

ECHOES OF DEFIANCE: LATIFA'S *MY FORBIDDEN FACE* AS A RESILIENT NARRATIVE AGAINST PATRIARCHAL SHADOWS

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Abstract: Latifa's *My Forbidden Face* emerges as a powerful testament to the resilience of Afghan women under Taliban rule. This paper delves into Latifa's poignant memoir, where she recounts the disintegration of her secure world by an oppressive regime. Writing under a pseudonym to protect her loved ones, Latifa's narrative is a vivid portrayal of lost innocence and unyielding determination. Through her evocative prose, she illuminates the relentless struggle of Afghan women against societal constraints and systemic discrimination. Drawing on feminist theory and literary critiques by Cixous, Woolf, and Carter, the paper underscores how Latifa's work epitomizes the essence of feminist literature. Her memoir serves as both a personal journey and a collective cry for justice, embodying the indomitable spirit and resilience of Afghan women. This essay explores how Latifa's story transcends mere survival, becoming a clarion call for unity, hope, and enduring strength against patriarchal oppression.

For years, Afghan women have been portrayed as spectral figures in a desolate landscape, their lives marked by neglect and harassment. They are illustrated as sorrowful, ostracized souls, akin to broken-winged birds, stripped of voice and joy. In the media's relentless gaze, they appear as ethereal beings ensnared in a labyrinth of discrimination and marginalization, enduring the oppressive shadows cast by their patriarchal and fundamentalist society. Despite enduring harassment and threats, many Afghan women writers have boldly illuminated the injustices and enslavement faced by Afghan women. They articulate their dire circumstances and document the savagery inflicted upon them, affirming their individuality. To carve a space for themselves, they resuscitate their past, drawing strength from the resilience of previous generations, reliving their lives in the present with renewed vigor. Their faith propels them toward a future envisioned with unrestricted liberty and egalitarianism. These writers dismantle patriarchal scholarly archetypes, revamping the maltreatment of women and presenting women's perspectives anew. They candidly address coercion while simultaneously weaving a utopian vision and a latent defiance throughout their narratives. Amidst severe abuse and coercion, the possibility of resilience emerges as a redeeming force, empowering the victims to reciprocate. Their writings serve as a beacon, guiding the oppressed toward a horizon where strength, dignity, and hope flourish, defying the oppressive shadows of their past and present. "Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar present women's resistance to social and literary constraint in terms of a theory of the anxiety of the patriarchal influence. They trace in women's writings the inscriptions of tensions, self-doubt, renunciation and above all rage against the society which confines them" (Sudha 40). Writing memoirs have been a powerful means for Afghan women to assert their right to live free from the fetters of social, religious, and patriarchal domination. By revealing the harsh and horrifying conditions they face, these women open new vistas of hope and expectation for freedom and liberty.

Latifa's *My Forbidden Face* is a poignant and evocative memoir of life under Taliban rule. With agonizing candor, Latifa recounts how her secure world crumbled, dismantled by a frenzied interpretation of faith she could not fathom. Her voice captures a lost innocence and resonates with an unyielding determination to cling to optimism. Writing under a pseudonym, Latifa, born and raised in an educated middle-class family, seeks to protect her loved ones still in Afghanistan. As Woolf notes, "The truth is only reached by laying together many varieties of error" (Woolf 69), echoing her struggle. In 2001, Latifa and her parents escaped Afghanistan with the assistance of *Elle*, a French-based Afghan resistance group. The book was written in Paris with Shekiba Hachemi, founder of *Afghanistan Libre*, who advocates for Afghan women. With rectitude born out of pain, Latifa embodies the microcosm of a young woman in Kabul, educated first during the Soviet occupation, then under communist regimes, through four years of civil war, and finally as a mute spectator to the terrors imposed by the Taliban. Latifa briefly describes her family's life as one of happiness and contentment in a united, affectionate, religious, and liberal household. Her father ran his own import/export business; her mother was a doctor. Her sister Soraya, twenty years old, was a flight attendant, while her other sister, Shakila, lived in Pakistan and awaited a move to the US to join her husband. Her older brother Wahid was a soldier who fought valiantly during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, while another brother, Daoud, majored in economics. Latifa dreamed of becoming a journalist. As the youngest, she was pampered and cherished by her family.

