The Woman In The Novel, The Patience Stone (Syngue Sabour)
By Atiq Rahimi

Abdul Wali Yawari* 

* English Department, Faculty of language and literature 
" Kabul University 

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Abstract- “For far too long, Afghan women have been faceless and voiceless. Until now, with The Patience Stone, Atiq Rahimi, an Afghan author gives face and voice to one unforgettable woman.”(Khalid Husaini) The long lasting devastation, pain and sorrows that changed Afghanistan into a mountain of ashes, made Afghan women suffer this extreme pain and hardships without speaking a word in an absolutely male dominated society. In this novel, the woman who has absorbed the plights of a country explodes and gives all her pain to a man to suffer like her. In Persian folklore Syngue Sabour is the name of the magical black stone, (patience stone) which absorbs the plight of those who confide in it. It is believed that on the day of the Apocalypse it explodes out of too much hardship and pain. But, here Syngue Sabour that explodes by the confided pains is not a stone but a woman; a woman from the millions of women that opens her heart and speaks the pains, grievance and her deepest desires to her man who is paralyzed by war injuries who is lying motionless and indifferent to her complaints. This novel is an unrestricted confession and expression of an Afghan woman from a man’s eye about sex, love and her anger against a man who never understood her feelings, who mistreated her, and who never showed her any respect or mercy. This article is trying to have a critical analysis of this woman as a major character in this novel.

Index Terms- Body, Patience Stone, Pain, Women

I. INTRODUCTION
Atiq Rahimi was born in Afghanistan in 1962. He immigrated to France in 1984. There he has become renowned as a film maker and as a writer. The film Earth and Ashes was in the official selection at Cannes in 2004 and won a number of prizes. He is currently adapting A thousand Rooms of Dreams and Fear for the screen. Since 2001 Rahimi has returned to Afghanistan a number of times to set up a writers’ house in Kabul and offer support and training to young Afghan writers and film makers. He lives in Paris.

In Persian folklore Syngue Sabour is the name of the magical black stone, (patience stone) which absorbs the plight of those who confide in it. It is believed that one day, perhaps on the day of Apocalypse it will explode out of too much sorrows and pain.

For almost three decades of war the voice of Afghan women was cruelly silenced by customs, cultures, discrimination and religious fundamentalism. During this long period of war and destruction called the dark period in the history of Afghanistan, it was men who killed, it was man who destroyed and it was man who widowed women and orphaned children. On the other hand, it was women who suffered war, cruelty and inhumanity: it was women who witnessed the deaths of their children, and their husbands; as the only supporter of their families. And it was women who had to suffer all pain and anguish without having the right to raise their voices. Indeed, it was woman who had to absorb all of this pain while remaining as patient as a stone.

Writing “Sang-e-Saboor” which in English translates as “The Patience Stone” Atiq Rahimi breaks the silence and speaks of the wounding pain of one woman, one offered “as a proxy for the grievances” and grumbles of millions. This story is not only the story of a woman in Afghanistan, indeed this story is the story of woman anywhere in this world where there the wild dominance and ignorance of men can steal the natural rights that God has bequeathed to all humanity. Perhaps, it’s for this reason that Atiq Rahimi writes this short and poignant sentence in the beginning of this story. “Somewhere in Afghanistan or elsewhere” Inaddition, Sang-e-Saboor or “The Patience Stone” is the story of body. The story of how underestimating body can be counted as underestimating and torturing soul. This theme of the story is clearly foreshadowed in the second page of the book by a poem from the French poet, Anthonin Artaud: “From the body by the body with the body, since the body and until the body”

II. Who is Atiq Rahimi?
Atiq Rahimi was born in 1962 in Kabul from Istiqlal High School. When the soviet invasion happened, he fled to Pakistan with his family. Finally, he migrated to France and received political asylum in 1985. After his graduation from Sorbonne University, he joined a Paris – based production company where produced over seven documentaries for French Television. Rhimi’s first book was published in late 1990s which was named Erath and Ashes. Later on this book was changed into a movie which received several awards from film festivals all over the world. In 2002 after the fall of the Taliban regime, Rahimi returned to Kabul after 17 years of exile.
Rahimi won France’s most prestigious literary award in 2008, Prix Goncourt for Syngue Saboor, described as “Sober and Life” by French Minister of Culture. This novel is translated under the name of The Patience Stone in English, which was also changed to into a movie.

