

MENTAL OBJECTIFICATION; UNPACKING THE PROTAGONIST'S TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY IN *THE PATIENCE STONE*

Syeda Ayesha Kazim

MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan

Email: sayshajaved@gmail.com

Mohammad Muazzam Sharif (Corresponding Author)

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan

Email: sharifmuazzam@gmail.com

Tanzeela Muffarih

MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan

Email: muffarihtanzeela@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

*This study examines mental objectification and racial discrimination, as an issue that is common to women in patriarchal setup, in which a woman is treated as commodity. Although the world view is transitioning, this issue is still prevalent in patriarchal societies. This study focuses on exploring mental objectification and patriarchal domination in the novel *The Patience Stone* (2008) by Atiq Rahimi. This also shows how societal norms shape women behaviour and attitudes and creates anxiety. By using the Objectification Theory (Nussbaum, 1995; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and Social of Dominance Theory (Sidanus and Pratto 1999) this study demonstrates that all forms of mental objectification and suppression are found in abundance in the novel. Doing so highlights the ways as well as the factors involved in the mental objection of the main characters in the novel. Furthermore, this study also demonstrates how Rahimi makes use of the metaphor of sang-e saboor in order to challenge the established norms of silence suppression that leads to mental objectification; thus, gives voice to the protagonist.*

Keywords: Objectification, mental objectification, suppression, metaphor.

Introduction

“Desolate, she stammers, “I ‘m going..... I’m going..... I am mad “she throws her head back. “why tell him all this? I’m going mad. Allah, cut out my tongue!” (Rahimi, 2018, p.18, line 26) These lines serve as a clear divulgence to the world of misery, plight of Afghan women and the societal norms that perpetuate their suffering. A haunting exploration of women’s inner life under the burden of war hierarchy and silence. Moreover, the novel delves deeper into the phenomenon of women mental objectification and sexual harassment and societal treatment of women as second class citizens. Antique Rahimi is not only narrating the suffering of Afghan women but he uses Afghan women as a proxy to convey the universal struggles of women globally. Rahimi makes it clear at the beginning of the story; “Somewhere in Afghanistan or elsewhere” (Rahimi, p.08, line 01)

Furthermore, he also uses *sang-e-saboor*”, a mythical stone believed to absorb a person’s (women mostly) deepest confessions until it bursts. *Sang-e-saboor* is also used as a metaphor for the patience and endurance of women. The established societal norms demand women to be patient like a stone, faceless and voiceless, with the society considering them heartless and emotionless, because there is no one to listen to their sufferings except a stone (*sang-e-saboor*). Here Rahimi also challenged the establishment norm by giving voice to the woman to confess her truth. He is subverting the norm of silence and invisibility.

This paper seeks to analyze the novel's profound concerns about the objectification of women in Afghan society as well as the metaphoric representation of *sang-e-saboor* as a shield of the women's resilience and perseverance. Also, the unjust patriarchal hierarchy of dominance and power.

The Patience Stone is the most poignant novel written by Atiq Rahimi in 2008. He was born in Kabul in 1962 and migrated to France in 1985, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Atiq Rahimi wrote the novel in French under the name *Syngué Sabour, Pierre de patience*, but the concept is deeply rooted in Persian and Afghan traditions. The name of the mythical stone in Persian mythology is *Sang e saboor*, which absorbs the sorrows and secrets until it shatters. Rahimi is the prominent French Afghan writer and filmmaker, who described the sensitive topic of women objectification in patriarchal societies through his work. He portrays the sufferings and apprehensions of Afghan women with indisputable dexterity. He unlocked the avenue of recognition for women psychological problems, shedding light on the complexities of their experiences in patriarchal societies. In *The Patience Stone*, Rahimi through the perspective of unnamed women caring for her comatose husband, he disclosed the critical themes of female oppression, female objectification and their psychological struggles. These societal perspectives of suppression are internalized by women which causes anxiety and depression.

