Chapter-2

Woman as a Cultural Construct
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Gender

Gender is a social term with purely social interpretations and these interpretations vary from society to society and from culture to culture. The base of gender is considered biology and in no case is gender a fixed reality that cannot be probed into, questioned and problematized. The assignment of gender based roles depends on the convenience of the society, culture and civilization and is taken as something that naturally evolves from the fact that one is born with a particular set of genitalia. The concept is in a mid way of its definition and it can always be deconstructed. M. Crawford believes

Rather than seeing gender as a possession or a set of behaviours which is imposed upon the individual by society, as many essentialist theorists have done so far . . . many feminists have now moved to a position where they view gender as something that is enacted or performed and, thus, as a potential site of struggle over perceived restrictions in roles. (qtd. in Mills 138)

Earlier conceptualized as sex roles, gender has come to be viewed as a socially constructed institutional arrangement with gender divisions and roles built into all major institutions such as family, culture and religion (Kennelly, Merz, Lorber 600).

Gender is usually done to social members of gendered culture and they as social agents reiterate the process further: “we use clothes, and other physical attributes we control such as our jewellery, hairstyles and use of makeup, to indicate our gender. Similarly, perhaps women and men adopt certain styles of talking as part of the process of demonstrating to the world what their gender is” (Wareing 72). A person is born with a sex tag but the society makes gender the primary aspect of one’s
personality and his/her identity depends on the class of gender to which he belongs. Shan Wareing defines, in simple words, "'Sex' refers to biological category, which is usually fixed before birth. 'Gender' refers to social category, which is associated with certain behaviour" (58). This differentiation however has not remained so valid with the advent of queer theory and the formation of an entirely new space in the society which accommodates the homosexuals and lesbians. Earlier such behaviour was regarded as abnormal and was silenced and restricted but with the passage of time there has been an increase in the tolerance level towards homosexuality. This led to open discussions on sexual orientations. The individuals with such orientation began to be seen to constitute an entirely different, hitherto undefined category. This led to another and a slightly more accepted construction of gender in the postmodern world in the form of homosexuals and heterosexuals instead of males and females. However, even today the acceptance of such categorization is not simple at practical level. The discussions are being done openly but in practice what is problematic is that they still have to fit within the frame of heterosexuality and heteronormative behaviour has its impact and manifests in a different incarnation in homosexual liaisons also. Besides, though the 'knowledge' of this concept is accepted but the social and cultural stigma is still there.

The shift from sex to gender is taken as an essential constituent of human identity and gets so imbibed into the minds that it becomes very natural for us. Judith Lorber writes, "Gender signs and signals are so ubiquitous that we usually fail to note them- unless they are missing or ambiguous. Then we are comfortable until we have successfully placed the other person in a gender status; otherwise we feel socially dislocated" (289). The gender of a person is constructed on the approaches deciding the way a girl and a boy are brought up. Their upbringing is done in a way that a
specific behaviour is expected from them and thus their personality is moulded accordingly to conform to culturally gendered norms. Kennelly, Merz, and Lorber in an article “What is Gender” affirm that gender has nothing to do with the sex of a person. They quote several examples and assert: “what may be thought of as “universal behaviours” are very context-specific, relying more on setting and circumstances than on individual “predispositions”” (600). They come to an important conclusion that it would have been easier to deal with gender as a socially constructed entity than dealing with its biological predispositions. So it can be said that human females and males are born, but women and men as different categories are products of the society and enculturation. One universal demonstration of gender identity has the external demarcations. For example, women and men may wear different kinds of clothing or ornaments. Even the colours of the dress are clearly defined in some societies. Wareing writes, “The use of colour to indicate gender is particularly marked when it comes to dressing boys. Many British people would feel quite disturbed by the thought of dressing a baby boy in pink” (72). Besides there are mostly two sets of personal names, one appropriate for females and one appropriate for males. Although in recent times these strictly demarcated areas have been trespassed often but the basic distinctions are maintained. Other kinds of differentiating behaviours which are more consequential but just as dominant in identifying oneself as a man or woman are the style of walking, sitting, talking and general body posture. Human postures and gestures are imputed with masculinity and femininity. Features of non verbal communication such as gestures, smiling, eye contact, and touch are also well defined if not always written. Both men and women are expected to follow the set of culturally specific mores but these behaviours are expected weightily in case of women and any deviation on their part is catastrophic.
The Question of Woman

