing or subjugating women. Gender theory, as explored by scholars such as Judith Butler (1990), emphasizes that gender is not an inherent identity but rather a performance shaped by social expectations. These social and cultural expectations, which include family dynamics, marriage, and leadership structures, are crucial to understanding the gender roles in Qaderi's memoir. The study examines how these roles are enacted through the perspective of the narrator and the focalization of key events in the narrative.

Through narratological tools, the subjective perspectives of the narrator can be uncovered. Focalization, or the lens through which the events are seen, reveals not only *who* perceives the action, but *how* and *why* certain perspectives are privileged in the narrative (Bal, 2009: 153). By analyzing these elements, this study aims to explore the construction of gender within *Dancing in the Mosque*, specifically how gendered behavior is shaped by cultural pressures and how the female characters react to their marginalized status.

The data will be organized according to three key objectives. First, the study will examine how thematic elements, such as family structures, marriage, and societal expectations, reinforce gender stereotypes and the norms that shape them. These "cultural norms" influence not only the characters' behavior but also their social status and roles within their communities.

Second, the study will trace the ways in which female characters challenge or conform to their marginalized status, analyzing how the narrative voice and focalization techniques highlight their responses. This analysis will explore how the text critiques gender stereotypes and the societal pressures women face, especially in relation to Afghan cultural norms.

Finally, the third objective synthesizes the findings from the previous two to evaluate how the thematic elements of the narrative engage with broader gender discourse in literary studies. By investigating the interplay between narrative voice, focalization, and cultural norms, the study will provide a feminist narratological reading that contributes to ongoing discussions of gender in literature. In this way, the study aims to uncover how Qaderi's memoir addresses and critiques the cultural forces that shape gendered experiences in Afghanistan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In *Dancing in the Mosque*, the interplay between the narrator and focalization plays a crucial role in

shaping how cultural norms and gender stereotypes are presented. Bal's (2009) theory of narratology, which highlights the relationship between the narrator and the focalizer, is central to understanding how the narrative is constructed. In this memoir, the choice of focalization determines how the characters, particularly the female protagonists, are viewed both by themselves and by the reader. The focalizer's perspective shapes the readers' perceptions of events and characters, underlining the significance of gendered experiences within Afghan society.

For instance, the narrator in *Dancing in the Mosque* is homodiegetic, meaning she is a character within her own story, directly experiencing and reflecting on the events around her. This type of narrator allows for a more intimate portrayal of her internal struggles and the cultural forces shaping her identity as a woman in Afghanistan. Through this choice of focalization, readers gain insight into the complex relationship between the protagonist and the cultural norms surrounding her, particularly those related to gender roles and societal expectations.

The role of focalization in this narrative is dynamic, shifting between the protagonist's perspective and the external world's perception of her, which emphasizes the tension between personal agency and social constraints. This lens, as Bal (2009) describes it, functions like a movable tool, allowing the reader to experience both the protagonist's internal thoughts and the external pressures imposed on her by Afghan society. The way the protagonist's viewpoint is often at odds with the traditional cultural norms highlights the tension between individual desires and societal expectations, particularly in terms of gender.

Moreover, the use of analeptic and proleptic structures in the narrative further complicates the depiction of cultural norms and gender roles. As Barry (2009) notes, flashbacks (analepsis) and flash-forwards (prolepsis) allow the narrative to shift between past experiences and future anticipations. In *Dancing in the Mosque*, these shifts are particularly effective in revealing the protagonist's evolving understanding of her own identity within the context of societal pressures. Through analepsis, the protagonist recalls moments from her childhood and early adulthood that shaped her understanding of gender roles. These memories provide context for her current struggles, offering a critique of the cultural norms that continue to oppress her.

The proleptic moments, on the other hand, anticipate the potential outcomes of resisting these norms, showing the possible futures that await those who defy or challenge the gender expectations

imposed upon them. These narrative techniques not only serve to develop the protagonist's character but also underscore the broader gender discourse, highlighting the potential for change while also emphasizing the risks of challenging entrenched cultural norms.

The narrator's perspective is not the only viewpoint in the text; the use of focalization through different characters provides additional layers of meaning. At times, the story shifts to the perspectives of other women in the protagonist's life, showcasing how their experiences with gender stereotypes align or conflict with her own. These shifts in focalization allow for a more nuanced exploration of the ways in which Afghan women navigate societal expectations, revealing the complexities of their internal struggles and external behaviors.