However, this idyllic world shattered on September 27, 1996, when the white flag of the Taliban flew over Kabul. The family was engulfed in dread, uncertain of what the future would bring. Latifa's poignant narration unveils the drastic transformation of their lives under the oppressive regime. The brutal enforcement of rigid laws confined women to their homes, stripped them of their rights,

and obliterated their dreams. Latifa's memoir is a testament to resilience, a poignant reminder of the stark reality faced by many, and a powerful call to uphold the principles of freedom and equality against all odds.

Even after my brother told us he'd seen the white flags I didn't want to believe the truth. The government forces must have pulled back to prepare for another attack on the Taliban...the mujahideen can't have abandoned Kabul. So many times I've heard, read and preferred to ignore what the government has been telling us about the Taliban: "They imprison women in their own homes. They prevent them from working, from going to school. Women have no more lies, the Taliban take away their daughters, burn the villagers' houses, force the men to join the army. They want to destroy the country!"(Latifa 4)

Flabbergasted and aghast, Latifa vividly depicts how life in her country transformed overnight. "Just yesterday, despite the civil war, life was 'normal' in Kabul, even though the city is in ruins. Yesterday, I went to the seamstress with my sister to try on dresses we were going to wear to a wedding today. There would have been music. We would have danced" (Latifa 4). These words echo the poignant memories of Anne Frank, the Jewish teenager who chronicled the horrors of the Nazi regime from within the confines of her home. To escape the sorrow and apathy imposed by forced imprisonment, Latifa clings to cheerful, frivolous things, typically feminine like new dresses and cosmetics. This defiance against the outrageous rule signifies her refusal to relinquish her dreams. "Maybe I'm revealing a shallow side to my character, but I need to cling on to the 'normality' of my life as an ordinary girl. It's a way of denying the imprisonment that is lying in wait for me, lying in wait for every Afghan girl and woman. It's inevitable" (Latifa 33).

The rigid laws enforced by fundamentalists surreptitiously and silently destroy the spirits of all girls and women. These oppressive constraints, entrenched across much of the country, obliterate women by locking them outside of society. Every woman is afflicted, from the youngest to the oldest. They are no longer allowed to work, resulting in the collapse of medical services and government administration. Latifa passionately recounts, "No more school for girls, no more health care for women, no more fresh air for us anywhere. Women go home! Or disappear under the chadri, out of sight of men. It's an absolute denial of individual liberty, a real sexual racism" (Latifa 38). This petty tyranny over their personal lives is intolerable to Afghan women, turning their days into endless tunnels of inactivity. Forcing women to wear the chadri is akin to shutting them within a cage and "stealing their faces" (Latifa 48). Latifa's refusal to step out of the house is her form of resistance against the fundamentalists. "The only way I can still resist is to shut myself in, refusing to see them" (Latifa 50).

Through her evocative narrative, Latifa brings to life the dramatic and tragic metamorphosis of Kabul. One day, she was an ordinary girl, preparing for a wedding, dreaming of a future, and embracing the simple joys of life. The next, she finds herself in a dystopian nightmare, where the fabric of her existence is unraveled by an oppressive regime. Her memoir is not merely a recounting of personal anguish but a testament to the unyielding spirit of Afghan women. They are determined to hold on to their identities, their dreams, and their hope for a future where they can breathe freely, unshackled by the chains of fundamentalism. Women like Soraya's friend Narguesse embody defiance and rebellion, tearing off her chadri in broad daylight to reveal her face. Humiliated and denied entry into her former workplace by the Taliban, she was summoned to collect unpaid salary. Inspired by her boldness, other women similarly barred from entry join her in protest, vocally resisting their oppressors. Miraculously, the Taliban merely push them out, perhaps sensing they are outnumbered. This first act of protest injects a glimmer of hope into Latifa and her friends. Narguesse, ever willful and independent, galvanizes them: "We have to fight back. Today we couldn't do much because there weren't enough of us. But tomorrow, if there are thousands of us, we'll be able to overthrow these Taliban" (Latifa 61).

