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Women's Victimization in Post-War Afghanistan: A Feminist Analysis of Abawi's The Secret Sky (A Novel of Forbidden Love in Afghanistan)

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Abstract

This research analyses Atia Abawi's The Secret Sky (A Novel of Forbidden Love in Afghanistan) from the perspective of feminism in the backdrop of the contemporary Afghan situation. It mainly uses Betty Friedan's views in her book The Feminine Mystique, especially how she examined women's experiences in post-war scenario and advocated for their rights, including opportunities for education, employment, and an end to gender-based discrimination. Moreover, the researcher also elaborated aspects of the texts engaging with debates developed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Sara Suleri regarding the situation and experiences of women in the global south/third world (South-Asia). Mohanty is highly critical of the representations of women from the third world, especially when Western feminists generalize their grievances. Sara Suleri also bases her critique of western feminism on the lived experiences of South-Asian women. Arguing on these theoretical grounds, this research claims that marginalizing women in the name of religion, societal norms, traditions, and cultural codes should be regarded illegitimate. The female protagonist in the selected work is vulnerable and victim of men's cruelty. The aim here is to identify the major factors that contribute to the denial of the post-war agency to Afghan women and afflict their lives. In this aspect, the research is also cognizant of the ways women have been brutally treated at the hands of fundamentalists in post-war Afghan society. This research study is highly significant for future researchers in other areas of feminist studies, specifically as it sets the path to look at issues of patriarchy, oppressive societal norms, honor-killing, regressive traditions, and culture, and how these elements are used as constructs to marginalize and victimize women in the contemporary Afghanistan.

Keywords: Feminism, Abawi, The Secret Sky, Betty Friedan, Sara Suleri, Mohanty

Introduction

If examined from a feminist perspective, almost in every society across the globe, the exploitation and subjugation of women at the hands of men is still a topical phenomenon. Within the realm of social sciences, feminist theory has emerged as a powerful framework for understanding and challenging gender discrimination. In literature, feminism is a theory that stands for the advocacy of women's rights across the globe. It critically analyzes and rationalizes

not only the experiences of individuals across the gender spectrum as well as the social, and economic factors that perpetuate gender inequalities. It is to be noted that women who specially live in the third world/ South Asian societies are often compelled to strictly observe their traditional norms and customs. Betty Friedan, Mohanty and Sara Suleri, are among the feminist theorists who have struggled to work in the field of feminism. Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) critiques the post-war societal pressures that encouraged women to conform to a limited and stifling role. Friedan argues that the problem is not inherent in women themselves but rather in the social structures and expectations that constrains their lives. Mohanty is highly critical of the representations of women from the third world. In her book, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003), she highlights how economic exploitation and neo-colonialism affect the lives of women, particularly those in developing countries.

Atia Abawi, an Afghan-American writer, and novelist, is among those who have used their mind and pen to raise the voice of the Post-war victimized Afghan women. At the heart of Abawi's *The Secret Sky* (2014), lie concerns about oppression, subordination, subalternity and discrimination. The selected text of Abawi, covers the same phenomenon of post-war Afghan society. *The Secret Sky* is a saga of two young individuals, Fatima and Sami Ullah, but patriarchy and male dominance are the main barriers to their love. *The Secret Sky* by Abawi is a novel about forbidden love in post-war Afghanistan, where women's lives and family honor are strictly controlled by patriarchal and tribal customs. The story focuses on Fatima and her childhood friend Sami Ullah, whose relationship is labeled sinful by religious extremists. When discovered, Fatima is punished and forced into marriage with a much older man, leading the couple to escape to Kabul with the help of a moderate cleric. Their defiance triggers violent revenge in the name of religion and tradition, resulting in the murder of Fatima's infant sister Afifa. Through this tragedy, Abawi exposes the misuse of religion, the oppression of women, and the cruelty of patriarchal power, with Afifa representing the most innocent victim of male-dominated extremism.

Research Questions

1. What are socio-cultural and religious factors that contribute to denying to Afghan women the right of destiny-making decisions, such as marriage, taking up a profession, etc?
2. What kind of oppressions and their implications women usually have to face in post-war Afghan society as reflected in *The Secret Sky*?