The analysis reveals that the narrative voice and focalization are integral to how gender stereotypes are constructed and critiqued in the text. The interplay between the narrator's internal perspective and the external cultural forces provides a multifaceted exploration of gender within the context of Afghan society. By focusing on the narrative techniques of focalization and voice, this study has illuminated how *Dancing in the Mosque* engages with the cultural norms that shape women's lives and their resistance to these forces. Through this feminist narratological lens, the novel becomes a powerful critique of the gendered experiences in Afghanistan, offering both a personal and a collective reflection on the limitations and possibilities for women within a deeply patriarchal society.

At the beginning of *Dancing in the Mosque*, the narrative introduces Shah-Pesar, a young boy whose perspective drives the opening pages of the story. Shah-Pesar, whose name means "son of the king," is depicted through his innocent and curious eyes as he stumbles upon a magical world. His sense of wonder is captured when he discovers an old metal lamp: "Suddenly, his hand closed on a heavy object. It was an old metal lamp." (Qaderi, 2020: 8). This moment marks Shah-Pesar's initial sense of discovery, and the narrative stays rooted in his viewpoint, underscoring his childlike excitement. When the jinni appears and introduces himself, "Hello, Master Mushtaq, I am at your service." (Qaderi, 2020: 8), the reader is still immersed in Shah-Pesar's magical world, highlighting the fantastical and playful nature of his experience.

The narrative then shifts dramatically to the mother's deeply personal voice, marking a stark contrast in the story's focus. "My grandmother, Nanah-Jan, never told me stories like that. In the

stories she saved for me, there were no jinnis or magic wands to make my dreams come true.” (Qaderi, 2020: 9). Here, the focus moves away from Shah-Pesar’s whimsical fantasy and into the mother’s grounded reality. She reflects on her own childhood and the cultural constraints that shaped her life, which contrasts sharply with the magical adventure that Shah-Pesar is experiencing. This dual perspective—Shah-Pesar’s innocent, magical adventure contrasted with the mother’s painful and cautionary reflections—adds complexity to the narrative, enriching it with multiple layers as described by Bal’s theory of focalization.

In Shah-Pesar’s tale, the narrative unfolds as a simple adventure. He asks the jinni for a magical gift: “Bring me a black horse with a long mane and a gleaming coat.” (Qaderi, 2020: 8), reflecting his innocent desire for excitement and exploration. The tone remains light-hearted, and fantasy driven. However, the story gains depth as it shifts to the mother’s perspective. She recalls darker, cautionary tales from her childhood: “The purpose of her stories was primarily to keep me from playing with boys, cutting my hair, wearing short skirts. If I did any of those forbidden things, she would tell me: A monster will appear out of thin air and drag me off.” (Qaderi, 2020: 8). The mother’s voice adds a layer of cultural context and societal expectations, creating a sharp contrast with Shah-Pesar’s magical experience. This narrative shift emphasizes the way multiple layers—adventure, reflection, and cultural critique—contribute to a textured, nuanced story.

At the text level, the reader encounters a shift between Shah-Pesar’s external adventure and the mother’s internal reflections. The mother addresses her son, Siavosh, in a letter: “Dear son, my grandmother never told me stories like that.” (Qaderi, 2020: 9), which shifts the tone from an omniscient narrative to a deeply personal monologue. Her emotional reflections, such as “It has been 985 nights since you were taken from me” (Qaderi, 2020: 9), highlight the pain of loss and separation, grounding the magical tale in the harsh realities of life.

Initially, in Shah-Pesar’s narrative, the story is told in an omniscient third-person style, describing his magical adventure in detail: “A cloud of smoke enveloped the middle of the room and turned into a black horse with a full mane and a long, graceful tail.” (Qaderi, 2020: 8). However, when the mother’s voice enters, the tone shifts to a deeply personal one. The narrator refers to herself as “I.” As the narrative moves into her perspective, the mother reflects on the weight of cultural expectations, adding emotional depth: “My grandmother believed that one of the

most difficult tasks that the Almighty can assign anyone is being a girl in Afghanistan.” (Qaderi, 2020: 9).

The story does not show any interaction between the narrator and Shah-Pesar. Instead, the first part of the narrative focuses on Shah-Pesar, detailing his magical encounter, while the second part shifts to the narrator’s own reflections and past. By sharing her inner thoughts, the narrator critiques the cultural norms that shaped her life, offering a personal and reflective commentary. This character-bound narration contrasts sharply with Shah-Pesar’s magical adventure, as described by Bal. The shift from Shah-Pesar’s external, fantasy-driven adventure to the narrator’s internal, reflective voice adds depth and emotional resonance to the story, illustrating the tension between the idealized world of childhood and the harsh realities of adulthood shaped by societal constraints.

