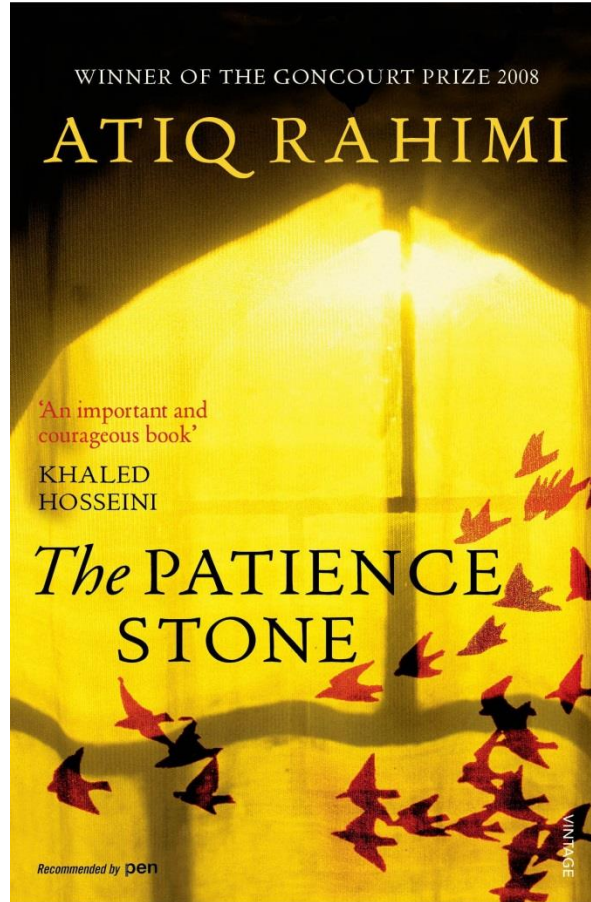


**From the Silenced to the Silencer:
An Afghan Woman's Journey from a Fractured Self to
Emancipated Womanhood in Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone***

Nisha Thomji Varghese and Dr. R. Saravana Selvan



The Patience Stone

Atiq Rahimi explores the plight of Afghan women in his compelling novel *The Patience Stone*. Mixing myths and history he tries to weave a brutal piece of reportage. The novel was written in French, and was translated into English by Polly McLean. Critics have praised not only the storytelling skills of the author but also his language use. The translator Polly McLean is also greatly appreciated. For example, a review in the newspaper *Independent* reports:

Atiq Rahimi's prose is spare and elegant and sporadically mutates into shards of evocative poetry. Polly McLean's lean translation does justice to the original French. While the events the nameless woman speaks of are hyperbolic, the narration is not. (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-patience-stone-by-atiq-rahimi-trans-polly-mclean-1910810.html>)

The same reviewer also says:

Yet despite the beauty of the writing, this slim novel is hard going. The confined setting, the woman's dramatic soliloquys and Rahimi's impassive narration make it read more like a play. War is going on offstage. In the distance, beyond the ragged fluttering yellow and blue curtains, neighbours are beheaded, the house looted. The world shrinks and becomes one squalid room.



Atiq Rahimi

Courtesy: <https://alchetron.com/Atiq-Rahimi-348326-W>

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A Single Room: Tragedy and Long String of Prayers

The novel opens in a single room, barely more than a cell, in which a man lies comatose, his eyes open, his wife crouched at his side. She holds vigil in their bedroom, tending to her much older warrior husband, who has taken a bullet to the neck. Abandoned by his brothers and fellow jihadists, it's up to her to hide him from prowling soldiers and protect him and her two young daughters from bomb attacks. The nameless woman nurses her badly injured husband. She feeds him through a tube and lubricates his eyes. She watches him carefully making sure that he is breathing. She holds a long string of prayer beads in her left hand, moving them between her fingers, telling them. The sound of two little girls crying can be heard but they are not in the room, but somewhere nearby. Sounds of war can be heard outside.

Far away, somewhere in the city, a bomb explodes. The violence destroys a few houses perhaps, a few dreams. There is a counter attack. The retaliations tear through the heavy midday silence, shaking the window panes but not waking the children. For a moment- just two prayer beads- the woman's shoulders stop moving. She puts the bottle of eye drops in her pocket. Murmurs *Al-Qahhar*. Repeats *Al-Qahhar*. Repeats it each time the man takes a breath. And with each repetition, slips one of the prayer beads through her fingers. (Rahimi 5)

What makes the whole scene a little eerie and eerie is the fact that the woman counts the man's breathing by her prayer beads. Time for her is governed by her prayer- bead cycles. "I no longer count my days in hours or my hours in minutes, or my minutes in seconds... a day for me is ninety-nine prayer bead cycles" (Rahimi 8).

