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Behind the veil of marriage: Afghan women's quest for freedom within the marital cage

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Abstract

Persistent political instability, sexism, custom, and religion have all had a role in shaping Afghan women's conditions for a long time. Marriage is one of the numerous institutions that manage women's lives; yet, it is frequently more of a place of confinement and control than a place of companionship. For many Afghan women, marriage limits their access to education, movement, bodily autonomy, and self-expression, making the home a "marital cage." There is limited space for individual agency or choice within this framework, and women's identities are often reduced to subservience, reproduction, and endurance.

So, the fight for Afghan women's independence needs to be seen through the prism of marriage and family as much as it does through politics and law. Polygamy, child marriage, forced marriage, and the practice of exchanging women to resolve conflicts all serve to solidify gender hierarchies and normalise women's oppression. Traditional tribal practices and misunderstandings of religious teachings justify these practices, which have the effect of silencing women and making their pain invisible. Consequently, liberation struggles are more often carried out in private homes than in public places, and they are both very individual and highly communal.

One potent way to look at this unseen tyranny is in literary accounts and memoirs written about or set in Afghanistan. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and other modern Afghan literature highlight the plight of women in abusive marriages and show how they fight back, stand firm, and desire independence. These stories show how marriage is a toxic environment where women fight for their lives and establish their place in society while also fighting for their autonomy.

Examining how marriage arrangements function as tools of patriarchal dominance and highlighting instances of resistance and empowerment, this article aims to learn about Afghan women's pursuit of freedom in connection to the institution of marriage. This study seeks to challenge the stereotype of Afghan women as helpless victims by examining their agency, resilience, and subtle resistance through the lens of feminist and postcolonial feminist theory. Ultimately, the publication argues that Afghan women begin their fight for freedom at home, where escaping the confines of marriage becomes a dramatic display of pride and independence.

Keywords: Afghan women, marital cage, patriarchy, gender oppression, quest for freedom, forced marriage, female resistance

Introduction

Socio-Cultural Background of Afghan Women

Tradition, tribal practices, religious interpretations, and decades of political strife have all contributed to the ingrained patriarchal system in Afghanistan, which in turn shapes women's sociocultural status. In Afghan society, men hold significant control over decision-making, social power, and authority. People generally view obedience, modesty, and perseverance as ideal feminine qualities, limiting women's roles to the domestic realm. As a cultural norm, submission is inculcated in girls from a young age, preparing them for a life of subservience as spouses and mothers instead of self-reliance. When it comes to controlling women's lives, kinship and family institutions are paramount. Because of the strong association between female behaviour, sexuality, and mobility and the concept of honour (Nang or Namus), women symbolically represent the family's reputation. Members of the community may feel threatened when members act contrary to social expectations, such as when they choose their spouse, pursue higher education, or fight against their husband's power in the marital bed. The institution of marriage plays a crucial role in maintaining and legitimising patriarchal control, resulting in the strict monitoring of women's bodies and choices.

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As a social compact between families, marriage in Afghan society is often planned to protect lineage, economic stability, or tribal affiliations; it is usually not a personal choice. The practices that women endure, such as child marriage, forced marriage, polygamy, and exchanging women to resolve conflicts, further underscore their marginalisation within this system. Marriage becomes a place of eternal captivity as a result of these traditions, which dehumanise women and make them feel like mere commodities. Despite its idealised portrayal as a safe haven, the home becomes a stifling place, where women are subjected to emotional, psychological, and physical oppression in this setting.

Religious beliefs heavily influence Afghan cultural customs; however, patriarchal interpretations of religion, rather than religious truth, often perpetuate women's subordination. Oftentimes, cultural customs are portrayed as religious requirements, which makes it difficult for women to challenge or fight against their current situation because the boundary between religion and custom becomes blurry. The framing of resistance as a moral or spiritual violation contributes to the strengthening of male dominance within marriage and the discouragement of women from claiming their rights. War, political unrest, and regime changes throughout the years have only served to make women even more defenceless. Many families have resorted to more traditional practices in order to survive, as education, economic prospects, and legal safeguards for women have all been severely impacted by the conflict. Under these circumstances, women may see marriage as a safety net, even if it leads to abuse and exploitation. Marital hardship is normalised, which adds to a culture of silence where women's anguish is endured rather than spoken.

Regardless of these limitations, Afghan women aren't helpless bystanders to their cultural and social milieu. Even while they are confined in these systems, they find ways to subtly fight, such as by being strong emotionally, sharing stories, standing together as women, and wanting more freedom and education. To understand the marital prison that is the institution of marriage in Afghanistan and the subtle but strong ways that Afghan women fight for independence and dignity under oppressive systems, it is vital to learn about their socio-cultural background.

