

Religious Fundamentalism: A Backlash to Women in Nadia Hashimi's Fiction *When the Moon is Low*

T. Suba Mol¹,

Ph.D. Research Scholar (Reg No: 18223014012001),

Department of English and Centre for Research, AnnaiVelankanni College, Tholayavattam.

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti,

Tirunelveli- 627012 , Tamil Nadu, India

Email : subamilton98@gmail.com

Dr. J. Jesu Latha²,

Associate Professor & Research Supervisor,

Department of English and Centre for Research, AnnaiVelankanni College,

Tholayavattam.

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti,

Tirunelveli- 627012 , Tamil Nadu, India

Email: jesulatha198@gmail.com

Abstract

Women are still struggling to get their rights, although they partly won some battles. Women are still tortured by all forms of violence and discrimination that becomes part of their life. The problems of low wage for women, 'honour' killing, marital rape, child bride, female mutilation still exist in third world countries. Feminism is a movement that aims to deconstruct all the discrimination against women and to establish equality among men and women. There are some factors affecting women empowerment such as education, unequal wages, work burdens, family, denial of property rights, social protection etc. Religious fundamentalism is one among the causes that impose women to follow certain dogmas. This paper analyse how religious fundamentalism affects and backlashes women from empowerment with the help of Nadia Hashimi's fiction *When the Moon is Low*.

Key Words: Religion, Fundamentalism, Afghanistan, Gender-Discrimination, women empowerment, tradition

There are people who believe that there is no need to talk about feminism, since it is not needed today, but nothing could hide from the truth. Women are still struggling to get their rights, although they partly won some battles. Women are still tortured by all forms of violence and discrimination that becomes part of their life. Although in some areas have improvements such as in Saudi Arabia for the first time in 2015, women were allowed to vote, we still have long way to go. The problems of low wage for women, 'honour' killing, marital rape, child bride, female mutilation still exist in third world countries. This paper analyse how fundamentalism backlash women empowerment in Afghanistan with the help of Nadia Hashimi's fiction *When the Moon is Low*.

Feminism is a movement that aims to deconstruct all the discrimination against women and to establish equality among men and women. This movement also tries to get social, political, economic and personal equality to women. It questions the strict ideologies of society against women and protects them from all forms of violence. Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist, argues in *The Second Sex* (1949) as:

Women's actions have never been more than symbolic agitation; they have won only what men have been willing to concede to them; they have taken nothing; they have received. It is that they lack the concrete means to organize themselves into a unit that could posit itself in opposition. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own ... They live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests, and social conditions to certain men – fathers or husbands – more closely than to other women.(28)

So, it is needed to talk about the issues regarding female and feminism has continuously been given its contribution to perceive women empowerment. There are certain factors affecting women

empowerment such as education, unequal wages, work burdens, family, denial of property rights, social protection, Gender norms and social discriminatory norms. Apart from the above, there is 'religion' that generates a threat to women empowerment.

Religion is one among the causes that impose women to follow certain dogmas. It leads to women's oppression. According to Sheeba S. Nair, "Religion, as any other social institution, is a man's forte and women can afford to enjoy only secondary or rather no status at all" (31). Gerda Lener argues, "traditionalist, whether working within a religious or scientific framework have regarded women's subordination as universal, God-given, or natural, hence immutable" (16). Religion restricts women to make choice over their body, sexuality, style, clothes, roles, and in whole about everything. Especially, religion strictly restricts sexuality and reproductive rights of women. Women in Islam are also not an exception from religious oppression. Sheeba s. Nair states, "The Muslim women are conditioned to be ignorant not only about legal rights but also about the true tenets of Islam."

Almost in all religion, people follow or show some 'symbols' or 'tools' such as *Veils, Hijab, Niqab, mangalsutra* and *sindoor* to showcase their religious identity to others. Women are strictly instructed to follow this religious identity but men are exonerated from this obligation. Sheeba S. Nair explains, "Every religion excels the other in inflicting women subjugation and many writers as well as theorists trace religions as the source of patriarchal predominance and suppression of women (31). Women are supposed to show case their marital status in order to express men's ownness towards women but men needn't. Particularly, when it comes to discuss about the sexuality and sexual desire of a particular gender, most religion considers it as 'taboo' and sin to women to discuss about sex. It is needed to talk about 'impurity'. In some religion, women are considered as 'impure' during their menstruation and are forbidden to do household works. Women are also forbidden to do religious duties because they possess menstruation that is deemed to impurity. Simone de Beauvoir argues that religion is a tool to men in order to exercise power over women. She says, "Lawmakers, priests, philosophers, writers and scholars have gone to great lengths to prove that women's subordinate condition was willed in heaven and profitable on earth. Religions forged by men reflect this will for domination: they found ammunition in the legends of Eve and Pandora. They have put philosophy and theology in their service" (11).

