



SUPPRESSED IDENTITIES AND SURVIVAL STRATEGIES: ANALYZING ZARGHUANAKARGAR'S DEAR ZARI

Namita Singh

Assistant Professor, Department of English, S.S.Jain Subodh P.G. College, Jaipur.

Abstract

Identities are said to be the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. Identities can be focused on the past, present and also on Future. They are not the fixed markers people assume them to be but are instead dynamically constructed in the moment. The Identity of Afghan women has been in a dilemma for decades. They have been oppressed and exploited during the long and continuous war and exploitation in several societies. Afghanistan is one such society. Over the past few years' Afghan women have invented different ways of coping with life, under the most extreme forms of coercion, fear and high levels of uncertainties. They are seeking freedom from hierarchical and patriarchal domination and hope to establish their own identity free from male, ethnic, religious and imperial domination.

The paper aims to discuss the suppressed identities of Afghan women and their coping mechanism to survive through the experiences of several oppressed women in ZarghuanaKragar's Dear Zari: Secret Lives of Afghanistan. It is a collection of life stories of the women who were the victims of both patriarchal norms of Afghan society and unfavorable conditions of long and continuous war in Afghanistan. Through the life stories of these oppressed Afghan women the paper also intends to throw light on the socio-political conditions of Afghan society.

Identities are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. They can be focused on the past, present or the future and make up one's self-concept variously described as what comes to mind when one thinks of oneself. They are not the fixed markers people assume them to be but are instead dynamically constructed in the moment. Choices that feel similar to identity in one situation do not necessarily feel similar in another situation. Identity becomes self-useful in diverse situations with this kind of flexibility. Identity has been defined by several critics in various ways. Hogg and Abrams 1988, defines it "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others". Jenkins defined that Identity "refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities" or they are "relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self" as stated by Wendt. In simple way answer to the question "what is identity?" is how one answers the question "who are you?" Or, a person's identity is how he defines who he is? As asserted by Hopf.

Though described by several critics in different ways, "identity" in the present context has a double sense. It refers at the same time both to social categories and to the sources of an individual's self-respect or dignity without having any necessary linkage between these. "Identity" can be used to refer to personal characteristics or attributes that cannot naturally be expressed in terms of a social category, or it can also be described as different to their personal identity. In its present form Identity reflects and evokes the idea that social categories are bound up with the bases of an individual's self-respect. The answer to the question "who are you?" is entirely differently in different circumstances. Depending on the context, one might answer "an American," "a professor," "a daughter-in-law," "a taxpayer," "a Democrat." "or so on.

Hence each individual might have multiple identities, since the answer to the question will depend on the specific context. Identities are also socially constructed and determined by wider social, cultural, political and economic contexts. As a result of inequalities of power and authority identities may be reinterpreted or even imposed upon certain groups or individuals by others. In this case they may be divisive and repressive or even rebellious and subversive. Identity of Afghan women is one such case.

In the past ten years a great deal has been written on Afghan women and yet so little is still known about who they are, what they need or what they want. Dominant or western scholarship on Afghan women, often claim about representing 'authentic' voices and experience of Afghan women in which they are portrayed as silent and passive victims of their culture, their men and their politics. Sometimes we are introduced to an extraordinary Afghan woman who defies her culture and becomes a symbol of progress and hope for advancing women's rights in Afghanistan. But even these women are presented as seeking the militarized assistance of the west. The voices lacking in this scholarship are those of the everyday woman who has survived decades of war, who has continued to find ways to meet the needs of her family, and is still finding ways to survive under growing insecurity, poverty and patriarchal oppression.



Zarghuana's book *Dear Zari : The Secret Lives of Women* of Afghanistan makes an exceptional effort to share voices of such Afghan women, who are easily ignored, or marginalized in dominant discourses. This book shares narratives of Afghan women who are living under and actively resisting local and foreign oppressions. Although these women have always faced multiple social, economic and political limitations, Zarghuana demonstrates that they have never been passive or silent. Rather, they have been fighting for their rights and self-determination long before the west invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Even in exile, Afghan women continue to empower themselves by constantly fighting stereotypes about their culture, their religion, and creating solidarity with other Afghan and Muslim women of various backgrounds. The story of such Afghan women which has been shared in the book has never been explored by the west.

