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The Plight of Afghan Women in Sally Armstrong's *Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan* (2002) and Fawzia Koofi's *The Favored Daughter: One Woman's Fight to Lead Afghanistan to the Future* (2012)

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Abstract

The present dissertation has compared Sally Armstrong's *Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan* (2002) and Fawzia Koofi's *The Favored Daughter: One Woman's Fight to Lead Afghanistan to the Future* (2012). It has investigated the way these authors reveal that the Taliban distort religion to justify their institutionalized oppression of Afghan women. To examine this point, this dissertation has brought into focus the way they seek to control their bodies and access to the public space. This research has also examined the influence of the authors' backgrounds on their portrayal of Afghan women's ability to struggle and their perception of the extent to which the Western intervention in the country has liberated them. To reach these aims, this paper has relied on Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's rights in Islam* (1991) and Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013). The analysis of Armstrong's and Koofi's texts has revealed that both authors believe that the Taliban distort and misuse Islam to oppress Afghan women and justify their actions. Afghan women are subjected to severe restrictions on their physical appearance and access to the public sphere on religious grounds. The analysis has also revealed that the authors differ in the portrayal of Afghan women's ability to resist oppression and their need to be liberated by the West. Armstrong differs from Koofi in her portrayal of Afghan women as voiceless victims to be rescued only by the involvement of the West.

Key words: *Afghan women, Taliban, institutionalized oppression, misinterpretation, Islam, struggle, U.S. intervention, liberation/saving.*

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I- Introduction

Afghan women have long been deprived of their rights and freedoms because of the patriarchal social structure of their country. In fact, Afghanistan is situated in that part of the world to which John Caldwell refers as ‘the patriarchal belt’¹ which is characterized by what Deniz Kandiyoti terms ‘classic patriarchy.’² The latter describes the system that makes women’s sole role in society to be obedient wives and daughters-in-law from a very young age. The only possible way for them to gain some status in the household is by producing male offspring.³

Although measures were taken to improve the legal and social status of women in Afghanistan during the late 1970s and 1980s, they were not fully implemented. This project, which had long been occupying a central position in political debates, was constrained by the patriarchal social structure of the country and the religious extremist backlash which saw granting women’s rights as something foreign to their culture and religion. However, when the religious extremists took power in the last decade of the 20th century this project was brought to a complete halt.⁴ By this, the patriarchy which had long oppressed women took another turn. It became institutionalized and was given a religious explanation.

The condition of women in Afghanistan has received unprecedented attention following 9/11 attacks and the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan.⁵ Indeed, stories about the situation of women in the country since this event were known worldwide thanks to mainly personal memoirs and journalistic accounts which contributed hugely to their spread. However, many of these stories end up constructing generalized images about voiceless oppressed Afghan women in the readers’ minds.

The plight of Afghan women has inspired a considerable number of authors, both Afghan and non-Afghan. This topic has also inspired a great amount of research. The condition

of Afghan women as portrayed in books –both fictional and nonfictional- has been widely investigated from different feminist perspectives.

One of these books is Tzemach Lenon's *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* (2011) which is a story of a woman's bravery to become the breadwinner of her family during the Taliban years. It has been studied by Augustina Kresia Agasi in 'The Rebellion of an Afghan Woman Against Taliban Oppression Revealed through Kamila's Struggle in Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana*' (2014).⁶ Relying on the theory of radical-libertarian feminism which holds that women's reproductive capabilities are the source of their oppression in a patriarchal society, this study analyses the description of the main character of the novel, Kamila, the Taliban's oppression of women as experienced by this character and her rebellion against it. By analyzing Kamila's character, the researcher points out that she has many unique qualities which are the cause of both her inner struggle and strength after the Taliban takeover. The Taliban are particularly against women like her, educated, brave and open-minded. For this, the researcher believes that the Taliban laws that restrict women's freedom affect her to an even larger extent. However, those qualities which are the reason of her distress are used to rebel against the Taliban's restrictions and struggle to empower other women.

In addition, Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* (2014), the story of Rahima who revives the ancient custom of *basha posh* which allows her to dress and be treated like a boy for certain years, has been studied by Shahzadi Sumra and Mehroz Taseer in 'Subalternity in *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell*: An Alternative Feminist Reading' (2018).⁷ Using Spivak's and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's theoretical conceptions of the subaltern and by paying special attention to religion, this research tries to explore women's subalternity as depicted in the novel. The researchers also hope that studying Nadia Hashimi's novel alone and their focus on the relationship between religion and patriarchy will allow them to understand the situation of

women in Afghanistan and other Muslim countries. The findings of the research have allowed the researchers to make generalizations that Afghan and Muslim men distort religion in a way that allows them to maintain their authority over women and achieve their desires. This is embodied by the husband of the main character Rahima who shapes and interprets religion as he pleases in order to justify his polygamy and violent behavior towards his wives. According to the researchers, in such a society, a woman becomes a commodity that is sold to her suitor with a good price and a victim of forced marriage, polygamy, constant and unreasonable beatings, and other misogynistic traditions.

In a recent study entitled ‘Patriarchy and Gender Stereotyping in Khaled Houssaini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*’ (2019),⁸ Siham AZZI and Youssouf BELKHIRI have studied Khaled Housseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). The latter is a novel that traces the history of Afghanistan through the story of two women from different generations and social backgrounds experiencing the same oppression under the same roof. The study focuses on the impact of the patriarchal nature of Afghan society and culture on women and the way it renders them passive subjects who are not allowed to have a voice of their own. Their aim is achieved by relying on postcolonial feminism and focusing on the female characters of the novel- Nana, Mariam, Laila, and Aziza. Although the choice of the novel allows them to study the impact of the institutionalized oppression of women throughout several periods, they focus solely on the period of the Soviet occupation as they believe that women’s suffering during this period ‘is greater than ever.’⁹ Little attention is given to those enacted during the Civil War and after the takeover of the Taliban. These are merely seen as another aspect of the patriarchal society of Afghanistan. The researchers also discuss the question of women’s resistance in the novel. For them, their resistance stems from their shared feeling of sisterhood.

Research on the plight of women in Afghanistan has not excluded female children. In ‘Parvana’s Struggles against Gender Inequality in Taliban Society in Deborah Ellis’s *The*

Breadwinner: A Feminist Children's Literature Study' (2015),¹⁰ Endah Ratnasari has studied the impact of the Taliban's restrictive laws on female children in Deborah Ellis's novel *The Breadwinner* (2000). The latter tells the story of a little girl, Parvana, who disguises as a boy to become the breadwinner of her family during the Taliban years. Relying on feminist literary criticism, the researcher reaches the findings that life under the Taliban causes 'fear and lack of confidence'¹¹ in female children, 'desperation and unwillingness'¹² as well as dependence on men from an early age. This study also analyses female children's struggle against inequality as experienced by Parvana. For the researcher, the only character who is able to struggle against this inequality is Parvana by disguising as a boy and engaging in many actions forbidden for women despite the risk of her identity being discovered. These risks build her personality as she becomes more confident and independent. The findings of this study allow the researcher to reach the conclusion that children may play a huge role in the struggle for gender equality, especially because the Taliban's regulations that restrict women's freedom are more harmful to female children.

Issue and Working Hypotheses

From the review of the literature, one can say that the condition of Afghan women, especially during the Taliban years, has been widely studied. However, there are still some gaps that this research will attempt to fill. First, it appears that studying the books from the perspective of Muslim women has been neglected as most studies relied on Western and postcolonial feminist theories. Second, the question of whether the texts offer a stereotyped image about Afghan women being passive awaiting liberation has not been addressed. Third, most studies focused on fictional books and neglected non-fictional ones. Therefore, this research is an attempt to fill these gaps by comparing and contrasting two non-fictional books, namely Sally Armstrong's *Veiled Threat* (2002) and Fawzia Koofi's *The Favored Daughter* (2012). The comparison will be based on Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite: A*

Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam (1991) and Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013).

What motivates this comparative study is the fact that *Veiled Threat* (2002) as a journalistic account and *The Favored Daughter* (2012) as a memoir represent two of the genres that have hugely contributed to spreading stories about Afghan women. Moreover, the fact that the authors are from different cultural and geographical backgrounds allows space for the examination of how their respective cultures may influence their writing.

This dissertation intends to compare how both *Veiled Threat* (2002) and the *Favored Daughter* (2012) show the extent to which Afghan women's lives have been controlled and restricted by religion which is used as a pretext for their oppression. It seeks to discuss how religion is misused and distorted to control women's bodies and exclude them from the public sphere. To approach this point, it is appropriate to make reference to Fatima Mernissi's ideas developed in *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991). Mernissi is known for questioning the condition of women in Muslim countries; therefore, her ideas are relevant for this research.

This dissertation also intends to contrast the way Armstrong and Koofi represent Afghan women's ability to struggle against oppression and whether they offer a generalized image about them being voiceless in need of liberation. Because the authors are from different cultural and geographical backgrounds, the existence of differences in the way Afghan women's struggle and the role of the Western intervention in the country is perceived is more than possible. For this, it is appropriate to make reference to Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013). In this book, Abu-Lughod draws attention towards the widespread Western representation of Muslim women as voiceless victims who need the West to save them. Therefore, her ideas fit the last objective of this dissertation.

In addition to a general introduction, methods and materials and results, this dissertation contains a discussion section which comprises three chapters. The first chapter examines the way religion is misused to make women's bodies subject to male control. The second chapter is devoted to the analysis of how religion is also used as a pretext for excluding women from the public sphere. As regards the third chapter, it analyzes how Afghan women's agency is represented in both books, whether they are represented as helpless women who cannot fight against oppression and are, therefore, in need of saving.

Endnotes

¹ Jon Caldwell, *Theory of Fertility Decline*, (London: Academic Press, 1982) quoted in Moghadam 'Patriarchy, the Taleban, and Politics of Public Space in Afghanistan,' *Women's Studies International Forum* 25 (2002), 20.

² Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with patriarchy,' *Gender and Society* 2 (1988), 278.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Valentine M. Moghadam, 'Patriarchy, the Taleban, and Politics of the Public Space in Afghanistan,' *Women's Studies International Forum* 25 (2002).

⁵ Laura Bush in George Walker Bush Institute, *We are Afghan Women: Voices of hope*, (New York: Scribner, 2016).

⁶ Augustina Kresia Agasi, 'The Rebellion of an Afghan Woman Against Taliban Oppression Revealed through Kamila's Struggle in Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana*' (Undergraduate thesis, Santa Dharma University, Yogyakarta, 2014)

⁷ Shahzadi Sumra and Mehroz Taseer, 'Subalternity in *The Peal that Broke Its Shell*: An Alternative Feminist Reading', *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies* 6 (2018).

⁸ Siham AZZI and Youssouf BELKHIRI, 'Patriarchy and Gender Stereotyping in Khaled Houssaini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*' (Master's thesis, University of Mohammad Boudiaf, Msila, 2019).

⁹ Ibid, 17.

¹⁰ Endah Ratnasari, 'Parvana's Struggles against Gender Inequality in Taliban Society in Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner*: A Feminist Children's Literature Study' (Undergraduate thesis, Yogyakarta State University, Yogyakarta, 2015)

¹¹ Ibid, viii

¹² Ibid.

II- Methods and Materials

This section introduces the methods to be used in order to analyze *Veiled Threat* and *The Favored Daughter* and provides the latter's summaries. To reach the aforementioned aims, the analysis of the books will be primarily based on Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite*. This research will also resort to Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

1- Methods

A- Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991)

Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015) is a Moroccan feminist who questions and examines the condition of Muslim women. In *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991), she travels back to the early years of Islam to discover the roots of Muslim women's current situation. She argues that the male-biased manipulations of the sacred texts in Muslim societies is the root of the misogyny that is restricting Muslim women's lives. She contends that since the death of the Prophet Mohammad, men started misinterpreting Islam's religious texts as a way of 'blocking women's rights.'¹³ Men interpret the texts according to their own interests, and these personal interpretations are held as basic truth. The main ideas Mernissi develops in this book fit this analysis because she sheds light on how religion is used to justify the oppression of women and maintain male dominance in Muslim societies which is epitomized by the experience of Afghan women as depicted in both Armstrong's and Koofi's texts.

Mernissi emphasizes the egalitarian dimension of Islam which Muslim societies reject and which many non-Muslims deny, arguing that 'Islam promised equality and dignity for all, for men and women, masters and servants.'¹⁴ However, because Muslim societies are inherently patriarchal, this egalitarian message is rejected by many Muslims and they believe it to be imported from the West. She believes that it is the misinterpretations and the distortions

of Islam which denied it the possibility of being ‘a sort of declaration of human rights, similar to the grand principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a universal declaration that is still today challenged as being alien to our culture and imported from the West.’¹⁵ For this, she refers to the ‘contemporary Muslims’ amnesia, which sees equality of the sexes as an alien phenomenon.’¹⁶ Indeed, Koofi and Armstrong show that Afghan women’s rights were denied because of this widespread idea that women’s rights are a foreign idea to Afghanistan.

