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Women Against Fundamentalism: The Journey of Zoya in the Struggle for Afghan Women's Freedom

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Abstract: *Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom* is a compelling biography that chronicles the life of Zoya, a brave young Afghan woman navigating the socio-political turbulence and gendered oppression under fundamentalist rule (Taliban-ruled Afghanistan). Born into a society where women's voices are systematically silenced and their rights dictated by patriarchal norms, Zoya's journey is one of resistance, loss, and firm resilience. She endures personal tragedies, including the deaths of family and friends, while confronting a regime that enforces violence and denies women autonomy. Her pursuit of education and liberation becomes both a personal mission and a collective crusade, as she works to enlighten others, echoing the philosophical awakening described in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. Anchored in postcolonial feminist theory, this narrative critiques the local and global structures perpetuating women's subjugation, emphasizing the intersection of culture, politics, and gender. Through grassroots activism and community empowerment, Zoya transforms her pain into purpose, becoming a symbol of hope and resilience for Afghan women and oppressed women globally. Her transformation from victim to activist accentuates the power of solidarity and the agency of women in resisting systemic injustice. Her story surpasses geographic boundaries, symbolizing the universal struggle for female dignity, autonomy, and equality. Finally, Zoya is not merely a survivor but a beacon of defiance and hope, an embodiment of resistance that inspires women to confront oppression not for visibility but for genuine emancipation in the ongoing fight against fundamentalism.

Key words: Women, Oppression, Resistance, Postcolonial Feminism, Freedom, Solidarity

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INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in literature has long been central to feminist literary criticism, exposing how patriarchal ideologies and cultural hegemonies shape and limit the roles, voices, and autonomy of women. This study interrogates the intersection of gender, culture, and fundamentalism in *Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom*, using the lens of postcolonial feminist theory to reveal how Afghan women navigate and resist patriarchal systems compounded by colonial histories, religious extremism, and internalized misogyny. Postcolonial feminism critiques the global power dynamics that situate Third World women within narratives of victimhood, emphasizing instead their independence, resistance, and lived experiences in localized contexts. In this vein, *Zoya's Story* serves not merely as a biography but as a counter-narrative that dismantles stereotypical portrayals of Afghan women as passive or voiceless.

Despite global advancements in gender equality, many literary representations continue to reinforce reductive stereotypes of femininity. Women are often confined to roles such as the nurturing mother, the temptress, the object of male desire, or the sacrificial figure, tropes that obscure the multiplicity of female subjectivities. This literary pattern mirrors real-world gender dynamics, especially in Afghanistan, where women face both institutional and interpersonal oppression. This research aims to bridge the gap in feminist discourse by centring Afghan women's lived experiences and interrogating how both men and women contribute, consciously or unconsciously, to systems of subjugation. The analysis draws from close readings of the primary text and contextualizes its themes with contemporary realities in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

One of the most pervasive forms of oppression in *Zoya's Story* is the silencing and social control of women. Women's lives are dictated first by their fathers and brothers, and later by their husbands, reinforcing a life-long cycle of patriarchal domination. As Zoya observes in the refugee camp, "She is my daughter, and I will decide whether her future should be dark or bright" (190). Despite being in Pakistan, away from the immediate grasp of Taliban rule, the patriarchal mindset persists. A young girl is married off to a man thirty years her senior, and both she and her mother remain silent. Even post-marriage, the girl believes her education depends on her husband's permission, despite Ameena's insistence that it should be her own decision. The case of Farah, another character, illustrates internalized oppression. Though educated alongside Zoya and exposed to progressive values, Farah allows her father to choose a husband for her, a stranger from a madrasa where boys are trained to suppress empathy and dominate women. These narratives echo what postcolonial feminists argue: that colonization and religious extremism do not merely victimize women from without, but also foster internal complicity, where patriarchal values are accepted and perpetuated within women themselves.

