



## *From Subjugation to Self-determination: An Analysis of the Impact of Western Values on the Muslim Afghan Woman in The Patience Stone (2008)*

من الاستعباد إلى تقرير المصير: تحليل تأثير القيم الغربية على المرأة الأفغانية المسلمة في رواية حجر الصبر (2008)

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### Abstract:

This article explores the dynamic interaction between tradition – mainly influenced by Islam – and modernity in Afghan culture, focusing on the influence of Western ideals on the cultural identity of Afghanistan. It examines how literature, particularly Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone*, reflects the evolving perspectives of the Afghan society, especially its women. The research methodology involves a textual analysis that explores themes such as mental health, patriarchy, oppression, faith, tradition and liberation, which define the protagonist's journey toward self-awareness and empowerment. The study reveals that the protagonist's transformation is very much shaped by her adoption of ideals typical of Western thinking.

**Key words:** Afghanistan; culture; Islam; The Patience Stone; West; women

### ملخص :

يستكشف هذا المقال التفاعل الديناميكي بين التقاليد – المتأثرة بشكل رئيسي بالإسلام – والحداثة في الثقافة الأفغانية، مع التركيز على تأثير القيم الغربية على الهوية الثقافية لأفغانستان. يدرس المقال بشكل خاص كيف يعكس الأدب، ولا سيما رواية عتيق رحيمي "حجر الصبر"، وجهات النظر المتطورة للمجتمع الأفغاني، وخاصة نساءه. تتضمن منهجية البحث تحليلاً نصياً يستكشف موضوعات مثل الصحة النفسية، والنظام الأبوي، والقمع، و الدين، والتقاليد، والتحرر، والتي تحدد رحلة الشخصية الرئيسية نحو الوعي الذاتي والتمكين. تكشف الدراسة أن تحول الشخصية الرئيسية يتشكل بشكل كبير من خلال تبنيها لقيم موجودة في التفكير الغربي.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** أفغانستان ; الثقافة، الإسلام، "حجر الصبر"، الغرب، النساء.

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## Introduction

Afghan-born author and filmmaker Atiq Rahimi has emerged as a significant voice in modern literature thanks to his poignant examination of identity and cultural tensions. Born in Kabul, Rahimi fled to France in the 1980s during the Soviet-Afghan War, bringing with him a deep awareness of the inconsistencies and complexity of Afghan society. His book *The Patience Stone*, which was first published in French and then translated into several other languages, has received a lot of appreciation for its candid and intimate depiction of Afghan women's lives. His work offers as a vivid portrayal of the Afghan woman's terrible plight in a society whose structure is extremely patriarchal and where the family institution plays a key role in nurturing and upholding it (Zabihzadeh, S., Hashim, R. S., & Wei, G. C., 2015, pp. 54, 64). The novel demonstrates Rahimi's ability to skillfully weave personal tales with more general sociopolitical themes into a story that appeals to Afghan and international readers alike.

*The Patience Stone* centers on an unidentified Afghan woman who tends to her unconscious husband amidst a backdrop of war and social instability. This extreme situation can be viewed as a metaphorical representation of her own imprisonment in a strict patriarchal society. As she speaks to her unresponsive man about her deepest aspirations and feelings, she reveals the significant impact of societal and cultural constraints on her life. Rahimi uses this narrative structure not only to portray the systemic oppression Afghan women endure, but also subtly explores the impact of Western cultural ideals.

The novel subtly but significantly engages with Western cultural influences, presenting them as both a source of empowerment as well as a challenge to traditional Afghan norms. Western ideas are not explicitly introduced through specific characters or direct contact with Western society but are instead mirrored in the protagonist's growing awareness and changing perspective. Her thoughts and confessions illustrate the conflict between the weight of cultural expectations and the attraction of change, exposing her own internal conflict between inherited traditions and the potential for alternative lifestyles. This conflict is a reflection of Afghanistan's larger cultural dynamics, where Westernization is viewed with distrust but is also seen as a source of modernity and empowerment.

