

UNVEILING WOMEN'S STRUGGLES: A POST-COLONIAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF NOVEL 'THE SECRET SKY' BY ATIA ABAWI

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ABSTRACT

The Secret Sky is a novel written by Afghan-American journalist on forbidden love in Afghanistan. It tells a heart-breaking story of two young Afghans, Fatima and Samiullah. The novel is based on cultural, religious and class conflicts which led two young lovers, especially Fatima to a long-term struggle. The misinterpretation of religion resulted in violence and long-term turmoil. Post-colonial feminism theory has been applied on this text, with the perspective of an Islamic feminist, Fatema Mernissi. The current study illustrates the prevalent practice of women's oppression in postcolonial Afghanistan. The theory explores the way women are repressed in third world countries especially in patriarchal societies. The purpose of this research is to expose the ethnic, gender discrimination as practiced by Afghan people in the name of religion. The narrative underscores the considerable challenges women face in attaining freedom within Afghanistan's social set up, where deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions impede their progress. Abawi meticulously portrays the harsh realities of women's oppression, emphasizing the disproportionate suffering endured in the name of religion, culture, and ethnicity. The novel reveals that the source of animosity is not Islam itself but rather the cultural misinterpretations of Islamic doctrines.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Forbidden Love, Post-colonial feminism, Culture, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

Atia Abawi is a foreign news journalist, who was posted for five years in Kabul, Afghanistan. Her parents were Afghani, but she was born in West Germany and was raised in the United States. More specifically, Abawi's parents fled Afghanistan during the Soviet invasions. Abawi is known for her strong support for women's empowerment in both her reporting and writing. In 2008, she moved to Afghanistan full-time as an American television correspondent and got immersed in the country and its people. Abawi soon learned that Afghanistan is a land of contradictions, it holds unimaginable beauty and inconceivable ugliness. Good people were needlessly killed and bad people got away with the slaughter of many. Her first book, The Secret Sky: A

Novel of forbidden love in Afghanistan published in September 2014, was inspired by her time in Afghanistan. She illustrated real-life experience, the tragic, despair, and hardships of the people that are unseen by so many.

Afghan society is characterized by a complex interplay of cultural, traditional, and religious influences, which have had a profound impact on the treatment of women. While it's essential to note that Afghan society is diverse and experiences may vary, there have been longstanding issues related to the status and treatment of women. Historically, women in Afghanistan have faced challenges ranging from limited access to education and employment to strict societal expectations regarding their roles. In some

instances, particularly under the Taliban rule, women were subjected to severe restrictions on their mobility, dress, and participation in public life, further exacerbating gender inequalities. Women have often been marginalized and treated as subordinate to men, and gender discrimination remains a pervasive issue. While it would be unfair to categorize all Afghans or their cultural practices as inherently oppressive, certain societal norms and interpretations of Islamic teachings have contributed to an environment where women's rights are curtailed.

The novel *The Secret Sky* is based on discrimination, religious conflicts of tribal groups, and the forbidden love story of a Hazara girl and a Pushtun boy and their struggle to get married despite their different ethnic groups. In this novel, Abawi shows us that false teachings in madrassas could ruin the innocent minds of children, so we need to be sure about the authenticity of a place, where we are sending our children. Their learning should be fruitful, and she also urges us to ignore ethnicities and discrimination of gender in society. By applying Post-colonial Feminist theory to this novel, we get to know that how some so-called mullahs impose false allegations on people in the name of religion. They think that only girls are punishable for breaking religious laws and boys could be forgiven because they are the authoritative figures in the society, whereas they do not have proper knowledge of Islam. Their only purpose is to implement fake laws in the name of Islam and to terrify people.

