

# Breaking Traditions: An Analysis of Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's *The Dress Maker of Khair Khana*

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## ABSTRACT

Feminism as the theory and practice performed a major role in the representation of women. Feminism advocated for the rights of women across the globe. The oppression of women by men and fellow women, their devalued status gave rise to the roots of feminism. Feminism as theoretical approach attempts to represent the comprehensive description of subjugation and subordination of women, the causes of subordination and the strategies to overcome this subjugation towards liberation. Cultures have usually robbed the subalterns, especially women, brutally and stripped off their rights. The best way to destroy this malice from the society is by giving voice to marginalized community in discourse and in legislative issues. The representation of Subaltern women remains an important element in South Asian literature. Even today, in many countries women face difficulties to exercise their rights and freedom as they are considered lower in rank than men. Women's subjugation and oppression in Afghanistan, especially under the Taliban influence, forms the theme of Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana*. This particular study analyses the causes for female subalternity in Afghanistan under Taliban regime and their subsequent fight towards liberation.

**Key Words: Subaltern, Subjugation, Marginalization, Third World Women.**

In 20<sup>th</sup> century, a majority of Afghan women, who were earlier discriminated in society due to lack of knowledge is getting to know the outside world. Moreover, women in Afghanistan are also not allowed to vote and contribute to the development of their country. Huma Ahmed in her book *A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan*, states that women are pawned into marriages and not allowed to divorce, total obedience to the husband and his family is expected, and women are prevented from getting any education. Queen Soraya is an important figure in the

Afghan history who argued that the nation not only needs men, but also women to serve it. Women should also take part as women did in the early years of Islam. The valuable services rendered by women are recounted throughout history. In 1920, women's emancipation began to spread throughout the world, and Afghanistan took part. School for women was built in Kabul, women were allowed to vote and they could express their opinion. Not only that, Queen Soraya also built women's hospital. The important thing was women could finally choose their own husbands, because previously, the men who become their husbands were chosen by their brothers and father.

Women in Afghanistan cannot do all the activities they loved to do; it means that all of their activities are controlled by men. For women in the country, control over their lives and gender roles is determined by patriarchal kinship arrangements. In 21th century no women at all attended to school except men. In 2001, no girl child attended formal schools and there were only one million boys enrolled. Women were arduous in getting good education even the government changed from period to period. Society still believed that women needed to stay at home rather than go to study at school. Female education was banned. As a result, majority of Afghan females were deprived of education and went in to the world of ignorance.

Women across the world understands that education is the only weapon that can be used against the patriarchal norms that works against women in the society.

*The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon shows how courage and perseverance wins out. This novel teaches about women of Afghanistan from a spirit of entrepreneurship and nation building. Kamila Sidiqi's desire to help her family and her community is profoundly inspiring, how she provided a sanctuary of productivity, creativity and hope amidst the oppressive practices of the ruling Taliban regime. In 1996, Kamila was a newly trained teacher, ready to make her mark on the world. But then the Taliban rolled into Kabul, laying down an oppressive and regressive regime that condemned women to virtual imprisonment in their homes, while forcing many of the men to flee (including Kamila's father and later her older brothers) for fear of imprisonment or being forced to fight for the Taliban military. Stuck at home with little to do (other than reading and rereading volumes of poetry and novels) and becoming increasingly impoverished, Kamila searched about for some way to alleviate the combined stresses of boredom, fear and poverty.

Dressmaking was the solution, and through sheer determination and bravery, Kamila made her business grow. She was driven not only by the need to provide for herself and for her family but by her desire to restore to the women of Kabul, their belief in themselves as self-determining and self-sufficient. Before the Taliban entered their lives, many of these women had been trained as doctors or teachers, and they had been important contributors to their families, both economically and socially. Kamila gave these women the chance to once again support their families and form new networks of support and community. After the Taliban were driven out by American attacks following 9/11, those networks of support and community held, laying the groundwork for new business and allowing new opportunities to flourish not only for the women of Kabul but also for the city's returning men.