This article addresses the complicated relationship between tradition and modernity in Afghan culture, focusing on how Western influences are affecting the identities and empowerment of Afghan women. While ideas like individualism and social critique from the West have opened up new opportunities for self-expression and independence, they also challenge the deep-rooted patriarchal values that have shaped Afghan society for so long. This tension is especially visible in the lives of Afghan women, who often feel torn between the exciting possibilities of modern life and the strong pull of their cultural traditions. The novel *The Patience Stone* emerges as a powerful case study in this regard, offering profound insights into the struggles of Afghan women for liberation and self-awareness amidst these conflicting forces.

This paper employs a literary analysis approach to investigate the themes of mental health, patriarchy, faith, and liberation in *The Patience Stone*, with particular attention to the subtle integration of Western cultural influences within the narrative. The methodology involves a close reading of the text, focusing on how the protagonist's personal journey reflects broader societal transformations in Afghanistan. The study investigates her internal tension between traditional norms and modern ideals to reveal how Western thought influences Afghan women's self-perceptions and their changing societal roles. Additionally, the analysis examines the reception of *The Patience Stone* within Afghan and Western literary contexts, highlighting how varying cultural frameworks shape interpretations of the novel and, consequently, views of Afghan identity. This dual analytical approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the novel's significance within the broader landscape of Afghan society.



The primary objective of this study is to contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions regarding the impact of Western cultural influences on Afghan society, particularly in relation to gender roles and women's empowerment. By analyzing *The Patience Stone* through the interplay of tradition and modernity, the research highlights the complexities inherent in cultural transformation and the personal struggles individuals face as they navigate these changes. The protagonist's journey serves as a microcosm of the societal shifts occurring in Afghanistan, offering insights into the tensions between preserving cultural heritage and embracing progressive ideals. Through this exploration, the paper seeks to deepen our understanding of the challenges and opportunities that arise during periods of cultural transition, particularly for Afghan women.

## 1. Background to Western Influence on Afghan Cultural Identity

Although Afghanistan was never officially colonized, it has been heavily influenced by foreign powers, particularly during the British and Soviet invasions. These interactions introduced Western ideas and systems that have left a lasting imprint on Afghan cultural identity. The combination of foreign influence and Afghanistan's strategic geopolitical location facilitated the integration of Western educational, political, and social concepts with native traditions. This hybridization process has given rise to a cultural identity that merges elements of Persian and Central Asian heritage with Western influences, resulting in a distinctive character that defines contemporary Afghan society. Religion and ethnicity further enrich this cultural fabric, with Islam serving as a cornerstone that dictates daily life, governance and moral values. As the dominant religion, Islam acts as a unifying force across the country. Consequently, Afghanistan's cultural identity in the post-colonial era is a dynamic blend of historical influences, hybrid cultural elements, and a mosaic of ethnic and religious traditions.

Afghan literature, deeply rooted in the traditions of oral storytelling and poetry, has been significantly influenced by Afghanistan's historical and cultural settings. Over the past century, the presence of Western culture has introduced new themes, styles, and perspectives into Afghan literary works that simultaneously enriched and challenged traditional narratives. The 20th century marked a period of growing Western political and cultural influence in Afghanistan, particularly during the modernization efforts during the reign of King Amanullah Khan and under the Soviet invasion. These interactions facilitated cultural exchanges that shaped Afghan writers, encouraging them to experiment with Western literary forms and ideas, which began to manifest in their works.

This new trend is most notable in the shift to explore new themes. Traditional Afghan literature often prioritized communal values, with an emphasis on collective identity and social harmony. However, exposure to Western ideals of individualism has prompted Afghan writers to explore themes related to personal identity and autonomy. Modern Afghan literary characters frequently engage with inner struggles and self-discovery, reflecting Western narratives centered on individual empowerment. A famous example is the novel *The Kite Runner* (2004) by Khaled Hosseini, where the main character Amir battles with guilt, identity, and cultural and familial expectations.