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the basic factors that plague rights of women in Afghanistan.
2. To figure out the remedial measures and retribute balance in Afghan society to end the oppression and suffering of women.

Literature Review

This part consists of a review of literature in patriarchal societies in different parts of the world where women are exploited. It mainly examines the works of Afghan feminist writers who have significantly contributed to feminist discourse by raising their voices for post-war Afghan women through literature and other forms of writing. The final part of this division holds a review of research studies about Atia Abawi's *The Secret Sky* (2014), which is the main focus of the researchers. The objective of this attempt is to describe the invaluable research work on the subject of gender inequality and feminist theory. The researchers have not explored feminist issues like gender inequality, women's oppression, and Subjugation in Abawi's fiction, "*The Secret Sky*". So, in the current research work, the researchers try their best to analyze the opted text in order to justify the place.

Before shedding light on the subject of post-war victimized Afghan women under the theory of feminism, it is important to describe and know what feminism actually is. Though there is no

specific and straightforward definition of feminism. In literature, feminism is a theory that stands for the advocacy of women's rights across the globe. It is defined differently by different feminists, as; Betty Friedan, states about feminism as feminism advocates for gender equality within the existing societal framework. It emphasizes individual autonomy, equal opportunities, and freedom of choice for women. Feminists believe in challenging and changing discriminatory laws, practices, and attitudes that limit women's potential. (Friedan, 1963).

In general, feminist fiction studies concentrate on female suffering and give voice to the pain and desire of women in socially constructed patriarchal societies. This theory is primarily concerned with promoting gender equality and advocating for women's rights within the existing social and political structures of society. Thomas Hardy speaks of subaltern women and exposes the power dynamics and oppression imposed on women by patriarchy, where they endure humiliation and compromise without complaint. A number of critics have unveiled a close relationship between feminist concerns and the works of Thomas Hardy, particularly in his representation of women's suffering, resistance, and social marginalization.

According to Ahmad, (2013) analysis of Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride*, which centers around an innocent girl named "Zaitoon". The researcher addresses the issues of domestic violence and women's rights within the context of Zaitoon's marriage. The writer has portrayed the true picture of Kohistani society, and this picture vividly depicts the culture, norms, and traditions of Kohistani society. The novel critiques the oppressive power exercised by men within a rigid patriarchal society. Wilany, (2017) discusses the conditions of women in Egypt by analyzing *Woman at Point Zero* (1977). Nawal El-Sadawi is a prominent Egyptian authoress, feminist, and activist known for her tireless struggle for women's rights. *Woman at Point Zero* (1977), is her masterpiece, in which she vividly depicts the cruel face of Egyptian male-dominated society and the condition of women. In this study, the researcher claims that Sadawi, through her novel, portrays the challenging life of a woman named Firdaus, who endures severe abuse and torment from men throughout her life. From a young age, Firdaus experiences sexual abuse, including at the hands of her own uncle, whom she initially trusted. In her novel, Sadawi, through her central character Firdaus, unveils the strict societal norms of Egypt, in which women are forced into an arranged marriage with a much older widower. Further, the researcher analyses Firdaus's claim that her suffering only intensifies as she becomes a victim of physical abuse by her husband. These experiences lead Firdaus to a life of prostitution after she encounters a man who offers her a way out on the streets.

Olsson, (2011) examines the conditions of women in India in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, which features various female characters who are trapped within a system of oppression but still possess a significant level of agency. By employing the concept of 'strategic essentialism,' she aims to amplify the voices of those who are often overlooked in official historical narratives of India. Roy's feminist perspective contributes to diversifying the representation of subaltern women from the Third World. Through her portrayals, these women are not depicted as devoid of agency or responsibility, despite their oppressed and marginalized positions. In Roy's *The God of Small Things*, one of the prominent characters, Ammu, staunchly rejects the intricate system of oppression in the story and faces severe repercussions from her mother and aunt as a result. As a central figure in Roy's novel, Ammu symbolizes those who dare to challenge the established norms and cross the boundaries that uphold the hierarchical caste system. She represents individuals who have suffered due to transgressions against the restrictive 'Love Laws' and gender-specific expectations imposed upon them, sometimes paying the ultimate price with their lives. The novel itself grants fictional characters like Ammu and Velutha, who symbolize countless inter-caste relationships in real-life India, a resounding voice that resonates globally.