Though Latifa's mother has lost the will to live, she persists in tending to clandestine patients with her meager supplies until they are exhausted. She appears "her old self when she can take care of others and give them medical advice" (Latifa 74). Her resilience shines when she urges her friend Dr. Sima to open a covert medical practice. This resolve is sparked by a harrowing encounter: three young girls, repeatedly raped by fifteen Taliban, seek her help with mutilated genitals and battered bodies. Unable to manage alone, she calls upon Dr. Sima for assistance. Together, they work tirelessly from ten that evening until four the next morning, "sewing them back up again" (Latifa 70). Incensed by this atrocity, Latifa's mother concludes that Afghan women desperately need a secret clinic. Forbidden by Taliban decree to be treated by male doctors, she convinces Dr. Sima to establish an underground medical refuge. This clandestine clinic becomes a beacon of hope and resilience, a sanctuary where they can reclaim a fragment of their lost autonomy and dignity. Latifa's narrative is not merely a chronicle of suffering but a testament to the indomitable spirit of Afghan women, who, in the face of overwhelming oppression, continue to fight for their right to exist, heal, and dream. Their courage and defiance illuminate the path toward a future where they can live unshackled, their voices and lives fully restored.

There are too many sick women in the neighbourhood. They come to me even from far away, as you see and I can't cope by myself. I have no drugs, and almost no supplies. You, on the other hand, have grown children living abroad whom you could ask to send us all the medicine we need. (Latifa 71)

This is the first step of resilience—hoodwinking the Taliban by covertly defying their draconian edicts. Emboldened by Latifa's mother's resolve, Dr. Sima establishes an underground medical clinic in Kabul, transforming it into a sanctuary for many ailing women.

The second step is catalyzed when Latifa observes a mullah in the courtyard of a mosque opposite her house, surrounded by young boys endlessly reciting Koranic verses under his stern supervision. "It is at this precise moment something clicks in my brain. First of all, of course there are no girls, only boys, in that Koranic school" (Latifa 120). She realizes that the only education these boys receive is religious, devoid of subjects like history, geography, mathematics, literature, and science. This narrow education, she understands,

robs them of a comprehensive understanding of the world. Moreover, she apprehends that many parents refrain from sending their boys to such schools to avoid Taliban indoctrination.

Reflecting on her own fortune, Latifa acknowledges how privileged she was to receive an education despite the Soviet invasion and the subsequent civil war between the Mujahedeen and the Communists. She had completed high school under the Islamic state government established by the resistance and was preparing for university entrance exams in journalism when the Taliban seized power. Determined to utilize her knowledge rather than languish in despair, she resolves to take action. Her friend Farida offers the necessary support, and together, they draw inspiration from their former teacher, Mrs. Fawzia, who had started an underground school in her locality. Despite the immense risk, Mrs. Fawzia had not hesitated, though she was eventually caught, beaten, and imprisoned by the Taliban. Her story fuels Latifa and Farida's determination to continue her legacy.

As Latifa puts it, "The mosque and the little boys reciting as they rock back and forth, hypnotized or terrorized by the mullah—that's the jolt I needed this morning to spring into action. Sometimes things happen like that—it's just fate" (Latifa 123). The clandestine school they establish becomes a tribute to Mrs. Fawzia, who would undoubtedly be thrilled to know her efforts had not been in vain. The entire family pitches in, and Latifa's friends join the cause. Mrs. Fawzia, though unable to teach, provides lesson plans and advice. Taking every precaution, they proceed with their mission calmly. "Oddly enough, I am not frightened" (Latifa 126), Latifa muses. Teaching history to the students, she revisits the tumultuous times her family endured during Afghanistan's turbulent history: first under Soviet rule, then during the civil war, followed by the Mujahedeen's reign, and finally the Taliban's tyranny.