Western feminist ideals have also left their mark on Afghan literature, inspiring authors to address issues of gender roles and women's rights. The influence of these Western ideals is not strictly a new phenomenon, but has a history going back for at least a century. Since the early 1900s, the role of women in Afghan society has been shaped by an ongoing ideological conflict. This conflict has involved modernizing efforts led by the urban elite, conservative forces represented by Islamic religious scholars (ulama) advocating for sharia law, and various rural and tribal communities adhering to traditional customs (Barakat, S., & Wardell, G., 2002, pp. 911-916). In the modern era, writers such as Khaled Hosseini and Atiq Rahimi integrate themes of gender equality and liberation into their works that challenge traditional patriarchal norms and shed light on the struggles and resilience of Afghan



women. These themes resonate strongly with Western readers, resulting in cultural understanding and global empathy. In her novel *A House without Windows* (2016), Nadia Hashimi, like the authors mentioned above, tells the story of a group of Afghan women who suffer and struggle to survive and thrive against the constraints of an ultra-conservative, patriarchal culture.

Such thematic shifts and overall Western influence in Afghan literature have produced major cultural tensions. This is reflected in many literary works that depict the conflict between preserving traditional values and adapting to modernity. This is often portrayed through characters caught between these opposing forces, serving as an illustration of the cultural and generational divides that typically emerge from rapid socio-political changes. As the “cultural proxies” of Afghan life, Afghan writers address these issues and try to express the consciousness of the Afghan people, continuing the Afghan tradition of producing fiction that parallels the country’s political history (Sadat, 2008, p. 291).

## 2. Reception of *The Patience Stone* in Afghan and Western Literary Circles

Originally written in French and later translated into multiple languages, its reception has varied significantly between Afghan and Western audiences, reflecting how cultural context influences interpretation. In Afghanistan, *The Patience Stone* is celebrated as a groundbreaking work that brings to life the unspoken struggles of Afghan women. Through the protagonist’s voice, the narrative uncovers repressed emotions and long-overlooked experiences. Arbabzadah (2019) emphasizes that Rahimi’s story provides a rare and intimate glimpse into the lives of women who have historically been marginalized, highlighting their quiet strength and ability to endure. By challenging the common narrative of Afghan women as helpless victims, the novel portrays them as active participants in their own lives, even in the face of adversity. Khan notes that the protagonist’s emotional and honest confessions reveal deep-seated frustration with the cultural norms that trap her in servitude. For many Afghan readers, her emotions and struggles feel deeply familiar, mirroring their own lives. As such, the novel not only reflects a collective trauma but also serves as a call for recognizing women’s voices and their role in society (Khan, 2017, p. 191).

In Western circles, *The Patience Stone* has won praise for its poetic language and deep emotions. It has received numerous accolades, like the Prix Goncourt, and critics have commended it for its capacity to convey complex emotions in succinct yet impactful words, making it accessible to foreign audiences not familiar with Afghan culture (BookBrowse, 2010). Some Western interpretations, however, risk oversimplifying the narrative by focusing solely on themes of victimhood. Arbabzadah (2019) warns that this narrow perspective reinforces the stereotype of Afghan women as passive victims, overlooking the quiet strength and resilience that Rahimi’s protagonist embodies. These interpretations fail to fully grasp the depth and complexity of the story’s portrayal of women’s agency, missing the nuanced ways in which the character challenges her circumstances. The diverse reactions to *The Patience Stone* highlight the role of cultural context in shaping how literature is understood.