Objectification of women in a patriarchal society is not a new phenomenon; however, it does not mean that it does not need any further probe. It needs further exploration as it still is relevant and prevalent in patriarchal societies as depicted in the novel *The Patience Stone*. Much has been written about the subject at hand; however, limited or no significant research has been carried out of the mental objectification of women in patriarchal society; especially in relation to the novel at hand. Therefore, this research probes into the female characters of the novel and probes into the factors that cause mental objectification and their subsequent effects on them. By doing so, this project also determines the role of the mythical stone *sang-e-saboor* on the female characters. Does this stone allow the female characters to fight and/or cope with the mental objectification they are subjected to and/or faced with? How successful are they in resisting the mental objectification through this mythical stone? Doing so not only highlights and determines the factors involved in mental objectification but also allows potential parameters for defense mechanisms and/or coping mechanisms for women in a patriarchal society. Therefore, essentially qualitative in nature, this study makes use of the interpretivist paradigm and applies close reading techniques set by David Greenam (2018) to meet the set objectives and questions. The lenses of Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) and Sidanius & Pratto (1999) of Objectification Theory and Social Dominance Theory respectively are applied.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Al Qubati (2020), in their paper discusses the condition of women in male dominated societies where they are treated in such a way that they are nothing without men and they should act the way men want them to. In order to get acceptance in such societies, women have to act according to the norms and regulations set by men and they have to suppress their own well for the sake of societal acceptance.

According to Ali et.al (2021), a woman is not considered as a partner to men but merely a sexual being through which men can fulfill their desires and lust. They say that women are not considered more than an object. She is always exploited in this patriarchal society where men

have full power to control women's minds and actions and this societal discrimination is portrayed by Atiq Rahimi in the novel.

Similarly, Kumari et. al (2022), in their studies on *The Patience Stone* reveal the objectification of the novel's protagonist. They portray the sufferings of women in the patriarchal system. Women are treated just like an object, not human beings. They are considered only servants to the family where they have to suppress their feelings and emotions. This suffering has been given breath by Atiq Rahimi in his novel 'The Patience Stone'. He depicted that after suffering throughout her lifetime, the protagonist explodes like *sang-e-saboor* in the form of confessions of feelings and sufferings.

According to Khan and Khan (2021) Rahimi in *The Patience Stone* presents the psycho traumatic persona of the woman. They predict that the persona of the woman passes through different levels of transformations. At the very beginning, he was shy and introverted and later became a strong person after she started revealing her secrets. It shows that she was suffering from trauma long before she started confessing her secrets, she started healing her traumatic past, her mental illness, causes and consequences has been highlighted in the article in patriarchal society.

According to Zabihzadeh at al. (2015) woman status is reduced to the status of instrument. As her aunt is shown as a victim of rape by her father-in-law. Likewise, the protagonist is also tortured as a barren wife and then as a sex slave in her husband's family. All this depicts the sorry state of women in male dominated societies where they are emotionally, physically and sexually abused by the man as a powerful being of society.

Ashwini and Kiruthika in their research paper analyzes the trauma and suffering experienced by Afghans during war. The characters in the novel experience both physical and mental suffering that has effects on their personalities and throughout the novel the protagonist is trying to find out about herself, her existence, her society in which she was treated as a sexual being.

Therefore, this paper critiques Rahimi's novel with references to the mental objectification of the protagonist. The researchers had applied the lenses of Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) Objectification Theory and Sidanius and Pratto (1999) Social Dominance Theory. According to Fredrickson and Robert, self-objectification is the process in which a woman changes herself according to the perspective of others, which interferes with agency and autonomy. According to Social Dominance Theory by Sidanius and Pratto (1999) all human societies are grouped according to social hierarchy which consists of dominant hegemony groups at the top and subordinate groups at the bottom. Social values are given unequally from top to bottom.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The core idea of objectification theory is how women are treated in patriarchal societies, and this treatment leads to self-objectification, where women internalize society's perspective on their bodies and actions. This causes psychological fragmentation and paves the way for anxiety disorders. Whereas, the dominance theory elaborated how societies maintain hierarchies and it also emphasizes the systematic inequality where one group is dominant over the others. Rahimi vividly showcased in the novel *The Patience Stone* the ways in which the male figures are superior and dominant over women or inferior figures in Afghan society. Women are objectified physically and mentally under the weight of war and silence.