The underground school symbolizes resistance, a beacon of hope in a landscape darkened by oppression. Through clandestine efforts, Latifa and her allies challenge the Taliban's authoritarian regime, transforming despair into defiance. Education becomes an act of rebellion; each lesson taught is a strike against tyranny, each student a testament to unwavering spirit. Latifa asserts, "To be oppressed means to be rendered invisible," (Butler 39), yet in their secret classrooms, they reclaim visibility and power, illuminating their path with knowledge and resilience.

And in spite of everything we went on living...Having lived through so much war, we had become indifferent to the tragedy of our country, so anesthetized that we were blind to the final threat that still lay in wait for us: a secret movement of religious students, a new militia that would take advantage of the tribal infighting over Kabul and seize a third of the country in the south west at the end of 1994. (Latifa 142)

The clandestine school infuses Latifa's mother with renewed vigor and purpose. She not only aids in its operation but also prepares meals for the children who attend. This newfound mission provides her life with meaning and acts as her personal rebellion against the malevolent force of the Taliban. Encouraging Latifa, she says, "Well done! This is a way to keep up the good fight" (Latifa 146).

The third step of resilience manifests when Latifa and her friends resolve to revive their shelved news review project, *Fager* (meaning Dawn), abandoned since the Taliban's rise to power. This project had previously produced a single copy of each issue, circulating it hand-to-hand throughout the neighborhood. Latifa and her friends would gather articles and photos on diverse topics, from fashion to films. However, under the Taliban regime, the populace was starved for information, with only unverified rumors circulating. Farida, ever the catalyst for change, poses the pivotal question, "How about if we publish our review again? Don't you want to? I do! All we have to do is to get started" (Latifa 149). She volunteers to act as an undercover reporter, collecting news of Taliban atrocities while hidden beneath her chadri. Latifa's brother Daoud pledges to procure paper and handle the writing. Despite the myriad challenges in gathering content, they press on, determined to produce a millennial edition in 2000.

At this time, the global phenomenon of Titanic fever has gripped Kabul. TVs and VCRs, forbidden by the Taliban, are clandestinely stashed in basements. Young men sport Leonardo DiCaprio haircuts as a form of silent rebellion. Amidst widespread deprivation, famine, and an influx of refugees into camps in Iran and Pakistan, the Taliban remain indifferent, steadfast in their oppression: "imprisoning barbers, whipping men, and beating up women" (Latifa 177). The people, barred from laughter and joy, find solace and defiance in the 'heathen' love story of "Titanic." Latifa and her friends decide to create a special Titanic issue of *Dawn*, secretly gathering materials and pictures with a sense of rebellious glee. "Leonardo is so cute! The girls in my neighborhood need to 'sin' by gazing at him. I glue his photo into *Dawn* with the feeling of rebellion one has at twenty years old, robbed of education and learning, robbed of life" (Latifa 177).

Compounding their defiance, the Minister of Health, Mullah Mohammed Abbas, makes an official visit to Paris, igniting fury among the Kabul populace. While the Taliban exult in their international recognition, those secretly tuned into BBC or American news are incensed. The sheer hypocrisy of the Taliban's regime, which subjects its people to unbearable oppression while its officials gallivant abroad, stokes the fires of resistance further. In this atmosphere of clandestine defiance and seething indignation, Latifa and her compatriots continue their covert rebellion. The underground school thrives, the news review spreads its subversive messages, and the people of Kabul cling to every morsel of forbidden joy, every act of rebellion, as a beacon of hope in the darkness. The secret school, the revived news review, and the Titanic issue of *Dawn* become symbols of their unyielding spirit and relentless quest for freedom. Their efforts are not just acts of resistance but declarations of their undying resolve to reclaim their lives, their education, and their future from the clutches of tyranny.