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The article also urges a re-examination of individual and collective behaviours that sustain inequality, echoing the postcolonial feminist call for intersectional awareness. Solidarity is not merely a slogan, it is a strategy for survival and resistance. This need for collective introspection is also emphasized by Ismail (2019) in *"*Giving Voice: For Muslim Women, Islam is Empowerment, Not Oppression". She cites alarming statistics from the World Health Organization and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine that lay bare the global scale of gender-based violence and inequality, "Every 15 seconds a girl or woman somewhere in the world is assaulted... 35.6% of all women worldwide will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime..." Ismail argues for a reimagining of womanhood rooted in dignity, intellect, and faith, not in subservience or silence. This sentiment is mirrored in Zoya's transformation from victim to activist, as she reclaims her voice and inspires others to do the same.

Desouki's (2017), *"*How Women are Contributing to their Oppression" takes this further by critiquing cultural norms that compel women to place themselves second, "Some women were taught that there is no limit for their compromises, and I'm torn between blaming them and feeling sorry for them..."(para. 4). From the normalized expectations in courtship and marriage to harmful beauty standards that prioritize male pleasure over women's health, Dusouki exposes the subtle ways women are conditioned to relinquish power. These behaviours, she warns, reinforce the notion that women are inferior and in need of male supervision.

The situation in Afghanistan post-2021 highlights how these gender norms are reinforced at a systemic level. Vanlangevelde (2024), in *"*To Be Neither Seen Nor Heard: The Oppression of Women in Taliban Controlled Afghanistan," details how the Taliban's return to power reversed any semblance of gender progress, "... students could only be taught by professors of the same sex or old men... women were gradually banned from education past sixth grade..." (para. 2)These draconian measures, masked as religious reforms, are calculated to erase women from public life. Postcolonial feminism interprets this not just as religious fundamentalism but as a reassertion of patriarchal control over female bodies and minds, an attempt to institutionalize silence.

Through *Zoya's Story*, this study interrogates the narratives of both domination and defiance, examining how women in Afghanistan are doubly oppressed by the structures imposed upon them and by the complicity that sometimes arises from within. But it also affirms the transformative potential of solidarity, resistance, and self-awareness. Women are not merely victims, they are agents of change, capable of rewriting the very narratives that seek to erase them.

In examining the systemic erasure and silencing of women in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, postcolonial feminist theory provides a crucial lens for interrogating the

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entanglements of gender, religion, nationalism, and colonial legacies. The brutal policies enforced by the Taliban reflect not only an institutionalized misogyny but also a deeply patriarchal attempt to control women's bodies, mobility, and voices in the name of moral and cultural preservation. These restrictions are steeped in a fundamentalist ideology that sees women not as individuals with rights and autonomy but as symbols of honour, temptation, and sin, a logic that postcolonial feminists identify as both a tool of political control and a remnant of colonial gender hierarchies, now internalized and violently enforced.

In March 2022, Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada overruled his ministers and declared that female schools would remain closed indefinitely. By November, laws escalated further: women were banned from parks, gyms, and bathhouses. That same month, public punishments, floggings and executions were reintroduced, and by December, a formal ban on women's education was codified. Female students arriving at their universities were met at gunpoint and turned away, while their male peers were escorted into classrooms. Female professors and professionals were dismissed en masse, with women effectively banned from most forms of employment by February 2023.

These policies, far from being protective or culturally rooted, function as disciplinary mechanisms designed to erase women from the public sphere. In May 2022, women were mandated to cover themselves fully, including their faces, under the pretext of modesty. An unspoken rule emerged: women should simply stay at home. Denied access to public spaces, they are also forbidden to leave the house without a male chaperone. The message is chillingly clear: a woman's existence is permissible only through and for men.

The psychological and emotional toll of these restrictions is staggering. As reported by Afghan refugee and American journalist Bushra Seddique (2022), a 14-year-old girl broke down in tears as she watched her younger brother board a school bus she was no longer allowed to ride. She asked, "Is the Taliban at war with women?" Her only dream is to find a secret school, even if it results in being beaten. In defiance, a 22-year-old woman now teaches 80 girls in secret in her basement, wishing she could take on more. These acts of rebellion echo postcolonial feminism's assertion that resistance often takes place in the margins, away from the gaze of the state, where women create alternative spaces of empowerment.