## 3. *The Patience Stone*: Cultural Shift versus Rigid Afghan Culture

The novel reflects a contrast between the rigidity of Afghan culture, on the one hand, and a gradual cultural transformation on the other. Rooted in a society dominated by patriarchal norms, deeply ingrained traditions, and the pervasive influence of religion, Afghan culture often places strict limitations on personal freedom, particularly for women. These constraints manifest in the oppressive structures of patriarchy and the strong authority of faith and tradition, which demand conformity to established roles and expectations. Yet, within this seemingly inflexible framework, the narrative reveals moments of resistance and transformation, as some characters begin to question and push



against these boundaries. Through its exploration of themes such as self-awareness and empowerment, the novel highlights the possibility of breaking free from the psychological confines imposed by cultural norms. At the same time, it underscores the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity, illustrating both the enduring hold of cultural rigidity and the subtle yet significant shifts that hint at change.

### 3.1 Mental Health and Trauma:

*The Patience Stone* offers a deep exploration of the psychological and emotional struggles of its female protagonist. In doing so, it presents an intense portrayal of mental health and trauma within the context of a patriarchal society. The protagonist's mental state transforms from one characterized by silent endurance to one characterized by a cathartic, though chaotic, expression of long-held pain, with the undercurrent of new ideals permeating her consciousness – ideals of freedom and independence, foreign to Afghan women.

The novel begins with the portrayal of the protagonist as a woman who has adopted the societal expectations placed on her, passively enduring her husband's neglect and abuse, as well as the pervasive violence of war. Her psychological state is marked by a profound isolation and emotional suppression. She carries out her caregiving responsibilities in a mechanical manner, feeding her husband through a tube, administering eye drops and reciting prayers in a ritualistic fashion. Her existence is reduced to the cadence of her husband's breathing, as she counts his breaths and measures her days by the cycles of prayer beads (Rahimi, 2009, pp. 10-12). Her intensifying trauma eventually leads to her to develop dissociative identity disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (Ashwini, D., & Kiruthika, P., 2024, p. 3). The woman's repetitive and almost robotic behavior indicates a dissociation from her own emotions, reflecting a coping strategy developed to survive in an environment where her voice and wants have been systematically silenced.

The initial mental state of the protagonist is representative of the wider psychological effects of patriarchal oppression. In a society where women are stripped of autonomy and subjected to continuous surveillance, her emotional repression is not simply a personal flaw but rather a strategy for survival (Khajuria, 2017, p. 1119). Her silence and patience is a manifestation of the societal expectation that women should bear suffering without protest, similar to the titular "patience stone", which absorbs the sorrows of those who confide in it (Rahimi, 2009, p. 5). This metaphor highlights the psychological weight carried by women, who are expected to suffer pain and trauma without pursuing relief or justice.

As the narrative continues, the protagonist's mental state starts to be clearer. With her husband lying in a comatose and unresponsive state, she begins to talk to him, initially with hesitation but gradually with growing audacity. Her monologues turn out to be a form of emotional catharsis, a means to disclose her most hidden secrets, grievances, and aspirations. She speaks about having to endure her husband's emotional and physical abuse, her sexual dissatisfaction and even her unfaithfulness, which led to the birth of her two daughters (Rahimi, 2009, pp. 91-92). These confessions are not just for her husband but for herself as well, as they can be seen as a means for her to confront the trauma which she has suppressed for a long time. The content of her revelations and the very act of speaking out are indicative of a shift in her worldview.

The woman's mental breakdown is characterized by episodes of intense emotional release. For example, she remembers an incident where her drunk husband sexually assaulted her and subsequently beat her for failing to inform him that she was on her period (Rahimi, 2009, p. 28). This and other memories trigger a burst of emotions, causing her to get enraged with her husband, the mullah and even herself. Her outbursts are accompanied by acts of self-harm, such as punching her belly during one of her confessions (Rahimi, p. 18). These incidents of self-harm highlight the intensity of her psychological pain and the lack of healthy outlets for her emotions. The protagonist's response to her trauma is intensified by her contemplation of the outlandish notions of self-determination and justice, which stand in stark contrast to the passive suffering prescribed by her society.