The Concept of the "Marital Cage"

For women living in a patriarchal society, marriage is more of a prison than a community of support and friendship; this is what the "marital cage" idea is trying to get at. In Afghanistan, marriage is often used as a tool to limit women's independence, self-expression, and physical freedom. Once women join married life, they endure a loss of mobility, voice, and choice. The term "cage" figuratively expresses this loss, since resistance is discouraged and submission is normalised.

In this system, marriage serves to institutionalise the power dynamic between husband and wife. There is a rigid gender hierarchy in Afghanistan, with males serving as decision-makers and women as subservient. Afghan women are supposed to bow unquestioningly to male authority. Rather than being a haven of safety and honour, the marital home becomes a place of control and monitoring, where women's behaviour, words, and even emotions are subject to regulation. Imposing sexual availability, domestic obligations, and reproductive expectations as marital duties

leaves little room for personal ambition or expression.

Forced marriage, child marriage, and polygamy are social norms that ensnare women in the "marital cage" by removing their ability to provide their informed consent and emotional agency. Women in these marriage arrangements do not join the union as active participants but rather as objects of family decision-making. Married women are more susceptible to economic dependence on their husbands, which makes it more difficult for them to socially and monetarily depart from restrictive or abusive marriages. The idea that perseverance is a feminine quality is perpetuated when women are forced to suffer silently due to a lack of social and legal support structures.

The marriage cage is maintained through the power of silence. Because doing so would impose shame on the family, cultural norms forbid women from discussing emotional trauma, marital rape, or domestic violence. By elevating a woman's social standing over her physical health, honor-based beliefs normalise domestic violence. Consequently, marriage is transformed from a choice connection into a permanent punishment, erasing women's identities and making their agony invisible.

But there are ways out of the marital cage as well. Through emotional toughness, female solidarity, and silent rebellion, Afghan women manage tiny but meaningful forms of resistance within repressive marriage systems. As women maintain their identity in the face of oppressive regimes, literature and personal experiences show that perseverance can be a resistance strategy in and of itself. Texts like *A Thousand Splendid Suns* depict marriage in dual ways: as a place of anguish and as a site of struggle where women gain power through sacrifice and unity.

As a result, the marital cage is an essential lens through which to view the experiences of Afghan women. While shedding light on women's ability to resist suffocation from inside, it reveals marriage as a patriarchal institution that upholds injustice. The study highlights the domestic sphere as the main location of women's subjugation and their struggle for liberation and dignity by examining marriage through this lens.

Marriage as a Patriarchal Institution in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, marriage is more than just a personal tie; it is a patriarchal institution that permeates all levels of society, from the cultural to the economic. Marriage is a crucial institution for the establishment, maintenance, and transmission of gender hierarchies, which are based on male supremacy and female subjugation. Marriage often reinforces women's dependence on male power, constraining their autonomy and shaping their identities primarily as homemakers and mothers, rather than promoting equality and camaraderie.

The patriarchal system places men in authoritative roles as decision-makers, guardians, and controllers, and it expects women to be submissive, humble, and selfless. Men with authority over women often dictate their every move, from choosing a life mate to controlling their everyday actions. Due to societal and familial expectations, women are unable to reject marriage or negotiate its conditions; hence, any consent that is given is often symbolic rather than real. As a result, patriarchal authority is normalised and legitimised through marriage. Marriage becomes even more patriarchal when one's financial stability is dependent on another. Afghan women, due to their limited education and career

opportunities, rely more on their husbands for financial support, making any attempt to challenge marital dominance risky and unfeasible. While men's control over household finances reinforces masculine authority, women's unpaid domestic work goes unrecognised and unappreciated. Marriage becomes a system that perpetuates women's vulnerability instead of offering safety due to this power imbalance. Polygamy, forced marriage, and child marriage are all societal practices that uphold patriarchal marriage in Afghanistan. These practices deny women agency and have a disproportionate impact on women. The behaviours in question view women as mere possessions that can be traded for the sake of preserving family honour, economic security, or tribal allegiance. Due to the high level of social shame associated with divorce and separation, which frequently results in social marginalisation, women are expected to suffer silently through physical and emotional pain once they are married. Therefore, marriage is a binding institution that puts societal norms ahead of women's welfare. Patriarchal marriage is reinforced through religious discourse in a multifaceted way. Although Islam does in fact provide women specific rights inside marriage, these rights are often neglected due to male-centric interpretations that prioritise female submission to male authority. Women have few opportunities to speak out against injustice without facing moral or spiritual accusations because cultural customs are conflated with religious duties. The combination of patriarchy and religious authority further normalises male dominance in marriage.

Marriage, in all its repressiveness, becomes a battleground where Afghan women plot their course for resistance and survival. Women can challenge patriarchal dominance within marriage through emotional resilience, female unity, and endurance. Afghan narratives in particular show how women's fights for autonomy and dignity are constantly reshaping marriage, although it is a very patriarchal institution. Therefore, it is essential to analyse marriage as a patriarchal institution to comprehend the constriction that Afghan women endure and the ways in which they seek independence despite these constraints.