The physical consequences of such oppression are equally dire. In a story reported by CNN, a girl named "Arzo" fled to Pakistan with her siblings for medical attention after ingesting arsenic in a suicide attempt brought on by depression from the Taliban's policies. Dr. Shikib Ahmadi (a pseudonym) told CNN that female patient numbers increased by 40 to 50% since the Taliban's return to power, and that roughly 10% commit suicide, often by ingesting household chemicals. Notably, this interview occurred before the Taliban banned

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male doctors from treating women in January 2023. Women are now barred from becoming doctors and are also forbidden from seeing male physicians, essentially eliminating access to medical care for half the population.

Such state-sanctioned violence is embedded in the Taliban's "vice and virtue" laws. In August 2024, new restrictions banned women from speaking or singing publicly, even from within their homes. Women were forbidden from making eye contact with men who were not their husbands or blood relatives. According to official doctrine, a woman's voice and body are said to incite sin in men. To this, one must ask: Did the covering stop men from sinning? Why must women suffer for men's inability to control themselves? As a postcolonial feminist argument would posit, these regulations do not "protect" women; they discipline them, turning their very existence into a moral threat that must be controlled, hidden, or eliminated.

The Taliban's approach mirrors Foucault's (1977) concept of surveillance and discipline, but it is made gender-specific through religious and cultural justifications. When a government bans something, the act itself often becomes more desirable. As one female commentator reflects, "When you stop a child from doing something, it's that thing the child ends up wanting to do." Denying boys the sight or interaction with women only fetishizes and mystifies femininity. In contrast, when a boy sees a woman as she is, over time, he gets used to her looks and is not moved by anything.

Despite these extreme limitations, resistance persists. Afghan women protested publicly when the laws were first introduced, enduring violent crackdowns and brutal consequences. Although public protest is now nearly impossible, resistance continues covertly. Secret schools have become sanctuaries of learning. Afghan women inside and outside the country use social media to protest. One viral video features women singing in defiance of laws that silence them. As Seddique writes, "In secret, behind closed doors, Afghanistan is still breathing. And it always will" (cited in Vanlangevelde).

Afary (1997), citing Edward Said, accentuates that both Western liberalism and Islamist fundamentalism have historically constructed women's roles in reductive, patriarchal terms. According to Said, the West positions itself as rational and moderate by othering Eastern cultures as irrational and extreme. Yet both systems have "called for a return to more traditional norms for women," including submission, the veil, and domesticity. This binary places Afghan women in a bind, objectified in the West as helpless victims and constrained in the East as moral barometers.

Women in Afghanistan endure not just restrictions on movement or education, but also deep symbolic erasure. They are banned from wearing shoes that make a sound. They are not permitted to smell good. One woman's act of rebellion was simply wearing "my little perfume, my small gesture of rebellion (2)." In the Taliban's worldview, women's

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bodies and even their scents are deemed sources of corruption. “You will die by seeing their wild faces (2),” one woman was told, because men were trained to be fearful of and hostile toward women.

Teenagers were even assigned to display severed limbs of executed individuals, an intentional tactic that shatters innocence and breeds fear. Women, as noted on page 5 of the primary text, were reduced to sex instruments. On page 16, Zoya recalls how many were disappointed at her birth simply because she was a girl. “Many were disappointed when she was born a girl (16).” When a boy is born, there is jubilation, visits, and celebration. For girls, silence and sorrow.