Mernissi discusses two topics which are the source of heated debate in the Muslim world: violence against women and the veil. She states that in the Muslim world, men seek to keep control over women by using violence against them. They believe that any act of rebellion against the authority of men must be punished by violence. To support their belief, they resort to religion to find proof and they come up with a verse from the Quran or Hadith they barely understand. However, she highlights that ‘beating a woman was not part of the Prophet’s tradition.’¹⁷ The Prophet ‘advised against the use of violence toward women,’¹⁸ she maintains. She even emphasizes that he ‘abhorred violence toward women.’¹⁹ Armstrong’s and Koofi’s texts show how the Taliban resort to violence to punish women for the slightest mistake, claiming that they are merely obeying the Prophet’s command to stop evil actions.

In addition to violence, veiling is another way of controlling women. Mernissi highlights that seeking to ‘veil’, ‘hide’ and ‘mask’ women, which has become an ‘obsession’, is a result of ‘a phobic attitude’²⁰ towards women which sees them as a source of sin and impurity. She claims that the veil was originally a protection for women, but it became the means of their exclusion from society. Indeed, *Veiled Threat* and *The Favored Daughter* show the extent to which the Taliban have this ‘phobic attitude’ towards women by seeking to hide them from men’s gaze.

Mernissi elaborates the idea of the exclusion of women and argues that men seek to exclude them from politics and the public sphere on religious grounds. Men ‘imagine’ that ‘power is necessarily male,’²¹ and to exclude women from politics and restrict it for themselves, they resort to religion for justification. When women started conquering territories that were considered ‘the private preserve of men and the privilege of maleness,’²² such as the school and the workplace, men started calling for a return to tradition. This return to tradition ‘invites women who have left “their” place (the “their” refers to the place that was designated for them) to leave their newly conquered territories’²³ and go back to the place society imposed on them. This ‘place in which society wants to confine them again is to be marginal, and above all subordinate, in accordance with the ideal Islam.’²⁴ *The Veil and the Male Elite* has allowed Mernissi to reach the conviction that ‘if women’s rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite.’²⁵ The Taliban laws that aim specifically at keeping women at home are a reaction to the few liberties some Afghan women enjoyed during the Soviet occupation and which allowed them to join the public sphere.

Moreover, Mernissi shows that the oppression and subordination of women in Muslim societies is maintained and enforced by the law, an indication that ‘woman occupies a central position in the debates on the political scene.’²⁶ In this context, she refers to Article 1 of the 1957 Moroccan Code of Personal Status which encourages male domination. The article states that ‘Marriage is a legal contract by which a man and a woman are united with the view of a common, lasting conjugal life ... whose objective is life in fidelity, purity, and desire for procreation by impregnation on a stable basis and *under the direction of the husband* [emphasis added].’²⁷ This indicates that the patriarchy men strive to impose and seek to prove as having ‘a sacred basis’²⁸ is not merely taking place inside the society or within the family; it is rather

sanctioned and encouraged by the law. Armstrong and Koofi show that the restrictions against Afghan women are institutionalized and no longer a matter of culture and customs.

Besides using religion to maintain male dominance, Mernissi argues that it is also used for political reasons. It is exploited to gain power and legitimacy 'since all power, from the seventh century, was only legitimated by religion.'²⁹ The death of the Prophet did not only bring about the emergence of misinterpretations but also the struggle for political power that would plague the Muslim world to the present day. This power struggle, therefore, also led to the manipulation of the Quran and the Prophet's hadiths. Koofi and Armstrong emphasize that there is a political end behind the Taliban's use of religion.

B- Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

While Mernissi deals with the condition of Muslim women, the Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1952-) deals with their representation in the West in her 2013 book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* In what she calls 'writing against culture,'³⁰ she tries to confront the various Western generalizations about Muslim culture being oppressive to women. Her book is an attempt to put the constructed image of Muslim women in the West under scrutiny. Her ideas fit this research since they allow it to examine any difference in the representation of Afghan women in *Veiled Threat* and the *Favored Daughter* that may result from the authors' different cultural and geographical backgrounds.

Throughout her several years of ethnographic research in many Muslim countries, Abu-Lughod met different women with different stories and personalities; some were oppressed, others not; some were submissive, others rebellious. Her research showed her the diversity of the experiences of Muslim women and allowed her to challenge the Western stereotypical claims that all these women share the same experience, an experience characterized by oppression and passivity. She also challenges the Western claim that this oppression stems

primarily from religion. She argues that ‘these women’s lives show us just how varied and complicated the sources of any one woman’s suffering might be.’³¹ She highlights that poverty and government corruption constitute one of the fundamental source of their suffering. Indeed, Armstrong differs from Koofi in her portrayal of Afghan and Muslim women as been suffering from the same oppression justified by religion.

Having put Muslim women as an oppressed category, the West found a new mission for itself: ‘saving’ Muslim women from the oppression of their culture and religion. What is striking, the author maintains, is that this ‘popular concern about Muslim women’s rights’³² took off after the 9/11 attacks. Writing about abused women –especially Muslim women- did appear in the 1990s, but it witnessed unprecedented development after 9/11. An ‘obsession with the plight of Muslim women’³³ appeared following this event and everyone started asking questions about the status of women in Islam. Stories of violence against women in Muslim countries were reported daily in newspapers, and memoirs along with journalistic accounts about oppressed Muslim women became bestsellers. However, Abu-Lughod believes that this concern is not an innocent one. These stories are sometimes put to political use to justify the United States’ and its allies’ intervention in countries like Afghanistan, countries where women were oppressed by their culture and tradition and needed their intervention to save them. These stories portray the West as the sole saviour of Afghan women and try to show that if their help vanishes from Afghanistan, the country will descend into chaos again. *Veiled Threat* differs from *The Favored Daughter* in its conviction that Afghan women cannot struggle and need the West to save them.

The book also shows that the idea of ‘going to war for women’ and saving them gained momentum thanks to international human rights organizations and their reports as well as the stories reported in newspapers and written in books, especially memoirs and journalistic accounts about oppressed women in what she terms ‘IslamLand’³⁴. The latter is ‘this mythical

place'³⁵ in which women are waiting for help from the West. In other words, a place from which 'a call to arms for women'³⁶ is issued. Indeed, Armstrong establishes Afghanistan as 'IslamLand' from which Afghan women are calling for the West to liberate them.

Abu-Lughod maintains that the books that serve this new mission of saving Muslim women use the language of human and women's rights that has gained widespread acceptance, showing powerful and determined Western men and women working to help oppressed women in 'distant lands.'³⁷ They are the 'we' who are aware of 'what's wrong in the world and must do something about it'³⁸ while 'IslamLand' is the place where most of these wrongs are found, even if they tend to eliminate any direct blame on the religion of Islam. She argues that 'these stories are the key ingredients in the normalization of political and military hostility toward countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq.'³⁹ *Veiled Threat* differs from *The Favored Daughter* in showing that Western women are working restlessly to save 'their sisters' who are trapped in Afghanistan.

2- Materials

A- Summary of Sally Armstrong's *Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan* (2002)

Veiled Threat is a journalistic account by the Canadian journalist and human rights activist Sally Armstrong in which she focuses on the life of Afghan women in the shadow of the Taliban regime. The full title of the book is *Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan*, but this dissertation will only refer to it by the title *Veiled Threat*. This book reveals the stories of the Afghan women the author meets in her visits to Afghanistan and the Afghan refugee camp in Quetta, Pakistan. These women, like Wahida Nader, Hamida Omid, Fatana Osman, Sima Samar and many others she does not name, share with her their stories about their difficult life under the Taliban as international help is fading.

One woman to whom Armstrong devotes a special attention is Doctor Sima Samar who is a Hazara, one of the most persecuted ethnic groups in Afghanistan. She is also a member of a very conservative family. Doctor Samar defeats her family's strict rules by getting an education and engaging in political activism. She later defeats the Taliban's strict rules by getting international help to open a health clinic for women and underground schools for girls. Because of her huge efforts, she is selected to serve as a deputy prime minister in Afghanistan's interim government after the fall of the Taliban.

Armstrong visits Afghanistan again after the Taliban regime is toppled to meet the women who have previously shared their stories with her. This time, they share with her their optimism about the future of their country and theirs. Most of them get the chance to resume their jobs while those who used to work in concealment are working openly.

B- Summary of Fawzia Koofi's *The Favored Daughter: One Woman's Fight to Lead Afghanistan to the Future* (2012)

The Favored Daughter is a memoir by the Afghan politician and women's rights activist Fawzia Koofi. Like the previous book, its full title is *The Favored Daughter: One Woman's Fight to Lead Afghanistan to the Future*, but this research will only refer to it by *The Favored Daughter*. This memoir chronicles the story of her life from her birth up to her election as deputy speaker. It is both a story of her struggle as her family suddenly loses its privileged status and many of its members as well as an account of the political history of Afghanistan. Her narration is interspersed with letters she writes to her two daughters.

Fawzia is the nineteenth daughter of an important leader of the Badakhshan district in Afghanistan and its representative in Parliament. The day she is born, her mother is so disappointed and ashamed of giving birth to another girl that she leaves her outside under the burning sun until she gets severe burns in her skin. However, her mother's heart softens and

she brings her home. From that day, she swears never to abandon her and she becomes her favourite daughter.

Their life turns upside down when her father is assassinated by the mujahedeen who fight the Soviet occupation. Because it is no longer safe to live in their village, they flee to the capital where Fawzia gets a chance to study. With the Taliban takeover, she is forced to stop her medical studies and ends up marrying Hamid, who is arrested three times by the Taliban without any charge. He develops tuberculosis as a result of the harsh treatment he receives in prison that eventually leads to his death, leaving Fawzia to raise her two daughters alone.

While her husband was ill, Fawzia has already started her political career and fight for women's rights. She works for the United Nations in the province of Badakhshan which is not controlled by the Taliban. After the fall of the Taliban, she wins a seat in Parliament as a representative of Badakhshan and continues her father's job. Despite receiving death threats, her ambition never wanes. She wins the position of a deputy speaker, becoming the first woman to hold this office.

Endnotes

¹³ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, (1987), trans. Mary Jo Lakeland, (Abingdon: Perseus Books Group, 1991), vii.

¹⁴ Ibid, viii.

¹⁵ Ibid, 129.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 156

¹⁸ Ibid, 155.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 81.

²¹ Ibid, 2.

²² Ibid, 23-24.

²³ Ibid, 24.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, ix.

²⁶ Ibid, 23.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, ix.

²⁹ Ibid, 9.

³⁰ Laila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 6.

³¹ Ibid, 24

³² Ibid, 25.

³³ Ibid, 30.

³⁴ Ibid, 68

³⁵ Ibid, 69

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid, 62

³⁸ Ibid, 69

³⁹ Ibid, 107

III- Results and Discussion

The study of *Veiled Threat* and *The Favored Daughter* has revealed that these texts display similarities as well as differences. This paper has resorted to Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite* to examine how the selected texts reveal their authors' belief that the Islamic religion has been misinterpreted and distorted to exert control over Afghan women's bodies and to exclude them from the public sphere. It has also resorted to Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Muslim Women Need Saving?* to analyze the representation of Afghan women's agency in Armstrong's and Koofi's texts and the extent to which the authors believe that Afghan women need Western liberation.

The analysis of the texts from Mernissi's perspective has revealed that despite coming from different cultural and geographical backgrounds, both authors express a similar belief about religion being misused to oppress Afghan women. It has also shown that although Afghanistan witnessed two religious extremist regimes in the 1990s (first the mujahedeen's in 1992 and then the Taliban's in 1996), it is during the Taliban years that women suffered more from institutionalized oppression. Analyzing the texts from the perspective of Abu-Lughod, however, has revealed that the difference in the authors' backgrounds has led them to perceive Afghan's women's ability to struggle differently.

The first result of this research indicates that both Armstrong and Koofi believe that the Taliban have distorted the Islamic religion to restrict Afghan women's lives. They both criticize the Taliban's measures, claimed to be in accordance with Islam, that seek to exercise control over Afghan women's physical appearance by seeking to determine the way they dress, talk, walk, and behave in the presence of men.