Dr Rebecca Kay in *Identity and Marginality* asserts about the marginalized groups that these groups often face complex choices in defining and enacting their own identities. They may choose, or feel compelled, to assimilate to the norms and values of the dominant group, thus abandoning alternative identities, or at least judging them by the standards of the dominant group as illustrated. Alternatively, they may choose to emphasize a separate identity in contrast to dominant norms and to act this out as demonstrably as possible, drawing individual pride and collective strength from such boldness. Such a stance may run the risk of increasing the isolation of marginalized groups and prompting a repressive backlash from the dominant group if it feels its power is threatened. It may also produce a new set of dominant norms within the marginalized group itself, resulting in new fractures and experiences of marginalization for those members who are unable or unwilling to comply. In reality, most marginalized people steer a path between these two extremes developing a multifaceted identity and negotiating complex relationships with a wide variety of individuals and groups.

Zarghuana in her work depicts the ways in which oppressed women of Afghanistan used their marginalized identity to challenge the power structures of the dominant social order. In doing so however, these women may risk a further marginalization as mainstream feminism. Being a marginalized group which has gained considerable authority and discursive power they struggle to understand their strategies for dealing with oppression. Sometimes they are either misinterpreted as victims in need of help or dismissed as complicit with male violence. Zarghuana has taken up all these different aspects of the identities of Afghan women dealing with different kinds of circumstances. She has taken into consideration the problems faced by these women and their struggle for existence in unfavorable circumstances. The stories in *Dear Zari* circulate not only in the lives of marginalized Afghan women and in dangerous, war-torn, tumultuous conditions that they face but also dwells in the historical turmoil and oppression of the whole country.

The stories are drawn from the radio programme Afghan Women's Hour, which was produced by Kargar from 2004 to 2010, and they cover several controversial issues such as the "exchange" and sale of child brides, rape, honor and virginity, and the pressures on women to produce a son. Some of the most touching stories are those of the widows and divorced women, who find themselves exploited by their own families: "Becoming a widow in a traditional society like Afghanistan means you lose the right to talk freely, you lose the right to put on make-up and dress up." In certain parts of Afghanistan, women were not allowed to work outside the home, so they become carpet weavers. One of the character Samira's story describes how their babies are sedated with opium to allow the women to concentrate on their work. Zarghuana Kargar states in an interview: "I have met many widows from my country and heard their stories. I have seen widows in my own family. Now that the foreign troops are leaving and Afghan soldiers continue to fight, I felt the need to hear from the women affected what this war had done to them..."

Zarghuana intentionally has taken up a newer way to represent the story of the suppressed identities of Afghan women who have emerged as a new self after going through all the hurdles and exploitation throughout their life.

Each story in the book has a woman character with an identity imposed by society, family and the nation or the adverse circumstances. Nasreen, Sharifa Shereenjan, Sameera, Ilaha Anisa Wazma, Janpari, Layla Mehgul and Bakhtawara are the women characters in the story whose lives were made complex by the socio-political suppression and exploitation, yet they overcome all the hurdles and emerged with a new self out of the marginalized identities. Nasreen was forced to marry a man twenty years elder to her just because she fell in love with a man of her choice and of the caste other than hers: "Abdullah's parents must have been able to hear my screams from next doors as I was beaten like an animal. My mother wept and pleaded with my father not to hurt me, but father shouted back that it was all her fault..." (45)

It was not considered decent for Afghan women to fall in love with a person of her choice. Her marriage is totally her father's affair. She has no right in going beyond her. She lost her identity of a carefree and happy girl after marriage and became an oppressed wife and found solace only after becoming a mother. Being a mother was her new identity that gave her strength to overcome all the hurdles of her life.



Shereenjan's story is even more pathetic as she was given away in terms of marriage at the age of twelve to settle a family dispute. In Afghan society forced marriages are arranged as a way of solving a family dispute or problem. Sometimes daughters are exchanged to enable the son of the family to marry and sometimes disputes are settled by giving a girl away. Shereenjan was treated like an animal in her in-laws house and she was not even allowed to meet her parents. At the age of seventy while sharing her story to Afghan Hour Programme she says: "As you can see I am alive and well, but I do sometimes wonder how I have survived everything that's happened to me" (54)

Like Nasreen she also diverted herself towards her children that gave her strength to overcome the brutal treatment and she learned some coping mechanism too as she asserts: "But Dear Zari, somehow I managed to survive by learning some tricks and despite all hardships and beatings I was still naughty." (65)

Women's rights were formulated by the predominantly male Afghan elite and were generally based on western models of women's rights which were culturally insensitive and unpopular with the majority of Afghan women. The text emphasizes the protest of Afghan women in the patriarchal society. This dichotomy of the oppressed traditional and liberated modern Afghan women is viewed largely by the west that is biased against Islam and the Muslim as depicted in Orientalism by Edward Said 1993 but their survival strategies, coping mechanism and courage has not been explored much.