Mental objectification and psychological breakdown in *The Patience Stone*

This section highlights the theme of mental objectification and its role in the suffering and exploitation of women in Atiq Rahimi's novel *The Patience Stone*. The novel showcases how

women are considered inferior in patriarchal society and are silenced, and reduced to mere objects. This treatment is further internalized by women on their bodies and actions and causes psychological fragmentation and depression. Through the protagonist's psychological struggles, Rahimi criticized how systemic oppression demolishes women's identity and autonomy.

Rahimi vividly portrays the mental objectification of women in this society, highlighting how internalized oppression renders them incapable of articulating their suffering. In *The Patience Stone*, the unnamed protagonist undergoes an intense psychological transformation, which exposes the psychic toll of patriarchal dominated societies. She is constantly surrounded by silence, and repression, until she can no longer bear the weight of her circumstances. This emotional breakdown is captured in the line: "I can't take it anymore" (Rahimi, 2008, p.12, line.24). This powerful expression reveals the protagonist's deep desperation, and psychological stress. Her statement reflects not just a single moment of personal despair, but also a broader perspective on the arduous mental burden imposed on women by the society. Her suffering exemplifies what theorists like Nussbaum (1995); Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) define in Objectification Theory, where persistent objectification leads to low self-esteem, depression, and a fragmented sense of self. They internalize that societal expectations on their bodies are attitudes and make their identity fragmented just like their self-esteem.

This fragmentation is further highlighted in her contradictory behavior: while peripherally she performs religious rituals like reciting the names of God, inside she remains emotionally broken, shaken and disconnected: "With an angry sigh, she suddenly stands up and repeats, shouting: "I can't take it anymore....." then more dejected: "Reciting the names of God, over and over from dusk till dawn." (Rahimi, 2008, p.12, line.25) This moment reflects what psychologist R.D Laing (1960) described the "divided self" - a psychological split and conflict between a person's inner experiences and the social facade they are compelled to maintain. She is in a constant battle with herself. Here, the protagonist's outward piety shields her inner battles, highlighting the mental conflict caused by societal expectations and gender roles.

In patriarchal societies, as Rahimi illustrates, women are deprived of their basic autonomy and independence—even over the smallest of actions. They are dependent on males for their survival. They must seek permission for mundane tasks, reflecting their complete subdued and dependent nature set by societal norms. This is made evident in the following scene:

"A dozen drips later, she is back, chador in hand. "I have to go and see my aunt". She waits again ... for permission, perhaps. Her eyes wander. "I have lost my mind!" (Rahimi, 2008, p.16, line14)

Though clearly overburdened, she remains committed to her responsibilities and duties—caring for her comatose husband and managing her children—trying to hold her role in a society that demands silent sacrifice from women. The established norm of every patriarchal society. This aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) feminist theory where she states that women are often seen not as autonomous beings, but as objects or commodities of male gaze and control, defined by their relationships to men. In parallel, the Social Dominance Theory by Sidanius and Pratto (1999) also share the views of injustice and indifference towards women. How societies pursue hierarchies, where one group is considered superior over others. As in *The Patience Stone* women are inferior to men in Afghan society. Inferior groups (women) are objectified physically and mentally.

Furthermore, Rahimi explores how mental objectification gives birth to fear, and apprehension which is the major reason for anxiety disorders and depression. The protagonist lives in a state of constant anxiety and apprehension, so intense that even the arrival of a mullah—a religious authority figure—provokes terror: “That mullah is driving me out of my mind!” she says as she puts the feather back inside the Koran. “What was I talking about?... oh yes, bleeding... I was lying to him, of course.” (Rahimi, 2008, p.26, line.12)

This fear reflects not just her personal experience but also the broader role of religious patriarchy and domination in perpetuating the objectification of women. The mullah represents a system that monitors and promotes control of her body and speech, forcing her to lie about personal matters to maintain her social image. This was explained perfectly by the Social Dominance Theory where one group is superior and has control and influence over others.

