

**FUNDAMENTALISM AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN
AFGHANISTAN: A STUDY ON JEAN SASSON'S
*FOR THE LOVE OF A SON***

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Abstract

'In Afghanistan girls can dream, but only the dreams of boys come true. Boys own the world they live in, while girls are basically servants, compelled to please men in their families.' These are the first few lines of the prologue of *'For the Love of a Son'* by Jean Sasson. Parents who have only girl children are condemned, girls are brought up and dressed up like boys; girls are not allowed to work outside except in medical profession; a father can have the possession of a child instead of the mother having it; in divorce cases, the man always wins; these are a few of the discriminatory elements of the Afghan society. Jean Sasson, 'a sharp-eyed and compassionate chronicler of women's lives' in the Middle East, presents the pathetic condition of the women of Afghan through the life of Maryam. Even the law does not consider the valid arguments of women; even the lawyers side with the accused men to shower a torrent of lies and false accusations against the victimised women. The fidelity of the wife is safeguarded by keeping her locked inside the room, while the husband goes anywhere with any woman. The Fundamentalist regime has aggravated the condition of Afghan women, as they consider themselves as the custodian of religious and moral principles. This paper makes an attempt to present the gender biased social norms that prevail in Afghanistan controlled by fundamentalists.

Key words: *subjective violence, systemic violence, fundamentalism, gender bias, Sharia law.*

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The plight of women everywhere is the same. When the laws are made for the men, whether it is political, religious or social, the end sufferers are women. While constituting a law, it is not the human concerns but the self motivated male concerns are taken care of. In such a society women are just a living object at the service of men. Further aggravated would be the condition of women in a fundamentalist society, where even the moral or religious laws are opportunistically ignored or interpreted for the comforts of men. The passions, feelings, ideas, desires and needs of women are thwarted away; women live with her desecrated and devoured body, after satisfying men in her youthful days as a pleasing wife. The secluded well of their life is filled with the unfulfilled aspirations of their mind and with memories of their bruised existence. Both the 'subjective' and the 'systemic' violence, as the terms used by Slavoj Zizek in his book *Violence*, are very much rooted in many of the societies; but unfortunately our attention falls on the concrete expressions of violence and fails to see the inherent agents of systemic violence (1-2). It is basically in the process of establishing or maintaining a system that the subjective violence takes place. An established system, in order to fulfill its objectives, whether it be to eradicate violence or to establish peace, turns to brutal methods and thus the system itself contradicts its objectives; the system itself becomes a form of systemic violence. All the forms of violence against women and the gender discrimination are in a way caused by the forms of 'systemic' or 'symbolic violence'. In Afghanistan, the rule of Taliban is a form of systemic violence and the major victims of this fundamentalism are women. In Jean Sasson's work *For the Love of a Son: An Afghan Woman's Quest for her Stolen Child*, we get a clear image of the gender discrimination in the Taliban ruled Afghanistan.

Thinking of the burdens a girl child would bring, most of the parents wish to have a boy child. Parents having a first girl child expect their second child to be a boy. This might have motivated the parents of Maryam Khail to disguise their second child as Yousef Khail and told her to sit and mingle with boys in the primary class. The parents of girl children are not given respect in Afghanistan. Even the sarcastic remarks from the close relatives ‘What a pity she wasn’t a boy’ (Sasson 20) also compelled the parents to bring up their child as a boy. But they could not keep the secrecy for a long time. In the school, teacher discovered her identity and the humiliation wearied away her confidence. Maryam believed that her modern parents could protect her from her fate,

but of course I was too young to realize the real implications of being a woman in Afghanistan. What I was to learn was that even the queen could be murdered on a whim by her king husband or even by her father, brother or cousin. (21-22)

Maryam later on realized that her grandmother was a victim of husband’s or relatives’ tortures. Her grandmother was a woman in deep thought, and head bowed; ‘the grief she had suffered over her lifetime had moulded her face into a mask of eternal sadness’ (24). She always remained in her room; her eyes remained without expression; lips failed to spread in a smile. ‘Mayana had been one of the most beautiful girls in the country. But as with any Afghan woman, even the celebrated beauty could not save her from the evil lurking in Afghanistan (25).’ She was unable to live with a man whom she loved. She was forced to live with the head of the Khail tribe as his fourth wife. In order to possess Mayana, Ahmed Khail Khan killed the cousin of Mayana to whom her marriage was arranged and his mangled body was stuffed into a bag. ‘The murder was a harsh reminder that the Khan held undisputed power over his tribe (32).’