Women, Silence, and Domestic Violence

Domestic violence, both common and often overlooked in their married lives, still affects many Afghan women. Marital institutions often normalise and justify many forms of violence, including physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological abuse, as a husband's legitimate means of controlling or disciplining his wife. The patriarchal ideas that uphold this normalisation see women's suffering as an inevitable part of being wives rather than a denial of human dignity since they place a premium on male dominance and female submission.

Maintaining domestic violence is greatly aided by the practice of silence.

Many Afghan women have internalised the values of suffering, acceptance and silence as a badge of pride via their upbringing. People are afraid that if a woman speaks out about her husband's abuse, it would bring shame on her and her family. Women endure abuse in silence for fear of societal rejection, vengeance, or stigma; silence serves as a defence mechanism and a weapon of oppression. Consequently, domestic abuse is often shrouded in secrecy and goes unnoticed.

The notion of honour only serves to encourage this lack of expression. Because of the strong correlation between a woman's physical appearance and her family's reputation, standing up to abuse poses a danger to the dignity of the community. Despite the severity of the abuse, many people still blame the victim, the woman, when she chooses to end her marriage or obtain a divorce. Women are trapped in violent marriages because of this cultural logic, which values endurance over well-being and equates submission with virtue. As a result, marriage's institution serves to normalise violence and silence women.

Women who rely on others for money are more likely to be victims of domestic violence. The lack of adequate legal protection, along with women's limited access to education and jobs, makes it even more difficult for them to escape violent situations. The judiciary and law enforcement agencies frequently stay out of domestic abuse cases because they view it as an individual problem rather than a societal evil. Consequently, the lack of institutional support further isolates and silences women.

Afghan literary narratives forcefully bring this unspoken pain to light. One-way domestic violence is normalised in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through Mariam's marriage to Rasheed, in which she is expected to bear physical and emotional abuse without protest. A culture that does not value women's opinions results in Mariam's lack of vocal expression. Similarly, the stories of other Afghan women show how keeping quiet is a way to hide the psychological anguish that many experience as a result of being forced to comply.

Nevertheless, remaining silent does not necessarily mean that one is giving in. By remaining silent in some situations, Afghan women are able to subtly reject assault while maintaining their inner power and dignity. Women are able to endure oppressive relationships and cultivate a longing for independence through acts of emotional endurance, maternal protection, and female solidarity. When silence finally breaks, whether through narrative, sacrifice, or collective resistance, it calls into question patriarchal violence and the inherent injustices in marriage systems.

Therefore, understanding the marriage cage requires an examination of the relationship between women's silence, domestic abuse, and the cage concept. Silence contains the seeds of resistance, yet it also perpetuates violence. Analysing these dynamics sheds light on the challenges faced by Afghan women as they fight for autonomy within marriages and overcome societal pressures to remain silent.

Conclusion

This study shows that marriage is often a prison for Afghan women, not a safe haven, by examining their lives through the lens of marriage, patriarchy, silence, and domestic abuse. The home is where Afghan women spend most of their time because of patriarchal power, biased religious interpretations, extended periods of political instability, and strongly ingrained sociocultural practices. Marriage becomes a main tool for enforcing gender norms, limiting women's agency, and reducing their identities to those of submissiveness, procreation, and persistence.

Rather than looking at the struggle for Afghan women's independence through a purely political or legal lens, the article has claimed that it is necessary to place the oppression of women within marriage and familial systems. Domestic settings, like marriages and close relationships,

are the most controlling environments and the riskiest places to oppose control, as they instead contest freedom. Practices that normalise and suppress women's suffering, such as forced marriage, child marriage, polygamy, and honour-based violence, foster culturally sanctioned virtues like perseverance. Domestic violence perpetuates a cycle of economic dependence and social stigma, further isolating and marginalising women.

Simultaneously, this research questions simplistic depictions of Afghan women as helpless victims. Literary works such as *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portray Afghan women as possessing incredible strength, autonomy, and moral fortitude. While silence often functions as a tool for subjugation, it can also function as a protective mechanism and even initiate a path towards defiance. Despite repressive marriage systems, women are able to negotiate dignity through female solidarity, emotional resilience, storytelling, and little acts of rebellion.

The article concludes that Afghan women's liberation begins at home, where they resist the limits of marriage as a powerful form of rebellion. The idea of the marital cage sheds light on the inherent inequalities in marriage and the strength of women to fight back, persevere, and regain control of their lives. In the context of culturally and historically complicated realities, it is crucial to acknowledge these lived realities in order to reimagine freedom as dignity, choice, and selfhood, as well as in feminist and postcolonial study.

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