Her mental state deteriorates further when strangers intervene at her home. Overwhelmed, confused and oblivious to her surroundings, she projects her fear onto her comatose husband: “It was you... You moved! You’re doing all this to terrify me!” (Rahimi, 2008, p.37, line.04) This delusional reaction emphasizes the depth of her psychological trauma and inner battles, and shows how isolation and fear can lead to irrational thoughts. She becomes so disempowered that even imagined movements from her unresponsive and lifeless husband seem like acts of control and punishment.

Despite her suffering, the protagonist embodies resilience and perseverance. The central metaphor of *sang-e saboor* symbolizes her inner strength and hope. In Persian mythology, the patience stone is an object one confesses to until it eventually explodes —taking the pain with it and unloading the person from the pain of burden. For the protagonist, her comatose husband becomes this *sang-e-saboor* a lifeless stone, a silent witness to her suppressed truths, harsh experiences and emotions:

“Don’t you agree, my sang-e saboor?” she continues. She approaches the curtain, moving aside some of the mattresses concealing the hiding place. She looks deep into her man’s eyes, and says, “I do hope you are managing to grasp and absorb everything I’m telling you, my sang-e saboor.” (Rahimi, 2008, p.60, line.24)

Here, Rahimi challenges the traditional notion of male gaze and gives the woman power and autonomy —finally allowing her to speak, confess and reclaim power, even if it is to a nonchalant listener. Her resilience is not marked by rebellion, but by endurance, perseverance, introspection, and the slow reclaiming of her inner self and soul.

“The woman stands up, and walks toward the plain green curtain. She pushes the mattress aside, but doesn’t open the curtain. “So, I’ll have to stay here. I’ve got a whole night to myself, to talk to you, my sang e saboor.” (Rahimi, 2008, p.62, line.03). In this scene the woman is talking to her comatose husband about her mythical stone. Here the novel marks a powerful reversal of the traditional male gaze. The novel challenges the established norm; instead of being seen, she becomes the speaker, instead of being silenced and suppressed, she confesses. This act of speaking is a form of challenge and resistance to oppression and objectification. Through her voice she dismantled the mental objectification and internalized oppression.

Here Rahimi reiterated the stance of her perseverance and reclaiming her position in this world of injustice. She gathered the courage and determination to confess her own truth. So, through the lens of Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), and Sidanius and Pratto (1999), of Objectification

theory and the Social Dominance Theory the injustices and tribulations of women in the novel *The Patience Stone* are analyzed.

The findings of the study reveal that the protagonist of the novel was mentally objectified by her father, husband, society and other male characters of the novel. This objectification diminished her identity, reducing her to a silent entity. In patriarchal societies women rights are robbed and they are considered inferior to men and are treated as an object; speechless and emotionless. The study also shows the psychological impact of women's mental objectification, shedding light on the complexities of their experiences in patriarchal societies particularly in Afghan society.

This novel is a powerful representation of women's sufferings. Through the life of the protagonist the sufferings and apprehensions of women in Afghan society is portrayed. Women with no authority over their own bodies and being treated as an object, are living with fears and phobias as discovered in the paper. These fears are inculcated in their bodies and they are unable to cope with the situation. This phenomenon is explained through the lens of objectification theory and social dominance theory, where women internalize society perceptions on their bodies and attitudes. It gives birth to complex psychological disorders and fragmentation, which engulf the mental wellbeing of upcoming generations. As Rahimi illustrates how the protagonist's mother suffered and she also inherited that suffering, impacting her daughter mentally. Lastly, Rahimi through the confessions of the protagonist challenged the established norm of suppression and gave her voice. Despite her suffering, the protagonist embodies resilience and perseverance.

The central metaphor of *sang-e saboor* symbolizes her inner strength and hope. In Persian mythology, the patience stone is an object one confesses to until it eventually explodes —taking the pain with it and unloading the person from the pain of burden. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that in order to achieve women's mental and emotional stability, they must be considered equals, giving autonomy and authority. The society that objectified and oppressed women not only damages them but perpetuates the system of psychological distress across generations. Only through equality, empathy and demolishing established norms true progress can be achieved.

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