The second result of this study shows that both authors criticize the way the Taliban have also used religion to enforce the exclusion of women from the public space. They show that women are a subject of a host of laws that seek to exclude them from taking part in public

affairs. They also show that other measures by the Taliban, such as using violence against women and forbidding them from going out unescorted by a male relative, work to discourage women from even appearing in the streets.

The third result of this research has revealed that the cultural and geographical backgrounds of the authors have influenced the way they perceive the ability of Afghan women to struggle against the numerous restrictions directed at them and exercise agency. Armstrong forms a generalized image about their experience and portrays them as passive victims of their culture and oppressive laws despite having herself discussed some forms of their resistance. Besides, her account is mixed with ethnocentrism as she seeks to show that Afghan women depend on the West to liberate them. She sees that helping these women is their duty which, for her, they succeeded to fulfil. Koofi, on the other hand, shows that despite all the restrictions, Afghan women struggle in their own ways to survive. For her, their experience during the Taliban years has helped them acquire some skills. Moreover, her description of post-Taliban Afghanistan reveals that Western attempts to improve their situation have not succeeded in establishing security and gender equality.

Chapter One: Religion as a Pretext for Controlling Women's Bodies in *Veiled Threat* and *The Favored Daughter*.

Islam is often considered to be a religion that encourages patriarchy and the oppression of women by many non-Muslims and Muslims. For example, Robert Spenser and Phyllis Chesler refer to 'Islamic gender apartheid'⁴⁰ in *The Oppression of Women in Islam* (2007). They claim that many oppressive practices against Muslim women are encouraged and sanctioned by Islam's religious texts: the Quran and Hadith. Ayaan Hirsi Ali speaks about an 'Islam [which] is strongly dominated by a sexual morality derived from tribal Arab values dating from the time the Prophet received the instructions from Allah, a culture in which women were the property of their fathers, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, or guardians.'⁴¹

No one can doubt that many women in many Muslim societies are subject to oppression which is often justified on religious grounds. The women of Afghanistan represent a relevant example. However, some Muslim feminists such as Fatima Mernissi, sought to offer a different explanation to the oppression of women in Muslim societies. In *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991), she challenges the belief that Islam is against women's rights and explains that Muslim women's oppression is a result of male-biased misinterpretations of Islam's religious texts and men's deliberate attempt to keep women in a subordinate position. She argues that patriarchy is not a legacy of Islam. She states that 'if women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite.'⁴²

Although Armstrong and Koofi are from different cultural and geographical backgrounds, this belief is echoed in their texts as they both stress that the oppression inflicted on Afghan women on the basis of religion by the Taliban does not have anything to do with Islam. They also criticize what Mernissi considers an 'obsession' with hiding the female body and a 'phobic attitude toward women'⁴³ which was prevalent during the Taliban rule that

sought to control women's physical appearance so as to stop them from bringing shame to the community and its religion. Therefore, this chapter is an attempt to elaborate these points.

Both *Veiled Threat* and *The Favored Daughter* describe the impact of distorting religion on Afghan women. In *Veiled Threat*, Armstrong states that most of what the women she meets and the women of Afghanistan in general are going through during the Taliban years is justified in the name of God and Islam. Although Islam is not her religion, she is aware that the Taliban's actions have nothing to do with it and that what they do is 'a dreadfully misogynist interpretation of Islam'⁴⁴ which Muslim scholars throughout the world have condemned. She even devotes space for an overview of Islam and the position it accords to women which has allowed her to reach the conclusion that Islam's religious texts are 'interpreted however the local power-brokers want.'⁴⁵ Mernissi explains that Islam is a religion that encourages 'all Muslims to get involved in understanding the written word.'⁴⁶ Armstrong maintains that this 'emphasis on personal interpretations of religious doctrine has often meant that Islam is "translated" into a confounding mix of piety and ferocity that is nowhere evident than in the lives of women and girls,'⁴⁷ especially when the religious leaders are illiterate which is the case with most of the Taliban members. She claims that 'the Taliban only have basic knowledge of the Koran. For the most part, members have had no formal education.'⁴⁸

Similarly, Koofi explains in a letter to her daughters how the Islamic religion has been distorted by the Taliban who call themselves 'men of Islam'⁴⁹. She tells them that these men represent nothing of the Islamic religion they are familiar with, a religion that gives value to all human beings. She argues that it is an 'alien', imported version of Islam. She claims that this extremist version is brought to Afghanistan by the Arab and Pakistani fighters who came to aid the mujahedeen, and it is the version taught in the madrassas from which the Taliban originated. 'Many of their ideas about Islam came from different cultures, mostly from the Arab lands,'⁵⁰ she explains. Indeed, Nile Green explains that the withdrawal of the Soviets

from Afghanistan led to the empowerment of extremist groups that received help from countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan. Each of these countries was trying to spread its own religious ideologies in Afghanistan. This began with the mujahedeen who fought the Soviets and destroyed Afghanistan in a vicious civil war, and it was continued by the Taliban. They both accepted the ideologies brought by their supporters. He highlights that the decades of fighting against the Soviets and the influx of extremist ideologies 'had changed both Afghanistan and its Islam beyond recognition.'⁵¹

Mernissi maintains that women occupy 'a central position in the debates on the political scene'⁵² in Muslim societies as they are subject to laws that encourage their subjugation. In an interview to *TRT World*, Koofi admits that gender has always been very politicized in Afghanistan and that women are always touched by the political changes of the country.⁵³ During the Taliban years, this 'central position' resulted in them being subject to a host of laws that sought to maintain their subjugation. Indeed, Armstrong's and Koofi's texts show that women are the ones affected the most by the institutionalization of the Taliban's religious convictions. They also reveal that the patriarchal culture of Afghanistan is no longer the sole source of Afghan women's oppression. The oppressive laws, which are claimed to be in accordance with Islam, emerged to be the second source of their oppression. Both authors show how controlling women's appearance and behaviour in public is one of the central points of these laws.

There exists a common belief among many Muslims which sees a woman's body as a 'source of shame that must be covered'⁵⁴ and 'the exposure of any part of her to public view causes shame and embarrassment.'⁵⁵ In *Veiled Threat*, Armstrong shows how this belief is reflected in the Taliban rules that stress full-body covering for women by imposing the burqa, a garment that covers the whole body. She judges that during the Taliban years Afghanistan has become 'a place where mothers and wives, sisters and daughters were seen as a threat to

holiness'.⁵⁶ They are seen as a threat to the Taliban's project of making Afghanistan an Islamic country, an idea that parallels what Mernissi calls a 'phobic attitude toward women'⁵⁷ that leads to the 'obsession' with veiling and hiding them. For this, one of their attempts to control them is imposing the wearing of the burqa whenever they venture outside. She reports the leader of the Taliban saying that 'a woman's face corrupts men';⁵⁸ for this it must be hidden. Many women who have never owned burqas complain to Armstrong that they lack the money with which to buy one, especially that the Taliban do not take into consideration the dire financial situation of most Afghans when they try to enforce this rule.

It is important to note that there exists another widespread idea among many Muslims which consists of believing that the honour and identity of Muslim societies lie in covered women. If the woman is uncovered, the whole society is under the threat of losing its principles and identity as well as falling a victim of foreign influence.⁵⁹ Indeed, Mernissi explains that the veil in all its forms is seen as 'a symbol of Muslim identity'⁶⁰ This idea is, in fact, suggested by the title Armstrong chooses for her book 'Veiled Threat'. The 'threat' here is Afghan women who are perceived as a target of Western and Soviet influences, and therefore a threat to patriarchal and Islamic identity of Afghan society. Armstrong reports the leader of the Taliban, Omar, stating 'otherwise, they'll be like Lady Diana'⁶¹ as the reason for their actions against women. They are afraid they may act like Western women and bring disgrace and shame to the religion they claim to be preserving and the society as a whole. For this, they want to veil them in an attempt to control them. Armstrong strongly criticizes this imposition of the veil on women, referring to it as the 'coup de grace'⁶² for the women who used to go out unveiled.

Similarly, Koofi criticizes this imposition of a full-body covering and emphasizes that it does not have anything to do with the prescribed Islamic dress. She believes that the prescribed burqa which has become 'the new uniform of Afghan women'⁶³ during the Taliban years is a cultural phenomenon; it is worn by older women who see it as 'a sign of nobility'⁶⁴

but that ‘younger women like [her] didn’t identify with the tradition.’⁶⁵ She insists that ‘anyone who says a woman must cover her entire face to be truly Islamic is wrong. A burqa is definitely not an Islamic requirement but is usually worn because of cultural or societal reasons.’⁶⁶ This is an indication that it is their cultural norms which are often established as religious ones. The first time her mother tries to convince her to wear a burqa for her safety, Fawzia objects with tears. ‘It wasn’t that I had, or have, a particular problem with burqas,’ she explains, ‘but what I object to is that someone can impose a decision about what to wear.’⁶⁷ She also stresses that in the Islamic religion covering the hair with a headscarf and wearing loose clothes are enough to be modest. She is so disappointed when she finds herself compelled to wear something she has not chosen to wear and which is merely a cultural tradition that belonged to her mother’s generation. For this, she confines herself at home in the first months of the Taliban takeover.

A Pakistani human-rights activist, Farida Shaheed, tells Armstrong that what is practised in countries like hers and Afghanistan is their cultural traditions and customs which have nothing to do with religion; ‘but to convince the women and keep control over them,’ she maintains, ‘the men say it’s the law of the Koran.’⁶⁸ She asserts that ‘studies have shown that it’s not the religion, it’s the culture and customs that have come down through generations.’⁶⁹ Moreover, she highlights that they ‘use custom over religion when it suits them, and religion over custom when it suits them. They use justification by way of religion, customs or culture –whatever works at the time.’⁷⁰ For example, although they stress the separation of the sexes, many Taliban agents unexpectedly bring their women to Samar’s clinic, and they enter the waiting and examination rooms reserved only for women.

According to Valentine Moghadam, Afghanistan’s Islam ‘is a unique combination of practices and precepts from the Shari’a and tribal customs’⁷¹ because many customs which are forbidden by Islamic law are practised in Afghanistan such as not giving women their share of inheritance and dowry. In fact, Mernissi holds that female oppression is the result of the

patriarchy which is embedded in society that even Islam could not change. Indeed, Asma Barlas maintains that because Islam was revealed in a patriarchal society, it 'has been interpreted by adherents of patriarchies ever since.'⁷²In this context, Amina Wadud explains the influence of the gender beliefs of the interpreter of a religious text on his interpretation,

If readers of the Qur'an have assumed in any manner that men are superior to women intellectually, spiritually, ontologically, etc.; that men are 'in charge of women'; that men have a more significant role in the continuation of society; that men are natural leaders; that men should 'rule' the family and get obedience from women; that women do not have to participate and contribute in order to maintain the family and society or that her participation is marginal; then those readers will interpret the Qur'an in accordance with those assumptions.⁷³

It is worth noting that most of the Taliban members are originally from the Pashtun ethnic group whose culture is 'highly masculinist'⁷⁴ and strongly emphasizes women's honour as the basis of the community's honour. Therefore, this offers an explanation to the source of their rules against women.

What shows the extent to which the Taliban are 'obsessed' with covering women is their readiness to use violence against them and their constant surveillance of all areas to make sure no part of a woman's body is shown, an action which both Armstrong and Koofi criticize. The Taliban police, to whom Armstrong refers as the religious police, are responsible for making sure their rules are respected –usually by using force; they are part of the Department of the Enforcement of Right Islamic Way and Prevention of Evils. She explains that this department's aim is to enforce following the tradition of the Prophet Mohammad and the principles of Islam as preached in the seventh century. Mernissi explains that the extremists justify some of their violent actions by referring to the Prophet's command to stop any evil actions. However, she emphasizes that the Prophet 'advised against the use of violence toward women.'⁷⁵ Some women tell Armstrong that a woman is severely beaten because she lets her hand show while she is paying for her purchases. In Doctor Samar's clinic in the refugee camp, they also tell her about a woman who is also severely beaten for only letting her ankle show although she is wearing a burqa. It seems that the only place in which women are not asked to

be fully covered is inside their houses. Yet even there the Taliban demand that house windows be painted so that no one catches a glance of a woman inside. Armstrong is astonished that even at hospitals both female doctors and patients are forbidden to remove the burqa. There is a Taliban guard who watches them. One doctor complains about a female patient who dies of severe burns in her body because that guard refuses to let her remove her burqa in order to treat her burns.