1. Focalization Depicting Gender through Cultural Lenses

Focalization refers to the point of view or perspective from which a part of the narrative is seen, which may differ from the narrator’s viewpoint (Onega, 2014). Bal (2009) describes focalization as the relationship between vision and what is seen, emphasizing not only the visual but also the cognitive, emotional, and ideological aspects (Bal, 2009: 145). Genette (1980) distinguishes between “who is talking” (narrator) and “who sees” (focalizer), separating the act of narration from focalization. The difference between narrative point of view and focalization point of view is about who is speaking and who is seeing. These two are not always attached to one agency but focalization can move from one agency to another (character). While a first-person narrator may perform both roles, a third-person narrator can describe what another character sees, making it essential to differentiate between narration and focalization.

The narrative text of *Dancing in the Mosque* begins with a classic fairytale opening, “Once upon a time.” (Qaderi, 2020: 8). which is typical of a zero focalization where an omniscient narrator describes events and details beyond the perspective of Shah-Pesar. This opening sets the stage for a narrative that is not limited to a single character’s viewpoint but instead provides a broader, all-knowing perspective, often seen in traditional folklore. When the narrator describes the jinni’s appearance, the level of detail suggests omniscience. “A thick coil of smoke rose from the spout, curling toward the ceiling. A pair of stout legs materialized from the smoke, followed

by a large belly, a barrel chest, muscular arms, and a huge head. The giant had a black beard topped with curly black hair. His black eyes glowed beneath heavy black eyebrows, and a golden earring dangled from his left earlobe, almost touching his shoulder.” (Qaderi, 2020: 8). The narrator provides a detailed description that Shah-Pesar would likely only observe in part, particularly due to his fear. This points to zero focalization, as the narrator has more knowledge than Shah-Pesar himself. The omniscient narrator describes Shah-Pesar’s physical reaction as “trembling” and his voice as “quivering,” giving readers insight into Shah-Pesar’s emotional state. Although we are provided with a detailed external description of the jinni, we also consider Shah-Pesar’s emotions, which indicate internal focalization.

Based on Bal’s (2009) concept of focalization, Shah-Pesar serves as the focalizer in the narrative, meaning that we experience the world and events through his perspective. Focalization, as defined by Bal, refers to the way a narrative’s events are filtered through a particular character’s point of view, which encompasses not just the visual, but also cognitive, emotional, and ideological perspectives. In Shah-Pesar’s case, his thoughts, feelings, and cultural background shape how the events are perceived. This is significant in terms of understanding gender dynamics in the story, as Shah-Pesar’s experiences and reactions are central to how gender roles and norms are presented. As the focalizer, Shah-Pesar’s subjective experiences—whether it’s his confusion, curiosity, or fear—are what the reader interprets as reality, making his perspective a key mechanism for shaping the portrayal of gender and cultural expectations. Bal’s theory allows us to see how the focalization, through Shah-Pesar, not only governs the flow of the narrative but also influences our understanding of the cultural norms and gender expectations that the character navigates.

In Genette’s Zero Focalization (1980), the text is mainly internally focalized; there is a sense of an omniscient overview when Homeira discusses general beliefs and societal and cultural views, especially those of her grandmother. The narrator recalls her grandmother’s perspectives on being a girl in Afghanistan “My grandmother believed that one of the most difficult tasks that the Almighty can assign anyone is being a girl in Afghanistan.” (Qaderi, 2020: 9), narrator adopts an omniscient tone to comment on a cultural issue, as everything is conveyed through her subjective lens.

According to Bal’s theory (2009), the focalizer and the focalized object are key components of the narrative. In this case, the story is told from

Homeira’s perspective as a mother (focalizer), who speaks directly to her son. Her memories, emotions, and regrets drive the narrative. For instance, she reflects on her grandmother’s restrictive stories and the oppressive environment in which she was raised. These stories are presented through the mother’s perspective, shaping the way we perceive both the grandmother and the societal limitations placed on girls. The mother’s view imbues these tales with feelings of resentment and frustration, emphasizing how they functioned as mechanisms of control.