Post-colonial feminism or "third world feminism" came in response to western feminism. It works for the social, cultural, and religious freedom of women (Mishra 2013). This theory explains how racism, as well as political, cultural, and economic after-effects of colonialism, disturb the non-western women in post-colonial countries. (Lubelska 2018). Tyagi (2014) has stated that the theory of post-colonial feminism puts pressure on the prevailing post-colonial theory in its constant repetition of the need to consider gender issues. Postcolonialism and feminism have developed into a strained relationship as some feminist critics suggest that postcolonial theory is a man-centered field that not only excludes but also exploits women's concerns. (Tyagi 2014). Post-colonial feminism is a way to look beyond the white-washing of feminism and understand the

distinctions of power, geopolitics, and money that take place in tyranny and mistreatment of various people, and for every feminism to become accountable for their acts. Feminism, in reality, is not feminism if it is not post-colonial (Lubelska, 2018). There are many contributions to post-colonial feminism by people throughout the world, but we are going to use the ideas and lens of Fatema Mernissi to analyze the novel *The Secret Sky*.

Postcolonial feminists seek to amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized women, recognizing their agency within the context of double marginalization based on both gender and postcolonial positioning. A fundamental aspect of postcolonial feminism is the critique of Eurocentric perspectives within mainstream feminism. Scholars within this framework challenge Western-centric tendencies that may overlook or marginalize the experiences of non-Western women. The resistance and agency of women within postcolonial contexts are central to the discourse, exploring how women navigate and challenge oppressive systems using strategies rooted in their cultural and historical contexts. Postcolonial feminism engages with the concept of cultural relativism, respecting diverse cultural practices while critiquing those perpetuating gender-based violence or discrimination.

The impact of globalization on women in postcolonial societies is a key focus, examining how economic, political, and cultural globalization affect women differently based on their social locations. Postcolonial feminists also deconstruct stereotypes and essentialist notions about women in postcolonial societies, emphasizing the diversity of women's experiences. Notable scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Bell Hooks have contributed significantly to postcolonial feminist discourse. Their works, including Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (2009) and Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes* (1911) have shaped critical discussions on the complex and intertwined issues of gender, race, and colonialism in the postcolonial world. Overall, postcolonial feminism provides a crucial lens for understanding the intricate dynamics of power, identity, and resistance within diverse postcolonial contexts.

Fatema Mernissi is a Moroccan sociologist, writer, and activist who advanced the ground of post-colonial feminism. She talked about the way women

were treated under misogynist traditions in third-world countries, like the Middle-East and Arab society. In *The Veil and The Male Elite* (1991) it is said, "Not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies" (Mernissi 2015). According to Mernissi, most of the Islamic scholars manipulated the Islamic teachings and Hadiths by their own needs, they especially manipulated the topics that promoted equality in males and females, to suppress the women, and made Islam seem like a misogynist.

As a feminist, Mernissi worked to undermine the social construction, gender identity, and the stand of a woman in Islam, and how the political and social constitutes oppress and silence Muslim women. She contends that Mulla's view of a woman as "obedient, silent and passive" contradicts the actual preaching of Islam and Muhammad P.B.U.H (Rassam, Amal and Lisa, 2021). Her work, rooted in feminist perspectives, explores issues related to gender, sexuality, and power dynamics within Islamic cultures. Notably, Mernissi's writings advocate for the empowerment of women, challenging societal norms that limit their agency and emphasizing the importance of reinterpreting religious texts to promote gender equality. Through her insightful and courageous contributions, Fatema Mernissi has left an indelible mark on feminist discourse within the context of Islam, inspiring ongoing discussions about the intersection of religion, culture, and women's rights.

This research paper has analyzed the novel *The Secret Sky* by Atia Abawi from a postcolonial feminist perspective. It has explored how women are repressed by patriarchy socially, culturally, economically, and physically. It highlighted the gender oppression that is faced by Afghan Women because of their lifestyle, culture, purpose, and norms of their society. The prime purpose of this study is to expose the ethnic, racial, and gender discrimination as practiced by Afghani people in the name of religion. It laid special focus on how wrong interpretation of religion can cause violence and damnation in society and how some false mullahs manipulate people's minds by giving them wrong teachings of Islam.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In an Amazon review, Doucet (2021) says that *The Secret Sky* is a sad, inspiring and heart-rending story of love. Further, he says that this gipping debut by Afghan-American journalist is a simple but straight forward romantic tale. Fatima the Hazara girl and Samiullah the Pushtun boy were not meant to fall in love but they do. In the same website a Booklist reviewer says that Abawi composes with a delicate hand as she tells a story of tribal rituals that are chilling deep down. Abawi's introduction, writers note and liberal glossary supply invite setting of this disastrous delivering of forbidden love.

