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Women's Agency and Resistance in Afghan Society

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Abstract

This paper explores the pervasive control exerted by men over women's lives in patriarchal societies, with a particular focus on Afghanistan where women endure acute suffering. Despite the crucial role they play, Afghan women face severe restrictions imposed by the government, compounded by widespread poverty. Through an examination of Janpary's poignant narrative, as featured in the Afghan Women's Hour program and later documented in Zarghuna Kargar's *Dear Zari* this paper sheds light on the harsh realities confronting Afghan women. Janpary's struggles, including her fight against poverty and the gender-based denial of her rightful inheritance, underscore the intersecting challenges women face in Afghanistan. Drawing on Kimberle Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality as outlined in *mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour* this paper delves into the multifaceted issues affecting Afghan women, highlighting the complex interplay of gender, poverty, and discrimination. Through this analysis, a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics shaping the lives of Afghan women within patriarchal structures is elucidated, contributing to broader discussions on gender inequality and social justice.

Keywords: Afghan women, discrimination, gender inequality, inheritance, poverty.

Introduction

Poverty represents a significant challenge for every nation, and while many countries strive to overcome it, Afghanistan is regressing into poverty. Despite the efforts of Afghan individuals to combat poverty, governmental actions often hinder progress, perpetuating the cycle of struggle and deprivation for its citizens. Poverty remains a persistent and grave concern among the people of Afghanistan, particularly affecting those in rural areas. Afghan women, in particular, have been disproportionately impacted, enduring severe poverty as a result of ongoing conflict. The devastation wrought by war has stripped individuals of their homes, lands, livelihoods, and sources of income, exacerbating the cycle of poverty in the region.

Afghan Women: Liberation and Oppression in Changing Eras

Before the Mujahideen assumed control of Afghanistan in 1994, efforts were underway to alleviate poverty in the country. During the tenure of the Soviet-backed government, Afghan women were actively engaged in the workforce, and

girls had access to education, indicating progress toward economic empowerment and social development. The government supported by the Soviet Union and the USSR wielded considerable power in Afghanistan, boasting robust institutions that extended beyond military support. They prioritized providing comprehensive aid in social, economic, and educational domains. Notably, they championed gender equality, facilitating educational opportunities for Afghan women and girls in the Soviet bloc. Additionally, during this period, factories were established, offering employment opportunities, particularly to women who had lost their husbands in the conflicts, underscoring a commitment to supporting vulnerable populations. "Meanwhile factories were built in Afghanistan that women could work in, and those who had lost their husbands in the recent war were given priority when it came to securing jobs" (Kargar 10). Both the legal framework and prevailing societal norms in Afghanistan at that time recognized women as equals to men. Women enjoyed freedoms such as the ability to walk on the streets unaccompanied, attend cinemas, receive mixed-sex education, participate in televised singing and dancing programs, and

even wear mini-skirts, reflecting a relatively liberal social atmosphere.

While urban centers like Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan embraced progressive ideals, rural regions maintained traditional customs, particularly regarding the treatment of girls. Despite the Afghan constitution stipulating a marriage age of sixteen, many families in rural areas persist in marrying their children as young as eleven or twelve years old, highlighting a stark contrast in cultural practices between urban and rural communities. Kabul stood as a developed city characterized by its open-minded social attitudes. The rule of law was upheld by police and security forces, public transportation systems operated efficiently, and both men and women collaborated in various sectors such as schools, hospitals, and factories, reflecting a society where gender equality was practiced in the workforce. Even in social gatherings like weddings, men and women were permitted to dance together, reflecting the progressive social atmosphere of Kabul during that time. In the surrounding cities, development was evident, and women were no longer compelled to wear the burqa; instead, it became a matter of personal choice.