The question of woman is intricate and subtle as well. It is a labyrinth where one has to tread quite carefully. So much has been said on woman; less by women themselves and more by man that they have been thus trapped inside a male truth. Simone de Beauvoir writes in the introduction of *The Second Sex*, “If the female function is not enough to define woman, and if we also reject the explanation of the ‘eternal feminine’, but if we accept, even temporarily, that there are women on the earth, we then have to ask: what is a woman?” (4-5). In an ironic manner she answers elsewhere, “Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: she is a womb, an ovary; she is female: this word is enough to define her. From a man’s mouth, the epithet ‘female’ sounds like an insult; but he, not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear” (Beauvoir 22).

In the binary role assignment, woman becomes another and man becomes a point of reference or norm wherefrom a woman has to be defined. English writer Samuel Butler said about women, “Wise men never say what they think of women” (qtd in Woolf 2106)? On surface the word ‘woman’ looks very simple but who knows what woman actually is and the most important question is who has the right to define ‘woman’. At least men do not know but they have always assumed that they do and she has been always defined to suit their purposes. “No biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilisation as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine” (Beauvoir 293). Virginia Woolf confesses in “Professions for Women”, “I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know
until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill” (2154). She herself gives an answer to the above mystery in her another essay “A Room of One’s Own” where she writes, “At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial- and any question about sex is that- one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold” (Woolf 2093).

Beauvoir asks an important question in The Second Sex: ‘Are there women really?’ and she herself answers that women and feminity are the creations of men, casted and shaped to satisfy their sexual, social and emotional needs. It was Beauvoir who for the first time developed what is now known as a “social constructionist portrait of gender” (Hensan 3). Throughout the book there is an echo that men are considered the norm- essential beings in the western culture- and are supposed to represent all that is positive about human bequest and establishment. On the contrary women are defined wholly in terms of their deficiency in comparison to men and therefore represent what is base and contingent to human experience. Beauvoir quotes what Monsieur Benda declares in Uriel’s Report: “A man’s body has meaning by itself, disregarding the body of the woman, whereas the woman’s body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the male. Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man” (6). The concept of the ‘Other’ is synonymous with the women and she cannot be defined concretely or positively, but only as the dark, tenuous side of ‘Man’. “He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (Beauvoir 6).

The cultural implications on woman first centralize masculinity by marginalizing feminity, and then valorize the former by disintegrating the latter. In
In this context, Shoshan Felman writes, “Theoretically subordinated to the concept of masculinity, the woman is viewed by the man as his opponent, that is to say, as his other, the negative of the positive, and not, in her own right, different, other, otherness itself” (qtd. in Ruthven 41). This stereotype about women gets imbibed in one’s nature from the very infant stage and one grows up with a mentality where one always sees woman as a secondary being. This is because of an inseparable coalition of cultural conventions with the human psychology where coming out of such conventions seem to be aberrant as they are considered a part of true human nature.