In the interview taken by Penguin Teen, Abawi talks about her book *The Secret Sky*, which focuses on Pashtun and Hazara. It is primarily based on the village where she spent a lot of time with people, different tribes mixed, who survived the soviet war and were working together to help each other out. Afghanistan has various groups whether it be Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik, Uzbek, Nuristani, Qizilbash, and so on. The novel shows the diversity of Afghanistan and also the problems that people face due to all of this diversity. It was prominent especially after the soviet war where growing hatred between different ethnic groups was seen, nevertheless, it doesn't mean these people can't get along with all this. The divisions are still there deep down, but Abawi has revealed how Pashtuns and Hazaras worked out together and generated an element of love at the end (Abawi 2015).

In this review the author effectively portrays Latif and Rashid as extreme examples of wrongdoing, manipulating religion for justification. Rashid distances himself from the gang upon realizing Latif's limited knowledge of Islam. Mullah Sarwar stands in contrast as a positive character. The narrative avoids generalizations, depicting both good and bad landowners and workers. Cultural elements provide context, making the story universally relatable with hints of Romeo and Juliet set in Afghanistan. The perspectives of Fatima, Samiullah, and Rashid offer a well-rounded view, though some character transitions, like Rashid's sudden change, may appear abrupt and less believable (Islamic school librarian 2016).

In her small Afghan village, Fatima, a Hazara girl approaching womanhood, strives to maintain the freedom of childhood. Reconnecting with Sami, a

Pashtun friend, they resume their routine, but their innocent companionship is deemed taboo by the village. Sami's cousin, Rashid, exposes their secret, leading them to escape parental punishment. Rashid, seeking revenge, reports them to a Taliban-affiliated warlord, triggering a violent nightmare. The romance, though sweet, serves as a conduit to explore broader cultural conflicts in Afghanistan. Characters represent diverse beliefs, providing a complex examination of a traditionally conservative society grappling with globalization. Despite the brutality, Sami and Fatima survive, offering a glimmer of hope in an otherwise grim narrative (Quealy-Gainer 2014).

In this review Christina (2015) says that Abawi manages to balance the darkness with the light and conveys that even though the dark and evil forces are on the top, there is still a lot of goodness beneath. Rashid and Sami both went to the madrassa, but they responded to the teachings in dissimilar ways. Rashid was influenced by the Taliban and became immensely judgmental. Sami, in contrast, despised the teachings, the brainwashing in the name of Islam, and eventually ran away from the madrassa. Whether a person condemns evil or not, completely depends on the person himself.

According to April's review (2015) of *The Secret Sky* the novel is akin to an Afghan rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*. In her novel, Abawi strikes a few sad notes, yet there is optimism in the end. This is why most people enjoy young adult books: they frequently take readers to bleak places, but leave them with the optimism that things will improve. That is what this book shows. Abawi depicts a variety of people trying to make the best of their circumstances. In today's Afghanistan, *The Secret Sky* is set. Although the Taliban are no longer in power, they are still a significant force in the region. Religion has a significant impact. It gives an excellent sense of what life is like in Afghanistan.

Several novels set in Afghanistan shed light on the experiences of women in this context. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* vividly portrays the challenges faced by Afghan women, highlighting themes of gender discrimination, abuse, and the resilience of female characters in the face of adversity. The portrayal of women's oppression is a central theme woven into the narrative. The novel provides a poignant exploration of the challenges and

injustices faced by Afghan women within the socio-cultural and political context of the country. Forced Marriages and Patriarchal Control Domestic Violence and Abuse are also major themes of this novel. The story vividly depicts instances of domestic violence and emotional abuse suffered by women. The character Mariam endures mistreatment from her husband, Rasheed, reflecting the broader issue of spousal abuse faced by many Afghan women. Restrictions on Education and Independence. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* offers a nuanced portrayal of women's oppression in Afghanistan. The novel invites readers to empathize with the characters' struggles and sheds light on the broader societal issues that perpetuate the oppression of women in the context of the Afghan culture and history.