Most Afghan feminist authors opposed patriarchy. Afghanistan has seen the emergence of several influential feminist writers who have fearlessly advocated for women's rights and challenged traditional norms and practices. Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-American novelist, is known for his emotionally powerful storytelling, which often explores the experiences and struggles of Afghan women. While he may not identify explicitly as a feminist writer, but his novels contain strong female characters and tackle themes of gender inequality and women's rights. His *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) is considered a feminist novel due to its exploration of feminist themes and its portrayal of the challenges faced by Afghan women within a patriarchal society. Through the compelling narratives of Mariam and Laila, the novel exposes the deep-rooted gender inequality and oppression experienced by women in Afghanistan. It delves into themes of forced marriages, domestic violence, and societal restrictions, challenging the oppressive norms that confine women. *Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), serves as a testament to the power and resilience of Afghan women and contributes to feminist discourse. Gupta, (2020) analyses *The Kite Runner* under the lens of feminist theory. *Silencing the Song in Her: A Feminist Reading of Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner*. With the help of this research study, the researcher tries to argue that the absence or silence of women in a literary text does not imply their exclusion; instead, it is demonstrated in the novel *The Kite Runner* that their silent and submissive portrayals actually assert their presence strongly. The researcher provides brief and understated descriptions of women, which makes their presence felt more intensely than men's. Although their stories may not be explicitly told. Hosseini (1965) offers glimpses of women's lives through characters like Soraya, Jamila, Sanaubar, and Assef's mother, leaving much to the reader's imagination. The unavailability of information about Amir's deceased mother and Sanaubar's disappearance raises curiosity and intrigue, particularly regarding Amir's attempt to understand his mother through her diaries and books. Although the novel may not assign significant roles to female characters, their profound impact is felt even in their absence, death, or silence. Women may be excluded from the main narrative, yet their presence lingers on the fringes, making a powerful statement.

Atia Abawi is a prominent Afghan-American fiction writer, feminist and journalist, known for her impactful writings on women, war conflict, and social justice. She is among those Afghan writers who live in the diaspora. In 2014, she started her literary career and published her first novel, *The Secret Sky*. This novel has received widespread acclaim. Her first novel, *The Secret Sky*, which is considered her masterpiece, was published in 2014, for which, she has been selected as one of the best writers of the 21st century. The findings of this research, even if achieved in the context of fictional settings, can be used to understand how post-war Afghan women in real life deal with issues of subjugation and subordination victimized.

Kategainer, (n.d.) has reviewed the text of *The Secret Sky* (2014), in which he discusses that the entire novel centers around Fatima, a Hazara girl in a small village of Afghanistan who is desperate to maintain her childhood freedom as she approaches womanhood. When Sami, a young boy, returns from an unsuccessful time at a madrassa, he resumes his close friendship with Fatima, whom he secretly meets and wants mirage. However, their innocent companionship is deemed inappropriate by the village, and when Sami's cousin Rashid exposes their secret, they are forced to flee. Rashid, driven by a desire for punishment, reports their actions to a local warlord associated with the Taliban, leading to a series of violent events. The book explores the larger cultural influences and conflicts in Afghanistan, examining the clash between tradition and modernity in a traditionally conservative society faced with globalization. Despite the violence and brutality depicted, the story ends with Sami and Fatima surviving together, providing a

glimmer of hope amidst the bleakness. The inclusion of a glossary helps readers navigate the cultural aspects of the narrative.

