






**Afghan Women and the Taliban: Tracing Questions of Legal Rights, Insecurity and
Uncertainty in Select Texts vis-à-vis the Current Crisis**

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| Author/s | Anupama B.N.¹ & Payel Dutta Chowdhury² | |
| Affiliation | ¹ Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India. ² REVA University, Bengaluru, India. | |
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Afghan Women and the Taliban: Tracing Questions of Legal Rights, Insecurity and Uncertainty in Select Texts vis-à-vis the Current Crisis

Anupama B.N.¹ & Payel Dutta Chowdhury²

¹Associate Professor, Department of Liberal Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India.

ORCID: 0000-0003-3540-6396, Email: anupama.bn@manipal.edu

², Professor & Director, School of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences, REVA University, Bengaluru, India.

ORCID: 0000-0002-2999-0533, Email: payeldutta.c@gmail.com

Abstract:

The status of Afghan women has been a subject of academic interest primarily because of the strict patriarchal hegemony that they have been subjected to. Afghanistan has seen enormous changes in the last four decades due to multiple invasions, wars, and terrorism. 15th August 2021 marks a significant transition in the Afghan socio-political scenario with the Afghan government collapsing as Taliban took over Kabul. The Taliban's initial public statements after seizing power included assurances on allowing women their rights within the framework of Shari'a Law. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the actual status of Afghan women's legal rights and security concerns at present after the completion of one year of the Taliban take-over. The study delves into an exploration of the changing dynamics of women's status in real-life vis-à-vis such portrayals in select literary texts by Khaled Hosseini and Atiq Rahimi to understand how their narrative spaces mirror the socio-political conflicts in Afghanistan. Drawing upon Gender Studies and discourses concerning masculinity and femininity, particularly studies conducted on women and violence, and the UN Women's reports on gender alert published in December 2021 and August 2022, this paper aims to explore the fictional space in relation to the real-life scenario in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghan women, Taliban, Legal Rights, Security, UN Women's reports

Introduction:

The Gender Alert No.1 titled "Women's Rights in Afghanistan: Where Are We Now?" (December 2021) and the Gender Alert No. 2 titled "Women's rights in Afghanistan one year after the Taliban take-over" (15th August 2022) published by the UN Women (the United Nations entity working for gender equality and the empowerment of women) document women's status in Afghanistan in the last one year after the Taliban took over the country. These reports, developed using primary and secondary data, form the base of this study to examine the Afghan women's legal rights and security concerns in the present-day Afghanistan. After seizing power in August 2021, the Taliban, in their initial statements had assured women that their rights would be protected as per Islamic Law, which would also include their rights to education and employment. However, the Alert No. 1 summarizes its findings contrary to these assurances that "despite the Taliban assurances that

women's rights will be respected according to Islam, women and girls are seeing a rapid reversal of their rights." (Gender Alert No. 1, 2021, p. 1) The second and the more recent one, also records "drastic reversals on women's rights" (Gender Alert No. 2, 2022, p. 2) with rise in suicide rates among women, mortality rates, decline in women's employment and education. Afghan women are reporting "increased levels of restrictive gender norms and practices, impacting on freedom of movement and expression, access to life-saving services, information, protection, education, employment and livelihood opportunities" (Gender Alert No. 1, 2021, p. 2). Afghanistan is a country which has been ravaged by multiple wars. This had a tremendous impact on the socio-political fabric of the country. In a war-torn country, from the previous century to the present times, gender roles have been changing constantly. The constant clash in gender roles due to multifarious regimes and wars in the country led to a disturbed atmosphere in the society. Also, most men and women perform their roles as per the expectations of the society. In this context of gender roles, it has been said that,

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of a being gender proves to be performance – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. (Butler, 1990).

Based on the foundation of the two UN Women reports, this study explores the gender roles defined by cultural and political predominance in the works of Afghan writers, Khaled Hosseini and Atiq Rahimi, with special emphasis on institutionalized violence among men and oppression of women under various authoritarian regimes. The study also interprets the writers' approaches to diverse questions of identity through the intersection of gender, class, ethnicity, masculinity, and femininity.