The mother’s son, as the primary focalized object in the narrative, is not only central to her emotions but also serves as a lens through which her gendered identity is shaped and communicated. Through the mother’s perspective, we gain insight into how cultural norms dictate her role as a mother, positioning her as the sole figure responsible for fulfilling the societal expectation of producing a male heir. Her sense of purpose and identity are deeply tied to her fulfillment of this role, as evidenced in the passage: “At least I had done my duty: I was a mother in this tortured land, and I had produced a son—you, my dearest” (Qaderi, 2020: 10). Here, the cultural lens is evident as her identity is framed by her role within a patriarchal society, where a mother’s worth is often reduced to her ability to bear a male child. This perspective underscores how her gendered identity is intrinsically linked to societal norms that prioritize motherhood, especially in a restrictive cultural context. Furthermore, her internal conflict between personal pain and societal duty reflects the complex interplay between individual desires and cultural expectations, adding layers to her character that challenge simplistic interpretations. Bal’s (2009) theory of focalization highlights how the narrative is shaped by this gendered perspective, allowing us to see not only her personal sorrow but also how cultural norms surrounding motherhood are embodied in her emotional responses.

2. Cultural Norms and Female Marginality

Homeira’s childhood is shaped by the physical and emotional separation from the outside world. She vividly contrasts the safety within her home’s walls with the dangers lurking outside, saying, “Afghanistan was divided between the street in front of our house where I played during cease-fires, and the dangerous world beyond our walls when war returned and kept me stuck inside.” (Qaderi, 2020: 10). Her mother, fearing the violence outside, restricts her movement, warning her that even staying by a window could be dangerous: “She knew bullets could

pierce glass.” (Qaderi, 2020: 12). The walls of their home, combined with constant parental surveillance, become a metaphor for the larger societal constraints on women, where movement is not only restricted by war but also by deeply ingrained cultural expectations.

Homeira recalls her grandmother’s words, “A girl should have fear in her eyes,” (Qaderi, 2020: 11). “When it gets dark, the infidels hunger for blood,” particularly the blood of girls, “they like girls’ blood the most, Homeira!” (Qaderi, 2020: 19). This belief reflects the deep-seated cultural fear that women are vulnerable and must be protected at all costs. Her grandmother’s reference to ancient customs “In ancient times they would chain a girl’s feet together so that she wouldn’t stride wider and wouldn’t become a source of shame for her family” (Qaderi, 2020: 27). underscores how women’s mobility has long been tied to family honor. Though no physical chains bind Homeira, the societal expectations surrounding her restrict her in much the same way. Despite these limitations, Homeira expresses a strong desire to break free, telling her brother, “I would leave the house even if I didn’t have feet to walk on.” (Qaderi, 2020: 28). This statement captures her deep yearning to resist the cultural constraints imposed on her simply because of her gender.

Women’s marginalization in legal systems is evident through the exclusion of mothers’ names from birth certificates and official documents. This issue is illustrated in Homeira’s reflection on her erased identity as Siawash’s mother in legal records: “It contained your name, your father’s name, and your grandfather’s name. But nobody had asked for my name. I was irrelevant. Your mother’s name does not appear in any paper document” (Qaderi, 2020: 23). Homeira poignantly describes the pain of having her son’s identity associated solely with his father: “It’s not just your uncle who does that; they all describe you as ‘his’ son. Do you know how painful it is to hear that even my family members consider you ‘his’ son and not mine?” (Qaderi, 2020: 49). This exclusion reflects a broader cultural belief that women’s identities are confined to the private sphere, with men publicly representing the family.

Moreover, women’s names are deemed “a source of shame” beyond the confines of the family unit. Hence, mothers’ names are not mandated in various legal documents such as identity cards and passports. This is further emphasized when Homeira states, “When your father brought in the identity registration card, once again my name, as your mother, was nowhere to be seen” (Qaderi, 2020: 23). Afghan law, influenced by religious traditions,

often favors men in custody battles, as seen when the court grants custody of Homeira’s son to his father. Homeira laments, “The court has determined that the child belongs to the father under any circumstances” (Qaderi, 2020: 41). This legal bias reflects the cultural and religious belief that men are the rightful heads of households.

Homeira reflects on how women lose their names after bearing sons: “Instead of their own names, they were called by the name of their older son: the mother of Ahmad, the mother of Mahmoud.” (Qaderi, 2020: 117). This renaming reflects a cultural norm that erases a woman’s identity, replacing it with one tied to her role as a mother, particularly of male children. Homeira confesses that she delayed having children out of fear that motherhood would cause her to “lose myself, or that I would bleed to death in the process, or that I would give birth to a girl, or that your existence would prevent me from writing my stories.” (Qaderi, 2020: 117). These fears illustrate the physical dangers of childbirth and the societal devaluation of daughters.