Research Methodology

The nature of the present research work is descriptive and analytical, while the study is of a qualitative type. The research examines the representation of women's victimization in post-war Afghan society as depicted in Abawi's novel *The Secret Sky (A Novel of Forbidden Love in Afghanistan)*. The *Secret Sky* by Abawi serves as the primary text for this study, while secondary sources include scholarly works on feminism, post-war societies, and literary criticism. In order to analyze the primary text, characterization, and thematic elements related to women's marginalization and subjugation close textual analysis has been carried out as a method. The analysis focuses on how the text reflects social realities, power relations, and gender-based oppression within the post-war Afghan context. In this research, the opted novel is analyzed in the context of feminist theory, particularly the ideas of Betty Friedan as articulated in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which examines women's experiences of marginalization and advocates for their social, educational, and economic rights. In addition, insights from postcolonial feminist scholars such as Mohanty and Sara Suleri are used to contextualize women's experiences within specific cultural and historical settings. This theoretical grounding supports a critical interpretation of gender, power, and agency in the novel *The Secret Sky* by Abawi in the context of post-war Afghanistan.

Textual Analysis and Discussion

In the discussion part, text extracts related to feminism, patriarchal exploitation of women, gender based violence, and women's victimization of post-war Afghanistan has been examined mainly in light of Betty Friedan's views in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In the context of Afghanistan, *The Secret Sky* by Abawi, has obtained critical admiration from all over the world. The novel revolves around Fatima, a fifteen-year-old girl, and her childhood friend Sami Ullah, whose innocent relationship is considered sinful by their society and religious extremists. When their love is discovered, Fatima is brutally punished by her family and forced into a marriage with an old man who is forty years older than Fatima, prompting the couple to flee to Kabul after secretly marrying with the help of the moderate cleric Mullah Sarwar. Their escape enrages Rashid and the extremist Mullah Latif, who claim to act in the name of religion, culture, traditions and seek to punish the couple. In revenge, they kill Fatima's two-year-old sister Afifa exposing the cruelty and hypocrisy of religious extremism.

The Victimization and Innocence of Fatima

A number of Afghan feminist authors, such as Khaled Hosseini and Nadia Hashmi, have highlighted through their fictional works that Afghanistan is among the countries where women cannot independently choose their future partners. The same phenomenon has been portrayed by Abawi in her novel *The Secret Sky* (2014) through her fictional characters. In the narrative, as Rashid reveals Fatima's and Sami's secret relationship in front of their parents. Consequently, in a fit of anger, Fatima's father, Muhammad, demands an explanation for Rashid's reference to his daughter: "What does he mean about my daughter? Tell me!" (Abawi, 2014, p. 84). Fatima's father Mohammad condemns Sami's actions as shameful, underscoring the gravity of their behavior and the damage it inflicts on the family's honor. Here, Abawi, through her fictional characters, portrays an Afghan conservative and cruel society in which men prioritize patriarchal norms over their daughters' right to choose the life partners they love. According to Friedan, women's identity is socially constructed. They are conditioned to believe that housework, marriage, and motherhood were their only purpose. Friedan's supports the idea that **gender roles are imposed, not innate. (Friedan, 1963).** "Fatima, we have decided to marry you to Karim.

Your mother and I talked about it, and I have convinced him to take you as his second wife. It is the only way. (Abawi, 2014, p. 98). Friedan (1963), women have historically been defined not as independent individuals but through socially constructed roles such as wife, mother, housekeeper, and sexual object. Abawi illustrates that Fatima's identity is not recognized as autonomous; rather, it is controlled and defined by male authority figures and the rigid norms of Afghan society. Her father is the broader patriarchal structure determine her fate, particularly in the matter of marriage. Despite her clear emotional attachment to Sami Ullah, Fatima is denied the right to choose her life partner because family honor, tribal customs, and male dominance take precedence over her personal will. "But . . . but . . . why? ... Sami is my best friend. He can take care of me. You know his family. You know they're good people. You know he'll do anything to make me happy and treat me with respect," (Abawi, 2014, p. 98). Fatima's desire to marry Sami Ullah represents an act of resistance against patriarchal norms rooted in family honor, tradition, and male authority. By expressing her will and attempting to choose her life partner, Fatima asserts her agency in a society that denies women autonomy. Her resistance, though constrained and ultimately punished. Abawi through her novel *The Secret Sky* depicts how marriage is often used as a tool for maintaining men's control over women, preserving societal norms, and reinforcing traditional gender roles in conservative settings. As Friedan (1963) emphasizes the importance of women asserting their agency by making independent choices regarding education, career, and personal life. She argues that resistance to patriarchal expectations is essential for women to achieve selfhood and liberation. This assertion of choice challenges the rigid social structures that confine women to predetermined roles.