Koofi also criticizes the Taliban's tendency to use violence against women for similar reasons. Shortly after the Taliban take power, her sister comes back from the market horrified at the sight of the Taliban beating all the women who are not wearing burqas and only headscarves. 'I listened in shock,' Koofi says, 'she was describing them beating women who dressed like me.'⁷⁶ She hears many similar stories, but she is 'in denial' until she herself witnesses a similar incident. She sees them as they attack a woman who is not wearing a burqa although her clothes are decent. To save himself from the beating, her husband who accompanies her denounces her. Koofi also criticizes the Taliban's tendency to justify their violent behaviour by religion, 'all this was supposedly in the name of God. But I do not believe these were the actions of God. They were the actions of men.'⁷⁷ In fact, she explains that when the Taliban emerged they called themselves 'the angels of rescue,'⁷⁸ and most Afghans hoped that they might finally live in peace. However, it seems that what they did was plunging the country in another kind of unrest disguised as a message from God. In this context, a report by *Amnesty International* states that it is an 'irony that although the [Taliban] purport their policies on women are in place to ensure the physical protection and dignity of women, many women now cite fear of being beaten by the [Taliban] as their main security concern.'⁷⁹

Koofi describes the Ministry of Vice and Virtue as 'one of the worst places someone could be taken'⁸⁰ where the so-called 'morality crimes'⁸¹ are punished. She mocks the fact that those responsible for punishing these crimes are illiterate mullahs who come from the

conservative villages of the country. She explains that those villages and Kabul, in which they carry out their punishments, are ‘culturally and socially worlds apart.’⁸² This shows again how their conservative cultural norms guide the actions of these men and which are established as religious ones. Fawzia once visits the house of a key security adviser of the Taliban government to ask for help concerning her husband’s arrest. She is surprised by the ‘filthy’ state of his house and family. She is also surprised by the fact that no one in the house, including the man, is educated. This makes her wonder ‘What hope for Afghanistan ... while these ignorant uneducated people are in power?’⁸³ Mernissi explains that from her experience as a student in a Quranic school, she has realized that what matters the most when studying the Quran is pronouncing and writing the verses right. Its meaning is not of a big importance. It is important to point out that the Taliban members are mostly illiterate men who found the madrassas from which they originated their only shelter and source of education. Their ‘curriculum focused on the teaching of a strictly puritanical Islam’⁸⁴ and solely reciting the Quran. Indeed, Fawzia once noticed that one of the Taliban agents who arrested her husband yelled at her in an accent of an ‘uneducated village man.’⁸⁵

Moreover, it seems that prescribing that a woman must be fully covered is not enough to satisfy the Taliban’s aspirations of keeping them away from bringing shame and disgrace. They also seek to control how this form of covering must be. One of the Taliban decisions that both authors find very weird is forbidding women to wear white clothes, even white socks. In *Veiled Threat*, Armstrong states that the explanation given at the beginning is that white is the colour of the Taliban flag. The explanation provided later is that this colour attracts men’s attention. Asma Lamrabet laments that the spiritual messages of Islam for both men and women are disregarded while giving all attention to how women should dress so as to protect the Muslim identity and honour. ‘Unfortunately, nowadays, the whole of Islamic ethics seems to be reduced to women’s clothing behavior, and only to that. In other words, to their bodies, to

the precise way in which they must be covered, to the color and thickness of the fabric,’⁸⁶ she writes.

In *The Favored Daughter*, Koofi believes that such a rule is issued because ‘they saw the wearing of white as disrespect for the color of their flag.’⁸⁷ She elucidates that in many northern provinces of Afghanistan, the colour of burqas is white, and the Taliban beat the women for this. ‘They were beaten for not wearing a burqa and then they were beaten for wearing a burqa in the wrong color. It was insanity,’⁸⁸ she criticizes. When she is shopping for her wedding, she witnesses how the Taliban police beat a woman who is wearing white trousers. She witnesses another similar incident when she and her husband are leaving Kabul to go to the province of Badakhshan which is free of Taliban control. They find a Taliban checkpoint in which all the passengers let the Taliban agents inspect their luggage for anything suspicious. One woman is wearing a white burqa; when her turn comes for inspection, she is beaten mercilessly.

Valerie Hoffman-Ladd explains that there exists another common belief among Muslims which also sees a woman’s voice as a source of shame; thus it must be covered too to protect public morals and Muslim identity.⁸⁹ In *Veiled Threat*, Armstrong condemns the Taliban’s rule that forbids women from talking to both strangers and the person accompanying them or letting their voice be heard in public for any reason. In the presence of men, a woman should not speak, laugh or make gestures with her hands. When Armstrong visits Afghanistan, the man who accompanies her warns her to avoid speaking, laughing or making any gestures to the Taliban agents in the Afghan-Pakistani border checkpoints. And so she does. It is this man who discusses the reasons of her coming to Afghanistan with the men while she remains silent. It is here that she feels ‘the weight of the chains that bind the lives of women in Afghanistan’⁹⁰ before even entering the country.

Armstrong also tells two stories of women who are beaten more severely when they beg for mercy. One of them is beaten for letting her hand show while paying for her purchases while the other one for wearing high heels. When the Taliban hear their cries, they beat them again. Armstrong is even more astonished that they issued a rule that demands from women to walk silently in the streets by avoiding to make noise with their feet. She meets some women who work secretly in the basement of a Canadian-run hospital who complain about the uncomfortable shoes they have to wear in order to avoid making any noise with their feet. 'The Taliban don't like the tap-tap-tap of women's high-heeled shoes,'⁹¹ one woman expresses scornfully, because high-heeled shoes and the noise they make are seen as un-Islamic.

In the *Favored Daughter*, Koofi describes how women make efforts to be silent when they venture out to buy their necessities, 'they scurried along silently, doing their shopping as quickly as possible so they could get home safely. No one talked to anyone. Shopkeepers handed over bags wordlessly, and women took them without looking up.'⁹² From the balcony of her apartment, she can see other girls in their balconies talking and laughing. However, they run as fast as they can to hide themselves when they hear the sound of the Taliban car approaching. She describes the sound of the Vice and Virtue car as the 'one I will never forget ... It would drive through the streets, and always there was the [sound] of the Holy Quran blasting from the loudspeakers on the top.'⁹³

Furthermore, Koofi describes the extent to which the Taliban rule has changed her personality. It comes to her as an epiphany when she and her husband reach the province of Badakhshan. She realizes that the Taliban's restrictions and the many incidents in which she is forced to remain silent instead of defending herself as well as watching women being mistreated have turned her into a passive and silent woman. All the confidence she has started developing since entering high school has disappeared. 'Life under the Taliban had changed me in ways I hadn't really understood until now. I wasn't the same person I had been –My

confidence evaporated and the daily fear had exhausted my reserves of strength,'⁹⁴ she writes. She cannot answer the greetings of men or even talk in their presence. She just sits in front of her husband silent 'like a good Taliban wife,'⁹⁵ waiting for him to make all the arrangements in the hotel they are to spend the night in. Her attitudes towards men have changed, too. She has started seeing them as cruel creatures who do not hesitate to exploit women. 'This terrible shift in my attitude,' she says, 'has been done in the name of Islam, but it wasn't an Islam I recognized. This division of the sexes was not an Islam of peace; it was born of fear and suspicion, not respect as I had been raised to believe.'⁹⁶ In *Women in the Muslim Unconscious* (1984), Mernissi, under the pseudonym Fatna A. Sabbah, wonders why an ideal woman in Muslim societies is the one endowed with 'silence, immobility, and obedience.'⁹⁷ Indeed, it seems that the Taliban have succeeded in making Fawzia this 'ideal' woman.

In addition, both authors deal with another form of control which is forbidding women to wear Western clothes and make-up as if the burqa is not enough to reassure them that women will not bring disgrace and shame. Those who disobey this rule face the same violent punishment. In *Veiled Threat*, Wahida Nader relates to Armstrong how she is punished for this reason on the first day of the Taliban takeover. She borrows a burqa thinking that she will carry on working as usual. Under the burqa, she is wearing makeup and Western clothes. These are not visible, but her nail polish is visible. She is stopped by the Taliban religious police who beat her for the nail polish. 'They beat me with a long rubber stick when they saw my nail polish,'⁹⁸ she tells her. Just behind her, they stop a bride who still has the manicure of her wedding ceremony and they cut off her fingertips.

In *The Favored Daughter*, Fawzia goes through a similar experience when she visits her husband in prison. A guard who has already been furious with her for complaining about the mistreatment of her husband in prison throws a stone at her. As she is trying to protect herself, he catches a glimpse of her painted nails; this stirs his anger even more to the extent

that he insults her and accuses her of not being a Muslim. To add insult to injury, he throws another stone at her and chases her out of the prison. In a second meeting with the same guard, he demands to see her fingers to check whether she still wears nail polish. He tells her, 'don't put nail polish on your fingers anymore. If you do, you are not a Muslim.'⁹⁹ His comment angers her. 'He dared to tell me I wasn't a Muslim, but then permitted himself to comment on the makeup worn by another man's wife,'¹⁰⁰ she fulminates.

In sum, throughout this chapter, an attempt has been made to examine how Armstrong and Koofi show that the Taliban's religious justification of their oppression against women is merely a distortion of Islam and a reflection of their conservative cultural norms. Focus has been placed on the way they use religion to justify their attempts to control women's physical appearance. Their unique religious understandings produce in them 'a phobic attitude' towards women by stressing the need for them to be concealed as much as possible when they appear in the streets. The next chapter will discuss another manifestation of this 'phobic attitude' which is by seeking to exclude women from the public space.

Endnotes

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⁴² Mernissi, *Veil and the Male Elite*, xi.

⁴³ Ibid, 81

⁴⁴ Sally Armstrong, *Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan*, (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002), 6.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 69

⁴⁶ Mernissi, *Veil and the Male Elite*, 186.

⁴⁷ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 62.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 79.

- ⁴⁹ Fawzia Koofi, *The Favored Daughter: One Woman's Fight to Lead Afghanistan to the Future*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.), 109.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Nile Green, ed., *Afghanistan's Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban*, (California: University of California Press, 2017), 187.
- ⁵² Mernissi, *Veil and The Male Elite*, 23.
- ⁵³ TRT World, 'Insight: Fawzia Koofi', YouTube video, 13:06, November 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uul4AD18G0Q&t=584s>
- ⁵⁴ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 'The Politics and Hermeneutics of Hijab in Iran: From Confinement to Choice,' *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 4(2007), 30.
- ⁵⁵ Valerie J. Hoffman-Ladd, 'Polemics on the Modesty and Segregation of Women in Contemporary Egypt,' *Int. J. Middle East Stud* 19(1987), 28.
- ⁵⁶ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 5.
- ⁵⁷ Mernissi, *Veil and the Male Elite*, 81
- ⁵⁸ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 2.
- ⁵⁹ Hoffman-Ladd, 'Polemics on the Modesty and Segregation of Women.'
- ⁶⁰ Mernissi, *Veil and the Male Elite*, 97.
- ⁶¹ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 05.
- ⁶² Ibid, 2
- ⁶³ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 216.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, 50.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid, 50.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, 52.
- ⁶⁸ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 154.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid, 155.
- ⁷¹ Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), 210.
- ⁷² Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), xi.
- ⁷³ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 96.
- ⁷⁴ Moghadam, 'Patriarchy, the Taleban, and Politics of the Public Space,' 20.

- ⁷⁵ Mernissi, *Veil and the Male Elite*, 155.
- ⁷⁶ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 104.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid, 114.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid, 92
- ⁷⁹ Amnesty International, 'Women in Afghanistan: Pawns in men's power struggle,' <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/documents/asa11/011/1999/en/>
- ⁸⁰ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 113.
- ⁸¹ Ibid.
- ⁸² Ibid.
- ⁸³ Ibid, 154.
- ⁸⁴ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*, (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 221.
- ⁸⁵ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 142.
- ⁸⁶ Asma Lamrabet, 'Muslim Women's Veil or hijab Between a Colonial Ideology and a Traditionalist Islamic Ideology: A Decolonial Vision,' trans. Houda Zekri, <http://www.asma-lamrabet.com/articles/muslim-women-s-veil-or-hijab-between-a-colonial-ideology-and-a-traditionalist-islamic-ideology-a-decolonial-vision/>
- ⁸⁷ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 87.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid, 123.
- ⁸⁹ Hoffman-Ladd, 'Polemics on the Modesty and Segregation of Women.'
- ⁹⁰ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 111.
- ⁹¹ Ibid, 118.
- ⁹² Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 106.
- ⁹³ Ibid, 133
- ⁹⁴ Ibid, 178
- ⁹⁵ Ibid.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid, 178.
- ⁹⁷ Fatna A. Sabbah, *Women in the Muslim Unconscious* (1982), trans. Mary Jo Lakeland, (New York, Pargamon Press Inc., 1984), 3
- ⁹⁸ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 4
- ⁹⁹ Koofi, *The Favored Daughter*, 168
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid

Chapter Two: Religion as a Pretext for Excluding Women from the Public Space in *Veiled Threat* and *The Favored Daughter*.