The monarch in Afghanistan ruled with undisputed authority. Cruelty was part of the culture, and the punishment for any crime was so merciless and agonizing. ‘Prisoners being fired from cannons, beheading by sabre, live burials, intentional blinding or stoning’ (29) and starvation were some of the many brutal methods of punishment. In such a society there is no wonder if the concerns of women were considered insignificant. Even the legitimate rights were taken away from women. When Ahmed Khail died in a war, his stepson Shair took charge of the entire family.

Although by Sharia law wives should receive their portion at the time of their husband's death, in Afghanistan men often ignore the Islamic law when it come to females, rarely allowing surviving widows and daughters to handle their own wealth. (43)

After the death of her husband Mayana and her children were given less food and more works. A widow had no role in the family affairs; she was considered another servant in the house. Mayana's daughters were not given the chance to marry young and rich men. The attempt made by Mayana to poison Shair Khan failed and she was ordered to be stoned. In Afghanistan and under Islamic law stoning is a legally sanctioned form of punishment for the sin of adultery. But Shair made his own law. The timely intervention of Ajab, Mayana's son saved the entire family and they were allowed to stay in the galah.

In Afghanistan tribal law takes precedence over civil law, as does religious law. The Sharia court and the Islamic police have the authority to enforce certain law, most particularly family law. Yet when tribal law confronts Sharia law, most Afghans will follow tribal law. Islam asserts that men and women are equal before God, and gives women various rights such as the right to inherit, the right to choose their own partner in marriage and the right to work. But Afghan men ignore these rights and focus on sections of Islamic Sharia law that keep women under men's control. When King Amanullah was forced to flee, many tribal chiefs and clerics began to take control over the situation and unearthly chaos reigned in Afghanistan In the Sharia court system it takes two women to testify to equal the testimony of one man. In divorce cases, the man always wins. With so many laws from too many groups refusing to bend to government laws, it was challenging for any government in Afghanistan to govern properly, and impossible for women to have a voice, with mutual hatreds erupting into a dozen internal conflicts going on at once.

Jean Sasson narrates the life of Amina, a neighbour to Maryam, who was beaten by her husband and thus took shelter in Maryam's house. Whenever Amina raised her voice, she was considered insane and was kept in the mental asylum where the staff did not allow her to take a bath for six months. Many of the women were kept locked inside the room and they were rarely seen outside. In the words of Maryam:

Our culture demands that men rule. Our culture demands that cruel men not be punished. Our culture demands that women are faulted for every bad thing that occurs in their lives. (156-157)

The story of hardships and tortures in Maryam's life began with her marriage with Kaiss, a man fifteen years senior to her. The nature of Kaiss can be understood from these words:

Kaiss jumped at me the moment we walked into his apartment, ripping at my clothes and pushing me into the bedroom. Kaiss was so rough with me that first night of married bliss that I ended up in a hospital emergency room. (264)

Maryam was not allowed to go to college for studies. When she resisted Kaiss sprang at her, grabbing her 'head with both hands, squeezing her skull until she waited to hear a deadly crack' (266). When she became pregnant Kaiss told her, 'If it is a girl, Maryam, I hope it dies in your stomach. I only want a son....Did you hear me? I will only accept a son (269).'