Despite this cultural marginalization, Homeira attempts to reclaim some agency by secretly writing her name on her son’s birth certificate “When no one was looking, I wrote in a bright color, ‘Mother’s name: Homeira.’” (Qaderi, 2020: 23). To assert her identity as a mother, writing to her son, “No scrap of paper will ever be able to forbid me to love you.” (Qaderi, 2020: 41). This small act of resistance symbolizes her desire to assert her identity and reclaim her role as a mother in a society that seeks to erase her from official recognition.

The marginalization of women is further highlighted in public spaces. During the Taliban regime, women were largely excluded from the public sphere, as the narrator observes. “Suddenly, the streets were barren of women. Only men were allowed in the bazaars and markets.” (Qaderi, 2020: 53). Such norms perpetuate the idea that women should remain invisible and submissive, limiting their participation in society and reinforcing their marginal status.

Cultural norms also affect women’s rights to education, as illustrated by the closure of girls’ schools under Taliban rule. This educational ban reflects a belief that women do not belong in public or intellectual spheres, as evidenced by Mushtaq’s comment. “Why are you crying? I wish the boys’ school was closed. I am the unlucky one. I wish I were a girl.” (Qaderi, 2020: 53). Mushtaq’s naïve response underscores the pervasive cultural norm that prioritizes male education and opportunities while denying women the tools for empowerment and independence.

From the outset, the Taliban's rule imposes strict control over gender roles, evident in the demand for women to remain hidden indoors at the first sign of danger. When house searches begin, Agha orders, "The women should go back inside the house. Ansari! Take your daughter to the storeroom." (Qaderi, 2020: 105). Homeira, a 16-year-old girl, understands that her "woman's figure" must be concealed from the "prying eyes of men." Her transition into femininity is viewed as a liability, something to be hidden to avoid provoking male attention. "Madar made me hide in a corner of the storeroom next to two large chests. One contained our school clothes, Zahra's, and mine the other was full of Agha's books. Madar covered me with two blankets." (Qaderi, 2020: 106). This fear compels her family to conceal her, a familiar act during the unrest. "It had been many years since the Russians and the mujahideen searched our house, and my aunties had to hide. Now it was my turn." (Qaderi, 2020: 106). The passage highlights not only physical concealment but also intellectual suppression.

Homeira's fear of the hidden books in the storeroom reveals how women's access to knowledge is perceived as a threat under Taliban rule. She notes, "The crime of having books in the chest next to us was no less than the crime of hiding guns." (Qaderi, 2020: 107). The storeroom where she hides becomes a metaphor for the larger societal space women are forced to occupy—hidden, marginal, and silent.

The recurring theme of silence in the text highlights the cultural pressure to suppress women's voices. At the river, when Homeira encounters the Maulawi (an Islamic cleric who holds significant religious authority in Afghan society), he attempts to gain her attention with a soft "hush" while engaging in inappropriate behavior. The Maulawi, a figure of power and trust within the community, abuses his position to silence Homeira and assert control over her, reflecting the broader societal expectation that women remain silent in the face of abuse. The phrase "Hush—Silence!" recurs throughout the narrative, particularly in the context of abuse. When Homeira's grandmother warns her, "Homeira, you will ruin our family's honor," it underscores how women are conditioned to remain silent in order to protect the family's reputation. Homeira's reluctance to speak to her father about the Maulawi's misconduct, along with the elders' refusal to expose Moneer's abuse, reflects cultural norms that prioritize safeguarding male reputations over protecting women and children. Women like Homeira are discouraged from speaking out, and their credibility is often questioned, as illustrated when Maulawi Rashid labels her as

"sinful" and a "liar." In this way, the Maulawi's role as a religious figure reinforces the patriarchal structure that silences women and disregards their experiences.

Forced marriage under Taliban rule highlights the stark reduction of a woman's worth to her marital status. Nanah-jan's warning, "We must address the fact that Homeira is a woman now. It's only a matter of time until one of the Taliban comes for her." (Qaderi, 2020: 109). reflects the pervasive fear families endure, knowing their daughters can be forcibly taken at any moment. The phrase, "In this land, it is better to be a stone than to be a girl," powerfully encapsulates the devaluation of women under Taliban rule, where being female equates to vulnerability and suffering.