Afghan women emerged as active participants in politics, taking on roles as lawyers, doctors, pilots, journalists, and government officials. Their presence extended to the entertainment industry, as they appeared in films and were encouraged to showcase their talents on national television, marking a significant shift in societal norms and opportunities for women in Afghanistan. Alongside women's development Afghan state media was broadcasting Bollywood movies and Russian programs which helped people to know about their outside world. "Alongside these developments in opportunities for women, the Afghan state media was busy broadcasting Western films and music, Bollywood movies and Russian programs, all of which contributed to the sense of Afghanistan opening up to the outside world" (Kargar 11). Every ethnic group was given access to education, training, and jobs, as the government was committed to ensuring equal opportunities for everyone.

Despite the progress towards modernization in cities like Kabul, life in Afghanistan, especially in rural areas, remained largely unchanged. Deeply rooted religious beliefs led to the continuation of traditional practices such as arranging marriages for daughters at a young age, offering girls as a means to resolve family disputes, and the exclusion of women from inheriting family assets. These customs persisted, highlighting the enduring influence of traditional values in certain segments of Afghan society. The prospects of Afghan girls are often regarded as a matter to be managed within the confines of the family, rather than an area where government intervention is deemed necessary or appropriate. The communist values promoted by the Soviet-backed government were not embraced by the more traditional communities in Afghanistan. Consequently, Mujahideen propaganda found fertile ground in the remote areas of the country. The divergence between urban and rural values led to challenges, including the targeting of rural girls' schools and violence against teachers and women who participated in television programs, reflecting the resistance to modernization and external influence in these conservative regions.

During the period from 1978 to 1992 in Afghanistan, everyday life was filled with hardship. Every young Afghan man was required to serve two years in the army, fighting against Jihadi groups. Many families experienced the loss of a loved one, with some young men returning from battle

severely disabled. Despite government efforts to support war widows in Afghanistan by providing them with monthly income, job opportunities, and benefits for their children to prevent homelessness, girls and women still faced considerable hardships during the decades of war in the country. "Regardless of which political faction was in power, women were always affected badly" (Kargar 12). The Soviet-backed government faced criticism for adhering to communist principles and disregarding Afghanistan's laws. The country's legal framework failed to adequately support its development, particularly in terms of women's advancement. In 1989, Soviet forces and the USSR withdrew from Afghanistan, leading to the cessation of all financial aid to the Afghan government. This sudden departure had immediate and devastating effects: Afghan factories shut down, shops stood empty, and the people of Afghanistan were left struggling with starvation practically overnight. When the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, they enforced strict regulations, particularly targeting Afghan women. These measures included confining women to their homes, mandating that they be accompanied by a male relative when leaving their residence and prohibiting girls from receiving an education. Harsh punishments were imposed on those who defied these rules. This period marked a somber chapter for the Afghan people, as Afghanistan became isolated and impoverished under Taliban rule.

Janpary's Struggle: Challenging Tradition for Her Rightful Inheritance

In this challenging period, Janpary coped with the hardship of losing her husband, and together with her children, they experienced hunger and food scarcity. Janpary's poignant story was recounted on Afghan Woman's Hour and later documented in the book *Dear Zari* by Zarghuna Kargar. Afghan Woman's Hour was established by the BBC World Service Trust, with funding from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The program had a straightforward objective: to inform, entertain, and uplift Afghan women through the medium of radio. Zarghuna Kargar began working for the program in 2004, contributing to its mission of empowering and highlighting the experiences of Afghan women. The conflict between the Soviet-backed government and the Taliban resulted in widespread displacement and loss for many Afghans, who lost their lands, homes, jobs, and sources of income. In the aftermath of the war, people continue to face immense challenges as they strive to rebuild their lives in Afghanistan. According to a UN report, approximately one-third of the Afghan population resides below the official poverty line. Many impoverished families face the additional burden of having disabled breadwinners or losing family members to war. While some receive financial assistance from relatives in the West, those without such support are left to endure dire circumstances, including starvation and exposure to extreme weather conditions, leading to tragic outcomes for both adults and children. In dire circumstances of poverty, some families faced the heart-breaking decision of selling a new-born baby to provide for their other children. This desperate measure was taken to ensure that the remaining siblings could be fed and cared for amidst severe financial hardship.