This grim hierarchy is reinforced in other ways. Marzieh Hamidi, an Afghan Taekwondo champion, received over 5,000 death and rape threats after she criticized the Taliban’s male cricket team, saying it didn’t represent her. The threats included, “I know your location. Where do you want to be raped?” As you reflect: Of all the choices a woman should be free to make, education, speech, dress, you instead give her the choice of where to be raped. How about letting her choose to live, to speak, to learn?(Ataman, and Hou 2024, para.1)

As Yeung, Coren and Temori (2023) report, “The women in Afghanistan are being slowly erased from society, from life, from everything, their opinions, their voices, what they think, where they are.” Harvey (2024) adds, “Reports from Afghanistan suggest the Taliban’s repressive control over women has led to a sharp rise in suicide attempts.” One harrowing example comes from a 16-year-old girl who drank battery acid because she was “overwhelmed by hopelessness” after being banned from school.

Zoya's experience can be powerfully related to Plato's Allegory of the Cave. In Plato's allegory, prisoners are chained inside a dark cave, seeing only shadows of reality projected on the wall. When one prisoner escapes and sees the outside world, the truth, he experiences enlightenment but also faces resistance and disbelief when he returns to free the others.

Similarly, Zoya’s life under Taliban rule represents the cave, where women are metaphorically chained by patriarchy, fundamentalist ideologies, and cultural oppression. The burqa functions as both a physical and symbolic barrier, obscuring truth, identity, and freedom. Zoya’s eventual escape from Afghanistan and her work with RAWA parallel the prisoner's emergence from the cave. She gains a clearer understanding of the world, women's rights, and justice. Upon trying to advocate for Afghan women, she meets resistance and fear, mirroring Plato’s freed prisoner who tries to enlighten others still trapped in darkness. Okoronkwo and Udumukwu (2024) in their analysis of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”, "describes humans who have been bound on their neck and legs to the wall in a cave with just a reflection of light shooting into the cave displaying their

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images. Plato argues that if one of them is taken out of the cave, at first the individual's sight would be blurry until the eyes gets accustomed to the light and the individual begins to recognize those shadows as they exist in life. If taken back into the cave, the individual's duty would be to educate or enlighten others, moving them from ignorance to knowledge." (212). Zoya as a prisoner who has seen light serves as an agent to liberate others still in darkness into light and move them from ignorance to knowledge.

In essence, Zoya's journey is one from ignorance and imposed silence to awareness and activism, echoing Plato's philosophical call for awakening and the pursuit of truth despite resistance.

This study foregrounds these voices and stories as a form of resistance literature. Through postcolonial feminist theory, it seeks to reveal the power structures, cultural, religious, and political, that underpin Afghan women's oppression, while also highlighting their acts of defiance and survival. In a society intent on silencing women, every whisper becomes a revolution.

All Shades of Wrong Against Women

This paper explores the multidimensional oppression of Afghan women as portrayed in *Zoya's Story*, examining how patriarchal ideologies, religious extremism, and systemic violence intertwine to suppress female independence. This analysis interrogates whether Afghan women, as subaltern subjects, are ever truly given voice in a society that silences them at every turn by drawing upon Spivak's (1988) critical question in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern as those marginalized by structures of power is crucial here. Afghan women under the Taliban were stripped of visibility and voice. Child sexual abuse, one of the gravest forms of sexual violence, becomes a recurring theme in the narrative. Matlin (2000) observes that such trauma "can affect the child immediately or over the long term, such as anger, fear, depression, etc" (436). In *Zoya's Story*, the Taliban perpetuated these abuses with devastating consequences. Rather than submit, many girls chose death. Naheed, for example, chose to throw herself from a fifth-floor balcony rather than be raped by a Mujahideen commander. "Teenage girls were raped in the street" (142), while others begged for death: "Let me die, let me die" (146). The Taliban's actions reveal deep-seated hypocrisy. "Theirs was a strange creed. They could rape women and force them to marry, but they stoned to death women suspected of adultery" (143-144). This contradiction echoes the Biblical story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), where the man involved goes unpunished. Similarly, in Afghanistan, only women bear the consequences of sexual transgressions. Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak is materialized in the enforced silence and systemic punishment of these women.

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Misogyny, the extreme hatred of women, governs life under the Taliban. Women are commodified, used for sexual gratification, and denied autonomy. Marriage becomes transactional, devoid of affection. This mirrors Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart*, where women only exist in relation to men. Afghan women could not go outside without a Mahram (male guardian), who also spoke on their behalf. They were invisible and voiceless.