Women in Afghanistan had wide-ranging experiences under several dictatorial regimes. Also, there was a stark contrast in the experiences of rural women and the women in cities. Women in the villages were not much exposed to the outside world and they were strictly governed by the conservative archetypes of patriarchy. In the 'Postscript' to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the author states -

. . . women in Afghanistan were professors at universities, they were doctors and lawyers, worked in 153 hospitals, taught at schools, and played an important role in society. But that was in Kabul . . . There has always been an ideological gap between liberal reformist Kabul and rural Afghanistan. (Hosseini, 2008).

Afghan men in rural areas laid several restrictions to uphold the dominant ideology of patriarchy. Having extremely limited exposure to different customs, women normally accepted the stringent norms in the countryside as something normal or way of life. In Afghan cities, most people had liberal attitude towards various norms and customs of the society. Their outlook towards women, education and other social systems was more progressive. Nevertheless, it cannot be generalized. Few people in rural areas were more liberal in thinking, likewise in urban areas people had extremely restrictive point of view towards women's empowerment. There were clashes among people in both rural and urban areas, especially in the cities where people had strikingly opposite views. Especially with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, when progressive social reforms

were introduced in the country which were extremely radical in nature, the entire social equilibrium of the country was disrupted. This led to extreme chaotic atmosphere in the country. Followed by the Soviet invasion, multiple civil wars had a great impact on the lives of both men and women. The wars became the determining factors for the troubled atmosphere in the country. This study examines Afghan women's position during the Taliban regimes (both in the past and the present) by comparing their status under several other rules, with particular emphasis on portrayals in select literary texts. Focus will primarily be on violence meted out towards women and girls, restrictions on their movements, and education, employment, and healthcare concerning women.

Violence against Women & Girls (VAWG):

Patriarchy is a social system which disseminates the superiority of a man in comparison to a woman without logical grounds. In this context, it has been stated:

The word "patriarchy" means the rule of the father or the patriarch . . . this social system is the belief or the ideology that man is superior to woman, that women are and should be controlled by men, and are part of a man's property. Now when one uses the word patriarchy, it refers to the system that oppresses and subordinates women in both the private and the public sphere. (Bhasin and Khan, 1986).

In a country like Afghanistan, in most of the regions, patriarchal attitudes of men are not an uncommon phenomenon. Violence against women and girls has been a common aspect of Afghan life. Even before the Taliban take-over in August 2021, the rate of violence towards women and girls was extremely high. However, there existed an access to quality services for survivors which are on a decline at present due to coercion from the Taliban to stop such services. In most of the cases, such service providers had fled the country after the Taliban take-over. This has resulted in complete isolation and a lack of a safe refuge for Afghan women and girls who are facing violence. The UN Women Gender Alert no. 1 puts forward an important perspective related to domestic violence in Afghanistan. Usually, it is seen that in every crisis, an increase in VAWG can be noted when they are bound to their domestic sphere. Along similar lines, Alert no. 1 records the primary reasons for such violence in Afghanistan –

. . . multiple displacements, the loss of livelihoods, the increase in poverty, inflation and skyrocketing prices of daily necessities are compounding factors increasing women and girls' vulnerability to violence. This is seen, for example, in increased rates of child marriage reported due to economic insecurity. (Gender Alert No. 1, 2021).

Afghan writers too have focused on the impact of violence in the lives of women. Khaled Hosseini dedicates his second book, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, to the women of Afghanistan. This is a testimony for a greater need to focus on the lives of the Afghan women in particular. Due to several authoritarian regimes, Afghan women have witnessed some of the horrendous acts in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the rules are set by men in the institution of marriage. The sacred institution of marriage is brought down to the level of business. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Rasheed proclaims to his second wife Mariam,

But I'm a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand? (Hosseini, 2008).

The tone and language of the man is so authoritative, patriarchal, and oppressive, that the women suffer silently without raising their voice. However, when Mariam notices Rasheed's sexual inclination or his perverse behaviour towards other women and displays of violent sexual behaviour towards her, she remains passive –

He was a man, after all . . . His needs differed from hers. For her, all these months later, their coupling was still an exercise in tolerating pain. His appetite, on the other hand, was fierce, sometimes bordering on the violent. (Hosseini, 2008).