Janpary's narrative encapsulates the struggle against poverty, but it is also a testament to a woman's journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Her story embodies resilience as she courageously seeks to claim what is rightfully hers, defying societal constraints and advocating for her rights.

Janpary hails from Nangarhar Province in the eastern region of Afghanistan, where entrenched tribal traditions shape societal norms. In this region, early marriages are prevalent, with higher rates of girls being married off before completing their education. Additionally, cultural norms often dictate that girls cease their schooling upon reaching puberty.

Janpary, a widow lacking formal education, finds herself trapped in poverty as she struggles to provide for her four children. Her plight is compounded by the circumstances of her early marriage to an elderly man, where she was wed as a second wife. In Afghanistan, women are often treated as commodities and can be used as currency to settle debts or disputes. In such situations, a girl may be given away in marriage to resolve conflicts between her male relatives, even though she may not have been involved in the dispute. This practice reflects the systemic devaluation of women's agency and autonomy in Afghan society. Exactly, Janpary's story is a tragic example of how women are often treated as commodities to settle debts or disputes in Afghan society. In this case, her brother, unable to pay off his gambling debt, resorted to offering his sister as a second wife to settle the debt, illustrating the pervasive exploitation and disregard for women's autonomy in such situations. Janpary's life took a drastic turn when her husband, who had been providing for her and her children, was killed due to gambling-related circumstances. This tragic event shattered the stability she had known, plunging her and her family into uncertainty and hardship. In the 1980s, during the Soviet-backed government's rule, Janpary managed to survive because of the assistance provided to widows and orphans. She received monthly coupons that allowed her to obtain essential household items such as flour, oil, sugar, and soap. However, when the Taliban seized power, everything changed. The government assistance and support for widows like Janpary ceased, leaving them without the crucial aid they had relied on for survival.

Janpary led a challenging life marked by poverty, which left her children constantly hungry due to a lack of food. Struggling to find employment, she sought work as a domestic helper in affluent households near her province. Despite her efforts, the societal restrictions imposed by the Taliban government, prohibiting women from working or studying outside the home, further complicated her situation. Unable to secure traditional employment opportunities in government buildings, schools, or hospitals, Janpary resorted to visiting wealthy households in hopes of finding work to support her family. She embarked on her job search, this time targeting a large bungalow where wealthy women offered her a two-week employment opportunity. Upon visiting the woman who extended the job offer, Janpary observed her watching television, despite its prohibition by the Taliban government. This act of defiance allowed affluent individuals to stay informed about the outside world. Adorned in new clothes and golden bangles, the wealthy woman exuded beauty, while Janpary appeared younger yet wore a weary, pale expression. Accepting a position in the household involving cleaning and washing, she received payment and was permitted to take leftover food home. Empowered by her mistress, Janpary was encouraged to assert her rights, particularly regarding her wealthy brother, who led a contented life with his wife and nine children. Upon learning of Janpary's plight, her educated mistress advised her to claim her inheritance from her brother, citing a verse from the AL-Nisa chapter of the Quran. "Men shall have a share in what their parents and closest relatives leave and women shall have

a share in what their parents and closest relatives leave, whether the legacy be small or large: this is ordained by God" (Kargar 179). Despite cultural norms that typically exclude daughters from inheritance, Janpary's mistress urged her to demand her rights from her brother, holding him accountable for her hardships.