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as the ‘realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed.’¹⁰¹ That is, the public sphere comes into being when ‘private individuals assemble to form a public body, [and] access is guaranteed to all citizens.’¹⁰² For the political philosopher Hannah Arendt, the public sphere is ‘the common world [that] gathers us together.’¹⁰³ For ancient Greeks, the public sphere was highly regarded while the private sphere was viewed as worthless.¹⁰⁴ They believed that ‘if you were not involved in public life, you were “diminished”.’¹⁰⁵ Women traditionally belonged to the ‘worthless’ private sphere of domesticity while men monopolized the ‘worthy’ public realm of work and politics.¹⁰⁶ Relegating women to the private sphere has occupied a central position within feminist thought which insists that women can function properly in public life just like their male counterparts. Thanks to feminist efforts, some parts of the world managed to transcend this gendered division between the private and public spheres as women joined the latter with huge numbers. However, in other parts of the world, women are still prisoners of this private/public distinction.

In Afghanistan, the division between the public and the private spheres is highly gendered as women’s ‘access to public space has long been politicized, contested, and denied.’¹⁰⁷ Moghadam claims that ‘there are very few places left in our increasingly integrated world where women have been as excluded from the public sphere as in Afghanistan.’¹⁰⁸ The communist regime’s attempts to defy the cultural norms of the country and drag women out to the public space were crashed by the religious extremists who tried to implement their conviction that ‘women’s role is in the home and away from public spaces.’¹⁰⁹ Because women are perceived as ‘the guardians of the last Islamic bastion,’¹¹⁰ the few freedoms they enjoyed

during the Soviet occupation troubled the men who saw them as bringing disgrace to the nation and its religion and felt their grip over women was loosening.

Mernissi argues that ‘the conservative wave against women in the Muslim world ... is a defense mechanism against profound changes in ... sex roles.’¹¹¹ She explains that the inequality between the sexes is seen as a part of Muslim identity, an identity which is sought to be preserved by the law and justified by religion. For this, when women started penetrating territories that have previously been the ‘private preserve of men,’¹¹² such as schools and the workplace, men started calling for a return to tradition. This return to tradition ‘invites women ... to leave their newly conquered territories’¹¹³ and return to ‘their’ place which society has traditionally prescribed for them and ‘in which [it] wants to confine them again ... to be marginal, and above all subordinate, in accordance with the ideal Islam.’¹¹⁴ This chapter seeks to examine how Armstrong and Koofi show that the Taliban years are characterized by ‘the almost complete privatization of women’¹¹⁵ as Afghan women are targeted by a host of restrictive laws and violent treatment that seek to ensure their disappearance from the public.

Both Armstrong and Koofi show that one of the ways that have contributed to taking Afghan women back to ‘their’ place and excluding them from taking part in society is banning girls’ education by the Taliban. In *Veiled Threat*, Hamida Omid is very concerned about this ban because her daughters will grow up uneducated and live a life similar to that of their grandmothers. Being aware that women’s education is the key to the progress or backwardness of a nation,¹¹⁶ some women, like Doctor Samar, put their lives in imminent danger to save the education of a generation of girls by secretly running schools. Armstrong explains that if such a school is discovered and attacked abruptly by the Taliban, the teacher is incarcerated while the students’ families are punished with beatings. One of Doctor Samar’s schools is once attacked. Luckily, they allow her to carry on teaching provided that she sticks to religious teachings and does not go beyond third grade. She pretends to follow their instructions, but she

carries on teaching all the subjects to all grades. She refuses to relinquish her project of educating girls because working as a doctor has helped her realize that women's 'lack of education was a direct cause of the turmoil the country was in.'¹¹⁷ Education is offering women the strength to resist the unceasing attempts to subjugate them. In this context, Moghadam maintains that 'the greatest threat to the patriarchal community and the power of men is posed by "public women"—those who work, or go to school, or even walk from one place to another.'¹¹⁸ For this, banning education can be seen as a reflection of the extremists' desire to make the manipulation of women easier. Indeed, in her conversation with Armstrong, Farida Shaheed points out that women 'who aren't educated, believe what they are told and trust what they hear.'¹¹⁹

The Favored Daughter shows that girls' education has started deteriorating since the mujahedeen's civil war. Because the streets are no longer safe for girls to walk in, many families stop sending their daughters to school. As a result, many schools for girls close their doors. However, Fawzia never abandons her studies. She goes to her English classes despite the risk and starts her medical studies during this period. She has begun to have 'big dreams' and has been studying hard for an exam when the Taliban ban education. This marks the end of her dream of becoming a doctor and the dreams of many other girls. 'My dreams of becoming a doctor were shattered... my days were spent ... cooking, cleaning, drinking chai in the garden. It was the life of boring drudgery my mother and sisters endured, and the one I had battled so hard to escape. I was very depressed,'¹²⁰ she says. The Taliban's ban on education deprives her of the only thing that has helped her develop her personality and confidence as a little girl and to get over her mother's death. The sharp decrease in girls' education during the mujahedeen years coupled with its complete ban by the Taliban means that women's participation in society will absolutely be affected when the Taliban are finally out of power. This makes Fawzia deeply

worried about the future of her country. Yusuf Sidani explains the impact of depriving women of education on their participation in public affairs,

By keeping them at home, they had little access to education and could not develop. Thus their chances of penetrating the public world of men became even more unlikely. Even when societal conditions change, women are not equipped to function properly in a men's world. They are less educated, less skilled, and less sure of their powers. When they enter the public world of men, they are more likely to fail as they have been historically disadvantaged. Women's failures thus further strengthen the argument that they do not belong to the public sphere.¹²¹

Besides banning education, Armstrong and Koofi show that the Taliban take a further step towards accomplishing their project of barring women from the public space by banning them from working. In *Veiled Threat*, Armstrong states that women 'have become invisible, confined to their homes, forbidden to take part in civil society'¹²² during the Taliban years. She meets several women whose 'jobs, social lives and self-esteem disappeared overnight.'¹²³ Hamida is vexed over this ban. She is the breadwinner of her family because her husband has been unemployed. Thus, if she does not work, her family will starve. Armstrong strongly criticizes the fact that the ban includes female doctors. What makes the situation worse is that male doctors are forbidden to treat female patients. When female doctors are allowed to work again, the clinics assigned to them lack the basic facilities. 'The so-called religious edicts make women unjustly unequal to men to the point that they interfere with their health and, in some cases, with their right to life,'¹²⁴ she fulminates. The women who work in the basement of the Canadian-run hospital have previously been teachers. Their current job is not what they have dreamt of, yet it is more than enough in a time when work for women is regarded as a sin. Armstrong comments on the abrupt change in women's participation in the public sphere,

until that day [the day of the Taliban takeover], women had made up 70 percent of Afghanistan's teachers, 50 percent of civil service, 40 percent of the doctors, half the students at Kabul University, and had worked in the government as cabinet ministers and members of parliament. Now they were invisible.¹²⁵

In the *Favored Daughter*, Koofi deems Afghanistan to be a 'male-dominated world gone mad'¹²⁶ when women are forced by the Taliban to give up on their hard-won rights to take

part in public life. She has already started working as a teacher of English when she abandons this job besides abandoning her studies. She used to be a big dreamer. When Hamid asks for her hand, she starts dreaming of building a family in which both she and her husband contribute financially to the household. However, all these dreams come to an early end. She is more saddened by the sudden disappearance of female TV presenters and the radio announcers she admires from the screen and the radio. She relates to her daughters how this ban has led some widows to beg in the streets with their children, many of them end up dying of starvation and disease. Just like Armstrong, including female doctors in the ban infuriates her, especially because male doctors are forbidden to treat women ‘even for a common cold.’¹²⁷ She states that the result of this is that ‘hundreds of women died unnecessary deaths during the Taliban rule’¹²⁸ who ‘claimed to be men of God’¹²⁹ because they ‘thought a woman’s life was worthless as a fly’s.’¹³⁰

Stripping women of their basic rights to education and work and increasing the restrictions on their bodies means that women will not accept those measures with their arms folded. Some resistance from women is sure to emerge which is, of course, something religious extremists do not allow. For this, women’s involvement in activism and politics imperils their lives. In *Veiled Threat*, Armstrong struggles to discover the identity of Doctor Samar and meet her. Her identity is kept secret because she constantly receives death threats from the Taliban who see her as ‘anathema’ for running secret schools for girls and health clinics for women. When Armstrong meets her, Samar explains to her why she is keeping her identity hidden, ‘I have three strikes against me. I’m a woman, I speak for women and I’m Hazara.’¹³¹ Indeed, death threats for her ‘became as common as the viruses she was treating in the clinic.’¹³² Armstrong wants to emphasize more the extent to which the Taliban abhor female activism by referring to an incident in which the leader of a women’s demonstration in the province of Herat is burned alive. ‘To disobey the Taliban was to die’¹³³, she comments, especially when the

disobedience comes from women. John J. Schulz and Linda Schulz liken the Taliban to the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, namely Stalinism and Nazism, in their recourse to terror in order to silence opposition and to gain absolute power. They claim that Taliban's terror is 'designed to paralyze and suppress the people of Afghanistan.'¹³⁴

Farida Shaheed explains to Armstrong that their job as human-rights activists is hard because religious leaders, who wield powerful influence, in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan are against non-government organizations devoted to fighting for women's rights. She explains that they 'accuse them of being run by Westernized women who are trespassing on male dominance.'¹³⁵ She also points out that these men are aware that 'when women are independent and know their rights, they won't put up with this nonsense. But that's threatening to [them].'¹³⁶ This indicates that when women show signs of independence, claim some of their rights and enter the spheres on which men aspire to exert complete dominance, they become a threat to the religion and honour of the country and to male supremacy. These men use the argument that women's emancipation is foreign to their culture and religion as a justification for denying women their basic rights. In this context, Mernissi emphasizes that

any man who believes that a Muslim woman who fights for her dignity and right to citizenship excludes herself necessarily from the *umma* and [that she] is a brainwashed victim of Western propaganda is a man who misunderstands his own religious heritage, his own cultural heritage.¹³⁷

She further argues that 'Islam promised equality and dignity for all, for men and women, masters and servants,'¹³⁸ an egalitarian message which is now seen to be foreign by many Muslims and believe it to be imported.

That being said, any sign of female independence is condemned by both the Taliban and others who hold extremist religious beliefs. Among these signs of independence is participation in politics. Women's involvement in politics means that women can both work alongside men –which is seen against religion– and lobby for women's rights. Choosing Doctor Samar to serve as a deputy Prime Minister in Afghanistan's interim government after the fall

of the Taliban is met by a strong opposition from extremists in Parliament. Armstrong judges that they see her as ‘Salman Rushdie of Afghanistan’¹³⁹ as they demand her execution. The idea of working with a woman in a field which has long been monopolized by them is hard to be swallowed. They also warn that they will not support the government if it does not withdraw its projects on women’s rights.

In the *Favored Daughter*, Fawzia’s job with the United Nations in Badakhshan has become a source of gossip and scandal among her neighbours. She is the only woman working with the UN in the entire country at that period. The mullah of the nearby mosque preaches against women working with international organizations and advises men to forbid their wives to do it. For him, both the job and the money earned from it are religiously forbidden as ‘his view was that women should not work alongside non-believers.’¹⁴⁰ The irony is that men are also working with the UN and no one has considered their job to be religiously forbidden. Fawzia sees it as an attempt to religiously turn the entire community against her and her husband because he has decided to make his opinion public rather than advising them privately.