Upton his arrival in Kabul in 2002, Mr Rahimi joined the largest media group in Kabul named Moby Group as senior media advisor founded by Sad Mohsini brothers

The story starts in a room. There is a man lying motionless, wordless and helpless, with his eyes and mouth open towards the ceiling. His wife, a woman who remains unnamed until the end of the story holds a long string of black prayer beads. She is praying for her husband to recover. Recommended by the mullah or Imam, she is supposed to call ninety-nine names of Allah, each of them ninety nine times a day. She is busy praying and nursing this motionless man lying in front of her. But, as she confronts her frustrations with his injury, the petty war that caused, and remembering the torturing memories she has with him, her heart is filled with pain. This pain slowly changes to words and finally to a one sided conversation with the man. War is going on. From the street the voices of gunfire are heard as the woman begins to reveal her painful secrets:

“I am going to tell you everything, my Sang-e-Saboor, everything. Until I set myself free from my pain, and my suffering.” (P, 79)

She has always heard, but has not said a word; she has always suffered, but has remained silent like a patience stone. But now she is in the position of an addressee to say all that has been left unsaid. She even calls her husband Sang-e-Saboor, as she begins to reminisce to the depressing events of her wedding day.

“…Anyway, they celebrated our engagement without the fiancé. Your mother said, don’t worry, victory is coming! It will soon be the end of the war, we will be free, and my son will return! Nearly a year later your mother came back, victory was still a long way off. It’s dangerous to leave a young, engaged woman with her parents for such a long time! She said. And so I have to be married, despite your absence. At the ceremony you were present in the form of a photo, and that wretched Khajar (sword) which they put next to me in place of you. And I had to wait another three years for you”,

“At that time I didn’t even question your absence it seemed so normal! You were at the front. You were fighting for freedom, for Allah.” (P, 59)

Having surrendered to the rules of society she is married to a man whom she has never met. She has remained in a constant state of loneliness waiting for a man who exists to her only in the form of a photo. She sacrifices her life, her body and her soul, and blindly accepts a man whom she has never seen? Without any doubt, the only thing she can do is to sit quietly and watch how her life is going to be shaped. In this context the custom and the disastrous traditionalism of the society or societies are questioned in which traditions are valued more than the lives of individuals. Moreover, in the aforementioned the man is present in the form of sword beside the woman. Perhaps, this symbolic comparison intends to address a war-torn society that courage is not to take a gun and kill; bravery is not to be blind to the pain of human suffering. Indeed, courage can be giving a sacrifice, giving your most valuable thing for someone you rely on, someone you love and someone you trust, on the name of humanity as the woman does in this story.

Lost in pain and grief of her torturing memories she continues:

“I did everything I could to make you stay with me. Not just because I loved you, but so that you wouldn’t abandon me. Without you, I didn’t have anyone. They would all have sent me packing… I admit that… I wasn’t very sure of myself. Wasn’t sure I could love you… for three years I had been trying to imagine what you were like. … And then one day you came. You slipped into the bed climbed on top of me. Rubbed yourself against me… and couldn’t do it! In total darkness, with our hearts beating furiously, our breathing all jerky, our bodies streaming with sweat…”, “after that I very quickly became used to you, to your clumsy body, your empty presence, which at that point I didn’t know how to interpret.” (P, 69)

Here is where the book introduces its theme as the story of the body. In this part the writer begins to inter the hidden self of the woman, her dreams, her desires, loneliness and suppressed passions which are going to explode like a stone out of extreme pressure of pain, and in this explosion not only a dominant male viewpoint, but society, custom, and an extremely ignorant male attitude towards women is challenged. Undeniably, the writer addresses the position of women confronting a society where women are left almost unrecognizable as beings that can have free desires, free thoughts and free personalities, although men supposedly consider woman as the other half of humanity, as mentioned in our religious doctrine, but this concept has never been pondered on.

