

# The Woman In The Novel, *The Patience Stone* (*Syngue Sabour*)

By Atiq Rahimi

Abdul Wali Yawari\*

\* English Department, Faculty of languages 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 men who destroyed and it was men 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 (Rahimi; 2009). This story is not only the story of a woman in Afghanistan, indeed this story is the story of women anywhere in this world where there the wild dominance and obliviousness 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” In addition, Sang-e-Saboor or “The Patience Stone” is the story of body. The story of how underestimating body can be counted as underestimating and mistreating human dignity and 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. THE PATIENCE STONE

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 aching mysteries:

“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 addresser to say all that has been left unsaid. She has eventually gained the courage to speak and even call 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 Khanjar (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 what Michel Foucault terms it “biopower” she is married to a man whom she has never met. Michel Foucault coined the word “biopower” to refer to a kind of dominant system of social control that effects the lives of very bodies, through individual self-discipline which we each adopt by subjugating ourselves. Individuals voluntarily control themselves by self-imposing conformity to cultural norms through self-surveillance and self-disciplinary practice. Foucault tell us that this power or the power of social norms is not imposed from above by a dominant group but rather comes “from below”. We are all the vehicles of power, because it's embedded in discourse and norms that are part of the habits and interactions of our everyday lives. She is a true example of such conformity. Being subject to the tricks played by such a destiny, she has married this man and has remained in a constant state of loneliness waiting for a man who exists for her only in the form of a photo. She has sacrificed her life, her body and her soul, and has blindly accepted to marry because she does not have the desire to fall out the norms and be known as a deviant. In this context the custom and the disastrous traditionalism of the society has left her paralyzed just like the body of her husband that lies in front of her. On the other hand, rules of a society are made for man and not the opposite, therefore, it should change in accord to the wills of humans. As Francis Fukuyama asserts “It's not the inner self that has to be made to confirm to society's rules, but society itself that needs to

change”(Fukuyama; 2018). But often such as in this context traditions and cultural norms are valued more than the lives of individuals, since it's easier to conform to it than to defy.

Moreover, in the quoted text, the man is present in the form of a sword beside the woman or bride. Perhaps, this symbolic comparison intends to highlight the value given to an individual as a human in the mentality of Afghan society and also, the shallow and primitive conception of courage and bravery. Perhaps, courage is not always going to war and being violent and bravery is not to be blind to the pain of human sufferings. Indeed, courage can be sacrificing, giving your most valuable thing for someone you love; courage is also meant forgiving.

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)

We find glimpses of feminine selfhood gained by the woman as she begins to reveals her feelings, dreams and desires, loneliness, suppressed passions corresponding bodily and sexual experiences which distressed her like a punishing pain. The woman not only questions a dominant male view point, but society, custom, and an extremely ignorant male attitude towards women. Definitely, the writer addresses the circumstances of women confronting a society where women are left almost voiceless and overlooked as human beings that can have free desires, free wills and free personalities. As De Beauvoir posits women are the “second sex” which means women are defined in relation to men. However, in this context men supposedly consider woman as the other half according to islamic doctrine, which claims that god created woman from the left part of man's body, but even in this concept woman has been given an inferior status then man, since there is a general consensus that the right side of the body is more powerful therefore better than the left side.

As humans, 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 marginalized by the brutality of war which 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 the brutality of war and ferocity. Ultimately, in such a situation not only is the social roles, desires and identity of women are shaped according to the desires of a man, but also her body is claimed as property owned by a man.

"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 any thing at all...all of this has been soothing and comforting to me." (P, 74)

The more she speaks, the more daring she becomes. As she continuous to unfold her grieves, she comes out the boundaries of her woman-ness, becomes the body, strongly takes hold of her husband's body and reveals the tale of her owns. 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. As a matter of fact, in Afghanistan *Ghairat* or honor has been a very prevailing and strong part of an Afghan man's personality. This mentality objectifies women by possessing them; since, a true man of *Ghairat* or honor has the control of her woman so she does not intentionally or unintentionally harm the social reputation or honor of the family. 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. Every day 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 refers to soul by using the word "stupid". She might value spirituality and soul, but she resents it for it is worthless in that violent situation in the middle of war. Indeed, for any reason if in a society physical strength is valued more, man as a wise animal inevitably becomes central, and the dignity of soul is undermined. All that is needed is a strong body that can protect one against another in the wildness of war and hostilities. In such communities women as creatures possessing less physical strength than man remains as the victims. Therefore, she desperately rely on her husband lying brain dead in front of her. In fact, history has thought us that as far as we need violence to proof our existence in a society we have underestimated the power of our souls and valued the wildness of our bodies.

The woman goes further in unfolding her hidden agony and enigmas. She tells her most torturing riddles; the riddles that make her have nightmares and keeps her awake. She becomes daring and bold enough to manifest:

"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)

Mavlena Balkhi posits that man and woman are similar and equal in spirit, but different in their physics or body. Woman and man have the same feelings and same sentiments, however physically they are different, and men are physically stronger. This complexity has led to miscalculations between the two genders in terms of understanding each other. They have been married for more than ten years, but have lived like strangers. There have been times they have lived under one roof, but their spirits have been miles away and they have never felt close enough to share their feelings. This chronic presence of detestation and distance has destroyed their life. They have not been able to respond to each other's emotional needs. 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!" (p, 138)

In summary, the woman as the main character of the story lives a life of misery and melancholy. War, bad culture, social norms, customs have put hands in hands to bring her such a destiny. Thus, when she reveals about her painful memories, she actually exposes these devastating realities that has caused her the sufferance. She lives in a society where despite all such sufferings that exist, very few people raise their voice to question or at least see the problems. People are used to ignore, stay silent and hide everything below the surface of daily life. Within the social order that the woman lives, as far as you can act and pretend that things are ok, no matter how much miseries are there in reality. This is the characteristic of the societies where its individuals always suffer and close their eyes to realities of life just in order to obey the rules and cultural norms of the society. Perhaps, 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 war torn society that is left unchanged for centuries like a stone, and finally the last name of Allah. As patient as a stone, and as broken as a patience stone she repeats the last name of Allah just before she puts an end to her misery by killing 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)

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#### AUTHORS

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