When Fawzia becomes a member of parliament after the fall of the Taliban, she realizes even more ‘how hard it is to be a woman in a man’s world.’¹⁴¹ Her involvement in politics and the success she keeps making in conquering more territory previously reserved to men has brought her many death threats from her opponents. Some conservative men who are outraged by female participation in politics attack her verbally on the phone and urge her to leave politics to men to whom it is supposed to belong. Indeed, when she begins raising her ambitions by targeting a position beyond that of an MP, her brother dissuades her, saying that ‘it was more than enough for a woman to become an MP.’¹⁴² Inside parliament, the male MPs who are displeased by the presence of women work to intimidate them and oppose their views. This demonstrates that the ‘return to tradition’ the Taliban have previously been calling for does not have anything to do with religion. It is rather the widespread cultural beliefs that a woman’s

place is to be hidden at home and their 'imagination' that 'power is necessarily male'¹⁴³ which is manifested in their rules. Being aware of the dangers of misusing religion against women, Fawzia explains to her daughters what rights they have in true Islam, 'I want you to understand that as a woman true Islam accords you political and social rights. It offers you dignity, the freedom to be educated, to pursue your dreams, and to live your life.'¹⁴⁴ This echoes Mernissi's claim that 'we Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country ... is a true part of the Muslim tradition.'¹⁴⁵

Having excluded women from taking part in society, the Taliban still try to ensure that they appear less in public by increasing their fear and dependence on men. The Taliban decree that a woman must be accompanied by a male relative outside. The women who break this rule are punished. In *Veiled Threat*, Hamida goes to check on her school on the first day of the Taliban takeover when she is stopped by the religious police who threaten to jail her if she dares to go out unescorted. If the woman has no one to accompany her, she will simply never go out again. Moreover, the fear created by the Taliban's use of violence against women for trivial reasons is also a factor that discourages them from appearing in public. Armstrong states that husbands whose wives are disabled decide that they no longer need a prosthesis 'since they no longer needed to be seen outside.'¹⁴⁶ Faranaz Mehdiz, who used to be a civil engineer, tells Armstrong that she cannot leave her house, 'it's six months since the Taliban arrived, and I don't want to leave my house.'¹⁴⁷ They prefer to stay at home rather than appear in a place they are not welcomed in. According to Moghadam, the Taliban's policies are 'against not only women's public participation but their very visibility.'¹⁴⁸

Koofi perceives the Taliban's imposition of the necessity of a male relative to escort a woman to be 'more akin to Arab culture than our own Afghan culture.'¹⁴⁹ This shows again her belief that Afghanistan's Islam is infiltrated by foreign religious ideologies, especially Arab

ones. To make sure that a woman never leaves her house unaccompanied, taxi drivers are threatened to be punished if they take unaccompanied women. Because no taxi drivers agree to take her alone, Fawzia risks being caught wandering alone in the streets several times as she travels long distances on foot to visit her imprisoned husband. A driver once agrees to take her, but only after giving her his personal details so that in case they are caught, they will pretend to be siblings. In prison, her husband meets many taxi drivers who are thrown into that place for taking unaccompanied women. They tell him that the situation is worse for women because they are accused of trying to seduce the drivers which is a ‘morality crime’ punished in the Ministry of Vice and Virtue.

Because the Taliban have turned their lives into a constant danger, Koofi explains that ‘staying alive and safe took precedence over dreams.’¹⁵⁰ The chaos that the country has slid into, the danger that is surrounding them and the uncertainty of their future push them to abandon their dreams while staying safe becomes their priority. She tells her daughters that ‘perhaps the worst thing that can happen to any woman is to lose yourself. To lose sense of who and what you are or to lose sight of your dreams is one of the saddest things.’¹⁵¹ She grieves that ‘these life losses are forced on us by those who don’t want us to dream or succeed.’¹⁵² She starts losing hope that the country may improve again because it is ruled by illiterate men who have known nothing but war. After her husband is imprisoned, she becomes preoccupied with trying to get him out of prison and finding a hiding place for her brother who is wanted by the Taliban. Even after her husband is released, worry and fear overtake her mind. ‘We lived in constant fear that the Taliban would show up again at our front door and drag Hamid back to prison,’¹⁵³ she explains. This constant fear and worry coupled with banning education and work is ‘destroying’ women’s minds and any aspiration they still have for penetrating the public space again. Besides, they experience another fear which is being beaten by the Taliban police for breaking any of their countless rules. ‘The Taliban’s rules were often unique ... [and] their

arbitrary nature and enforcement created an environment of paranoia in which it was safer to stay at home rather than risk breaking some new law,^{'154} Koofi explains. She notices that when the sound of the Vice and Virtue car is heard, women who are still outside 'would rush to hide themselves'^{'155} because they are aware that their presence in the streets is not wanted.

Mernissi argues that the veil in all its forms, which is originally a protection for women, has been imposed on them as a way of excluding them from the public space. The burqa which is imposed on Afghan women is a way of 'disguising [their] presence in public.'^{'156} In *Veiled Threat*, Fatana Osman describes to Armstrong that she feels 'invisible' when she goes out wearing it. When she falls because she is not used to walking in it, no one comes to help her as if she is really invisible. In *Beyond the Veil* (2011), Mernissi maintains that 'the veil is an expression of the invisibility of women on the street, a male space *par excellence*.'^{'157} Indeed, the imposed burqa is a sign that women have entered a restricted area they do not belong to. According to Juan Cole, 'full veiling allows the private character of women to be made portable ... veiled women transport their privacy along with them when they go out onto the street.'^{'158} Armstrong also explains that the women who do not own burqas or do not have enough money to buy one find themselves confined in their homes just like women who do not have male relatives to accompany them. Thus, as the reasons that increase women's confinement are growing in number, the disappearance of women from the public is also increasing.

In the *Favored Daughter*, Fawzia's feeling the first time she is forced to wear a burqa explains her awareness that it is not a simple form of clothing. 'My confidence evaporated,' she explains, 'as if the simple act of donning the burqa had shut all the doors in my life I had worked so hard to open.'^{'159} These doors are the doors of men's world, the world outside the house from which women are excluded. By excluding women from the public space, 'societies became a reflection of men's aspirations, needs, and desires.'^{'160}

Armstrong and Koofi argue that the Taliban distort religion, especially in relation to women, for political ends. This echoes Mernissi's argument that 'since all power [in Muslim societies], from the seventh century on, was only legitimated by religion,'¹⁶¹ political interests encouraged the distortions of Islam to gain support and legitimacy. Being aware of the exaggerated cultural role assigned to women in Afghanistan and the importance of Islam to Afghans is perhaps what has led the Taliban to adopt a more extremist stance towards women and give it a religious justification. An *Amnesty International* report points out that 'most armed groups [in Afghanistan] have imposed restrictions on women in the name of religion and culture as a means of consolidating their own position and legitimacy.'¹⁶² Armstrong sees the Taliban's version of Islam to be 'politics made sacred.'¹⁶³ This is because they claim they have 'restored peace to the country and that they were serving Islam by returning to the spiritual roots of the people'¹⁶⁴ when asked about their strict measures. She holds that their reference to religion is 'a grab for power and control in a country that had been struggling with unrest for eighteen years.'¹⁶⁵ Indeed, their promise to restore peace makes many Afghans 'willing to sacrifice the human rights of women and girls to gain peace.'¹⁶⁶ In an address in Canada, Doctor Samar asserts that 'religion and culture have often been used as a justification for the denial of rights to Afghan women. In reality, these restrictions have nothing to do with religion and culture and everything to do with control and power.'¹⁶⁷

Similarly, Koofi holds that the Taliban's assertion that 'all their actions were done in the name of Islam [is] used as a political catchall to silence their critics.'¹⁶⁸ If anyone criticizes their actions and treatment of women, they label him/her 'un-Islamic'. 'They had hijacked and corrupted Islam, turning it into a tool to pursue their own selfish purposes,'¹⁶⁹ she grieves. *Amnesty International* reports that this strategy is also used to silence international criticism of their policies towards women as they 'have repeatedly claimed that their policies are in accordance with Islamic law and Afghan culture, and thus not open to question.'¹⁷⁰ Koofi

explains that the Taliban gained the support of Afghans when they grew tired of the civil war and poverty. They ‘were desperate for a proper government that could help them;’¹⁷¹ for this the Taliban got huge support when they emerged and called themselves ‘angels of rescue,’¹⁷² promising to restore peace in the name of Islam. After officially taking power, they set about spreading their ideology on the radio. The latter is the only form of entertainment they do not ban and which is ‘taken over for [their] propaganda purposes.’¹⁷³

Koofi’s account shows that another category which is taken in by the Taliban ideology is the supporters of the repression of women. This category is content that the Taliban will take women back to ‘their’ proper place which they have started deserting during the Soviet years. One day prior to the Taliban takeover of Kabul, a shopkeeper expresses his joy over the coming repression of women to Fawzia and her sister. Fawzia is wearing a brightly-colored headscarf, and her sister tells her a joke that makes her giggle when the shopkeeper comments joyfully, ‘you ladies will not be able to come here dressed like this tomorrow. The Taliban will be here tomorrow and this will be your last day of pleasure in the market, so be sure to enjoy yourselves.’¹⁷⁴ Elaheh Rostami Povey reports women in the Ministry of Women explaining that ‘most men were and are against Taliban and fought against [them] (some of them died for their cause). But they have the same [backward] attitude as the Taliban about women’s place in the society.’¹⁷⁵ The joy the shopkeeper expresses over the repression of women shows to Fawzia that the Taliban have succeeded in attracting people to their ideology. She realizes this more when her sister tells her about the woman who is denounced by her husband to escape beating. She is astonished that their ideology has quickly succeeded in changing the attitudes of Afghan men towards their wives. In this context, she comments,

It was horrifying, the idea that an Afghan man could denounce his wife so easily. In traditional Afghan culture men will fight to the death to protect their wives and families, but the Taliban brought with them such fear, such evil, that they twisted some of the men of our nation. Some men who had previously been good men and kind husbands became swayed into believing this warped ideology, either because of their own fear or because they were taken in by the excitement of a mob psychology.¹⁷⁶

By warped ideology, she is referring to this distorted version of Islam that this group is spreading on the radio and which they use as a justification for their actions.

To conclude, this chapter has sought to examine another form of oppression towards Afghan women which is restricting their presence in the public space as revealed in *Veiled Threat* and the *Favored Daughter*. It has demonstrated that Afghan women are targeted by a host of laws that seek to confine them in their houses. Besides, the Taliban's readiness to use violence against women for trivial reasons also contributes to confining them at home. Therefore, this chapter along with the previous one have analyzed how Afghan women are subject to determined attempts to strip them of their agency. This has led to their portrayal as being truly stripped of any agency and ability to struggle. The next chapter will examine how their ability to struggle is represented by Armstrong and Koofi.

Endnote

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¹⁰² *ibid*

¹⁰³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 52.

¹⁰⁴ Alan McKee, *The Public Sphere: An Introduction*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 36.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁷ Moghadam, 'Patriarchy, the Taleban, and Politics of the Public Space,' 28.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 19.

¹⁰⁹ Sylvia Estrada Claudio, 'Sanctifying Moral Tyranny: Religious Fundamentalisms and the Political Disempowerment of Women,' in *Religious Fundamentalisms and Their Gendered Impacts in Asia*, ed. Claudia Derichs and Andrea Fleschenberg, 13-26 (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2010), 22.

¹¹⁰ Asma Lamrabet, *Men and Women in the Qur'an* (2012), trans. Muneera Salem-Murdock (Washington, DC, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 9.

¹¹¹ Fatima Mernissi, 'Muslim Women and Fundamentalism,' *Middle East Report* 153 (1988), 11.

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¹¹³ *Ibid*, 24

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- ¹¹⁵ Juan R. I. Cole, 'The Taliban, Women, and the Hegelian Private Sphere,' *Social Research* 70 (2003), 776.
- ¹¹⁶ Qassim Amin *The Liberation of Women* (1899), trans. Samiha Sidhom Peterson (Cairo, the American University in Cairo Press, 2000).
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- ¹¹⁸ Moghadam, 'Patriarchy, the Taleban, and Politics of the Public Space,' 28.
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- ¹²⁰ Koofi, *Favored Daughter* 113
- ¹²¹ Yusuf M. Sidani, *Muslim Women at Work: Religious Discourses in Arab Society*, (Beirut, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 55.
- ¹²² Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 104-105.
- ¹²³ Ibid, 9.
- ¹²⁴ Ibid, 130
- ¹²⁵ Ibid, 2-3
- ¹²⁶ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 168.
- ¹²⁷ Ibid, 152
- ¹²⁸ Ibid
- ¹²⁹ Ibid
- ¹³⁰ Ibid
- ¹³¹ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, xii.
- ¹³² Ibid, 34
- ¹³³ Ibid, 07
- ¹³⁴ John J. Schulz and Linda Schulz , 'The Darkest of Ages: Afghan Women Under the Taliban,' *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 5 (1999), 238.
- ¹³⁵ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 154.
- ¹³⁶ Ibid.
- ¹³⁷ Mernissi, *Veil and the Male Elite*, vii-viii
- ¹³⁸ Ibid, viii
- ¹³⁹ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 190.
- ¹⁴⁰ Koofi, *The Favored Daughter*, 199.
- ¹⁴¹ Ibid, 231
- ¹⁴² Ibid, 235

- ¹⁴³ Mernissi, *Veil and the Male Elite*, 2.
- ¹⁴⁴ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 109.
- ¹⁴⁵ Mernissi, *Veil and the Male Elite*, viii.
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- ¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 9
- ¹⁴⁸ Moghadam, 'Patriarchy, the Taleban, and Politics of the Public Space,' 20.
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- ¹⁵¹ Ibid, 150
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- ¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 174.
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- ¹⁶¹ Mernissi, *Veil and the Male Elite*, 9.
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- ¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 113.
- ¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 8
- ¹⁶⁶ Ibid
- ¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 183
- ¹⁶⁸ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 362.
- ¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 179
- ¹⁷⁰ Amnesty International, 'Women in Afghanistan.'
- ¹⁷¹ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 92.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 105.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 100.