McLeod refers to Spivak's theory about restoring women back to history, which he in some ways doubts, focusing instead on what leads to female oppression. The cause for oppression can be difficult to point out but there are several factors involved in oppressing women. Religion becomes the tool of coercion when male characters interpret religion and female sexuality from within the patriarchal frame. Instead of accepting female sexuality they veil women and use religion as an excuse. The emphasis of religion shifts and becomes a way of justifying oppression of women. In most of the novels the questions raised about veil and how women find refuge in veil and how veil became a source of comfort along with being a symbol of oppression or male dominance. But in Zarghuan's book *Dear Zari* none of the women refer to veil as a symbol of subjugation while telling their life stories. There is only one reference of hijab given in Shareefa's story where she says: "We always joked that we were wearing Hijabs to protect our hair and skin from pollution." (27) Instead they shared several other kind of oppressions they met which were not even mentioned by the writers like Khaled Houssini or Tamim Ansary.

As Spivak focuses on restoring women back to history after many years of silence and she encourages women in some way to speak up again Zarghuan also gave the Afghan women a voice after so many years of silencing. Through her female characters she questions the role of the family in controlling women, the possibility of egalitarian society and the use of religious doctrine in oppression of women. Women were treated as mere objects and experience oppression and subjugation within the family too. Along with the role of religion in oppression of women the writer also focuses on the issue of motherhood within patriarchal frame where a woman was considered incomplete if she does not give birth to a son: "I have seen my mother weep every time she gives birth and discovers that it's another girl. Each time it happens and my dad won't talk to her for months and life at home is wretched. Even my grandparents ignore my mother. It's truly awful to see what happens to a woman when she is incomplete." (28)

These words of Sharifa shows that the women are identified complete only after giving birth to a son not a daughter. The identity of a mother is questioned by the society. Later on Sharifa was given away in exchange of a new wife for her father and struggled a lot throughout her life.

Dr Rebecca Kay in her essay *Identity and Marginality* asserts that Marginalized groups often face complex choices in defining and enacting their own identities. They may choose, or feel compelled, to assimilate to the norms and values of the dominant group, thus abandoning alternative identities, or at least judging them by the standards of the dominant group as illustrated in Elias' example above, and weakening the collective ties which had defined them as a group in the first place.

Alternatively, they may choose to emphasize a separate identity in contrast to dominant norms and to act this out as demonstrably as possible, drawing individual pride and collective strength from such defiance. Such a stance may run the risk of increasing the isolation of marginalized groups and prompting a repressive backlash from the dominant group if it feels its power is threatened. It may also produce a new set of dominant norms within the marginalized group itself, resulting in new fractures and experiences of marginalization for those members who are unable or unwilling to comply. In reality, most marginalized people steer a path between these two extremes developing a multifaceted identity and negotiating complex relationships with a wide variety of individuals and groups. The women characters of *Dear Zari* found a new identity while overcoming the hurdles and oppression and survived them with their courage. They have invented different ways of coping



with life, under the most extreme forms of coercion, fear and high levels of uncertainties. Despite marginalization, they established their voices and agency and reshaped their identity.

Under the adverse conditions of war and exploitation they are challenging imperialist representation of Afghan women. They are seeking freedom from hierarchical and patriarchal domination with a hope that their active agency will enable them to establish their own identity free from male, ethnic, religious and imperial domination.

Reference

1. Hogg, Michael and Dominic Abrams. 1988. *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes*. London: Routledge.
2. Kay, Rebecca. *Identity and Marginality*, eSharp Issue 6:1
3. Jenkins, Richard. 1996. *Social Identity*. London: Routledge.
4. Wendt, Alexander. 1992. "Anarchy is What States Make of It." *International Organization* 46:391–426.42
5. de Beauvoir, Simone. 1980. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books. Deng, Francis M. 1995. *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
6. Erikson, Erik H. 1968. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton.
7. Rorty, Amelie, ed. 1976. *The Identities of Persons*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
8. Spivak, GayatriChakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1988 Rev. ed. reprinted in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*
9. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders. Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. Print.