Zoya's narrative classifies women in line with Udumukwu's (2007) framework of "the good woman" (societally constructed to conform) and "the real woman" (who resists oppression). Her grandmother, though initially a conformist, is reimagined as a strong figure attempting to chart a different path for Zoya. She tells a woman, "I'm not saying that she should...a housewife,...she should do the work that boys do. There's no future in cooking and cleaning." This push against domestic confinement symbolizes a generational shift and the desire to resist patriarchy.

However, societal norms remain entrenched. Zoya is called a prostitute for showing her hands (146). Arranged marriages reinforce female subjugation. Zoya recounts, "Your grandfather was heartless...I am your servant, but even servants are humans...and he went to fetch his boots...and beat me with them" (53-54). This normalized domestic violence reflects the internalization of misogyny: "It is their right, and we have to accept that" (55). Even food and social interaction are gendered. Women only eat after men are satisfied. Under Russian rule, women had some freedoms, education, personal grooming, mobility, but with the Mujahideen's rise, life worsened. "...a new, worse Devil had come..." (62-63). Promises of better governance mirrored Yeats' (2023), "The Second Coming": the anticipated saviour becomes the harbinger of chaos.

Fundamentalism burned books, enforced the burqa, and banned bright colours. "I saw more burqa than before...they no longer wore makeup or skirts...and they wore only sad colours" (64). Women disappeared from public life. Schools were closed to girls. Boys were indoctrinated in madrasas. "A mother Grandmother knew...was now complaining...he had changed into a stranger almost overnight" (65). This loss of affection and empathy in boys reflects the reproduction of patriarchy through education.

Ironically, "Taliban," meaning student or seeker, symbolizes the regression of knowledge. As Zoya laments, "[They] would send us back to the Stone Age" (65). Their brutality surpassed comprehension: "Animals are innocent" (68). They even controlled the colour of burqas, forcing Hindu women to wear yellow, "the colour of sickness and hate" (137). Zoya recounts how indistinguishable burqas confused: a man mistook her for his wife due to similar coverings. Women became faceless entities. They were banned from balconies, work, public spaces, and from laughing. High heels and makeup were outlawed. Their homes were shrouded in black curtains. Radio and television were forbidden.

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Despite all this, women resisted. Medical care was withheld, and only female doctors, scarce due to educational bans, could treat them. "Women suffered more because the Taliban would not allow them to be treated by male doctors...it was better for her to die than be treated by a man" (144-145). This evokes Angelou's (2009), *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, where a white doctor refuses to treat a Black girl, preferring to put "his hands into a dog's mouth" instead. In both cases, ideological prejudice dehumanizes women.

Zoya's Story dramatizes the failure of patriarchal, religious, and colonial power structures to hear or acknowledge the subaltern woman. Afghan women endure compounded layers of violence, yet they foster resistance through intergenerational bonds and redefinitions of selfhood. Spivak's question persists: Can the subaltern speak? In the face of systemic silencing, they resist, and in resistance, they speak.

Resistance Against Oppression

In *Zoya's Story*, resistance becomes both a political and symbolic act, foregrounded through the actions of women who refuse to be silenced. Drawing on postcolonial and feminist theoretical lenses, Zoya crafts her female characters not as passive victims but as agents of defiance and resilience within deeply patriarchal and colonialist structures. Zoya's mother emerges as a powerful figure of feminist resistance. Her steadfast commitment to the cause of liberation, risking her life repeatedly, demonstrates what Gayatri Spivak terms "the ethical responsibility of the subaltern to speak." While Afghan women are largely denied voice and space, Zoya's mother finds expression and purpose through her membership in RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan), an underground feminist movement resisting all forms of totalitarian oppression, whether under Russian or Mujahideen rule. Her activism reveals how even within systems of silencing, women find alternative channels for agency.