Culture here proves a treacherous terrain where all of us, whatever our sex is, are caught and manipulated according to the particular culture which we are a part of. However, women are doubly wedged in this affair; they are enslaved by males in a dungeon of culture in which the former themselves are the captives. This cultural influence has been epitomized in Simone de Beauvoir’s aphorism, “One is not born, rather becomes, woman” (The Second Sex 293). Woman is not born as a woman but is made into woman by the pressures and expectations of the patriarchal culture of which she is a part. She explains that the relationship between the two sexes may be necessary for the continuation of both but it is not a reciprocal relationship. It is not the change in the body in the form of puberty which makes a woman out of a girl but it is the cultural weight on her which makes out or at least expects her to become a submissive creature. Biologically she may be called a woman after a certain age but culturally/socially she is so from the very birth. Judith Lober writes, “Once a child’s gender is evident, others treat those in one gender differently from those in the other, and the children respond to the different treatment by feeling different and behaving differently” (289). The shedding of this construction becomes difficult because it is defined in relation to ‘nature’ rather than to ‘culture’ rendering it fixed and inherent.
All other classifications in our society are thought of as cultural classifications, be it on the basis of class, creed, region or religion whereas being woman is not. It is viewed as a natural division and thus culture is itself brought under nature. Somehow 'culture' proves stronger and dominant than 'nature' and dislocates nature by taking its apparels. It thus enjoys certain arbitrariness. The socio-cultural tuition of a girl dictates what she ought to think about herself. It is not the nature but the all powerful culture and customs which push woman towards inferiority. A woman is not allowed to develop according to her nature but is reminded at every stage of life that she is the 'other' who has to come up to the expectations of the social members. It involves not only the male kinship; there is an undeclared and silent alliance among all the men. There is an interference of a powerful force in all the things associated with her. K.K. Ruthven writes:

'[W]oman' is not an essence but a construct in the domain of patriarchal Culture, a dispersed subject, historically variable, socially feminized, and a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted. The corollary of all this, of course, is that if women are not essences but constructs, the same must be true also of men, which means that what feminists are opposed to cannot logically be men as such (Nature) but rather the male supremacist role conferred on men by Culture in a patriarchy.(44) In this construction male occupies the centre and female is pushed to the margin. The position taken by the men is considered as immune to all counter attacks and as some transcendental centre —such as God or Nature whose presence is believed to be beyond argument. Jennifer Hansen writes, “... within patriarchal setup men are those creatures capable of transcendence- they are capable of acting upon the world and bestowing meaning upon it- while women are immanent beings who derive their meaning from their relationship with men” (3). In this process the power and
importance accumulates around the centre and the margins around are merely presumed as secondary. There are however supporters of androcentric power distribution. Stephen Goldberg claims that in all cultures, “the feeling of both men and women [is] that the male’s will dominates the female’s” (31). At another place he writes, “The stereotype that sees the male as more logical than the female is unquestionably correct in observation, and probably correct in its assumption that the qualities observed conform to innate sexual limitations analogous to those relevant to physical strength” (Goldberg 204).

The Role of Power in Historical Context

‘Gender’ has been moreover defined in relation to the concept of power whose manifestation in the civilized societies is patriarchy. M. Haralambos and R M Heald write about power, “Those who hold power do so at the expense of others. It suggests that there is a fixed amount of power and therefore if some hold power, others do not” (99). One may or may not agree but in this binary relation between men and women it seems as if the power is in a limited quantity and if men have it women cannot possess it. In a way individuals become the tools in the hands of all powerful ‘power’ which plays the primary role in the relationships between the individuals of two sexes.

Michel Foucault regards society as a complicated field of study in which power is a part of everyday life, embodied in discourses, cultural, domestic and political institutions. Though power according to Foucault is not necessarily exercised through penal codes and physical forces yet it is present in every type of relationship including the relationships between the two sexes. For Foucault, power is not something which is imposed on others but it is a multi dimensional chain of relations circulating throughout a society. Althusser’s model of power is the state oppression
on people and thus a one-way traffic of power from top downwards. Contrary to it, Foucault's is a bottom-up model of power relations which permeates in all relationships within a society. It sees an individual as a dynamic subject and not as an inactive dupe.