A *talib* in Paris, in the country of the rights of man... A “Minister of Health” who bars women from hospitals, who in 1997 dared imprison the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs, Emma Bonino who had come to visit an NGO in need of emergency financial aid in Kabul. She was roughed up, beaten in front of the foreign cameraman accompanying her, and questioned for hours before being released. What right does this *talib* have to go abroad and discuss humanitarian matters? ...This visit is a disgrace. This *talib* is only an uneducated mullah; he’s not seen a doctor, he’s just a Pakistani puppet. (Latifa 181)

Latifa and her friends seethe with indignation at the French, who chose not to welcome the very women doctors and nurses barred from practicing by the Taliban. Once the beating heart of Afghanistan’s healthcare system, these women had dedicated their lives to maternal and infant hygiene in the countryside and providing crucial emergency gynecological care. The streets of Kabul throb with disillusionment, the people’s spirits crushed by the French media’s silence on the repression and torture endured under Taliban rule.

The fourth pillar of resilience manifests when Latifa accepts an offer to fly to France and bear witness to the horrors she has seen and heard in Kabul. As Dr. Sima urges, “such testimony is the only way we can resist” (Latifa 184). The French magazine *Elle* seeks young women willing to travel to Paris and illuminate the plight of Afghan women. With Dr. Sima and others’ encouragement, Latifa bravely decides to undertake the perilous journey, acutely aware of the dangers should the Taliban catch wind of their plans. Upon arrival in Paris, Latifa and her parents are greeted by officials from *Elle* magazine. The journey had been fraught with anxiety, each stopover presenting a gauntlet of probing questions, but Latifa’s resolve remains unshaken. Adopting the pseudonym Latifa for security reasons upon setting foot on French soil, she plunges into her mission with steely determination.

In Paris, Latifa, her mother, and Diba, another young Afghan woman, navigate a whirlwind of meetings with high-ranking officials. Each encounter becomes a stage upon which Latifa’s voice, though tempered by her harrowing experiences, resonates with unyielding fortitude. The juxtaposition of Paris’s elegance and the stark brutality of Kabul’s reality sharpens her resolve. Her testimony becomes a beacon, a searing indictment of the Taliban’s barbarity and a clarion call for global solidarity. Latifa’s narrative, imbued with fiery defiance and unwavering hope, transcends mere storytelling. It is a rallying cry for justice, a testament to the indomitable spirit of Afghan women. Through her words, the world witnesses not only the darkness that shrouds her homeland but also the radiant light of resilience and resistance that refuses to be extinguished. They vehemently speak about the women in Afghanistan:

. . . who have been robbed of their voices and their rights, oppressed as the designated victims of a systemic purge. We have no longer been able to work, to learn, to show ourselves, left beggars and widows in a country where men have been killed, handicapped or exiled by twenty years of war, and have no more weapons with which to fight the Taliban. One day, who knows, the purge will reach its climax, and we’ll see women subjected to the ultimate degradation of a noble and ancient land: forced to bring into this world the sons of the Taliban...we want to fight back, we refuse to give up our dignity, and we want to bring back from France the freedom that I have never known in the twenty years on this earth. We are a proud people, in a land rich with history, and it is there, to them that I would like to take this freedom. (Latifa 196)

Before they can fly home, crushing news arrives from Latifa’s brother Daoud in Pakistan. A fatwa has been issued against the women for denouncing the Taliban, their Kabul home ransacked and gutted. Latifa’s parents are demoralized, their efforts seemingly in vain. They cannot return to Kabul; death awaits them there. Amid this heart-wrenching devastation, Latifa clings to sanity, knowing she is now a refugee in France. Troubled by her parents’ silent suffering and the splintering of her family, her mind swirls with questions: Where to live? How to begin anew? Yet her indomitable spirit refuses surrender, anchored by her father’s words before the fatwa.