Grandmother, though confined by traditional norms during her youth, refuses to endorse the same cycle of oppression for her granddaughter. Her statement, "You must never tolerate what I went through" (55), is a radical break from patriarchal inheritance, signaling a feminist awakening. She may be a product of the "good woman" archetype, what Udumukwu (2007) terms the "societally constructed woman", but she repositions herself as a teacher of resistance, urging Zoya to break generational chains.

The educational space in Pakistan serves as a counter-colonial and counter-patriarchal ground. When the children are collectively caned and later asked to speak about their feelings, it becomes clear that this is a pedagogical strategy of teaching resistance. The process of encouraging children to "speak their mind" can be seen as the fostering of subaltern consciousness, a rehearsal for voicing dissent in a society where even speaking is

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dangerous for women. This aligns with Freire's (1983) assertion that true education must begin with naming one's reality.

Resistance takes many forms. While some Afghan women practice subtle defiance, listening to banned radio broadcasts at the lowest volume or applying makeup beneath their burqas, others engage in overt confrontation. One striking example is the woman who, after being whipped by a young Taliban member for buying something from a storekeeper, courageously confronts him. She removes her burqa, throws it to the ground, and challenges the Taliban youth by stating she is old enough to be his mother. The Taliban officer, stunned and powerless, retreats. This moment powerfully enacts Butler's (1988) theory of performativity: the woman disrupts the expected performance of submissive femininity, thereby unsettling the gendered power dynamic.

Zoya highlights how Taliban officials often failed to uphold their own laws. In a deeply ironic twist, one family is beaten for watching television, while Taliban members themselves consume the same forbidden media. This hypocrisy reveals the patriarchal double standard: control over women is less about morality and more about power. Women resist this power even in whispers, swearing silently under their breath or holding onto forbidden pleasures like scented oils and bright clothes. Zoya herself becomes the living embodiment of resistance. Her symbolic unveiling on Oprah's stage, "Slowly and very slowly, Oprah lifted the burqa off me and let it fall to the stage" represents a public act of liberation. In a society where women are banned from speaking or revealing their identities, this moment marks a rupture in silence and invisibility. The burqa falling to the stage is a metaphorical shedding of oppression, echoing hooks'(1984) call for women to "speak as subjects, not objects." Supporting this, Ihueze, (2019), writes that the authors used in her paper, "undermine patriarchy's belief in female weakness through its portrayal of women's strength by giving them a voice, an identity and an emotional entity … They have decided to break the silence by narrating in their own words their experiences …(2)

Zoya's Story illustrates that resistance, whether whispered or shouted, personal or political, always pushes toward liberation. As the feminist maxim goes, "The personal is political," every act of disobedience, no matter how small, is a step toward collective emancipation. As Zoya's narrative shows, no matter how long it takes, resistance always carries within it the seed of freedom.

Symbolism of the Burqa

In *Zoya's Story*, the burqa stands as a powerful symbol of erasure, oppression, and gendered violence. Through the lens of feminist and postcolonial theory, the garment is not merely a piece of clothing, it is an ideological instrument used to silence and erase Afghan women from public and private life. The Taliban's imposition of the burqa is a deliberate act of cultural and political erasure. It removes women from visibility and thus from

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historical and social memory. As the narrative warns that if care is not taken, Afghan women will be wiped out of the world, and there will be nothing that will be heard or said about them. The burqa becomes a metaphorical veil over both identity and existence, reflecting what Spivak describes as the "epistemic violence" inflicted on colonized or subaltern women. Their stories, their struggles, and even their faces are systematically erased.

Zoya draws a chilling parallel between the repression of Afghan women and the state's control over information, as seen in the arrest of an American woman for flying a drone. If the American woman had sought permission, she would have been denied. This act of silencing extends beyond Afghan citizens to anyone attempting to uncover the truth, further demonstrating how patriarchal regimes maintain power by obscuring visibility and truth. The burqa, then, is not just a garment; it is a state-sanctioned strategy of invisibility.