By the end of the novel, the psychological state of the protagonist reaches a breaking point. What begins as a therapeutic release through confession gradually spirals into a form of self-destruction. She experiences vivid hallucinations, seeing her father and hearing voices that push her to reveal her most intimate secrets (Rahimi, 2009, pp. 90-91). Her final act of violence – stabbing her husband with a knife – carries perhaps dual significance: it can be seen as both a defiant rejection of the patriarchal forces that have constrained her and a tragic descent into madness (Rahimi, p. 93). On one level, this act symbolizes her liberation from oppressive structures. On another level, it marks the destruction of her own psyche, as she is unable to harmonize her newfound voice with the harsh realities of her world.

### 3.2 Life under Patriarchy and Oppression:

The female protagonist's experiences in *The Patience Stone* highlight the oppressive power men have over women's lives by illustrating the standards and expectations of patriarchal society. The protagonist in the novel relates a story about her family when her father arranged for her twelve-years-old sister to marry a forty-year-old old man who was very wealthy in order to pay off his accumulating gambling debts (Rahimi, 2009, p. 46). The reader can immediately sense from the protagonist's emotional narration that men make reckless decisions like gambling and shamelessly force their daughters to pay for their mistakes – with their lives.

The story above serves as an example of two main complaints that many Afghan women have: dehumanization and a lack of agency. These women are denied the capacity to make important decisions about their own life and have little autonomy. Men are the only ones who decide their fate, including who they marry and whether or not to divorce. The patriarchal society in which women's preferences and choices are subservient to those of men is reflected in this portrayal. Furthermore, through the lack of fatherly compassion, the protagonist highlights the idea that Afghan women are exclusively seen by males as property, lacking any personality or personal agency, and existing just to fulfill their demands. The story of her infertile aunt demonstrates this male / female power dynamic: "After two years of marriage, my aunt hadn't been able to bear a child for him. I say for him, because that's how you men see it [...] my aunt was infertile. In other words, no good" (Rahimi, 2009, p. 63). Shortly afterwards, the aunt was sent by her husband to another house to serve his old parents, where she would be frequently raped by her father-in-law (Rahimi, p. 63). The implication from these stories is that women's lives are dictated by the whims of men in their families to be controlled and manipulated, further reinforcing the culture of gender inequality that dominates the Afghan society. This unequal distribution of power – the reader is lead to understand – perpetuates a cycle of subjugation and marginalization.

The societal norms that are responsible for the woman's complaints are not only accepted but are also heavily encouraged. Men are encouraged to act on them, and women are expected to accept them even though these norms often infringe upon their rights and freedoms. In other words, women are socialized to accept their fate as submissive and obedient to the decisions made by men. As the woman tells her husband, "[...] it didn't bother me. On the contrary, I was pleased. I told myself it was normal. That it was the difference between us. You men take your pleasure, and we women derive ours from yours. That was enough for me" (Rahimi, 2009, p. 77). This belief is very common in the country and is even rationalized. Many women adhere to a traditional framework within the family that is rooted in the concept of a "patriarchal contract", often justified by religious principles. This framework outlines their rights and duties. They believe that men's increased responsibilities in providing for their families and safeguarding family honor justifies their greater rights and privileges, such as authority over decision-making for their wives and children, as well as the right to enforce discipline, even through violence when deemed necessary (Kabeer N., Khan, A., & Adlparvar, N., 2011, p. 12).

This belief reduces women to essentially appendages of men, suggesting that their existence is dependent on a male figure in their lives – be it their husband, father, or brother. The protagonist explains,



But everything I did was for you ... in order to keep you [...] Or actually, to tell you the truth, so that you would keep me. So that you wouldn't leave me! Yes, that's why I [...] 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. (Rahimi, 2009, p. 49)

This dependency on men is not benevolent either. This is evident in the woman's monologue to her husband about another Afghan man, "Even though I know that he too could become awful, like you. I'm sure of it. The moment you possess a woman, you become monsters" (Rahimi, 2009, p. 91). This situation calls into question how this power dynamic affects women's agency and well-being, demonstrating how women are often powerless in challenging male decisions causing them emotional and physical hardship, which results in them being trapped in oppressive or unfulfilling relationships.