When women are instilled with such beliefs that they are meant to endure the trauma of suppression by the perceived superior gender, they find it difficult to fight against the irrational behaviour of men. At a very young age, their minds are ingrained about the normalcy of gender disparity prevalent in their society. As critics opine, "gender is also one of the first social categories that children learn in today's societies, and thus knowledge of gender stereotypes is evident from early childhood" (Steffens and Viladot, 2015, p. 132). Violence in its various forms did have a terrible impact on the mental health of women. But women succumbed to various forms of violence as the external forces, such as, the Taliban, supported patriarchal ideologies. The external socio-political world (the Taliban rule) and the internal family space worked in tandem with each other. They supported each other's brutal and domineering attitude to reclaim the superiority of men. In some cases, the social class of women determined the kind of life women would live. In Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam, born out of wedlock to Jalil and his maid, was forced to embrace married life at the age of fifteen, unlike her father's other children, who were planning to enroll in Kabul University for higher education. Even though Jalil loved his daughter, Mariam, he became voiceless amidst his wives. Also, the societal pressures forced Mariam's mother to end her life and the issue was not addressed or inspected to punish the guilty. Lamentably, the women who belonged to the lower class had to endure trauma and misery due to the arbitrary acts of men.

The official rule of Taliban from 1996 to 2001, is unarguably, one of the reprehensible chapters in Afghanistan. They systematized the lives and fate of Afghan people as per their stringent edicts which did not allow any scope for Afghan women to express their ideas or voice out their agony. This misogynist attitude of the Taliban only worsened the situation of Afghan women. Concomitantly, the stringent restrictions laid on women, refrained them from occupying any public spaces. Though some women adhered to the Taliban rules, there was also dissension from a few people. In Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the two wives of Rasheed, plan on a mission to leave their brutish husband and travel to a different country. Nevertheless, the outside male world does not support their dreams or aspirations. The police officers bring them back to Rasheed's dwelling. Undoubtedly, what follows would be physical and psychological violence –

One moment she was talking and the next she was on all fours, wide-eyed and red-faced, trying to draw a breath. It was as if a car had hit her at full speed . . . Dribble hung from her mouth. Then she was being dragged by the hair . . . (Hosseini, 2008).

Regrettably, the men at home, used the Taliban's dictates for their advantage to exercise their power on their wives. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Rasheed confidently articulates to his wife,

I could go to the Taliban one day, just walk in and say that I have my suspicions about you. That's all it would take. Whose word do you think they would believe? What do you think they'd do to you? (Hosseini, 2008).

His words clearly portray the powers which were bestowed on men. The Taliban contributed immensely to sustaining the male hegemony both in private and public spaces. The familial oppression pushed women towards the periphery, and the male oppressors remained ever powerful.

Contiguous to the literary presentations, the Taliban takeover at present has created fertile grounds for VAWG in the private as well as the public sphere. Women and girls, when abused, are unable to reach out to anyone for safety. The Taliban authorities have not committed to any support services while the numbers of violence are on a rapid increase. Highlighting the present situation of hopelessness amidst a violent environment, the Gender Alert no. 2 records an increase in child and forced marriages in the last one year driven by economic pressure. Even in the past, the plight of some Afghan women in rural and urban areas, during pre-Soviet invasion, was in a pathetic state due to rigid socio-cultural practices which finds mention in fictional spaces. In *The Patience Stone*, Atiq Rahimi has portrayed the customs of selling girls by male members of the family to clear their debts or selling the daughters to prospective grooms. Unfortunately, girls become material property, who could be merchandised within the institution of marriage. The protagonist sadly reminisces about her father's inhuman behaviour and says, "As fate would have it, he lost. He had no money left to honour his bet, so he gave my sister instead" (Rahimi, 2011, p. 58). The male-controlled society allowed for such atrocious activities. In this context, in the contemporary scenario, an increased rate of gender-based violence (GBV) on girls, who are forcibly married, by their husbands and in-laws, can also be noted. This violence in the private sphere also includes negligence and limitations in accessing reproductive health safety measures and a decline in the completion of education. Alert no 2. also notes an alarming decrease in access to justice for women and girls who have faced violence and records that –

Between August 2021 and June 2022, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) received 87 reports of violence against women and girls, including two honour killings, none of which were processed through the formal justice system. (Gender Alert No. 2, 2022).

