

Latifa, Afghan Women and Unfinished Struggle

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Abstract—This article examines the literacy ban for Afghan women in the era of Taliban focusing on the portrayal of Latifa as the narrator in *My Forbidden Face* (MFF) novel. As a writer and main character, Latifa fought for the rights and independence of Afghan women to gain access to education. Going to school and continuing education at the university level are things that were banned by Taliban in the era of occupation, 1996-2001. This article utilizes the Islamic feminism to reveal the women's struggling to fight for their opportunity to gain literacy at school. The women's role in the novel is described as victims of the apply of the Taliban Syar'i law. The results of this study revealed that the strict bannings and decrees can't stop the Afghan women to fight for their main latitude, that is the independence to access the education to broader their knowledge. The women carried out underground schools to give the lessons to the teenagers and kids as a part of their resistance against Taliban. They struggle to get learning opportunities as a part of fulfillment to gain their human right, that is having ability or quality about literacy.

Keywords—*Afghan women; education; literacy; resistance; Taliban*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Taliban do not allow television, music and cinema and prohibit girls from the age of ten and up into school since they came to power in 1996 [1,2]. The issuance of a decree that forcibly prohibits women and girls from going out of the house inevitably has many negative effects on them. Life that was previously normal, women and girls can go to school and continuing higher education is prohibited. They automatically become people who are imprisoned in their homes without being able to do activities outside. Their lives changed drastically, and resulted in the emergence of depression and sadness in various parts of Afghanistan.

The facts revealed by Human Rights Watch in an article and video entitled *Afghanistan: Girls Struggle for Education* presents a very sad reality about the fate of Afghan girls today as the effects of war, civil war, ethnic conflict and Taliban occupation of Afghanistan [2]. Likewise, when the Taliban regime was overthrown by the United States, the tragic story of Afghan teenage girls continues to occur. The lack of educational facilities in the form of facilities and infrastructure due to the effects of a prolonged war made many of them attend schools in emergency tents. In the modern era, where almost everyone is very familiar with internet connections, sophisticated communication tools and the ease of getting

access to education, the Afghan people are still living in a world of uncertainty. Life that is always beset by war, bloody tragedies and conflicts make various facilities and infrastructure minimal and even totally damaged. One of them is the facilities and infrastructure in the field of education, such as school buildings. Exposure to conflicts that are prolonged and decrees issued by the Taliban cause them to not get the right to get access to literacy. This gave rise to the Afghan women's movement to fight for access to literacy. One of them was the struggle from an Afghan girl named Latifa who was written in a memoir entitled *My Forbidden Face* (MFF). This text tells about Latifa's testimony in portraying all forms of violence and repression experienced by Afghan women [3,4]. This article will reveal Latifa and her friends' effort in fighting for their freedom to have literacy's right which was banned by Taliban. Agustina has discussed *My Forbidden Face* with the gender relation concept showing the inequality gender which repressed Afghan women [3]. Secondly, Agustina has discussed and compared this text with the other text, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* written by Khaled Hosseini using Gennet's focalization theory and Islam feminism and Postcolonial feminism to observe the repression and resistance toward Afghan women [5]. However, there is no researches discussed deeper about Afghan women's struggling to fight for their opportunity to gain literacy at school. Thus, this research focusing on analyzing Afghan women's struggles to gain access to education.

II. METHOD

The previous studies showed that many Afghan girls really face the troubles to have the education [6,7]. This study specifically observed the impacts of the prohibition of accessing education for Afghan girls through the view of Islamic Feminists who fight for equality for women. Islamic feminism fights for equality for women and opposes all forms of oppression and violence. One of them is the right to get education. The qualitative method is used in this study because this method is believed to help understanding human and social and cultural contexts around it. Qualitative research is research that intends to understand the phenomena experienced by the subject of research, for example: behavior, perception, motivation, action, and others in a holistic manner, and by way of description in the form of words and language, in a special natural context and by utilizing various scientific methods [8].

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. *A Story to Fight for Literacy*

Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, and low literacy among adults persists despite vast improvements in basic education among the younger generation. The data showed from 2010 reveal that only 22.2 percent of women between the ages of 15-24 are literate [9]. From those data, it can be seen that the progress in addressing adult literacy has been slow. Moreover, the literacy rate for women in rural areas is more than three times lower than in urban areas [10]. Only 12 percent of women above the age of 15 in 2007 were literate, compared to 39 percent of men [9]. In other words, 88 percent of Afghanistan's girls and women above 15 are illiterate. This fact will show a demonstrating a huge unmet demand for specially targeted literacy programs.

Through a memoir written by a young woman named Latifa, the fact that women were banned from going out and followed by their ban to go to school was revealed. This study specifically observed the story of a sixteen-year-old girl who struggled to get independence and freedom for Afghan women and herself. Through Latifa's narrative, women's lives have suffered greatly and are vulnerable to being exposed to violence. Their efforts to continue to get education were hindered along with the Taliban's power in Afghanistan in the 1996-2001 era. Several studies have suggested the role of Afghan women in their efforts to realize the freedom of literacy is not easy. Starting from restrictions related to fashion, lifestyle, to the prohibition to access education [11].

Literacy is the most important thing for the realization of a nation's progress. The absence of literacy because of the prohibition of the regime makes Afghan women suffer and backward. Islamic feminism opposes all forms of repression and violence against every woman, including banning women from accessing education. Mernissi mentions that repression of women is a fabricated tradition and is not an Islamic teaching [12]. In accordance with Mernissi, Barlas also championed the egalitarian principle so that equality between men and women could be felt by both genders [13]. Restrictions on the right to education to women are very irrelevant because Islam has never agreed on restrictions on women. Islam has provided the widest possible opportunity for women to gain any knowledge. Some names of women acting in Islamic history, such as Aisyah, Al-Khansa, Zainab and others [14].