### 3.3 Imprisonment through Tradition and Faith:

The novel also offers a comprehensive analysis of faith and tradition in a war-torn Afghan society. Through the protagonist's journey, the novel explores the complexities of faith and tradition and their oppressive nature. The author seems to be using these themes to shed light on the issues that women confront while also questioning the role of religion and customs in the patriarchal society. It is worth mentioning that, despite some progress in terms of gender equality in Afghanistan, many believe that traditional inegalitarian norms continue to prevail. For instance, domestic violence, especially against women has long been a common phenomenon in the country and has been used as a tool of coercion and control (Rochmawati, 2014, p. 1).

The novel critically examines the heavy burden of tradition placed on women in a deeply patriarchal society, focusing on a protagonist trapped by societal norms and traditional expectations. With her husband in a coma, she is stuck in the role of caregiver, unable to escape the limited identity of a wife that society has assigned her. Rahimi captures this imbalance through the description of the frustration of his protagonist at the unfair burden of suffering she carries. She cries, "Even injured, you've been spared suffering. And it's me who suffers! Me who cries" (Rahimi, 2009, p. 21). She feels the weight of her husband's dominance despite his severe physical disability, hinting again to a deeper cultural root of women oppression in the country.

The protagonist seeks comfort in her faith during times of extreme tribulation; ironically, that same faith ultimately imprisons her. Rahimi incorporates spirituality and mysticism into the story, but he also questions the actual effectiveness of religion in easing suffering. The protagonist's faith allows her to express her emotions, but it also limits her to passive endurance, which supports social conventions and the belief that her suffering is a predetermined fate. When she dares to voice her deepest frustrations, she almost invariably comes back asking for forgiveness from God or her husband. The style of narration is very revealing of her thoughts and emotions in such moments:

Later, she comes back. Eyes solemn, hands shaking. She walks up to the man. Stops. Takes a deep breath. Grabs hold of the feeding tube, closes her eyes, and pulls it out of his mouth.

Turns around, her eyes still closed. Takes an uncertain step. Sobs "Forgive me, God!" picks up her veil and disappears. (Rahimi, 2009, p. 47)

The novel further examines the relationship between religion and patriarchy, showing how religious convictions can be used to further oppress women. While Islam does have laws pertaining to women and gender relations in Muslim societies, varied interpretations of its teachings exist and are very pronounced. Islamic modernists and fundamentalists, as self-identified groups, do not share the same perspectives on the legal status and social roles of women (Moghadam, 1999, p. 175). The Afghan society, being predominantly fundamentalist, places strong restrictions on women. In the novel, the male characters, seeking to maintain a cycle of abuse and control over women, frequently invoke religious scriptures and interpretations to defend their authority. An example of this notion can be found in the woman's frequent and unpleasant encounters with the town's mullah (a highly regarded man of religion). Here, Rahimi shares her thoughts about him:



That cretinous mullah will come to visit you and, as always, will reproach me because, according to him, I can't have taken good care of you, can't have followed his instructions, must have neglected the prayers ... Otherwise you'd be getting better! [...] It's easy for him to say [...] that I must recite one of the ninety-nine names of God ninety-nine times a day ... for ninety-nine days! But that stupid mullah has no idea what it's like to be alone with a man who ...” She can't find the right word, or doesn't dare say it, and just grumbles softly “... to be all alone with two little girls!” (2009, pp. 11-12).

Rahimi draws readers' attention to the perils of blindly following religious doctrines without critically examining their ramifications, especially when utilized by people in positions of power.

### 3.4 Liberation from the Mental Prison of Culture and Empowerment:

Through the woman's intimate monologues with her unconscious husband, Rahimi explores the theme of liberation and empowerment, stressing the resilience of women in oppressive circumstances. As she divulges her deepest secrets and desires to her unconscious husband, she defies societal norms and reveals her quest for emotional liberation. Unlike the past, when her husband apparently never gave her a chance to communicate with him, she finally gets her opportunity to freely and openly tell him all of her secrets, including taboo ones.