Kamila visits her elder sister alone and seeks her help to learn sewing so that can support her family. "That's it, Kamila thought. I'll become a seamstress." (52) Kamila's travel to Lycee Myriam with the dresses was an adventure. She took her little brother Rahim as her *mahram*. It was her faith in her action that kept her moving; "Her work would help her family, which was a sacred obligation of Islam. And she firmly believed her faith would protect her and keep her safe." (66)

Kamila was in need of a false identity in order to keep herself and her family safe. She named herself Roya.

Kamila recounted the story, explaining how her false identity would protect both her and Mehrab the shop keeper. He wouldn't be able to identify her should the Taliban ever question him for speaking to or, much worse, doing business with a woman at the bazaar. No one at Lycee Myriam would ever see Kamila's face under the chadri, and none of their neighbours had ever heard Roya. She was safe, at least for now, and she urged her sisters to remember to call her Roya if they ever accompanied her to the market. (79)

Razia, a neighbor also helped them in dress making. The job undertaken by Kamila and her sisters are risky ones. They only could hire trustful neighbours otherwise they could get caught by the Taliban. Kamila, after selling the clothes to Mehrab's shop, is in search of new customers to expand her business. Later, many women began to approach Kamila for jobs and her business expanded. Kamila gets a new idea to incorporate her teaching skills too, to run a school for girls.

As she approached Malika's room to wish her a good night, an idea occurred to Kamila. We are seamstresses, yes, but we are also teachers. Isn't there a way we could use both talents to help even more women? And then those women could help us grow our tailoring business so that there would be more work for everyone. (114)

Kamila believed in empowering women around her, so that they too could help to run their family. She states; "we'll teach them valuable skills that they can use here or with other women, and while we're teaching them, we'll be building an in-house team that can help us fill large orders quickly-as many as we can secure." (114)

Kamila, being smarter, was careful enough to set certain rules and regulations in her house so that the Taliban do not possess a threat to them. First, the girls must wear a chadri and stick to simple attire –baggy pants, long-sleeved tops, and no white shoes as it is the colour of the Taliban flag and it is forbidden to do so. Nail polish is also not allowed. Second, no talking or laughing in the streets or the way to Kamila's house because if the Taliban encountered the place that would be very dangerous. Third, never, ever talk to men other than one's *mahram* on the way. Anyone caught speaking to a man of any age will be asked to leave at once. Kamila's top most priority is their safety. That is why she strictly enforces the rules. It is clearly stated that, "we have these rules to protect Kamila and her sisters as well as yourself and all the girls in this house and we don't make any exceptions." (128) Kamila's success story goes on like this;

Three weeks on, the school was growing fast, and so was the number of orders that were coming in from Lycee Myriam they had started in the spring of 1997 with four girls and were now at thirty-four and climbing; in the past few days three more young women had come to the house inquiring about the workshop. (129)

Despite all the efforts made by Kamila and her sisters they are never safe from Taliban and their weird rules. One day Rahim was held by Taliban at the streets. Kamila though that next time it could get much worse. The sisters realized;

Despite all the gains they had made-the orders from the market, the school, the flourishing little business they had built-their lives were as precarious as everyone else's in Kabul.... No, it wasn't fine at all. But the only thing Kamila could do now was to keep going. And to keep working. For all of their sakes. (140)



The women of Third World do have some problems and needs, but they do need a choice of freedom and decision. Mohanty puts forward the example of veil. To West, veil of a women is a prison in which she is captured. But the Eastern woman perceives veil as a part of their identity and a symbol of solidarity. So, the Western feminism must avoid generalizations and Western-centric views about the Third World women.