Foucault defines power not as an object in the hands of those who are regarded the most powerful in a society and who apply it on the lesser powerful people. It is rather power which controls the lives of both the powerful and the powerless within a society. Power for him was not a stagnant object lying passively in the hands of someone's hands, but its function was like that of the prime mover in different relations.

Power must be [sic] analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which functions in the form of a chain. It is never located here or there, never appropriated as a commodity or a piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its hands; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (Foucault 98).

By narrowing down power to interpersonal level, Foucault brings the study of power to a realm which was hardly taken up by power theorists. He rejects Marxist concept of the centrality of the state. For him, it is true that the state exercises tremendous power through its agencies over individuals but at the same time the state is not able to cover the whole arena of basic power relations that take place at interpersonal level.

On the pattern of military set-up, there is a hierarchical division of power in patriarchy; patriarchy which Marxist feminists see as 'ideology', Antanio Gramsci
calls ‘hegemony’, and Raymond Williams glosses as ‘a lived system of meanings and values. (Ruthven 35). Sometimes, as witnessed in the novels concerned, these two forces i.e. militarism and patriarchy join hands with culture leading to alarming disturbance in the ideological and institutional structures of a society. Violence is witnessed in the society and sometimes within home. In Afghanistan where all the four novels are set, the Taliban and other armed groups in an undeclared collaboration with patriarchy and the tribal culture of Afghanistan represent the hegemonic alliance of the three; the ultimate victim being the Afghan women although men too have been shown affected to a lesser effect. On a more generalized level history bears a witness to the entwinement of these three forces where a woman is limited to a primary role of procreation, home and the hearth while a man has power and is supposed to provide protection. Simone de Beauvoir writes, “The relation of the two sexes is not that of two electric poles: for man represents both the positive and the neuter . . . Woman is the negative to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity” (The Second Sex 5). The reproductive role of woman is a good tool for man to limit her. The biological role influences the other roles assigned to them and thereby results in assigning complimentary roles to men. In almost all cultures the women are taught to view themselves primarily in terms of their familial relationships and are allotted the home and care of infants. Presumably as an addition to these duties, women generally perform other caretaker activities that exceed biological necessities of birthing and nursing. Although the world saw drastic development in almost all the fields in the preceding century and most of the beliefs and customs were tumbled upside down due to the advent of liberalism, capitalism, and globalization, the relation between men and women seems to be fundamentally unaltered. Howsoever modernization we boast of, women benefitted only through a
trickle-down effect and this has been truer particularly in case of the Third world countries. Although there has been a revolution in the sphere of women’s education, women’s suffrage and their participation in public life, the dominant sexual norms continued to confine them in their traditional roles of cooking food and rearing children within the four walls of their homes. Gender inequality tends to be more marked in the states like Afghanistan where economic, social, political and sexual stratification affects the distribution of differential rights and privileges and renders gross discrepancies with disastrous results.

In Paleolithic age men got better chances of coming out of their huts for hunting purposes where as women got limited within the tribal boundaries to take care of the offspring. At the advent of the family and society, separate families were held together by the authority and the protection of the eldest male descendant. Patriarchal society was organized on the basis of power acquired by the males and the subordination by the females. The latter got limited chances not due to their inferiority but due to their procreative role as during the time of pregnancies and lactation it became difficult for them to leave their homes. Frederick Engels does not agree that “most early clans and tribes devalued women. Rather, many early societies were organized matriarchally (that is, property passed down in the women’s line)” (Chancer and Watkins 24). With the passage of time, which can be termed a ‘historical accident’, men assumed power and dominance due to their exposure to the external world and having surplus food. With this stratification, women came to be defined in relation to men. On this loss of identity, Beauvoir writes:

In fact, just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical that defined the oblique, there is an absolute human type that is masculine. Woman has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her
subjectivity; some even say she thinks with her hormones. Man vainly forgets that his anatomy also includes hormones and testicles. *(The Second Sex 5)*