Fuelled by the strength and encouragement instilled by her mistress, Janpary bravely confronted her brother to assert her legal rights, only to be met with disdain. Her brother dismissed her plea, asserting that decent women in their culture do not pursue inheritance claims, and vehemently refused to share. "Look, my dear sister, you know that in our culture no woman-I mean, no decent woman-asks for meeras. What our father left behind belongs only to your brother. You got married a long time ago" (Kargar 181). Despite her desperate appeals, her brother remained unmoved and lashed out in anger. Even her sister-in-law urged Janpary to abandon her pursuit of inheritance. Feeling disheartened, Janpary left the premises with a heavy heart, while her mistress advised her to seek justice through legal channels. Amid these challenges, Janpary's sister-in-law visited her home, warning her against pursuing her inheritance claim and instead proposing that Janpary and her children work as servants in her household. Undeterred, Janpary, accompanied by her mistress's guard, sought legal advice at the police station. However, the male guard was required due to Taliban government regulations mandating that women not travel without a male companion. Despite detailing her situation and her right to claim the inheritance, Janpary received no assistance from the officials, who merely recorded her complaint and warned her against further visits. "The mullah took some details down about her brother. He ordered Janpary to go home and told her she must not come to the police station again" (Kargar 188). This lack of support became tragically evident when, upon returning home, Janpary was confronted by her brother, who had learned of her actions from the police station. In a fit of rage, he physically assaulted her, leaving her injured and emotionally devastated.

In Afghanistan, discussing inheritance rights is considered taboo for women, who are traditionally dependent on men. As a result, Afghan women often do not have ownership of their own homes. "When she is young, it is her father's house, when she is married it is considered her husband's or in-laws' house, and when she is old it is said she lives with her son" (Kargar 190). While some families may be aware of the Quran's teachings regarding women's inheritance rights, many Afghan women and girls are denied their rightful inheritance, leading to experiences of hardship and struggle similar to that of Janpary. Afghan women are often afraid to seek legal recourse to claim their rights, as they fear social stigma and shame associated with challenging traditional norms. Unfortunately, those who do petition for their rights often face insurmountable obstacles and ultimately fail in their endeavors, highlighting the systemic barriers and challenges women face in accessing justice and asserting their rights in Afghan society. Afghan women believed that the patriarchal rules imposed on them were their Islamic rights. This patriarchal system effectively marginalized women by confining them to the domestic sphere and limiting their access to education. As a result, many women were unaware of their rights and were conditioned to accept their subordinate status within society. In Afghanistan, women must be informed about their Islamic rights and laws. "It's important for women to know their rights in a country like Afghanistan" (Kargar 8). Despite the numerous challenges

she faced, Janpany's courageous fight for her rights demonstrates her agency and boldness within Afghan society. Her determination serves as a powerful example of women's resilience and empowerment, highlighting the importance of advocating for one's rights in the face of adversity.

Janpany's Complex Identity: Navigating Gender, Ethnicity, and Socioeconomic Factors

Janpany's life provides a lens through which we can analyze the intersecting aspects of her identity that contribute to her suffering and experiences under Taliban rule. Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality theory offers a framework to comprehend the intricate dynamics and multiple layers of oppression faced by Afghan women like Janpany. By considering factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and political context, we can better understand the complexities of their lived experiences and the challenges they navigate in a patriarchal and oppressive environment.

The fact that minority women suffer from the effects of multiple subordination, coupled with institutional expectations based on inappropriate non-intersectional contexts, shapes and ultimately limits the opportunities for meaningful intervention on their behalf (Crenshaw 1251).

Janpany endured various forms of subordination, with her gender playing a pivotal role in her suffering under Taliban rule. The strict restrictions imposed by the Taliban government deprived Afghan women like Janpany of opportunities for employment, education, and even access to necessities like food. Additionally, being a widow compounded her hardships, exacerbating her vulnerability in a patriarchal society that marginalized women. Furthermore, the patriarchal norms prevalent in Afghan society led to Janpany being forced into marriage as a second wife to an older man to settle a debt incurred by her brother, underscoring the systemic exploitation and oppression faced by women in such contexts. Janpany's experiences underscore the stark gender disparities in educational and socioeconomic opportunities, highlighting the systemic inequalities faced by women in Afghan society. In addition to her gender, Janpany's identity as a resident of a rural area in Afghanistan, where traditional values are deeply entrenched, further constrained her. Furthermore, being part of the Pashtun ethnicity subjected her to additional societal expectations and norms. These factors combined to confine her within the confines of her home, where she was dominated by her patriarchal family and their adherence to traditional values. As a Pashtun woman, Janpany faced scrutiny and criticism when she attempted to assert her rights, such as asking for her inheritance, highlighting the complex intersection of gender, ethnicity, and cultural norms in shaping her experiences of oppression and marginalization. "I know you're really an honorable woman. You're a Pashtun woman so it doesn't suit you to do shameful things like this. Do you know of any Pashtun woman who has done this sort of thing?" (Kargar 184).