Similarly, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* delves into societal expectations and their profound impact on women in Afghanistan. The theme of women's oppression is intricately interwoven into the narrative, offering a nuanced exploration of the challenges faced by Afghan women within the intricate socio-cultural landscape of the country. The novel vividly portrays traditional gender roles that confine Afghan women to specific societal expectations. Against the backdrop of political unrest and conflict in Afghanistan, the story unfolds with the additional hardships borne by women, as the country's instability contributes to an environment where they face heightened vulnerability and oppression. Hassan's mother, Sanaubar, becomes a poignant representation of sexual exploitation, and her subsequent abandonment highlights the societal stigma associated with women who defy traditional norms. This narrative element underscores the intersection of gender oppression with cultural expectations and illuminates the consequences faced by those who deviate from the established norm.

The selected novel of Atia Abawi's *The Secret Sky* does not have any academic work done. Since it is a virgin area, the present study is the first one to be working on it and with the perspective of post-colonial feminism, through the lens of Fatema Menrissi. This research centered around the manipulation of religion and culture along with patriarchy to dominate and assert men's power over women, and also uncover the themes of women

objectification, ethnicity, and culture portrayed as religion.

Statement of the Problem

The present study addresses the struggle of women in everyday life, especially in the backward and conservative countries, in Abawi's *The Secret Sky*. For its theoretical underpinning, the study deploys relevant constructs from postcolonial feminism through the lens of Fatema Mernissi. In this regard, it is important to see what impacts of ethnicity and cultural dominance on the characters are portrayed in Abawi's novel. In the same view, the study explores the depiction of religion in this novel. With all this in view, it is imperative to see through the working of patriarchy in Afghan society, influenced by culture, religion, and society.

Research Questions

What are the impacts of ethnicity and cultural dominance on the characters?
How is religion portrayed in *The Secret Sky* by Atia Abawi?

Data Analysis and Discussion

The word patriarchy in literature, was even before the emergence of feminism, and the concept is to analyze the oppression of women. The term is defined as a system, which is dominated by male authority, created and subjugated by men themselves to oppress women through its political, social, and economic institutions. Ever since its origin, Afghan society has been a patriarchal society and has a major feature of traditional society, mainly influenced by the Taliban. It is a structure of social differentiation and stratification based on sex, and gender to repress, constrain and dominate women. Traditionally men do not participate in any domestic activities, like house chores or the upbringing of their children, and only work on the fields and outside their homes as it is the duty of men to provide to his family, and women, on the other hand, are only limited and confined to their homes, to ensure that the home is full of warmth and love, take care of her children, cook food and greet their men when they come back home from work, another major reason due to which women are not allowed outside their homes, is because they are the honor of their families. There are plentiful accounts of oppressed women in

Afghanistan for instance, starving widows, high maternal death rates, rape, deprivation of education, murder, under-age girls being forced into marriage wife-beatings, burning of girls' schools. Women running away from these norms are imprisoned again, they become victims of adultery or are killed for protecting the honor of the family name. "Almost every woman in Afghanistan is hidden and isolated from the outside world" (Nasimi 2014)

A successful marriage with many sons is the main goal of Afghan women, wholeheartedly encouraged by Afghan men. This belief and its contradictions are portrayed in the novel, through the characters of Fatema, Fatema's mother Mossuma, Zohra, and Zohra's grandmother. As Fatema is growing up, she does not like the changes in her body, since it restricts her from playing outside with both girls and boys, and is confining her to the walls of her home, this is a problem that many girls face in restraining societies of Afghan, one day they are playing freely and then the next day they are told to play the role of a pure woman. "My mother says that it's no longer proper for a girl of my shape to go out and play, that it will be seen as indecent" (*Secret Sky* p.4)

According to Fatema Mernissi, patriarchy makes an ultimate effort to use its domination based on the false interpretation of religious beliefs, tradition through the cultural practice, norms in the family to refuse all the matters which probably endanger the existence of patriarchy (Rassam, Amal and Lisa, 2021), such as women's limited access to the justice system in the equal divorce rights and early marriage. Fatema and Zohra though best friends are very contradicting and opposite to each other. Fatema hopes to see the world through her own eyes (*Secret Sky* p.63) experience freedom, and not just hear stories from her father.