The complete break-down of support system at all levels is proving a major threat in the survival of women and girls in Afghanistan, with the perpetrator of violence most of the time being a male family member on whom women's economic dependency is forcibly thrust upon.

Restrictions on Freedom of Movement:

In congruence with the issue of VAWG, much of the distress for Afghan women arises from the strict regulation imposed on their freedom of movement. From this restriction, stems various other forms of subjugation and violence on the Afghan women. The dire strait that the Afghan women are at present, becomes clear by the response of a woman to the restrictions imposed upon by the Taliban –

Back then [before 15 August 2021], I had no fear when I left home. I had no fear that someone would stop me on the street and ask me why my veil is black, or red or white, [or] that someone would stop me to see what is on my phone. (Gender Alert no. 2, 2022).

As per the Taliban dictate, women cannot go out without accompaniment, which makes the company of a *mahram*, i.e., a male relative, compulsory. Under the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Taliban imposed several restrictions on Afghan people and more specifically on Afghan women. Restrictions were voiced out in this manner –

Attention women: You will stay inside your homes at all times. . . . If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. . . . You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. (Hosseini, 2008).

During the Taliban regime in the late 1990s, women were made to be constantly dependent on their male family members for their movement outside the house. Nevertheless, some women dared to move out of the house without the *mahram*. The violent Taliban regime is portrayed in fictional worlds too where similar questions were asked repeatedly –

Where is your mahram? Other times, she met with assortments of wooden clubs, fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps, often fists. One day, a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna. When he was done, he gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said, 'I see you again, I'll beat you until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones.' (Hosseini, 2008).

Hosseini's portrayal of such incidents clearly exposes the ruthless nature of the Taliban in their treatment of women. Unfortunately, the Taliban fabricate various narratives to venerate their acts. Such announcements, which find place in the fictional space, are in fact taken from real-life experiences. After the August 2021 take-over, the Taliban authorities have time and again made such public announcements about restrictions on women's movement, blatantly declaring that women "are not to leave home except in cases of necessity" (Gender Alert no. 2, 2022, p. 3). These restrictions have limited the movements of women and girls, and have affected their day-to-day lives, where the worst sufferers are probably women with disabilities, female-headed households, or all-women households.

The announcements by the Taliban also included dictates on women's clothing. Wearing the Islamic *hijab* is compulsory and women who fail to adhere to these restrictions are beaten up in public and the male members of their families are also punished severely, thereby, enforcing oppression on women in the private sphere as well. The directive states that women should be in *hijab* while going out of the house and cover their faces completely, leaving only the eyes open. The dress code for women stems from patriarchal dominance and control of men over women's lives, thereby, strengthening the belief that women, if not controlled, can provoke sinful behaviour. Due to the after-effect of non-adherence of these restrictions, families have started self-censoring on women's activities. Women face harsh restrictions from their own families on movement outside home which is done more as a protective measure. However, this also has larger implications in a patriarchal dominated society where taking the cue from the Taliban restrictions, other self-imposed limitations are set by families, communities, and employers, hurling women further into the deep recesses of the private sphere. A society which is already steeped into

patriarchal hegemony becomes even more restrictive in such a situation as that of the present when concern over family honour overtakes the freedom of women. Women's incarceration inside their home is legitimized in terms of the strict interpretation of Shari'a law. It has been pointed out that "Men use Islamism and its variants as means of self-actualization and directly in service of matters associated with personhood, masculinity, and particularly honor" (Aslam, 2012, p. 7). The UN Women's report clearly sums up this situation –

This climate of fear, and uncertainty along with mobility restrictions on women will have a knock-on impact on women's mental health, their ability to work, pursue education, seek life-saving services, and participate in public and political life. (Gender Alert no. 1, 2021).

The restrictions on women's movement reinforces gender stereotypes about women's vulnerability and their requirement of protection by male members of the family.