Family Honor as Constructs to Subjugate Women

In the novel *The Secret Sky*, Abawi tries to show the readers that the concept of family honor in Afghanistan is closely linked to notions of purity, modesty, and control over women's sexuality. Violations of these norms are considered damaging to the family's honor. Abawi's *The Secret Sky*, unveils through various characters the patriarchal pressure of the concerned society that plays a key role in the subjugation of women. "Do you like being a whore? "Do you know how much you have shamed yourself? How much you have shamed this family? How much you have shamed me?" (Abawi, 2014, p. 103). Fatima apologizes, but her words hold no weight in her parents' eyes. Her parents accuse Fatima of being a whore, kicks her on the stomach, and yells at her that she is the one who shamed her family. According to Mohanty (2003), the ways women are subjugated in Afghanistan or India are shaped by local culture, religion, and political structures. This framework allows for an understanding of Afghan women's struggles in *The Secret Sky* as rooted in specific social, ethnic, and religious realities. This highlights how societal expectations and the obsession with maintaining family reputations can lead to extreme control and punishment.

Honor Killing as a Construct to Victimize Women

In the context of Afghanistan, a woman's destiny is often scripted by others, especially her father or elder brother. Her destiny is written before she is born, formulated by her family and community. A girl who raises her voice against it is dehumanized and even killed. Rabia Ali defines honor killing as "When a man takes the life of a woman and claims that he did it because she was guilty of immoral sexual conduct, it is called an honor killing, not murder" (Lari, 2011, p. 27). The act of killing women in the name of honor killings is a tragic and deeply concerning practice that occurs in some societies. "It has dishonored our village and my family. The wrong needs to be righted and our honor restored. As much as it pains me to say this, it involves one of my own family members" (Abawi, 2014, p. 120). Suleri (1992), critiques the ways in which violence against women is culturally and rhetorically normalized in patriarchal societies especially in third

world countries. She argues that honor killing is often framed as a moral, religious, or cultural necessity, thereby masking its true function as an assertion of male authority. By presenting such violence as a defense of honor, society legitimizes brutality and silences women's suffering. In the novel, *The Secret Sky* by Abawi, Rashid claims that Sami is his cousin and is involved in this act, which has shamed their family and village. "This is all proof that they want Satan's pleasures without God's consent. We need to make an example of them in front of your whole village." (Abawi, 2014, p. 120). This text reflects a judgmental and moralistic perspective towards sexuality, rooted in social control. Latif uses strong language, referring to the alleged behavior as sexual treachery, which suggests a betrayal of societal norms and values. The novel also shows that in Afghanistan, culture and family often triumph over religion. Suleri (1963) further advocates that this rhetoric transforms personal insecurity into collective moral justification, allowing men to exercise power while avoiding accountability. Through her novel, *The Secret Sky*, Abawi reveals that these killings are based on perceived violations of cultural or religious norms, such as engaging in premarital or extramarital relationships, refusing forced marriages, or seeking divorce. Abawi has drawn a shattered image of Afghanistan's complex culture in her novel *The Secret Sky*. She has found the soul of its culture to be dead.