Al Hibri writes in *Women and Revolution* (1981);

God was declared male, and man was declared to be created in His likeness. Eve became the symbol of temptation and sin. The woman was consequently judged as less likely candidate for salvation and an everlasting life in heaven than man. (176)

Keeping this ideology under consideration, *The Dress Maker of Khair Khana* by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, could be used as a tool to explore the issues of humiliation tyranny and subjugation against women in many cultures for centuries especially in Afghanistan.

Feminism gains more importance with the philosophies of Simone de Beauvoir. In her book *The Second Sex* (1988), she gave rise to the issue of feminism at the level of gender biasness. She writes, “There is no way out for her than to lose herself, body and soul in him who is represented to her as the absolute, as the essential.” (643) Woman enjoyed no freedom and hence has a secondary status. The term subaltern that was discussed by Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* can be employed to refer to these women characters who were assigned the ‘sub’ and ‘secondary’ status in the society. For Spivak, the oppressed subalterns cannot speak even if they tried because of the opposite voices that devoiced and silenced them by ensuring that subalterns cannot speak. But, despite of their oppression subalterns can speak. They always raised their voices against their oppressor in one way or the other. Literature too plays an important role in becoming the voice of the voiceless. The oppressed voices, their cries, sacrifices and tragedies dragged the attention of others towards subalterns. In Afghanistan women are considered as ‘second sex’. They are sufferers and slaves of their conservative, tribal cultural norms and values.

It is here we realize the role of feminist literature which it plays in sharing the sufferings of women and their quests to self-actualization S.P.Swain in her work, *The Feminine Voice in Indian Fiction* (2005), urges women to, “throw off the shackles of tradition, to educate and carve out an identity for themselves.”(16)

Female figures need to break themselves free from the confines of phallogocentric patriarchy to realize a female identity. This representation of women in literature portrays their suffering, their struggles against man-made societal norms and their struggles for survival in male oriented society. Women's resistance against patriarchy shows that they are not passive members of society as represented by western feminists. This study also sheds light on the contribution of women in socio-political and economic aspects of society. Women as the 'other' did raise their voices and still they do for their freedom and rights. But it is always the society who never tried to interpret those voices. All the feminist writers focused on one side of the story, victimization of women, they never portrayed the positive aspect of that victimization, that how those women resist against patriarchy and try to make their own identity. This outlook changes the reputation of eastern women as active and revolutionary members of society.

Condition of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban was so bad that one could not imagine. Women were dehumanized and stripped off from their rights. It was not allowed for a woman to walk freely in streets without any male guardian. in her story. This story provides an intimate look on how cultures and society treat a woman and how religions are being misused for the sake of personal benefits. Gender subalternity, humiliation, powerlessness and tyranny are the issues portrayed in the story.

*The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* portrays the struggle of a woman in Taliban controlled Kabul to protect her family and earning a living for the family. Kamila Sidhiqi decides to become a seamstress to support her family in tough times which later on becomes a dressmaking business providing a livelihood for nearly hundred women. All their achievements were made by Kamila while Taliban imposed strict laws for women making life miserable for them and impossible to live in the country. Kamila and her family are a real-life example of struggle and survival. This signifies that everything is possible for a woman if she trusts in herself.

"Man is the subject and absolute but woman is the other" (13) is stated by Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Likewise, women in Afghanistan and other Third World Nations are considered the second sex. It is clear that the novel *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* is a feminist work which focuses on the issues of women in male-dominated society and depicts women as subaltern category. These novels also highlight the struggle of women categories, struggle for freedom and struggle to unshackle the chains of patriarchal norms.

It also depicts women as active members of society who are aware of their subalternity and try to break their shell. Active participation of women and their struggle to get freedom in the novels present that woman as subaltern can speak and can resist against patriarchs of society.

Spivak says that education and consciousness is necessary for subalterns to restore their identity and history. Hashimi and Lemmon also portrays in their novels, the importance of education. It is only because of Kamila's and her sisters' education they were able to break all the obstacles in their lives and rise like the phoenix.

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