¹⁷⁵ Elaheh Rostami Povey, 'Women in Afghanistan: Passive victims of the Borge or Active Social Participants?' *Development in Practice* 25 (May 2003), 268.

¹⁷⁶ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 105.

Chapter Three: The Representation of Afghan Women's Agency in Armstrong's and Koofi's Texts

Gender issues in Afghanistan have received unprecedented attention following the 9/11 attacks. In fact, defending Afghan women's rights has been used as a justification for the U.S. and its allies military intervention in Afghanistan following this event.¹⁷⁷ Since then, the dominant portrayal of Afghan women has shown them as 'passive victims of war, violence, and political repression, to be liberated only by Western military intervention.'¹⁷⁸ Indeed, following this event, Western discourse has constructed the West as 'the beacon of civilization'¹⁷⁹ with a moral obligation to liberate Muslim women from the shackles of their culture and religion. This conviction is expressed in First Lady Laura Bush's autobiography. She states, 'after years of repression, the United States needed to speak out on behalf of these women'¹⁸⁰ who are 'truly powerless'.¹⁸¹ She adds, 'we needed to do more than talk; we needed to reach out and help them.'¹⁸²

In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Abu-Lughod questions this growing 'popular concern' about Afghan and Muslim women's rights in the West. She emphasizes that 'Western representations of Muslim women have a long history. Yet after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the images of oppressed Muslim women became connected to a mission to rescue them from their cultures.'¹⁸³ Although Armstrong and Koofi have displayed similarities in the previous chapters, examining their texts from the perspective of Abu-Lughod has revealed that their respective backgrounds have influenced the way they perceive Afghan women's need to be liberated by the West. To approach this point, this chapter sets out to highlight the influence of Armstrong's Western and Koofi's Afghan backgrounds on their representation and perception of Afghan women's diversity as well as their ability to act for themselves and struggle against oppression. It will also examine the differences between the two authors in their view of the West as the key liberator of Afghan women.

The first difference between *Veiled Threat* and *The Favored Daughter* concerns the portrayal of the diversity of Afghan women's experiences. Armstrong offers a generalized image about Afghan women in two ways: first, by ignoring the diversity of their own experiences; second by erasing the diversity between their experiences and that of other Muslim women. When she hears about the Taliban decrees, she decides to visit Afghanistan to interview the women in order to understand how they have received these decrees and how they are coping with them. However, all the women whose stories she tells are educated, urban and working women. Yet she seems to claim that their experience is representative of the experience of all Afghan women. She describes these women as follows,

With downcast eyes and sagging shoulders, the young women I met described their grievances They had attended university in Kabul, worn jeans and short skirts, met at restaurants on Da Afghanistan, and gone to discos on Froshga. Like other young people, they had walked along the river and through Pul bagh Vuumi Park with their friends. Their lives were full, their futures hopeful –despite the fact their country had been unstable since the 1979 Soviet invasion.^{'184}

She has relied solely on the experience of this category of women to understand the life of Afghan women during the Taliban years. She has ignored the extent to which their class and education shapes their experiences differently. Although her aim is to give voice to Afghan women's concerns, she has failed in transmitting the concerns of other categories of women which are not only about being forced to wear the burqa or abandon their jobs.

Moreover, although Armstrong does not blame Islam for the plight of Afghan women, she believes that their experience is prevalent in all Muslim societies. To remind the readers that they are reading about 'IslamLand', she provides an overview about Islam and the place it accords to women. From this overview, she concludes that 'Islam ... is protective, forgiving and respectful of women.'¹⁸⁵ However, she points out that these principles are not respected as 'Muslims women claim that they are beaten by their husbands, with no recourse in the courts. They often lose everything, including their children, when a husband decides to walk out of the

marriage. They have second-class status compared to the men in their lives.’¹⁸⁶ In another context, she writes,

the different realities for women living under Muslim laws range from being strictly closeted, isolated and *voiceless* within four walls, subjected to public floggings and condemned to death for presumed adultery and forcibly given in marriage as a child, to situations where women have a far lesser degree of freedom of movement and interaction, are refused the right to work, to participate in public affairs and to exercise control over their own lives.¹⁸⁷

Her claim is similar to *Time* magazine’s claim that ‘nowhere in the Muslim world are women treated as equals.’¹⁸⁸ Indeed, Abu-Lughod points out to the dominant Western portrayal of ‘IslamLand’ as ‘the place where things are most wrong today’¹⁸⁹ even if Islam tends to be absolved of all blame. She criticizes such stereotypes about Muslim women and stresses that her experience as an ethnographer has shown her that even within the same country ‘the kinds of suffering that Muslim women undergo are of many sorts and have various causes’¹⁹⁰ which are often not related to religion or gender. Miriam Cooke coined the term ‘Muslimwoman’ to describe ‘this erasure of diversity.’¹⁹¹ She states that the term ‘is not a description of a reality; it is the ascription of a label that reduces all diversity to a single image,’¹⁹² that of an oppressed woman. Armstrong, thus, establishes Afghan women as the ‘Muslimwoman’ by erasing the diversity between their already-different experiences and the experiences of other Muslim women.

In contrast, Koofi’s account represents to the readers some of the diversities of Afghan women’s experiences. Although she is telling her own story, she introduces other women who lead different lives than hers. One of them is her mother, a rural, uneducated woman. She describes her as ‘the epitome of the suffering and endurance of so many Afghan women.’¹⁹³ Their concerns are distinct. As a married young woman, her mother’s goal has been to prepare well-cooked food for her husband’s guests and fulfill her responsibility of keeping order in the house. Her greatest distress is when her husband marries another wife. As an older widowed woman, her goal is to keep the family together. The death of her sons and step-sons represents

her greatest sorrow. Koofi also introduces her sisters and other women she meets as an MP. Besides, she hints at the fact that the life of other Muslim women is different from that of Afghan women when she argues that some of the Taliban restrictions are foreign to Afghanistan and are a characteristic of Arab countries. For example, she sees the necessity of a male relative to accompany a woman which the Taliban have imposed to be part of Arab culture because even women in her mother's generation used to leave their houses unaccompanied.

Another difference between Armstrong's and Koofi's texts concerns the representation of Afghan women's ability to struggle. Armstrong's account reveals her ethnocentric bias by portraying Afghan women as voiceless in need of the West to liberate them. She first shows that their situation gets worse when the West's attention fades from the country after the end of the Cold War. She argues that the fact that Western countries have stopped providing help for the country and become silent about abuses against women is a move that 'would have enormous consequences'¹⁹⁴ on the country and its women. One of the consequences is the Taliban grab of power. She believes that it is the 'vacuum' left by the West which brings them to power. However, Rostami-Povey argues that if Afghans are disappointed by the West, it is because it was responsible for empowering Islamic fanatics. Thanks to their help, the mujahedeen gained power and their eventual infighting led to the emergence of the Taliban.¹⁹⁵ Another consequence of the West's silence, according to Armstrong, is allowing the Taliban to tighten their grip on women by issuing more restrictive rules. 'In the absence of any real protest from international community, a litany of new rules followed,'¹⁹⁶ she maintains.

Second, Armstrong shows that Afghan women have become voiceless and need Western women to be their voice that the Taliban have suppressed. She ignores the struggle of Doctor Samar and believes that Afghan women and Afghan people in general have passively accepted the situation the Taliban have imposed on them. She maintains that 'the truly amazing thing is that no resistance occurred at all. People devised coping mechanisms to keep

themselves from despair.’¹⁹⁷ It seems that the fact that there is no open resistance to the Taliban policies is for her a sign of not resisting at all. She adds that ‘females in Afghanistan knew that suffering in silence was their only choice’¹⁹⁸ because they cannot reveal any abuse against them as a result of the notion of ‘honour’ and the lack of human rights organizations that may help them.

Having expressed her belief that they are voiceless, Armstrong goes on to show that Afghan women are making a plea to Western women to ‘save’ them. One of the women working in the basement of the Canadian-run hospital implores her to reveal their story to the world and to ask other women to help them. The woman says, ‘get our schools open, get us back to work, or get us out of here.’¹⁹⁹ In fact, Armstrong claims that all the women she meets make a similar plea, stating, ‘when I left the Afghan women after my first voyage to the region in 1997, they begged me to ask Canadian women to speak for them. They said, “We no longer have a voice; we need other women to become our voice.” And in astonishing numbers, that’s what women in Canada –from coast to coast– did.’²⁰⁰ Even Doctor Samar is described as having lost her voice and urges other Western women to speak for them. Armstrong sates that she ‘urged Canada to put pressure on the Taliban to allow girls to go back to school and the women to return to work’²⁰¹ because ‘Canadian people care a lot about human rights.’²⁰² Armstrong also quotes her saying that what she needs from Canadian women is ‘solidarity and sisterhood. We want you to speak for us because we don’t have a voice in our country right now.’²⁰³ These women’s words are used to strengthen *Veiled Threat*’s claim that they cannot struggle on their own and that it is the duty of the West to ‘save’ them.

Third, Armstrong shows that Western women are working hard to fulfil their mission of ‘rescuing’ Afghan women. She maintains that while the world considers Afghanistan a thing of the past, ‘many women’s groups dedicated themselves to strategic planning to help these oppressed women.’²⁰⁴ She claims that all these women who are working for Afghan women

‘demanded something be done about the ghastly conditions of the women in Afghanistan.’²⁰⁵ The belief that it is the West’s duty to help Afghan women is shown in the words of American Mavis Leno describing that the experience of her father when buried in a mining accident is what has led her to join the fight for Afghan women’s rights. She states that he told her that while he was buried ‘the hardest thing was that he had no way of being sure that anyone was looking for him.’²⁰⁶ She compares his situation to that of Afghan women, stating, ‘that’s what came to my mind when I read about the women of Afghanistan. They don’t even know if anybody knows what happened to them. They don’t even know if people are trying to *save them*’²⁰⁷ (emphasis added). In this context, Lamrabet explores the meaning of such ethnocentrism, arguing,

this “need” to liberate Muslim women, brought about by a no-longer disguised Western intellectual ethnocentrism, serves to exempt other cultures and societies, especially in the West, from any charges of discrimination against their own women, as if these women were born liberated and in full possession of all of their rights.’²⁰⁸

Indeed, Abu-Lughod states that she does not think that ‘it would be as easy to mobilize so many of these American and European women if it were not a case of Muslim men oppressing Muslim women— women of cover, for whom they can feel sorry and in relation to whom they can feel smugly superior.’²⁰⁹

The Favored Daughter, however, shows that Afghan people struggle ‘in their own way and according to their own culture, religion and ethnicity’²¹⁰ to survive. Koofi expresses her pride by how Afghans help one another despite the perils. They rely on their sense of community and solidarity that has long characterized them to survive. For example, they risk their lives by providing shelter for their acquaintances who are in danger. Fawzia’s brother is sheltered several times by their relatives and acquaintances. He is once sheltered by a female relative who lives alone. Although she is aware that if they are caught they will both be accused of committing a ‘morality crime’, she accepts to take the risk without reluctance. Besides, Afghan people help girls to reach their underground schools and turn a blind eye as they see

them walking secretly in the dark to reach these schools. These schools are run by ‘brave, wonderful Afghan women, who despite the dangers to themselves, knew they couldn’t let the Taliban destroy the education of a generation of girls.’²¹¹ And these female students go through enough troubles to reach these schools.

Concerning Fawzia, she confronts the Taliban several times in prison and even ventures to their houses for the sake of her imprisoned husband. She later realizes that living under the Taliban has also given her an ‘inner strength.’²¹² The feeling of passivity and silence she experiences the first time she leaves Taliban-controlled areas quickly fades once she settles in her hometown Badakhshan. ‘The fact is I wasn’t the young and naïve bride I had been not so long ago,’ she realizes, ‘now I was a wife who had negotiated with fundamentalist tyrants.’²¹³ She tells her daughters that her experience when her husband is arrested has been the beginning of her involvement in politics, ‘in some ways your father’s arrest was the start of my own politicization. When he was arrested I could not, would not, sit at home and wait, doing nothing. I had to gather resources, find allies.’²¹⁴ In this context, Rostami-Povey highlights that ‘some women’s experiences of conflict resulted in their learning skills and obtaining social, economic and political exposure and strength. In effect, conflicts extended beyond the battlefield and into the domains of everyday life.’²¹⁵ This demonstrates that Afghan women find space to exert agency despite all the restriction. Moreover, having chosen to stay in Afghanistan rather than flee it is a form of resistance. Although she has an opportunity to live a better life in Pakistan, Fawzia prefers to stay in her country, hoping that someday it will know stability again.