It has been already stated elsewhere in this chapter that their limited chances were only due to their procreative role besides history proves that men were not the only people who hunted and women did not always stay at home. From a historical survey, Simone de Beauvoir observes that although pregnancy, giving birth and menstruation diminished their work capacity and condemned them to long periods of impotence where they needed protection and food, but other than these stages of their life, women used to carry heavy loads, took part in hunting expeditions, bloody wars or vendettas and they showed as much courage and cruelty as males: there are references to women who bite their teeth into enemies’ livers (Beauvoir 73-74). In her book *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) Ann Oakley asserts that there is no evidence to prove that behaviour, talent, attitude and aptitude in a person are a result of biological determinism. She believes that they are rather acquired in the process of social conditioning.

The views that male dominance is universal and that women are everywhere socially recessive although lend some credibility to the inescapable destiny of patriarchal relations but they ignore the importance of social and cultural upbringing in shaping people’s behaviour and attitudes. They ignore culture specific evidence of differences in the roles allotted to men and women and the values associated with each in a particular society. Finally, they ignore the importance of historical conditions in which various social formations and relationships develop and are maintained.
The Role Played by Religion

The advent of religion played a role in the subjugation of women and wherever it did not it was molded to suit men. Rosemary Ruether writes, “Eve is responsible for her own mistake, her husband’s sin, the original sin of all humanity, and the death of the Son of God. In other words, one woman acting on her own caused the fall of humanity” (“Christianity” 209). This notion of ‘Eve’s eternal mistake’ is found and followed in Islam as well. Elsewhere he quotes St. Tertullian who was even blunter while he was talking to his ‘best beloved sisters’ in the faith:

Do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of god on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the Devil’s gateway: You are the unsealer of the forbidden tree: You are the first deserter of the divine law: You are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert even the Son of God had to die” (qtd. in Ruether, Sexism and God-talk 168).

Traditionally men have headed the religions and women have followed. It needs not to be mentioned that the religion was also interpreted by men only and it was somehow natural for them to mould it according to their own benefit. Men have always stressed only on those portions of the religion where women are assigned the primary role within their homes and intentionally left those where women are given a religious sanction in public life.

The mention of the religion is a demand of this study as the novels are set in a country where tradition is based on a combination of Islamic tenets and local customs. All the characters are Muslims who give an ample reference to the Quran and the Prophet. Besides Islam plays almost a role of a living character in the novels. It is always quoted or referred to as a haloed entity influencing and directing the actions of
the characters in the novels. Moreover it is clear that most part of examples of victimization of women in the novels is due to the draconian and tribal interpretation of the religion.

Mohammad Hashim Kamali asserts that no doubt “Islam itself was revealed in a tribal society” (8), it stands opposite to the tribal culture. Oliver Roy too affirms this point and explains with some instances:

The tribal code and Muslim law are in opposition. Adultery (Zina) should, according to the Sha’ria, requires four witnesses if it is to be proven; for the pushtunwali, hearsay (peghor) is sufficient, for what is at stake is honour (one’s self-image) and not morality (defined by the Shari’at as what is permitted as opposed to what is not). Women in the tribes are not allowed to inherit property, for that would contradict the principle of strict patrilineage, which is the very basis of tribal system; while the Qur’an grants to women half the share of the male. The dowry, a sign of prestige, frequently exceeds the limits set by Shari’at, while, on the other hand the repudiation of a wife by her husband, something which, according to the Qur’an presents no difficulties, is practically impossible for the tribes, for that would be an insult to the wife’s family. Vengeance (badal) is commended within the tribal code while the Shari’at attempts to limit the occasions on which it can take place. (35-36)

In the novels the ignorance of the male characters about their religion is clearly reflected in their implementation of the values of their religion and wherever there is any reflection of knowledge it is used against women. In fact the tribal-cultural codes play a stronger role than religion. Patriarchal ideology is visualized as powerfully incorporated into religious beliefs and practices. Men have in one way or the other created it in different contexts and thus religion becomes a contrivance to uphold sexual hegemony and create prominently dimorphic sexual beings. In every possible manner religion has been used to reinforce and reproduce cultural
manifestations of patriarchy on account of the fact that religion is the only arbitrary element which people unquestionably adhere to.