Abandoned by the Family

Aside from a handful of neighbours cowering beside the woman in the bomb shelter during each attack, she is palpably alone – the once proud family of her rebel-fighter husband have fled the city and abandoned her.

Where is your mother, who always used to say she would sacrifice herself for a single hair on your head? She couldn't deal with the fact that her son, the hero, who fought on every front, against every foe, had managed to get shot in a pathetic quarrel because some

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guy-from his own side, would you believe-had said, I spit in your mother's pussy! Shot over an insult! (Rahimi 15)

Getting Bolder Every Minute Despite Suffering, Agony and Bombshells

She grows bolder and bolder by the minute and reveals how she has resented him all along. She speaks about her disappointments in him. She reveals candidly her apprehensions and fear of the repercussions that could come her way if she failed to bleed on her "bridal night".

Can you imagine-being engaged for almost a year and then married for three years to an absent man; not so easy. I lived with your name. I had never seen or heard or touched you before that day. I was afraid, afraid of everything, of you, of going to bed, of the blood...Although I was a virgin I was really scared. I kept wondering what would happen if by any chance I didn't bleed that night...It would have been a catastrophe. I'd heard so many stories about that. (Rahimi 29)

First Night of Marriage – Bleeding Impure Blood

She reveals her deeply guarded secret of how she had deceived him that night. "Passing off impure blood as virginal blood, bit of brainwave, don't you think?"(29). She speaks about her desires and hopes, the pains and sorrows she has suffered at his hands. All these confessions are not compressed to a single day. They are slowly revealed over the days with a mounting vengeance.

Monologues of Old Stories before the "Patience Stone": Sexual Dissatisfaction

As her husband lies before like a stone – indeed like the legendary patience stone, which absorbs the anguish of all who confess to it – the woman finds herself free from all restraint and her monologues reach a fevered pitch. What pours out of her is not only a brave and shocking confession, but a savage indictment of war, the brutality of men, and the religious, marital and cultural norms that continually assault Afghan women, leaving them with no recourse but to absorb without complaint, like a patience stone. The broken sentences uttered by the nameless woman, is a direct attempt on the part of Rahimi to rip away the veil over Afghan women's lives.

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She speaks of sexual desire, of obedience, rebellion and the terrible dehumanizing that occurs when the sexes cannot speak freely to one another.

The last of these old stories, delivered in tandem with the most shocking of her revelations, is that of the sang-e-sabur or the patience stone: a magical object that "all the world's unfortunates" can tell their sorrows to. In Persian mythology, the sang-e-sabur is a magical black stone that receives the problems of those who confide in it. According to myth, when the stone has absorbed all the pain and suffering of the person, it will explode, setting its supplicants free from their torments. This ambiguous scrap of myth is squeezed for every last drop of irony. Here the paradox of the patience stone lies in the fact that now it is the husband who plays the role. Till he had been laid up she had been the one silently absorbing all the pain. Now the roles get reversed.

“...Yes, you are my sang-e-sabur...I am going to tell you everything, my sang-e-sabur. Everything. Until I set myself free from my pain, and my suffering, and until you, you...”
She leaves the rest unsaid. Letting the man imagine it. (Rahimi 74)

To her sang-e- sabur the woman speaks bitterly about the years she had spent with him, sexually unsatisfied. She fiercely tells him about the times she had derived sexual satisfaction from masturbation. She speaks about how starved she had been for affection and how he had spurned her and her needs. With the new found courage she tells the man about how she pretends to be a prostitute when two soldiers of the warring factions barge into their house. She candidly speaks about how she had given in to one of them. And the brazen narration reaches its climax when she reveals her deeply guarded secret. She tells him that their two daughters are not his. He was incapable of fathering children. He was infertile. In Afghan culture the woman always faces the ire of society if she is unable to bear children. The fault may not lie with her but she bears the brunt. In order to escape the stigma her paternal aunt takes her to a man pretending to be a hakim and he fathers her children. She reaches the heights of her revelation with this. Though many times she feels terrible at revealing so much of her brokenness, she gets a grip on herself. As she says “...I am not insane, or possessed. I am not under the spell of a demon. What I’m saying,

what I'm doing, is dictated by the voice from on high, is guided by that voice. And the voice coming out of my throat is a voice buried for thousands of years.”(Rahimi 81)

Oppressed Afghan Wife Affirming Her Resilience

The nameless woman who has been rendered powerless for many years, who has silently suffered as an oppressed Afghan wife affirms her resilience at last. She talks about her unexplored sexual desires and then acts on them. She recalls being raped by her husband and treated like vermin by him when she was menstruating. Now in his paralyzed state, she fondles his genitals and shocks herself by treating him like an object after years of serving his needs and not her own. Her relationship with the stuttering young soldier, tutoring him in the art of making love is an act of defiance. When he responds to her with tenderness and brings gifts for her, she experiences warmth which she has never known before. Her transformations can be seen as the pathway to a more liberated and fulfilled life. Once living in silence and self-sacrificing abnegation, she now emerges as a human being, a woman.