According to Korinna Zamfir, the religious texts offer the people to believe that women are submissive. Korinna Zamfir says, "Women's submissiveness would have fitted the ideal of non-violence, forgiveness of enemies, gentleness amidst conflicts and persecutions"(8). The household regulation to women and the behaviour of family members demand women to submit themselves that they are socially inferior to the corresponding male authority. Zamfir states Elna Mouton's perspective as, "the patriarchal social roots of the household codes and their detrimental effect on family, society and the church; she knows that these texts are used to sanction domestic violence and elicit low esteem in women" (8).

Korinna Zamfir also writes, "Religious leaders and conservative scholars loudly endorse traditional gender roles and the "traditional family", limiting women's right to self-determination. Patriarchal discourse also impacts on women's right to protection from violence" (10). Simone de Beauvoir writes about the existence of family and private patrimony in Islamic world. She says the words from Koran as, "Men are superior to women on account of the qualities with which God has gifted the one above the other, and on account of outlay they make from their substance for them" (119). But Sheeba s. Nair states, "If men enjoy over their power extended to them by religion, women forward to suffer thinking it as god's will. They strongly believe that their suffering in this world will be rewarded in heaven and hence they never dream of challenging patriarchy" (32).

Fundamentalism is a type of religious movement that strictly follow certain specific scriptures, dogmas or ideologies. Religious fundamentalist believe the superiority of sacred texts and strictly follow it. Fundamentalism is not something unique for Islam but almost all religion. Fundamentalist activity exists almost in all religions and regions. Especially, fundamental Islamist movements are most wide and bring a dramatic impact on women life and their freedom. The variations in practice and interpretations of Muslim law affect women that prove that the religion dictates nothing but power. To gain power, fundamentalist groups promote visions of cultural values and tradition. Fundamentalist groups are often present the world as the antidote to the modern and western world,

but in fact, they make use of many of the components of modernisation like technology, media etc. to keep control over people. The subjugation of women is also one of the defining features of fundamentalism.

Religious Fundamentalism brings backlash to women empowerment in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is one of the religious fundamentalist dominant countries in the world. Afghanistan is at present under the control of the religious fundamentalist group named Taliban. Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021 after waging an insurgency against United States since 2001. Under Taliban control, the country Afghanistan is shattered and its economy has floundered, hundreds of people lost their jobs, malnutrition has soared, women are forbidden to go to school and work and lot of restrictions for women to get outside. Women are struggling to adapt to all.

The same happened before when Taliban took control of Afghanistan during 1996 to 2001. Women were treated worse and severe persecutions were implemented. Death penalty was given to the women for committing Zina or sex outside marriage. Women were not allowed going school. They could not go to work. They could not get proper treatment since the hospitals were dominated by male doctors. They could not go outside of their house without a male escort. Women are forced to wear *Burqa* at all the time from head to toe they should cover up their body in front of men. If any woman accused for committing prostitution, she would publically stone to death by the Taliban fundamentalists group. It was the dark period of women in Afghanistan. But, after the fall of Taliban in 2001, women in Afghanistan try to regain their existence.

Nadia Hashimi is a paediatrician and novelist, has shown the cruellest attitudes of Taliban in her novel *When the Moon is Low*. She shows the life of present day Afghan women in this novel. She introduces the Character Fereiba, a school teacher who is forced to leave her own country because of the rise of Taliban fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan. Fereiba wants teach the kids but she cannot because of the death thread of Taliban. Nadia Hashimi shows the Afghan educated women's worries after the rise of fundamentalist groups with the Character Fereiba. Fereiba worries, "The new rising regime, the Taliban, insisted that women dress more modestly and men grew beards in accordance with Islamic tradition. Every day, they issued a new set of decrees and meted out swift punishments for those who disobeyed. As a woman, I wasn't allowed to teach. Girls were not permitted in school" (92-93).

Nadia Hashimi shows the character Fereiba as the bold one who has the courage to go against the strict rules fundamentalist groups, although her life is under threat. It is shown in her actions. She secretly helps the neighbour's kid which is the greatest risk she has taken in order to educate the kids. She knows that she may be executed by the Taliban for her action but she has the courage to do things against Taliban because she was educated. It is shown in her words, "I taught several of the neighbor's daughters in a makeshift classroom in our home. But when the Taliban executed three people in one week for running a secret school, even our neighbor's kept their daughters home. Our once bright and cheerful home felt stifling and dark. (94)

Nadia Hashimi shares an incident that happened in the women's hospital with the help of the character Fereiba. Fereiba sees a handful of Europeans are arrested by Taliban for the reason of taking pictures at a women's hospital in Kabul, because, "*The Taliban feel that it is un-Islamic to take photographs of people,*" (94). On seeing the Europeans arrested by the Taliban, Fereiba thinks in her mind as:

If I were a European, I never would have left my home to come to Kabul. Not in those days. I would have stayed in Poland or England or Italy where there were no whistling rockets above, where meat and vegetables were abundant and women weren't afraid to step outside their homes. Why leave such a paradise to come to Kabul?"(94)

When we analyse the above statement of Fereiba, we can understand the real state of people there in Afghanistan under Taliban control. Fereiba feels that her country is not a place for the peaceful life. She feels unsafe to live there. She wishes to be live like European who can do what they wishes to do without any restrictions. She wishes to stay in the countries like Poland or England or Italy because there were no whistling rockets to destroy people and their belongings.