Women as the victims are reluctant to defend their rights in the name of family reputation. There is no subject position for women to speak up, express their idea and represent themselves. And if a woman becomes tainted or is accused to defy the norms, the society makes her life miserable and they start blaming other women related to her, that they are just as impure and stained. Abawi demonstrates this with the example of Fatima's 3 years old baby sister, who was murdered by Mulla Latif, right in front of the whole family, all for saving the honor of the country. Also, Zohra's father asserts to break the friendship of

Fatima and Zohra, when he finds out the dishonor Fatima committed, saying “Being friends with her could ruin the chances of you (Zohra) finding a suitable husband” (Secret Sky p.121). In an article by Nasrullah Mambrol on Literary Theory and Criticism, it is said that, reinterpreting Quran, Mernissi argues that sexuality is not an evil in Islam, and, therefore, even as women in the Islamic world are viewed as sexual, it is not to degrade her, nor even to reduce her stand next to men. However, from the patriarchal interpretations, the representation of women as sexual jumped to the conclusion that women in Islam are inferior to men (Mambrol 2018). Fatima’s mother, Mossuma is a woman with deeply embedded norms and beliefs of Afghan’s patriarchal culture and society. She only wants children to bring her luxury or to use them, in climbing up the ladder of class status by marrying her daughter to rich men. She did not care about her children and always criticized them to look presentable because “Every woman needs to look her best, even if it is just for her own family, Fatima” (Secret Sky p.28). Mossuma was also not in the favor of Fatima going to Zohra’s grandmother to gain education, even when Fatima and Zohra were really lucky to be allowed to enhance their minds with education as women were not allowed to do so but Zohra’s grandmother was one of the very few literate women in their village. Mossuma on the other hand, wanted her daughter to acquire the domestic role and not education which would not help her in the future, “you can skip your lessons today. The cookies will be more important to your future than reading” (Secret Sky p.53), “you know one day you’ll want to be married, and you’ll even enjoy it. It makes you a woman” (Secret Sky p.53)

Mernissi states that gender discrimination in Muslim societies, therefore, emerges not from the faith in women’s lower position, but the realization of their potential strength (Mambrol 2018). Fatima’s father Mohammad recognized the evil residing in the norms of the society, and he was totally against the idea of marrying Fatima off, even when his wife asserted to. “I want my daughter to live a happy life...I’ve seen men steal women, seen them sold, raped, and killed. I’ve seen fathers crying on the streets, holding pictures of their daughter, asking if anyone has seen them” (Secret Sky p.48-49).

The best example for a country where women objectification is practiced can be said to be Afghanistan. It is considered the worst country for a girl to be born in. She is treated as a burden by her family. Her one mistake can bring dishonor to the family. She cannot be seen with any boy who is not her relative, but if she is even seen with a boy, she is accused of adultery without any proof, and then she is punished by being killed. The punishment is only severe for the female, the male is somehow spared since the honor is placed in the body and activities of women and not men “the girl, of course, will die. As you know it is necessary to save your honor and our people’s honor. A family that raises such filth can’t be forgiven.” (Secret Sky p.193). She is classified as the honor of her family. Women become victims of animosities between two families. She is kidnapped, sold, subjected to slavery, raped, and killed for something that her father, brother, or husband did. Some men even pretend to marry them just to torture them later for something her family did to him. They are married at a young age, and their worth is measured by the money or income that their future husband gives. Fatima did not like this concept of marrying for money. “I can’t believe my best friend’s worth is calculated by whether someone owns a motorcycle or not” (Secret Sky p.26). She is not allowed to have a say in her marriage. She should accept whatever her elders decide for her as her fate. A girl is not even allowed to study as her husband will get jealous if his wife is successful. So, to hide their jealousy, they call the women who went to college, are on radio and television whore, they are considered to be dishonoring their family. Fatima is shown as a girl who wants to object to all this discrimination as she is against this objectification, but she was afraid to say it; she will be called crazy. “She may be a best friend, but I am still afraid of telling her---or anyone. I’m afraid they’ll all think I’m crazy” (Secret Sky p.24). This practice of women’s objectification should be stopped as it is a cause of psychological issues. Women should be allowed to have their own opinion; they also have feelings that should be considered before insulting them. No one is superior or inferior, everyone should have equal rights.