In the time of Rasulullah SAW, there were equal opportunities for men and women to gain knowledge by directly learning from the Prophet. Both men and women have equal opportunities to study and develop their potential. Thus when there are restrictions on Afghan women to get access to education as well as we go back to the dark ages.

The data showed by Gender Studies Institute, Kabul University with cooperation of UNDP and UNESCO in March 2010, gender disparities in Afghanistan are also reflected in the education system [15]. Based on the impressive progress has been made since 2001 with 6.2 million students enrolled in general education in 2008 in comparison to 2.3 million enrolled in 2002 much still needs to be done to increase the enrollment rate of female students. Of the 6.2 million children enrolled in

general education, 36 percent were female. The major obstacle to contribute the increased enrollment rate of girls, however, is the shortage of female teachers. In 2008, there were only 29 percent of all teachers were female. Similarly, the higher education system also faces disparities between male and female student enrollment rates. For instance, in 2009, 62,000 students were enrolled in higher education institutes in Afghanistan, 21 percent of which were women. Meanwhile this percentage has risen considerably in comparison to the end of the Taliban period when no women were enrolled in higher education, enrollment rates of male and female students are still far from equal. In technical and vocational education, only 16 percent of all students were female in 2008. The Ministry of Higher Education aims to address this disparity by setting a goal of having at least 30 percent female students in higher education by the end of 2014.

The facts that show the condition of the low level of education of Afghan women and children along with the lack of facilities make their lives hopeless and very suffering [16]. Various studies conducted by United Nations agencies on how many Afghans can access education, have higher education to provide adequate facilities and infrastructure are a very concerning fact.

In the memoir, Latifa wrote one of the narratives portrayed the story of her struggle in setting up an underground school along with some of her friends. Latifa realizes that life without literacy is the same as killing the lives of Afghan women slowly. Latifa's anxiety, sadness, and anger with the prohibition to go to school and a professional career for Afghan women from the Taliban made her a woman who had the desire to fight for women whose lives were never the same again.

The Taliban is a portrait of a regime in the name of Shar'i Islam in controlling and regulating the lives of Afghan people. Some of the rules and prohibitions imposed did not refer to the minutes brought by Rasulullah. So as a result, Latifa and other women characters in the text are the most suffering victims.

B. *Latifa: A Symbol of Resistance*

There were various sad stories about the prohibition of the right to go to school, continuing education to the university level become one of the main topics told in the novel *My Forbidden Face* (MFF) [4]. Under the Taliban, the majority of girls were closed and gross enrollment fell from 32% to just 6.4% [17]. Latifa is a sixteen-year-old girl who feels her life is uprooted by force when the Taliban enforces a decree, one of which does not allow girls and women to leave home, work and go to school.

As a young woman who has aspirations to continue her studies in journalism, of course Latifa feels angry, depressed and at the same time feels herself imprisoned in her own home. The doors and windows of the apartment are a symbol of human freedom which actually means the way in and see the beauty and freedom that everyone desires. But unfortunately, the doors and windows for Latifa and Afghan women became a prison they had to live in. They have no choice or even make the decision to stay or leave. The power of a regime that implements various restrictions in the form of decrees has

become a frightening ghost in the lives of every Afghan woman.

One of the efforts made by Latifa with his friends are by establishing an underground school for children and adolescents in the neighborhood around his house. Latifa's struggle to continue to get rights as well as in literacy is a symbol of resistance against anarchist regimes. Getting literacy is the most basic right for every human being. As a figure who represents resistance, Latifa never recedes in providing education to children and young men and women around her residence [11]. He felt compelled to become an underground school teacher so that young children until teenagers aged 7-14 years could still get reading and counting lessons.

I take eight children, and Farida does the same. Maryam will have five, on average, depending on what day it is. Our pupils will be between five and fourteen years old, both girls and boys. We're taking risks as well, of course, but we're careful to limit them [11].

The quotation is a reflection of the resistance effort carried out by Latifa and her friends in fighting for literacy for Afghan children and adolescents. Uncertain life in uncertainty makes Latifa think about struggling by continuing to provide reading and writing knowledge. Thus Afghan children can continue to study. Her enthusiasm to continue sharing knowledge through underground school made her became one of the representatives of Afghan women who voiced injustice, violence and repression in international forums in France [11]. Through a memoir, Latifa hoped the story of herself and Afghan women would be a tool to garner support from women and the international public.

Latifa also made another resistance related to her efforts to voice the oppression of Afghan women, namely by becoming Afghan women representatives who spoke internationally in Paris. She took all the risks to fight for women's right in accessing education which was banned by Taliban. Through all the efforts done by Latifa, she proved that for being the 'Speaker' she has voiced all the oppressions to fight for the women's freedom.

IV. CONCLUSION

My Forbidden Face is a portrait of women's struggle to fight for literacy for Afghan women and children. The obstacles encountered increasingly made her determination to move forward and fight harder. Latifa's courage to oppose the rule of the ruler proves that she is a symbol of resistance that is not afraid of all forms of punishment that might cost her life. Through a young woman who is actively voicing the rights to get literacy through access to education, readers become aware that the problem of the prohibition to get the right to go to school and continue higher education has an impact on the decline of a nation's progress. And this befalls to Afghanistan.

As one of the basic rights, the right to obtain literacy for every citizen is an important issue. Latifa's struggle is noted as a milestone for the rise of Afghan women to make history that can be known by the international public. So that there is no more arbitrariness committed by power holders, moreover

under the name of Islam. Because Islam is a religion that opens a space of equality for men and women, does not tolerate violence and repression let alone prohibition which is very anarchist.

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