Describing the physical and psychological toll of the burqa, Zoya writes, "The burqa not only killed women mentally, it could also help kill them physically" (146). Mentally, it imposes a barrier between a woman and the world, restricting her movement, expression, and identity. From a feminist psychological standpoint, this enforced anonymity can lead to deep depression and a fractured sense of self. Physically, the garment is dangerous, limiting vision, impeding movement, and endangering health. Zoya recounts nearly tripping several times because she was unaccustomed to wearing it, and more tragically, "A woman who suffered from an asthma attack removed her burqa to get some air and the Taliban gave her 40 lashes" (146). This illustrates how the burqa, as a tool of state oppression, prioritizes control over human life and wellbeing.

The burqa is also a symbol of confinement, a metaphorical prison. Zoya writes, "When I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw something that looked like the mark of a cage in the middle of my forehead" (160). The image powerfully evokes Foucault's notion of the disciplinary body: the body becomes inscribed with symbols of oppression. The "mark of a cage" is a visual trace of internalized subjugation, where the garment enforces both physical and psychological captivity. Metaphors of concealment and beauty also appear in Zoya's description, "A woman in a burqa is like a pearl in an oyster" (209). While pearls are precious, their beauty is rendered invisible unless the shell is opened. This seemingly poetic image critiques how the burqa hides physical beauty and the inner strength, intellect, and humanity of Afghan women. It is, therefore, a symbolic thief; it steals the beauty of a woman.

Perhaps the most haunting analogy comes when Zoya declares, "A woman in a burqa is more like a live body locked in a coffin" (209). This stark image foregrounds the ultimate dehumanization inflicted by patriarchal and theocratic rule. To be buried alive is to be conscious and aware, yet powerless, silenced, and deprived of air, light, and movement.

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From a postcolonial feminist view, the burqa here does not simply represent modesty or tradition, but a form of gendered death-in-life imposed by political violence.

In essence, the burqa, as portrayed in *Zoya's Story*, encapsulates the totality of oppression inflicted upon Afghan women. It is a garment that silences, blinds, isolates, and ultimately attempts to erase women. It functions as a weapon of theocratic patriarchy, marking bodies as shameful, regulating their existence, and enclosing them in ideological coffins. As a symbol, it speaks to every form of domination a woman can suffer in systems designed to suppress her body, voice, and soul.

Conclusion

This study has explored the multiple layers of oppression experienced by Afghan women as depicted in *Zoya's Story*, interrogating how gendered violence, cultural erasure, and systemic silencing function as tools of patriarchal and political domination. Through the application of feminist theory, particularly the work of Gayatri Spivak and her seminal question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The analysis foregrounds the ways in which Afghan women, though often forcibly muted, engage in both overt and subtle forms of resistance. Their resistance, whether through participation in activist networks like RAWA, defiant speech, or symbolic acts such as unveiling, illustrates the power and agency that persist even in the harshest conditions.

This research contributes to feminist and postcolonial discourses by highlighting how literature can serve as a site of both resistance and reclamation. *Zoya's Story* does not merely document suffering; it gives voice to women who have been systematically erased from public discourse. It exposes the violence of fundamentalist ideologies and interrogates how misogyny, religious extremism, and cultural norms intersect to enforce gendered subjugation. Yet, it also portrays female characters who defy victimhood by constructing alternative narratives of identity, resilience, and solidarity. By addressing the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Afghan women in both literature and global consciousness, this study highlights the necessity of centering women's lived realities and testimonies. It affirms that feminist theory must continue to challenge essentialist portrayals and embrace intersectionality, recognizing how class, religion, ethnicity, and politics shape women's experiences of oppression and resistance. The symbolic significance of the burqa, for instance, exemplifies how material culture can be wielded as both a weapon of suppression and a site of feminist critique.

Finally, this work calls for a more inclusive literary and scholarly landscape, one that validates women's voices across cultures and champions the complexity of their struggles. In doing so, it not only contributes to academic knowledge but also supports the larger movement for gender justice and social transformation in Afghanistan and beyond.

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