The Murder of the Innocent Afifa at the Hands of Cruel Men

The belief behind feminist theory is that in every domain, women are often considered inferior and oppressed socially, politically, economically, professionally, and psychologically in patriarchal reigns. Afghanistan is such a country in which, if someone is male, he is superior to all others. But if someone is female, she is considered inferior. If a woman succeeds in something, these are the encouraging sentences she will receive: "What a manly thing you did! You are so manly! Now, if a man does something wrong or inappropriate, here are the adjectives used to describe him: girly, womanly, wearing women's bracelets, and submissive to women" (Tantray, 2017, p.3). Abawi has raised the voice of the subordinated women of the concerned society with the help of her fictional work, *The Secret Sky*. "Give me that, with the way you're holding it, you'll kill all of us" (Abawi, 2014, p. 134). In her novel, *The Secret Sky* (2014), Abawi portrays that Afghanistan fails to provide the same equal rights to women as receive men because of a male-dominated system. Of all the characters in the novel, Afifa suffers the most because of her sexual identity and the subordinate manners of the men in her community. Of all the feminist writers, Abawi's brilliant novel, *The Secret Sky*, provides a vivid and realistic picture of post-war Afghan society. Suleri (1992), argues that patriarchal systems of control do not limit violence only to the woman labeled as "guilty," but often extend it to innocent female bodies in order to reinforce male authority. She argues that such violence exposes the performative nature of honor, where punishment is less about moral justice and more about demonstrating power and obedience. The targeting of innocent victims reveals that patriarchal violence is symbolic, meant to terrorize and discipline the entire community of women.

Factors that Contribute to the Denial Rights for Women in Afghanistan

Abawi, in her novel *The Secret Sky*, employed a mixture of factors that contributed to the denial women's rights in the context of post-war Afghanistan.

Ethnicity as a Construct to Subjugate Women

The novel *The Secret Sky* (2014) is set in Afghanistan and centers around two ethnic groups: Pashtuns and Hazras. In the novel, Sami Ullah is a wealthy Pashtun, while Fatima belongs to a poor Hazara ethnic group. In the narrative, Sami expresses his strong desire to marry Fatima, Sami's father softly tells him to stop and expresses that it is impossible for their marriage to happen. "Stop it, Please, stop." "Impossible. There is no way this can happen, no way". You are my son! The khan's son! You will marry the girl we feel you should marry". Not the daughter of

a farmer . . . a Hazara girl!" (Abawi, 2014, p. 88). Mohanty (2003), claims that women's oppression in postcolonial societies cannot be understood without examining how ethnicity intersects with patriarchy to regulate female bodies and choices. She emphasizes that ethnic identity often becomes a political and cultural tool through which women are controlled, particularly in societies shaped by conflict and nationalism. Rather than functioning merely as a marker of cultural belonging, ethnicity is frequently mobilized to police women's behavior, marriage choices, and sexuality in the name of collective honor and social purity. Abawi tries to draw the attention of the readers towards ethnic relations. Aaka Ismail dismisses the idea of marrying a farmer's daughter, particularly a Hazara girl, due to social and ethnic differences. He goes further to express that Sami's desire to marry Fatima is not only insulting to the religious and cultural figure, but also a personal insult to the family. In Abawi's *The Secret Sky*, the character Aaka Ismail is an evident that in Afghanistan, one of the root causes of women's subjugation and subordination is ethnicity.

The Exploitation of Women in the Name of Religion

The exploitation of women in the name of religion is a global issue that can be found in various societies and contexts. While it is essential to know that religion itself is not inherently discriminatory towards women, some individuals and groups misuse religious teachings and beliefs to justify and perpetuate harmful practices. "My dear boy, your cousin, and this girl have committed sexual treachery! This is all proof that they want Satan's pleasures without God's consent. We need to make an example of them in front of your whole village." (Abawi, 2014, p. 121). Mohanty (2003), says that women's oppression in postcolonial societies especially in south Asian countries is frequently justified through selective and patriarchal interpretations of religion rather than religion itself. She asserts that religious discourse is often mobilized by male-dominated power structures to legitimize control over women's bodies, choices, and sexuality, transforming faith into a political tool of domination. Mohanty (2003), emphasizes that such practices are not rooted in spiritual ethics but in socio-political agendas that seek to preserve male authority and silence women under the guise of moral righteousness. Abawi in her *The Secret Sky*, depicts the actual faces of such groups that misuse religion in order to justify the mistreatment and marginalization of women. In the novel, the character Rashid, Mullah Latif and his team misuse religion in order to subjugate women. Though the exact nature of these actions is not specified. It suggests a moral judgment and a belief that the observed behavior goes against accepted norms or values. The entire text clearly reveals that there is no such relation between Sami and Fatima except that of mutual trust and admiration between their families. They have not done anything wrong as what Rashid believes. They are just friends since they were children. Sami considers Fatima's family his own family and her father his own father. Fatima and Sami swear the Holy Quran that they do not have such type of relation. They love each other and want to marry.