Veiled Threat and *The Favored Daughter* also display differences in relation to their portrayal of the extent to which the U.S. and its allies’ intervention in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks has liberated Afghan women. Armstrong argues that the West has fulfilled its mission of ‘saving’ Afghan women by drawing the world attention again towards their condition and by freeing them. She refers to this event as ‘the time when the world lifted the

veil on Afghanistan'²¹⁶ as 'suddenly a country most North Americans couldn't have found on a map was front-page news. Suddenly the world saw the women of Afghanistan muffled in their burqas and learned of their restricted lives.'²¹⁷ Afghan women finally start receiving the aid they have desperately needed during the five years of Taliban rule. Armstrong admits that prior to this event, they used to see the people living in distant countries plagued by conflicts and unrest as 'others'. However, after this event 'everyone knew it was time to give voice to their screams, time to act for the "others".'²¹⁸ This again shows her conviction that 'Westerners are the ones who must change the world.'²¹⁹

Two months after this event, Armstrong visits what President Bush labels a 'liberated Afghanistan'²²⁰ to see the 'encouraging signs of change'²²¹ in the country. She meets the women who have shared with her their stories. She portrays them to be 'rejoicing at their liberation by the Americans.'²²² They have returned from the refugee camps, looking very happy and enthusiastic and are about to resume their previous jobs. Concerning Samar, Armstrong states that she 'had been silent for more than a year,'²²³ yet now 'she found her voice again and began to talk to the media.'²²⁴ When Armstrong meets those women who work in the basement of the Canadian-run hospital again, she claims that their 'life is looking very different from the despairing ordeal they were living through when last we met.'²²⁵ They tell her that they have experienced two feelings when the United States started bombing: 'fear' and 'gratitude' at the same time. Armstrong states that although the bombing frightened them, 'they all agree that they're pleased the Americans came.'²²⁶ 'Now we have freedom,'²²⁷ Frozan Mahran rejoices. Besides, she highlights that they do not want them to leave as one of them says, 'we'd like them here, taking care of Afghanistan.'²²⁸ 'They are better than Al-Qaeda,'²²⁹ adds another one. The claim that Armstrong is making here is similar to President Bush's claim that despite their bombing, 'the oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our

allies.²³⁰ Indeed, by showing how these women are ‘rejoicing’ at their liberation is a way of indicating that they are in need of saving and that the West has indeed fulfilled its mission.

Abu-Lughod draws attention to the widespread claim among Westerners that Afghanistan will descend into chaos and that women will be the first victims if their troops and the organizations helping the country abandon it. However, she doubts and criticizes this claim by pointing out that many atrocities against women happened while these troops were there. Indeed, Armstrong claims that their intervention has established security in the country by quoting the general of the Canadian troops deployed in Kabul describing ‘the impressive and encouraging’ situation in Afghanistan, ‘the level of prosperity, the number of people in the street, the amount of commerce has seen huge changes. At first it was odd to see a fruit stand, now there is nothing you can’t get in Kabul.’²³¹ All this because they have established security. Armstrong stresses that women can finally walk in the streets and feel safe. She also stresses the fact that the international community must not abandon the country again if this safety is to last. However, as a *Human Rights Watch* report maintains, this security is only established and maintained in the capital Kabul²³² because the country is named ‘the most dangerous country for women’²³³ in 2011 while these troops are still there.

As regards Koofi, she, indeed, expresses her happiness that the United States has rid the country of the Taliban, a feeling most Afghans do not share because they dislike the help of non-Muslims. She does not mind the fact that it was Western countries which are doing the job because she believes that Afghanistan has long been controlled by other nations, especially during the Taliban rule when she feels that Kabul is no longer an Afghan city. For this, it makes no difference this time, and she is happy that non-Afghans are this time involved in defeating the Taliban, not empowering them. Like Armstrong, Koofi sees that an air of optimism swept through Kabul. The refugees began returning home and some Afghan investors overseas came to invest in Afghanistan. But she points out that the country is still in a big chaos. The refugees

find their homes destroyed or taken by other people, and employment reaches staggering rates. Most people are still living in abject poverty, and insecurity is still a big issue. She points out that despite all foreign attempts to build the security of Afghanistan, ‘almost ten years since the Operation Enduring Freedom began Afghanistan is still far from stable.’²³⁴

Concerning women, Koofi acknowledges that the fall of the Taliban represents a fresh start for them. ‘For women the future was looking brighter than it had in years,’²³⁵ she acknowledges, but not because the West is present in the country to ensure their safety; it is because a new democratic constitution is agreed upon in the *Loya Jirga*. When she reveals her intention to participate in the parliamentary elections as a representative of her province, she is surprised that all her brothers support her, the sons of a family which once did not see a girl’s birthday worth being celebrated. She highlights that this change in gender attitudes is not only taking place in her family. However, she hints at the fact that it has not occurred thanks to Western influence, ‘I truly believe change in gender attitudes cannot be forced on a country by outside forces, however well-meaning those forces are. Change can only come from within and it begins with individual families. I am a living proof of this.’²³⁶ Koofi also affirms that being used to working with women changes men’s opinion about gender, ‘I truly believe that people change their opinions only from first-hand experience. And opinions on gender can and do change, even among the most conservative men.’²³⁷ When she starts working with the UNICEF, some conservative men refuse to work with her because she is a woman, but after becoming accustomed to working with her, it no longer bothers them. Besides, the mullah who has once preached against her for working with the UN comes to seek her help after she becomes an MP. ‘That is why it is so important to have women in public and governmental roles, because by doing so people’s views can slowly change,’²³⁸ she insists.

However, despite these few changes in women’s status, Fawzia’s experience as an MP shows her that Afghan women are still far from being equal. This gender inequality is mostly

experienced by rural woman who are ignored. Focus tends to be solely on urban women. When the status of these changes, people think that the situation of women in the whole country has improved. Yet the reality is different. For this, she states,

I have a dream that one day all humans in Afghanistan will have equal rights. Afghan girls have talent, skill, and the capacity to be educated. They should be given every opportunity to be educated and literate, and to participate fully in the political and social future of the country.²³⁹

She also dreams that Afghanistan ‘will no longer be labeled the worst place in the world for a woman or a child to be born.’²⁴⁰ This leads one to doubt the Western claim that their intervention has liberated Afghanistan and its women.

This chapter has resorted to Abu-Lughod’s *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* to sort out the differences between *Veiled Threat* and the *Favored Daughter*. It has dealt with three main differences between them. The first difference concerns their portrayal of the diversity of Afghan women’s experience. The second difference is about the authors’ representation of Afghan women’s ability to exercise agency and their view that they need saving. As regards the third difference, it concerns the extent to which the authors differ in their view that the West has liberated Afghan women and the country.

Endnotes

¹⁷⁷ Deniz Kandiyoti, ‘Old Dilemmas or New Challenges? The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan,’ *Development and Change* 38 (2007).

¹⁷⁸ Rostami Povey, ‘Women in Afghanistan’, 267.

¹⁷⁹ Carol A. Stabil and Deepa Komar, ‘Unveiling imperialism: Media, Gender and the War on Afghanistan,’ *Media Culture and Society* 27 (2005), 766.

¹⁸⁰ Laura Bush, *Spoken from the Heart*, (New York: Scribner, 2010), 149.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 152.

¹⁸² Ibid, 149.

¹⁸³ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

¹⁸⁴ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 9.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 67.

- ¹⁸⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 150.
- ¹⁸⁸ Lisa Beyer, 'Islam: The Women of Islam,' *Time*, December 03, 2001, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1001347,00.html>
- ¹⁸⁹ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 69.
- ¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 221.
- ¹⁹¹ Miriam Cooke, 'The Muslimwoman,' *Cont Islam* 1 (2007), 139.
- ¹⁹² Ibid, 140.
- ¹⁹³ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 243.
- ¹⁹⁴ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 32.
- ¹⁹⁵ Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion*, (London: Zed Books, 2007).
- ¹⁹⁶ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 11.
- ¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 144.
- ¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 126
- ¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 142.
- ²⁰⁰ Ibid, 142-143
- ²⁰¹ Ibid, 143
- ²⁰² Ibid, 144
- ²⁰³ Ibid.
- ²⁰⁴ Ibid, 141.
- ²⁰⁵ Ibid, 143
- ²⁰⁶ Ibid 148.
- ²⁰⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁰⁸ Lemrabet, *Man and Women in the Quran*, 2.
- ²⁰⁹ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 41.
- ²¹⁰ Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*, 2-3.
- ²¹¹ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 121.
- ²¹² Ibid, 181
- ²¹³ Ibid.
- ²¹⁴ Ibid, 227.

- ²¹⁵ Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*, 33.
- ²¹⁶ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 126.
- ²¹⁷ Ibid, 161.
- ²¹⁸ Ibid, 195
- ²¹⁹ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 63.
- ²²⁰ Bush W. Bush, '2002 State of the Union Address,' (Presidential address, Washington, D.C., January 29, 2002). <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/stateoftheunion2002.htm>
- ²²¹ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 186.
- ²²² Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 35.
- ²²³ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 166.
- ²²⁴ Ibid.
- ²²⁵ Ibid, 197.
- ²²⁶ Ibid.
- ²²⁷ Ibid, 196.
- ²²⁸ Ibid.
- ²²⁹ Ibid
- ²³⁰ George W. Bush 'Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan Address to the Nation' (Presidential address, Washington, D.C., October 7, 2001), <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911intialafghanistanops.htm>
- ²³¹ Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*, 189.
- ²³² Human Rights Watch, 'Taking Cover: Women in Post-Taliban Afghanistan.' <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgroundunder/wrd/afghan-women-2k2.htm>
- ²³³ BBC News, 'Poll says Afghanistan 'most dangerous' for women,' <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-13773274>
- ²³⁴ Koofi, *Favored Daughter*, 245.
- ²³⁵ Ibid, 210
- ²³⁶ Ibid, 218
- ²³⁷ Ibid, 211
- ²³⁸ Ibid, 200
- ²³⁹ Ibid, 244.
- ²⁴⁰ Ibid.

IV- Conclusion

The present study contributes to the existing literature on Afghan women by comparing their portrayal from the perspective of Muslim women in two non-fictional works written by a Western and an Afghan author. It has sought to examine the extent to which women's physical appearance and access to the public sphere constitute a focal point in the project of religious extremists in Afghanistan as shown in Armstrong's *Veiled Threat* and Koofi's *The Favored Daughter*. To reach this aim, this paper has resorted to Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite*. This study has also attempted to examine the portrayal of Afghan women's ability to struggle despite all the restrictions and the authors' perception of the role of the West in their liberation. To attain this objective, reference is made to Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

The comparison of Armstrong's and Koofi's texts has allowed this research to reach certain conclusions on the authors and their texts. Both works picture the impact of Afghanistan's political changes and instability on women. Afghan women are shown to be the first victims of these changes. They also show how their lives are highly influenced by their culture and religion which are used as a justification for oppressing them.

Although Armstrong and Koofi are from different cultural and geographical backgrounds, they are both aware that the religion of Islam has been distorted and misused by the Taliban to gain support and legitimacy as well as to justify their restrictive measures against women. These restrictive measures are particularly aimed at prescribing the appropriate physical appearance for women and their behaviour in public. Excluding women from taking part in public affairs is also central to these measures.

The last conclusion to be reached concerns the influence of the authors' cultural backgrounds on their texts. Armstrong's Western background has led her text to pay special attention to the role played by the West in Afghanistan. She holds that it is the responsibility of

the West to save Afghan women who have been stripped of their voice. As regards Koofi, her Afghan background has led her to appreciate many aspects of her Afghan culture, especially their solidarity that allows them to live through moments of crises. This solidarity has helped them survive during the Taliban years. Besides, her struggle throughout her husband's incarceration has helped her gain political skills which she used to gain a seat in parliament.

The scope of this research can be extended by comparing the experience of Afghan women with that of other Muslim women in other countries. It will be interesting for students to ground their comparison on other countries which witnessed religious extremist regimes, such as Pakistan, Iran and Sudan, and examine whether women there face the same restrictions as Afghan women. It will also be interesting to compare Koofi's *The Favored Daughter* with a personal account by another female politician, such as Benazir Bhutto's *Daughter of Destiny: An Autobiography* (1989) in order to examine how they have defied their societies' norms to enter the labyrinth of politics.

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