Another important theme of the novel *The Secret Sky* is the highlighted difference of ethnicity between groups. This individuality of identity is believed to

be expressed in language, race, religion, family rituals, caste, social differences, and culture which can be seen highly emphasized in this novel. The characters presented in this novel were either Pashtuns (landowners) or Hazaras (farmers). They are entirely different from each other because they believe each other's to be the murderers of their families. Families do love each other but they are selfish about love and at the back of their mind they know that it is obvious for them to remember that they are the owners and Hazara people are the ones who are bound to work on their lands as servants so they could never become one group in Afghanistan. As Fatima says about Samiullah: "He was always the leader out of our little gang of village kids. Some families didn't allow their children to play with us because we were a mixed group; Pashtun children playing with Hazara children" (Secret Sky p.6). They judge others based on their ethnic identity but Atia Abawi shows that love knows no boundaries, which is why two people who belong to different groups fall in love ignoring their apparent identities. They broke stereotypes of their society and didn't care for anything and did what they believed was good for them which shows their exceptional courage to accept other cultures who fought to get their love back and it is also a sign that there is a space for acceptance in our society only if we want to. People of Afghanistan believed that "A Hazara girl could never marry a Pashtun boy" (Secret Sky p.50). Their social status and ethnicity were so dear to them that they could not imagine living without their conditions and never marrying their family member in the lower rank. Children were brought up in madrassas with such a mindset that they were not aware of the real teachings of Islam and later on, they applied those wrong taught ways. Rashid was seen full of hatred against his cousin and he was not aware of Islam's teachings until he met a real Mullah. He hated everyone and didn't care for others. His status was so important for him that he didn't even respect other ethnic groups as he uttered comments about the father of Fatima who is a farmer: "I am disgusted by the fact, he calls them aka. They are not his uncles; they don't deserve to be treated with such respect" (Secret Sky p.81).

The heartbreaking story of the novel *The Secret Sky*, not only discusses culture, patriarchy but also religion in general. The cause of the fight between

Fatima's and Samiullah's families was not because of only culture and class differences between them but because of religion too. Islam in *The Secret Sky* is portrayed as a religion that spreads hate because of characters like Rashid, who spread anger, hate, action, violence, and trauma and name it as Islam and teachings of Islam. Likewise, the novel also shows us pious people like Mullah Sarwar who is gentle and full of knowledge and portrays Islam as peace-loving religion. As Mullah Sarwar says "We don't live in a society where we can love freely". (Secret Sky p.96) One thing to be clear is that Islam in reality never encourages the believers to spread hate but culture does. Rashid is influenced by the wrong teachings of Islam by culture. Henceforth, this novel in particular tells us there is a huge difference between cultural Islam and actual Islam. The union of Fatima and Samiullah in marriage is prohibited by their culture because of their class difference but not at all forbidden in Islam. Since our childhood, we are forced to focus and practice on the teachings of Islam that culture tells and the teachings about religion that our culture and society are following for centuries. For instance, we neglect the actual teachings of religion. Rashid teaches young boys Holy Quran and Samiullah says to Rashid "I hope you're able to teach them the true word of God, not the way it's been manipulated" (Secret Sky p.83).