Women and men are dependent on each other in order to continue a social life, but in different aspects of life and in different societies this dependency differs. Especially, in a male dominated society like Afghanistan at the same time at war, women are pushed aside by the brutality of war which by itself is often thought of as a male phenomenon. In such a circumstance a woman like the woman in this story can do nothing but to wait for a man just because he is a man and can protect her against another man in a male society. Ultimately, in such a situation not only is the social roles, desires and personalities of women shaped according to the desires of a man, but also her body is claimed as property owned by a man.
As she speaks more and more; she feels more comfortable. She says:

"Since I have been talking to you, getting angry with you, insulting you, telling you everything that I have kept hidden in my heart, and you not being able to reply, or do anything at all…all of this has been soothing and comforting to me." (P, 74)

The more she speaks of pain, the more daring she becomes. As a result of continuous expression of pains, she comes out of her woman-ness, becomes the body, strongly takes the hold of her husband's body and reveals the tale of her own; the tale that was accompanied by absolute dominance of man. She tells the story of her body, the body she shared with others in order to reclaim her role as a woman with desires which had been lost at her first sexual encounter with her husband. Talking about body and soul she addresses her man and perhaps all men in her society:

"You guys listen to your souls and nothing else. And it's not your stupid soul that is protecting me now, that's for sure. It's not your soul that is feeding the kids." (P, 117)

Throughout the story the woman is portrayed as a spiritual person. Everyday she prays; she counts every name of Allah ninety-nine times a day to bring her husband back to life, but here we notice that she angrily refers to soul by using the word stupid. It means, she has a dignified concept of soul in the back of her head, but she resents it for it is worthless in that violent situation.

Indeed, for any reason if in a society physical strength is valued, man as a wise animal automatically becomes important. And the dignity of soul is less felt or even not felt. All that is needed is a strong body that can protect one against another in the wildness of war. In such societies the women as a creature possessing less physical strength than man, starts to resent the soul with all its dignity which Islam gives to it. That is because in the brutal circumstances of war the only thing soul has to do is to suffer, therefore women can do nothing but to rely on the male body lying brain dead in front of her.

Moreover, it makes me think that as far as we need violence to prove our existence in a society we have underestimated the power of our souls and valued the wildness of our bodies.

As the story continues, the woman goes further in revealing her hidden pain and secrets she tells her most torturing secret the secret that makes her have nightmares and keeps her awake. She becomes daring and bold enough to say:

"Those two girls are not yours! And do you know why? Because, you were the infertile one, not me! … Everyone thought it was me who was infertile. Your mother wanted you to take another wife. And what would have happened to me? I would have become like my aunt." (P, 137)

They have been married for more than ten years, but have lived like strangers. They have lived under one roof but their souls have been miles away and they have never felt close enough to share their feelings. This distance being caused by the indifferent attitude of the man has destroyed their life. As we see throughout the story the man is lying silent. This gives us also the impression that if the woman could talk openly to her man without any restraints, what would she have told him? How would she have acted? It can be sensed in the environment that the writer creates that the man has not let her be a woman by neglecting and belittling her and by doing this he destroys his life in the worst way possible. As the woman says: "Oh my sang-e-Saboor when it's hard to be a woman, it becomes hard to be a man too!"

Furthermore, the writer points out another issue about his target society in the story and that is the culture of hiding everything below the surface and trying to make everything physically appear good. The surface of life should look perfect, no matter how suffering there is in reality. This is the characteristic of the societies where its individuals always suffer and keep everything hidden inside just in order to make life physically appear good.

It is for these reasons that Saboor is a name for all unnamed characters of the story, a name for the novel and a name for a society that lies like a stone and finally the last name of Allah.

Before, the man stands up to kill her and before she kills the man let me end this piece of writing by the last words she addresses to the man.

"Al Saboor, the patient! You are God, You exist, and do not move. You hear, and do not speak. You see, and cannot be seen! Like God, you are patient, immobile. And I am your messenger! Your prophet! I am your voice. And I am your gaze! Your hands! I reveal you al Saboor! Al saboor! Al saboor!" (P, 140)

REFERENCES

AUTHORS
First Author – Abdul Wali Yawari, MA, Kabul University, awaliyawari@gmail.com