Women and Education:

The multiple wars in Afghanistan had a devastating blow to the education system of Afghanistan. The Soviet-Afghan war and the civil wars bruised the social system to a great extent. Though in the initial years of the Soviet rule, girls and women enjoyed many liberties due to their progressive reforms, in the later years, things changed drastically. And especially, girls could hardly get education due to unsafe and miserable conditions outside the house. In this context, scholars have expressed their views on girls' schooling in Afghanistan,

Afghan females have been particularly disadvantaged with respect to education. . . . The war with the Soviet Union and the subsequent Taliban regime worsened the already bleak education opportunities in Afghan women and girls. (Fort and Tembon, 2008).

A similar situation can be witnessed in present-day Afghanistan after the Taliban take-over last year. It is only in seven provinces out of thirty-four that girls have access to secondary school education; in the other twenty-seven provinces, girls are barred from education from grades 7 to 12. There exists an environment of complete uncertainty and young women have also been facing various challenges to access university-level education. Familial pressure because of strict adherence to Taliban dictates has resulted in a negative attitude towards girls' education which is seen as a dead-end in the absence of opportunities for higher education as well as employment opportunities. This attitude towards girls' education is portrayed in fictional spaces too. In Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, we find that the entry of the Soviets in Afghanistan brought in many progressive reforms in favour of women but also the fury of traditional clerics and patriarchs. Girls had to discontinue their schooling due to continuous bombings and violence meted out on the streets. Laila and her friends Giti, Wajma, and Hasina had to discontinue their education in such unsafe conditions. This clearly indicates the insurmountable damage the wars have done in the lives of Afghan girls, who could have educated themselves and contributed immensely towards the growth of the country. Education for many girls becomes a distant dream or an unattainable destiny in Afghanistan because of denial of education based on traditional cultural taboos. Mariam's mother, Nana's assertion that a woman need not study, and endurance is the only skill needed for her had a cascading effect in Mariam's marital life. Nana can be considered as the perfect example of an exponent of patriarchy. She never raised any objections for the demeaning state that she had been pushed into by Jalil. She even conditions her daughter's

mind to accept the atrocities of the patriarchal system. As those ideas got ingrained in her mind, Mariam never challenged the unfair patriarchal system.

Interestingly, fictional narratives have also portrayed a world devoid of restrictions for women in Afghanistan. In Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Babi mentions that Kabul had always been relatively liberal and progressive. During the Soviet rule, it was even more progressive. This is evident because Laila and her neighbourhood girls were attending school without any male companion alongside. In a country where young girls and boys were not permitted to meet often in the public, young Laila and Tari would meet frequently. Her father, Babi, a progressive thinker, would never raise objections to that. Rather, once he had taken both of them to the Bamiyan valley to witness the two giant Buddhas. The period when Russians invaded the country (1979-1989), can be called as the golden age or the period of liberation for girls/women as they enjoyed freedom of choice in many aspects. But, this period, also brought in a lot of disturbances regarding culture, religion and politics. The tribal leaders in Afghanistan were not willing to accept the measures taken to elevate the status of women. Nevertheless, the situation was quite different in rural areas. There was a major clash between the Communist rulers and tribal leaders. In this line of thought, it has been stated that -

Here in Kabul, women taught at the university, ran schools, held office in government. [In] tribal areas . . . women were rarely seen on the streets and only in burqa and accompanied by men. (Nordberg, 2014, p. 133).

In the name of culture or religion, the traditional men did not support the reforms to maintain their superiority over the women during the Soviet war. In Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Amir's mother worked as a Professor at Kabul University and Assef's mother was a German teacher. The readers do not find any references to gender apartheid especially among the most privileged Pashtun women. They were not relegated to the tangential levels in the city of Kabul.

The situation at present under the Taliban, however, is not in tandem with the one portrayed in the fictional space. The Taliban has made public that they are working on a national policy for girls' education and would require more time to come out with a workable plan. In September 2021, they had announced that "women would be allowed to study, but not alongside men; that gender-segregation and new dress code would be introduced, and a review of the subjects undertaken" (Gender Alert no. 1, 2022, p. 5). However, even after a year has passed, the Taliban authorities have still not taken any initiative to reopen secondary schools for girls. Higher education in the universities is also disrupted due to strict regulations on gender segregation and dress codes, thus, closing all possible doors towards women empowerment.