Homeira's nightmare of being forced into marriage, like her neighbor Nasreen, symbolizes the tragic reality for many women, with no consent or control over their lives. Homeira's resigned acceptance, "Like Nasreen, I would put on my burqa and my slippers, and I would go." (Qaderi, 2020: 109). reveals the helplessness felt by many women in these situations. The haunting imagery of Homeira, burdened by a rope around her neck, being sold alongside other women with crying babies, underscores the commodification and dehumanization of women.

Homeira's description of the "nekah" matrimonial ceremony reveals the transactional and commodifying nature of marriage under certain cultural norms. She emphasizes how a few verses recited by a "maulawi" reduce her to "the property of the groom." (Qaderi, 2020: 118). The phrase "A property for which the groom had paid a good price" underscores the dehumanizing aspect of the bridal price. Homeira's silence during the "nekah" ceremony is also deeply significant. While the groom is repeatedly asked for his consent, Homeira's voice is absent: "But nobody asked whether I wanted him and was willing to accept him." (Qaderi, 2020: 118). This reflects the broader cultural norm where women's consent is ignored, and their fate is dictated by male authority figures. Her quiet inner assertion, "I am the bride," poignantly highlights the disconnect between her desires and the external reality in which she is powerless.

Homeira views polygyny as a violation of gender equality and a reinforcement of harmful gender stereotypes in Afghanistan. In her letter to Siavash, she draws parallels between his father and Commander Moosa, stating that his family culture "prized polygyny and thought women were to be bargained for with money" (Qaderi, 2020: 119).

Homeira argues that polygyny degrades women by assigning them hierarchical identities such as first, second, or third wives, diminishing their human value and social standing. She views polygyny as a form of gender stereotype deeply ingrained in Afghan culture and perpetuated by religious fanatics to increase the Muslim Ummah's population. Homeira opposes the practice, stating, "Polygamy is still very common in Afghanistan, and it requires women to accept being just a number in the family and the world. My dignity is lost" (Qaderi, 2020: 132), underscoring how polygyny strips women of their individuality and self-worth.

CONCLUSION

Cultural norms and societal structures profoundly shape women's roles and behavior, often relegating them to narrow, prescribed identities. In Qaderi's memoir, those who comply with these norms are viewed as "good," while women who resist, like Homeira, are branded as "evil" or "disbeliever" (kafer), punished for challenging the status quo. This dichotomy reflects the immense power societal expectations hold in regulating women's lives. Qaderi paints a poignant picture of a childhood steeped in isolation, where the walls of the home become symbols of both protection and confinement. Her exclusion from public spaces, including her son's birth certificate, underscores the pervasive belief that women's roles belong solely to the private sphere. The admonition that "a girl should have fear in her eyes" is one such cultural prescription that highlights how deeply ingrained societal expectations strip women of agency, reducing them to mere reflections of the roles assigned to them.

Despite these constraints, Qaderi's narrative shows moments of defiance, illustrating how women both conform to and challenge their marginalized status. Under the oppressive rule of the Taliban, she is forced to hide from the "prying eyes of men," a vivid metaphor for how female bodies are perceived as threats that must be concealed. Yet, despite the danger and societal pressures to protect male honor, Qaderi resists. Her act of writing her name on her son's birth certificate and her rejection of practices like polygyny and forced marriage challenge the cultural norms that seek to erase her individuality. Through her story, Qaderi demonstrates the power of personal agency in the face of overwhelming societal constraints.

Qaderi's memoir does more than recount personal experiences; it critiques the cultural forces that systematically limit women's identities. Through

narrative techniques such as focalization, where the mother's perspective dominates the narrative, the memoir reveals the intersection between culture, gender, and personal identity. The focus on cultural norms and the treatment of women's bodies and voices as property of society calls for a re-examination of the structures that perpetuate gender inequality. In doing so, Qaderi's work becomes an important contribution to feminist literary discourse, offering both a personal and collective critique of the systems that shape gendered experiences in Afghanistan.

By documenting her own struggles and resistance, Qaderi's memoir offers a powerful reminder of the resilience of Afghan women and the ways in which they continue to fight for their agency, voice, and identity in a culture that seeks to silence them. Her work stands as a call for change, advocating for a cultural shift towards more inclusive, equitable frameworks that allow women to reclaim their identities beyond the limiting definitions imposed upon them.

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