In the early parts of the novel, the reader can clearly detect the pervasive suppression of female voices in a conservative and war-ravaged society. The protagonist's inability to communicate openly with her husband before his sickness reflects the patriarchal silencing of women's perspectives. Through her inner monologues, the protagonist embodies the silenced voices of countless women, revealing the pain and frustration inherent in a culture that has no regard for female expression. As Hosseini affirms, “For far too long, Afghan women have been faceless and voiceless [...] Rahimi's nameless heroine is a conduit, a living vessel for the grievances of millions of women like her” (Rahimi, 2009, p. 1).

As the woman confides in her unconscious husband, Rahimi portrays a therapeutic act of self-liberation. Her confessions, which include intimate thoughts and hidden desires, offer her an outlet to express her suppressed emotions. She tells her man, “I've still so much to tell you [...] Things that have been stored up inside me for a while now. We've never had the chance to discuss them. Or—let's be honest—you've never given me the chance” (Rahimi, 2009, p. 63). Now that the situation is different, she feels more confident to speak: “I'm going to tell you everything, my sang-e saboor. Everything. Until I set myself free from my pain and my suffering” (Rahimi, p. 55). Furthermore, the man's comatose state becomes symbolic of the incapacity of the patriarchy to acknowledge or address the female experience. In sharing her experiences, the woman finds a newfound sense of empathy and understanding, allowing her to reclaim her identity and assert her agency. She declares, “Since I've been talking to you, getting angry with you, insulting you, telling you everything that I've 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” (Rahimi, p. 52).

Rahimi also explores the impact of war on traditional gender roles, particularly as men are sent to fight, leaving women to assume new responsibilities and roles. As the story goes, “At the [wedding], you were present in the form of a photo, and that wretched khanjar, which they put next to me in place of you. And I had to wait another three years for you. Three years” (Rahimi, 2009, p. 43). In the absence of male authority figures, she learns to navigate life independently, challenging societal norms and redefining her role as a woman, wife and mother. In a moment of defiance, she says to her husband, “You guys listen to your souls, and nothing else [...] And it's not your stupid soul that's protecting me now, that's for sure. It's not your soul that's feeding the kids” (2009, p. 81). She has now become the protector and the provider for the family.

As the woman begins to question societal norms and express her desires freely, she subtly subverts the established power dynamics. Rahimi shows her gradual emancipation from the patriarchal constructs that have long held her captive. Through this defiance, she takes control of her life and



challenges the traditional notions of femininity. This transformation is symbolic of a broader societal shift, leading women to start questioning their subservient roles and to seek empowerment.

## Conclusion

Rahimi illustrates the intricate impacts of evolving circumstances and perspectives through his character's self-reflection and heightened awareness, creating a narrative that addresses themes of identity, self-discovery and autonomy. The protagonist is caught in a conflict between the societal expectations placed on her and her desire for personal freedom, a struggle that many women in similar cultural settings can relate to. This internal battle shows how cultural traditions can both empower and limit individuals, offering a deeper understanding of womanhood in a society undergoing change. Rahimi explores the courage needed to challenge longstanding norms, emphasizing the tension between holding on to tradition and seeking new paths. The protagonist's experiences also reflect the collective challenges faced by Afghan women, whose voices are often marginalized in both local and global conversations. Her personal transformation illustrates the struggle between maintaining cultural heritage and embracing change. Through this, Rahimi not only highlights women's resilience but also invites readers to rethink their perceptions of Afghan identity and the complexity of cultural shifts. Notably, the protagonist's pursuit of freedom is influenced by Western ideals of autonomy and self-determination, pointing to a quiet but significant Western presence in the narrative. Her longing for personal liberation reflects values linked to Western culture, suggesting that her journey is both a personal quest and a response to the broader changes happening in Afghan society.



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