Janpany's situation exemplifies the compounding challenges faced by individuals from marginalized backgrounds under Taliban rule. Her lower socio-economic status, combined with her gender and ethnicity, severely limits her access to resources and opportunities. Despite her efforts, she struggles to provide food for her children, often enduring days without anything to eat and lacking proper clothing. Regardless of her brother's wealth and well-being, he refuses to share the inheritance due to her gender. This refusal highlights the gender-based discrimination and unequal treatment prevalent in Afghan society. Furthermore, the economic instability

worsens their vulnerability to food shortages and other hardships imposed by the Taliban regime, underscoring the intersecting layers of oppression Janpany and her family endure. The fear experienced by Janpany is not based on her actions or identity, but solely on her gender. Her brother's refusal to acknowledge her rights and inheritance, despite Janpany being his sister, reflects deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes that dismiss women's voices and agency. "That is why these people are afraid of educating women-they are afraid that then the women will ask questions, will speak up. That's why I believe in education. It is such a powerful tool to overcome poverty and rebuild the country" (Kristof 211). Janpany's struggle highlights the systemic challenges faced by women in asserting their rights and challenging traditional gender norms in Afghan society.

Violence against women affects not only those who are actually beaten and brutalized, but indirectly affects all women. Today, our wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and colleagues are held captive by fear generated from these violent crimes captive not for what they do or who they are, but solely because of gender. (Crenshaw Vol 43: 1241).

Conclusion

By examining Janpany's intersecting identities, we gain insight into the multifaceted challenges she encounters under Taliban rule. Her experiences are influenced not only by her gender but also by her ethnicity, rural upbringing, family values, and socio-economic status. For instance, Janpany's mistress, who urged her to claim her inheritance, came from a family that prioritized women's education and was financially well-off. This enabled Janpany's mistress to understand Islamic rights for women, the knowledge that Janpany lacked due to her circumstances. Thus, Janpany's story underscores how differing backgrounds and access to resources shape individuals' understanding and ability to navigate their rights within Afghan society. Janpany's life exemplifies the critical importance of education for women, particularly in the context of Afghanistan. Education not only empowers Afghan women but also equips them with the knowledge and awareness of their rights. "Education is the key issue for overcoming poverty, for overcoming war," Sakena says. "If people are educated, then women will not be abused or tortured. They will also stand up and say, 'My child should not be married so young.'" (Kristof 211).

The Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in 2021, following the withdrawal of international forces, including Australian troops. To keep pace with the rapid progress of the world, Afghanistan requires a significant investment in expertise and capacity-building, with education serving as the cornerstone of development. Education is crucial for empowering individuals and driving societal advancement. However, if barriers are imposed on people, particularly women, and girls, preventing them from accessing education, it will lead to a myriad of other challenges for the country. By prioritizing education and ensuring equal access for all, Afghanistan can lay the foundation for a brighter and more prosperous future for its citizens. In the lives of Afghan women, there is never a time when all doors are completely shut. Even in the face of adversity, there is always at least one door open-they just need to find it. Afghan girls must hold onto hope, as hopelessness is the greatest adversary of any individual. By maintaining hope and resilience, Afghan women can continue to navigate challenges and strive towards a brighter future. Being a woman should never be a source of shame; instead, it is a profound source of strength. Afghan

women have countless ambitions and dreams, and they should never let anything stand in their way. They must be prepared to boldly pursue their aspirations and make the world submit to their dreams. With determination and resilience, Afghan women can overcome any obstacle and achieve their goals, paving the way for a brighter future for themselves and future generations.

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