In the novel, some of the characters claim they are teaching true Islam but in reality, they are using Islam the way they like. Mullah Latif sexually tortured a boy. They are just acting like good Muslims but they are not. As theorist Mernissi says most Islamic Scholars manipulated the Islamic teachings and Hadiths according to their own needs, they especially manipulated the topics that promoted equality in males and females, to suppress the women and made Islam seem like a misogynist (Fox, 2015). In Islam, punishment of sin is equal for both genders but not here in the novel, as Fatima says: "We both know his (Samiullah) punishment will be less severe than mine" (Secret Sky p.57). Pinpointing the fact that they are using religion the way they want and like. Plus, she also says "If they catch us, they will use God and religion as their excuse to do anything they want. Including killing us" (Secret Sky p.34). Fatema Mernissi primarily concentrates on exploring the sexual ideology and the status of women within Islam. In her view, Islamic sexual ideology is rooted

in the belief that the innate sexual power of women, if left uncontrolled it could lead to negative outcomes. The same ideology is followed in the Afghan society. Due to which Fatima is forced to marry Karim (Zohra's Father) and to be his second wife as they see love as a huge sin. But Fatima denied as she says "Our Culture and tradition is not our religion. As a Muslim woman, you have the right not to be forced into marriage" (Secret Sky p.208).

Islamic women's oppression is a complex and debated topic, with diverse perspectives within the Muslim world and beyond. It's important to note that interpretations of Islamic teachings and practices vary widely, and not all Muslims or scholars agree on the nature or extent of oppression. Some argue that certain cultural practices have been wrongly attributed to Islam, leading to the oppression of women. Women in Islam are subject to diverse perspectives that reflect the multiplicity of interpretations and cultural contexts within the Muslim world. Feminist scholars like Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud advocate for reinterpretations of Islamic texts, challenging patriarchal readings and emphasizing women's rights within the faith.

Traditionalist viewpoints often emphasize the preservation of historical gender roles outlined in Islamic teachings. These perspectives typically uphold women's roles within the family and community according to established cultural norms. Progressive voices within Muslim-majority societies seek social and legal reforms to enhance women's rights, aiming to reconcile Islamic principles with modern understandings of equality and participation. Cultural influences significantly shape perspectives on women within Muslim communities, impacting practices related to dress, education, and work. Many Muslims advocate for women's rights based on principles of justice and equality inherent in Islam. Intersectional feminism in the context of Islam recognizes the diverse experiences of women, considering factors such as class, race, and ethnicity. Research on women's oppression in South Asia reveals a complex landscape marked by persistent challenges. Gender-based violence, including domestic abuse and sexual assault, remains prevalent despite legislative efforts. Discrimination and inequality persist in various spheres of life, impacting women's access to education,

employment, and healthcare. Although strides have been made in improving girls' access to education, cultural norms and other factors still hinder progress. Economic empowerment for women is a critical concern, with barriers to formal employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. The South Asian context is diverse, and research findings may vary across countries and regions within the subcontinent.

CONCLUSION

The present study portrays how women oppression is a common practice in the postcolonial Afghanistan. This is shown in detail by Abawi in her novel, *The Secret Sky*, that it is very difficult for a woman to achieve freedom in the conservative society of Afghanistan, where women are opposed with old patriarchal traditions. Abawi portrays harsh realities throughout the book, how women are oppressed and suffer disproportionately in the name of religion, culture, and ethnicity. It also shows that Islam does not urge its adherents to promote hatred; rather, culture does; Rashid fell victim to the culture's incorrect Islamic doctrines. Fatema was not allowed to marry Sami because of their ties to different ethnic groups. Their union was prohibited in their culture, not in the religion. This is demonstrated particularly in this novel that there is a significant distinction between cultural Islam and real Islam. Some women like Fatema's mother (Mossuma) also believe in these cultural practices and try to enforce them on their daughters. Fatema had to face many difficulties in order to marry Sami. True freedom appears to be an illusion, especially for women because of people like Mullah Latif (disguised Taliban), who was hell-bent on capturing and executing Fatima and Sami all in the name of honor. Even though by the end of the novel Fatema has achieved her freedom and married Sami, still it is not certain that her freedom will remain forever. She will have to face many more difficulties in order to survive in the man dominant Afghan society, where woman oppression is a traditional practice.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this research paper titled "Unveiling Women's Struggles: A Post-Colonial Feminist Analysis of Novel 'The Secret Sky' by Atia Abawi" is our original work. The material borrowed from similar titles other sources and incorporated in

this paper has been duly acknowledged. I understand that I myself could be held responsible and accountable for plagiarism, if any, detected later on.

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