Women in the Public Sphere:

Under the Taliban regime in the past as well as at present, women's right to employment has been severely challenged. As a result of stringent restrictions by the Taliban on women's movement and participation in the public sphere, families have started self-censoring, which has resulted in a steep decline in women's employment. The requirement of a *mahram* has added difficulties in women's movement to go for work, particularly in women-headed households. It has been recorded that

. . . in January 2022, almost 100% of women-headed households faced insufficient food consumption; and 85 percent of female-headed households surveyed reported turning to drastic coping measures – limiting food intake, borrowing food – compared to 62 percent of male-headed households. (Gender Alert No. 2, 2022).

The fictional representation of restrictions on Afghan women are also on similar lines. Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* unveils the traumatic experiences of a single woman who has to manage the household and take care of her sick and immobile husband. The unnamed protagonist expresses,

'I'll be back tomorrow,' she whispers. She is in the doorway, leaning down to pick up her veil, when a sudden gunshot, not far away, rivets her to the floor, freezing her mid-movement. A second shot, even closer. A third ... and then shots ringing out from all directions, going in all directions. (Rahimi, 2011).

Similar portrayal is seen in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, where it is apparent that the women in public space were completely controlled by the Taliban. Though the husband would exercise his power inside the house, he would not have a say in the presence of the Taliban. Hassan expresses his plight,

So she asked louder and suddenly a young Talib ran over and hit her on the thighs with his wooden stick. He struck her so hard she fell down. He was screaming at her and cursing and saying the Ministry of Vice and Virtue does not allow women to speak loudly. She had a large purple bruise on her leg for days but what could I do except stand and watch my wife get beaten? (Hosseini, 2013).

It is evident that the role of husband was passive in the Taliban world. Also, it is ironic that there was a Ministry of Vice and Virtue when the latter had no value in the war-torn country. In such stifling environment, women had to bear the brunt of cruelty in the male-dominated Taliban world. This imbalanced structure in the society further contributed to the declining of socio-cultural values, leading to the decline of the progress of the country.

Another important concern in this direction is the Taliban's ambiguous position regarding women's work in different sectors. Certain employment sectors, such as, education and health services, are considered acceptable for women (of course, with restrictions regarding gender segregation), but employment in the media and civil society are completely denied to women. Many women journalists fled the country in the wake of the withdrawal of the U.S. troops, fearing punishment from the Taliban. Those who are still working, report being attacked and threatened regularly by the Taliban. The Taliban's take on gender equality is better understood by their exclusion of women during the three-day gathering in June 2022 to discuss national policies. The gathering included four-thousand and five hundred male clerics and leaders, and the Taliban justified their stance by saying that "women would be sufficiently involved through the presence of their sons, husbands and fathers" (Gender Alert no. 2, 2022, p. 4). The abolition of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) and the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) also showcase the Taliban's systematic denial of women's rights and participation in the public sphere. The most problematic aspect of Taliban's restrictive directions on women's rights is the ambiguity

and lack of clear-cut policies. As a result, different mandates are followed at various provinces, creating room for confusion.

Women and Healthcare:

In a scenario where women's legal rights and basic human identity are trampled upon, it is not hard to imagine the poor condition that would be prevalent regarding their healthcare. The UN Women report records that the "freezing of international aid has had a tremendous impact on the ability to run health services, let alone specialized services for women and girls" (Gender Alert No. 1, 2021, p. 6). Due to lack of required number of service providers, restrictions imposed on women's mobility, access issues in rural areas, and shortages of supplies and equipment, women's healthcare facilities have deteriorated unimaginably in the last one year. It has also been stated that due to the existing conditions, "(m)aternal mortality rates for women and girls are expected to rise due to restricted mobility for pregnant women as well as midwives, and the rise of child marriage and associated likelihood of early pregnancy." (Gender Alert No. 1, 2021, p. 6-7). The pathetic situation of healthcare in Afghanistan, particularly for women, is portrayed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, when the doctor comments about the Taliban during Laila's delivery,

They won't give me what I need. I have no X-ray either, no suction, no oxygen, not even simple antibiotics. When NGOs offer money, the Taliban turn them away. Or they funnel the money to the places that cater to men. (Hosseini, 2008).