One day Maryam went with her son Duran to the common swimming pool wearing a swimming suit. When Kaiss noticed it he called her back to the home dragged her to the kitchen. This incident is narrated in the words of Maryam:

Kaiss gripped my throat with one hand while he started slashing at my swimsuit with the other. Choking, I gasped as my swimsuit dropped to the floor. I was stripped naked. He placed the sharp edge of the knife firmly against my neck. ... He leaned into my face, whispering in his menacing voice, 'The next time my wife wears a swimsuit in front of other men, I will kill her'. I winced in pain when he deliberately nicked my neck with the sharp blade. I felt blood stream down my neck. Kaiss's eyes widened in excitement at the sight of blood. (274)

The mind of Afghan women was so conditioned that they always took the blame on themselves. If a woman was beaten up, it was her fault. If a woman was killed, she must have been a prostitute and it must be her own fault. Nothing was the fault of males. Women bore all the blame. (278)

The cruelty of Kaiss compelled Maryam to divorce her husband. Divorce was unthinkable in Afghan culture and everyone in the family wanted the woman to accept the miserable lot and to endure the abuse in silence. Yet she took the bold decision. It was rather easy for her to go with her decision as she was in America. She was allowed to have the possession of her son Duran. But Kaiss was allowed by the court to see his son once in a week. During one of such meetings he took away Duran and fled to his country. While seeking the legal opinions, Maryam was told by her lawyer that the court had not yet ruled to give her full custody of her son. So she couldn't claim Duran had been kidnapped by his father (293). Knowing more about Kaiss, Maryam feared that her son would be safe at his father's hand. She continued to get justice for her claims. At last Kaiss was arrested and two weeks later a hearing was set. At the hearing Kaiss and his lawyers spun one lie after another. According to them Maryam was the abuser, and beat Kaiss regularly. Kaiss had never threatened to kill her or to kidnap Duran. 'Kaiss was a saint and his wife was the real devil' (298).

Years later Maryam married Khalid, an affectionate man from Saudi Arabia. When she became pregnant she wished for a baby girl. Like any other man Khalid also said: 'Maryam, don't ever wish for a girl! Girls are no good. Wish for a boy. Having boys is the only way for you to get respect from the family' (356).

People of Afghanistan never had a peaceful life. The communist rule under the Russian officials was as cruel as that of the tribal chiefs or monarchs. When the Mujahedin joined together Afghans expected a better ruling. But the situation was worse. In 1996 all the foreign influence was washed away by the Taliban. They had their own interpretation of the Sharia law and imposed a decree which was against the scholarly interpretation of the Islamic law. Most of the edicts were against the freedom of women. The twenty second chapter of *For the Love of a Son* presents the content of the Taliban law. Women were supposed to remain at home; they were not allowed to work outside or to attend school. Only women who are physicians could go out for the work. If at all a woman wants to go out she should cover her whole body. Women were no longer allowed to wash their clothes on the banks of the rivers, which they had been doing for a long time. Dancing, even at wedding parties, was forbidden. Music was banned everywhere; if music cassettes were found, the owner would be arrested and imprisoned. Female doctors were not to treat male patients. Female patients could go only to female doctors. No taxi

drivers were allowed to transport women not properly veiled. If a woman was found out alone in the street, her husband would be beaten or imprisoned.

Afghan man was not supposed to shave his beard. The popular pastime of making and flying kites was prohibited. All kite shops were closed. Photography was considered idolatry. Television was banned. All cameras, photographs, films and portraits were to be destroyed. Even laughing out loud in public could earn one a prison sentence. White shoes and jeans were not permitted; giving any kind of tuition to girls was prohibited.

Since war killed many men in Afghanistan, many women were widows. They took menial jobs to support the family. Some women going outside to do some work were not allowed to continue the work. Women who were employed in schools were very much affected by this restriction. This at last led them to sell their body. Since it was to please the other gender choosing this profession did not come as a restricted job under the law.

The nature of men everywhere is the same. No law or decree sufficiently safeguards women. In a country whether it is ruled by a king, a monarch, a president, or a group of people with national feeling, discrimination against women continues. Religious laws are conveniently manipulated in order to make the political administration easier. Making use of the fear factor of the human psyche and exploiting the religious sentiments of the people, the fundamentalists plan for the fulfilment of their selfish motives. Many often their laws and regulations curtail the freedom and dignity of women. Thus the system itself becomes another type of violence.

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