Nadia Hashimi shows the troublesome childhood of Fereiba in the novel. Although Fereiba had troublesome childhood, she fights for getting the basic education from her family. She lost her

mother when she was born, but she got another mother in guise of her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law allows her to go for higher studies. She chose teaching as her profession and does well there. She became a teacher. Everything goes well until the country fell under Taliban's control. She lost her profession. She could not teach. Although As an educated parent Fereiba, she could not send her daughter to school. Taliban tries to put women under dark by not allowing them to go to school. So the Taliban regime completely backlashes the empowerment of women.

During the time of Afghanistan's destruction, Fereiba got pregnant at the third time. She does not want her child to be born in the war torn country. She worries about her child that her child may lose her life if she lives in the country already torn by war and fundamentalist groups. Fereiba says:

And now we are to bring another child into this Kabul? A Kabul that neither you nor I can recognize? For what? If he is a boy, he will grow up and know nothing but beards and fear. And God forbid this child has the sorry fortune to be born a girl! I just don't think I could bear it. Already, I am ashamed to let Samira see what has become of me. I have had to cover under the stick of those turbaned tyrants while they stripped me of my career, my friends, my freedom to walk about! What future can there be for my daughter? (95)

The above quote is an evident of cruelties against people that are happened in Afghanistan. Mahmood and Fereiba feel sorry for their children, especially, the eldest son Saleem. Mahmood wants to give him safe country that could give what he wants in future. Mahmood says to his son, "I wish you could have learned to take your first steps without rockets firing over your head. This is no place for child but because of that, it's all the more important for you to step up. You must find a way to make good of this situation to reap a noble harvest" (99-100).

The Taliban searches Fereiba's husband Mahmood since they believe that Mahmood acts against them. The Taliban accused him of defiance of their Islamic law. They suddenly enter his house in order to search Mahmood there. But Fereiba worries whether the Taliban find anything against their rules in the house. She says, "We had no photographs, no television, and no radio, thank God. I hoped once they realized our home was free of contraband, they would leave" (102).

Nadia Hashimi writes that the women in Afghanistan are not easily allowed to get immediate treatment during their pregnancy. The character is also pregnant during Taliban regime. Her labour pain begins but she cannot go to hospital without a male escorts. Mahmood was killed by the Taliban and so she brings her son Saleem to escort her to the hospital. On the way to hospital, some men enquire her about her husband. Fereiba shows her son as her escort and say, "This is my son. He is escorting me to the hospital. I am in severe pain and in a...condition." (109). But the Taliban scolds her as:

Only loose women speak of such matters so openly! Have you no shame in front of your son? Where is his father? Or maybe he doesn't have one... "Get back to your home. Go home with your boy and try to carry yourself as a respectable Muslim Woman. You have no need for the hospital. Keep your women troubles to yourself and spare your son the shame of being seen you." (109)

Fereiba decided to leave from Kabul because she knows that life is not going to be easy under Taliban control. She says, "I feared my son would be swallowed by the Taliban, and as a woman, there was little I could do to help us survive. [...] "I have no choice but to get my children out of Kabul. Their stomachs are empty, their lips parched. There's nothing for us here" (115). Fereiba decides to risk her life to travel to another country in order to save her children and also to escape from the brutality of Taliban. She lost many things during her journey but still she is resilient. After Taliban loses its control, Afghanistan begins to come back to normal. But the impact of Taliban still influences Afghanistan. Jenny Nordberg writes:

Much of what the Taliban had banned and decreed regarding women is still effectively law in large parts of this mostly illiterate country, enforced by conservative tradition. In many provinces, burkas are still commonplace, and women rarely work or leave the house without their husbands. The majority of marriages are still forced, honor killing are not unusual, and any involvement of the justice system in a rape case usually means that only the victim goes to jail, charged with adultery or with having had premarital sex – unless she, as a commonly imposed solution, is forced to marry her rapist. Women burn themselves to death using cooking fuel to escape domestic abuse here, and daughters are still a viable, informal currency used by fathers to pay off debts and settle disputes. (11)

So, religious fundamentalism backlashes women from empowerment. Fereiba somehow managed to get freedom of education from her family and begins to fly on her own. But her wings are clipped by fundamentalist. We can see Fereiba as a role model to other women for her resilience and perseverance and strength to survive in the war torn country. Although, the situation may force her to take decision to move her children from Afghanistan to the safer place, she has the courage to face all changes in her life. Fundamentalist may clip the wings of women; there are still some women who are trying to fight for their freedom. So, religious fundamentalism is one of the factors that affect women empowerment in Afghanistan.

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