In such rigid conditions, the doctors had to perform their duties, without raising any objections. Also, the women doctors had to wear *burqa* while treating the patients. The medical care of the women was never considered important. The terrible healthcare conditions would eventually lead to several deaths. In another incident, we can witness the gender disparity in the medical world as well – "This hospital no longer treats women,' the guard barked. . . . 'But this is a women's hospital!' a woman shouted behind Mariam" (Hosseini, 2008, p. 228). The pain and trauma of sick women would worsen the situation as there were no medical facilities for women in some parts of Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. This fictional representation holds good in the present-day situation as well. Afghan women face several challenges in the most basic healthcare requirement and mental health support due to the Taliban restrictions, signifying that to improve the situation, it is required that other basic rights of women must be addressed with priority.

Conclusion:

This study showcases how the stereotypes related to masculinity and femininity has created a mayhem in the present-day Taliban led Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the conservative regime, legitimize the set patterns regarding gender stereotypes. It is essential to understand how theorists look at these traditional binary concepts. It has been stated that:

The masculine has come to be associated with assertion and aggression and, conversely, the feminine with gentleness and emotionality. Unsurprisingly, the socialization theorists have often been attacked for promoting a very static, unitary concept of gender differences and for not taking sufficient account of the variety of masculinities and femininities resulting from class, ethnicity and historical location. (Beynon, 2002).

While the socialization theorists have been criticized, it is essential to understand that the concepts of masculinities and femininities cannot be compartmentalized. James Fergusson, a freelance journalist and foreign correspondent, who has reported extensively on Afghan affairs for several years had analyzed the root cause of this conflict between the West's outrage and the Taliban's gender stereotyped activities. He states –

There was evidence that the leadership were genuinely baffled at the West's outrage over their treatment of women. In Pashtun culture, women had never had the same rights as men. Restricting them to their homes, the Taliban argued with complete sincerity, was as ever necessary 'for their own protection' – by which of course they meant for namus, the protection of the honour of women. (Fergusson, 2011).

This observation is perhaps an important perspective to understand the otherwise baffling nature of the Taliban's treatment of women. The present-day restrictions imposed upon women by the Taliban, otherwise, pose a lot of difficulty to comprehend their actions which are so severely criticized by the entire world. The UN Women's Gender Alerts act as a timely warning regarding the disconcerting situation related to Afghan women's security and legal rights in the Taliban regime. The fictional narratives of Hosseini and Rahimi build upon this process of limiting women's empowerment at every level in the patriarchal hegemony. This is an essential point of view that runs through all the narratives. This study has attempted to demonstrate how different forms of patriarchal oppression and restrictions are limiting women's day-to-day existence in Afghanistan and how the situation has assumed a new poignancy in the context of the recent Taliban take-over. The canvas of literary representations illuminates our understanding on the similar lines, drawing home the fact that indeed literature is a mirror of the society. The study, therefore, recommends that the present government take immediate steps to provide women with their basic rights, which would include, freedom of movement, education, healthcare, and employment, as well as bring back the much-required support services for women from civil societies. In the long run, the Taliban need to invest in women across all spheres of life and frame clear-cut policies concerning women, so that all ambiguities and uncertainties are done away with.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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Dr. Anupama B.N. teaches literature and language at Manipal Academy of Higher Education. Her areas of interest include American literature, English literature, and African American literature. Her doctoral research was on Afghan literature, with specific reference to Khaled Hosseini and Atiq Rahimi's narratives.

Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury teaches literature at REVA University, Bangalore. Her areas of interest include Gender and Sexuality Studies, Cultural Studies, and Film Studies. Her published works include *Lockdown Diaries: Stories of Unusual Times*, *Folktales from India's Northeast*, *The Nagas: Social and Cultural Identity – Texts and Contexts*, *Women of Phoolbari and Other Stories*, and *Dynamics of Self, Family and Community*.