You haven’t done this all for nothing. Just wait. Women listen to other women, and what you’ve told them will make people understand what the Taliban are doing to you. A woman is not nothing. If a *talib* tells a woman that she is nothing and he is everything, he is ignorant. Man is born of woman, the saint has a mother, the whole world was born in the body of a woman. You must remember this Afghan saying: ‘If the pearl tells the oyster it is nothing, and the pearl is everything, then a fish can tell the sky to stop raining.’ (Latifa 197)

Though exiled in France, her family still scattered, she clings to the hope of a brighter tomorrow. She is heartened by the Bonn Conference, where representatives from every Afghan ethnic group—the Tajiks, Hazaras, Pashtuns, and Uzbeks—pledged solidarity for the reconstruction of their ravaged land. “A devastation almost unparalleled in history,” Latifa muses (Latifa 200), yet now, a glimmer of light pierces the darkness. For decades, Afghan women have navigated an abyss, cloaked in ‘chadris’ like caged canaries, at the mercy of Afghanistan’s tumultuous chessboard. Latifa recalls a European song: “Woman is the future of mankind,” dreaming of a future where Afghan men embrace this truth. Her vision is profound and far-reaching. She envisions Afghan women, once shackled, rising like phoenixes, their voices resonating through power’s corridors, rebuilding a fractured nation. Latifa’s concluding words are a clarion call for unity, resilience, and hope. “The personal is the political,” (Moi 204) she affirms, echoing the need for collective strength. Her optimism is boundless, her spirit indomitable, envisioning an Afghanistan reborn from its own ashes, where women are the torchbearers of a glorious future.

I pray that women may have a greater voice in the coming days... I pray God that whoever will lead our country may be, in his heart, as much Pashtun as Tajik, as much Uzbek as Hazara. That his wife may counsel and assist him; that he may choose advisers of great wisdom, that books may replace weapons, that education may teach us to respect one another, that our hospitals may be worthy of their mission, and that our culture may be reborn from the ruins of our pillaged museums... I will do more than pray,

because when the last *talib* has put away his black turban and I can be a free woman in a free Afghanistan, I will take up my life there once more and do my duty as a citizen, as a woman, and I hope, as a mother. (Latifa 202)

The memoir reveals that Afghan women's susceptibility to assaults both at home and outside has accelerated their pursuit of emancipation and self-reliance. Through the powerful narrative, Latifa showcases her indomitable spirit and tenacity, weaving a tapestry of courage and resilience that defies the oppressive forces seeking to silence her. Her words are a testament to the unyielding quest for justice and equality, a clarion call for change echoing through the annals of history. In her memoir, Latifa stands as a radiant beacon against the malign stereotyping and systemic discrimination faced by Afghan women. Through her poignant narrative, she elucidates the ceaseless struggle of Afghan women to transcend suppression and societal constraints. Her prose, imbued with eloquence, seeks to reclaim her identity from the imposed confines. As Latifa writes, "It is essential to write about what is happening, to bear witness. It is a duty" (Cixous 876). This reflects the broader autonomy found in women's writing globally, where each author, undeterred by societal acceptance, pens the vast expanse of agony, torment, and defiance they endure.

Latifa's work epitomizes the essence of feminist literature, where conformity to literary genres or social norms is eschewed, driven by a singular agenda: to illuminate the trauma and subjugation inflicted upon Afghan women. Her narrative emerges as a rejuvenating epiphany, shimmering with hope and resilience, even as its themes resonate with stark realism. "Fairy tales hold up a distorting mirror that enhances our petty guilts, but they also draw us into a world of possibility" (Carter 193). Latifa's memoir, thus, stands as a testament to her indomitable spirit, weaving a tapestry of courage that defies the oppressive forces seeking to silence her. Through her story, Latifa not only documents her personal journey but also embodies the collective resilience of Afghan women. Her memoir, like those of her contemporaries, is a defiant cry against the injustices they endure, a cry that resonates with the enduring power of the written word.

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