Eventual Delivery through Death

Eventually, her Patience Stone, full of her pains, sorrows, frustrations, and of her most shameful and unspeakable secrets, explodes: her devastating, magic words have had their desired effect. As the man wakes up and reaches for her throat, she stabs him with a knife in the stomach. But the man, in a supreme effort, strangles her, liberating her from the marital, social and religious oppressions she has been enduring the whole of her life.

Women in Afghanistan

The mysterious and misunderstood ideas about gender dichotomy in Afghanistan and the historical exclusion of women from the public sphere have shrouded Afghan women's lives in mystery for ages. In mainstream media, the images that depict women in Afghanistan are often bleak, miserable and sad. The stories that circulate outside of Afghanistan are about Afghan women who speak about the dangerous, war-torn, tumultuous conditions that they face. (Benard 65)

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The media related to Afghan women can be exploitative at times; it victimizes the women, represents them for outside consumption and hardly sheds light on the actual, diverse realities of women in the country. She is even denied a subject position. Being at perilous crossroads, interlaced by multiple forces of coercion, she always finds herself at the bottom-most rung of the social ladder. Her presence is not even attested; if at all it is done, it is only to reinforce the supremacy of the man. She is the aberrant, the divergent, signifying all the handicaps. “In Afghan culture you brew up a revolution if you try to push against the system and break open your cage.” (Kargar 256)

Though women in Afghanistan were subjected to a number of monstrosities during the years that war ravaged their beautiful countryside, though they had to witness inhumane and barbaric acts, they never lost hope. Just like a pupa metamorphoses into a radiant butterfly, most of them emerged victors leaving their distorted pupa shells behind. They never looked back but surged ahead. They learned to exploit their own potential and resourcefulness and found ways to survive. “Networking and group solidarity enabled these women to survive... they relied on women’s support networks to meet their bare necessities” (Rostami-Povey 32).

Portrayal of a Gendered Subaltern

The woman in *The Patience Stone* can be classified as a gendered subaltern who has been pushed to the margins in a world dominated by powerful men. But there is a capacity for resistance within her... it comes from her inner strength. She might be physically weak but there is a power within her which can be unleashed by a suitable agency. In the novel the silence that her husband is forced into acts as her agency to resist. Her resistance is endorsed in his silence.

Rahimi has not depicted the woman as a glorified soul languishing ethereally in the chador. As the woman’s monologue with her comatose husband goes on, the layers are excoriated, expositions come forth and what emerges is the vignette of an intricate and nuanced human being. She is represented as daring, resolute, an adoring mother, but she is also imperfect in essential human ways, a woman capable of dissimulating, deluding, of being vindictive, a creature if, pushed hard enough bares her teeth...and her body. Rahimi has mooted a great

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Afghan anathema: the concept of a woman as a sexual being. He has been totally outspoken while delineating her sexual cravings and hunger. She is not the paradigm of the angelic, asexual, motherly figure which most Afghan men expect their women to be.

Atiq Rahimi portrays the journey of the woman towards a well-defined self-hood. Her existence which had been mired in the labyrinthine mazes of societal pressures, suppressive and egoistic male chauvinism undergoes a decisive change. She who was nameless, faceless and devoiced evolves out of the spiral of silence that once she, and her man is now subjected to. Silence which was once her destiny now becomes the agency for her resistance. She breaks the pre- defined spaces of confinement and silence and exercises autonomy and agency. She is a conduit, a living vessel for the grievances of millions of women like her who have been objectified, marginalized, scorned, beaten, ridiculed and silenced. But they have their say at last.

In Rahimi's own words, "Afghani women have a lot of strength, but they are also very shy and guarded. It is almost impossible to break that. But they will be very strong inside their homes. With *The Patience Stone* I wanted to show their bodies, their dreams, their strengths, their desires. They are all very courageous."

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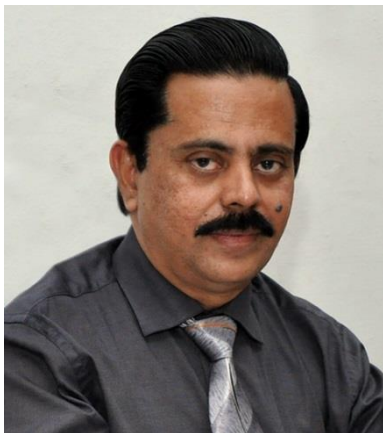
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