Conclusion

After close textual analysis and critical examination of Atia Abawi's *The Secret Sky* (2014), this study concludes that post-war Afghan society systematically denies women their legal, social, and moral rights. The novel reveals how women's subjugation is justified through deeply rooted cultural traditions, patriarchal values, ethnic hierarchies, and the manipulation of religion. Although women's oppression is a global and historical phenomenon, Abawi reveals that in post-war Afghanistan, cultural norms and tribal customs often override religious principles, resulting in extreme gender inequality and violence against women. Analyzed through the feminist framework of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the novel foregrounds the lived realities of Afghan women trapped in a rigid male-dominated social order. The victimization and

innocence of Fatima stand at the center of the narrative, symbolizing the suffering of countless Afghan women. Despite her moral integrity and emotional sincerity, Fatima is punished simply for expressing her right to love and choose her life partner. Her repeated pleas to marry Sami Ullah instead of an elderly man expose how women are denied agency over even the most personal decisions. Abawi highlights that women's voices are silenced within the family structure, where obedience is valued over consent, and honor is prioritized over humanity. This denial of choice perpetuates gender inequality and reinforces women's exclusion from both private and public spheres. Family honor emerges as a powerful construct used to control and subjugate women. In *The Secret Sky*, women's bodies become symbols of male prestige and social respectability. Any perceived deviation from accepted norms is viewed as a stain on family honor, regardless of the woman's innocence. This distorted concept of honor leads to extreme violence, culminating in honor killing, which is portrayed as a socially sanctioned crime. The novel exposes how honor killing is not rooted in religion but is instead a patriarchal mechanism used to discipline and silence women under the guise of morality. The murder of the innocent child Afifa represents the most brutal manifestation of patriarchal cruelty in the novel. Afifa's death underscores the inhumanity of extremist ideologies that justify violence even against children to preserve so-called honor. Through this incident, Abawi condemns a society where women and girls are treated as expendable and where male authority remains unquestioned. Afifa's murder powerfully reinforces the argument that patriarchy operates without moral limits when supported by social and religious extremism. Ethnicity also functions as a significant tool of women's subjugation in the novel. Abawi portrays the Hazara community as marginalized and dehumanized by dominant Pashtun groups. Hazara women suffer double oppression: first as women and second as members of an oppressed ethnic group. The rejection of Fatima as a suitable bride due to ethnic differences illustrates how ethnicity intersects with gender to intensify discrimination. Thus, ethnic identity becomes another mechanism through which women's rights are denied. Moreover, the exploitation of women in the name of religion is one of the novel's most critical themes. Abawi exposes how religious teachings are distorted by orthodox clerics to legitimize violence, forced marriage, and murder. This misuse of religion strips women of their legal and spiritual rights and reinforces male dominance. Drawing on the feminist insights of Friedan, Mohanty, and Suleri, this study establishes that women's marginalization in post-war Afghanistan is socially constructed rather than divinely ordained. Mohanty's concept of intersectionality is particularly relevant, as it highlights how gender oppression is shaped by overlapping forces such as culture, ethnicity, and religion. *The Secret Sky* presents women as "Other" and Subaltern within a patriarchal Afghan society that fears female autonomy and equality. The novel calls for a re-evaluation of cultural practices and religious interpretations that sustain women's oppression. Unless women are granted freedom of choice, thought, and action, genuine legal rights and social justice will remain unattainable. Abawi's narrative ultimately serves as a powerful critique of patriarchy and a call for human dignity, equality, and justice for Afghan women.

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