Although changes are taking place over time and no doubt with this even the approach towards the sex preference of a newly born baby has changed but the basic instinct remains there, “At the birth of a boy, all are joyful . . . at the birth of a girl all are sorrowful and when a boy comes into the world, peace comes into the world . . . When a girl comes, nothing comes” (Swidler 140). The notion that God is a male is another important factor contributing to the male dominance. Although there may be female mythic figures in some religions, they do not have the same status as male gods who are all-knowing and powerful. There is always a male god who is the ultimate creator, destroyer and sustainer. No female goddesses are endowed with such attributes.

A Need to Redefine ‘Woman’

Stereotypes are usually the hypothesized scripts or scenarios related to features, roles and possible narrative sequences which take some extreme aspect of a group’s perceived behaviour and generalize that feature as a whole (Mills 143). Although a strenuous job the stereotype regarding women can be changed but for that change there is a need to define these stereotypes in such a way that the changes seem possible. The foremost condition for this change is that women should be ready to take it. They have to take the initiative as Beauvoir writes, “If woman discover herself as the inessential, and never turns into the essential, it is because she does not bring about this transformation herself . . . they have won only what men have been wailing to concede to them; they have taken nothing; they have received (The Second Sex 8). For the liberation of the women it is necessary to dismantle those parts of the male-
centric culture which has left women entirely at the disposal of men. For this change to occur the need is to conceive world as a social entity and not as a physical essence and the beginning point of this change should be the deconstruction of the image of woman in terms of various levels, each of which privileges men and oppresses women. Unless woman as a category is deconstructed the change cannot be brought. The way people think about women in a world dominated by men in all spheres has to be defined anew and the foremost need is to discourage the way of defining women as an object whose nature is determined by biological parameters and whose sole destiny is to reproduce human species and maintain household. Their coming out of the four walls is indispensible for this change.

[Women] have to become aware of that domination. Then they have to believe in their own strength to change it. Those who profit from their "collaboration" have to understand the nature of their betrayal. And finally, those who have the most to lose from taking a stand, that is, women like me who have carved out a successful sinecure or career, have to be willing to risk insecurity – be it merely ridicule – in order to gain self-respect. (Beaviour, "Interview with Simone de Beauvoir")

The belief that anatomy is destiny reflects an impression that it is unnatural of a woman to get involved any activity above her procreative role. This ideology places a stamp of freakishness on women who come out of their houses and ensure that women be taught from the very beginning that their real place is inside their homes to bring up their families in a proper sphere. For a real change the woman has to be conceived not as an object but as a construct produced by the male dominated society and placed in a vacuum of uncertain identity. The question to be probed is not what woman is by nature which can never be ascertained or fixed with the availability of various examples countering each other. It always turns out to be 'fixed' or
‘determined’ in relation to specific culture and society. The area to be examined is, what she is assumed to be in a particular society or culture in which she lives and how those assumptions came about, and whose interests they serve. Once the answers to these questions are thought of, the change may be a possibility. The beginning of this change should come from the word “woman” itself. The first step to study some changes should be problematizing the word ‘woman’ and the idea it denotes and connotes to.

**Woman as a ‘Construct’ in Afghanistan**

As already stated the construction of women and the purpose served varies from culture to culture in different ways with some specific purposes. In the tribal Afghan society, woman is viewed “half of men” (Brodsky 133) and “household honor” (Nojumi, Mazurana, Stites 36). Families traditionally live together in the same walled compound, known as the *kala*. When a son gets married he and his wife begin their married lives in a room under the same roof. Though the situation is different in the urban areas but the basic feature remains the same. The image of the woman has been derived from the *Pashtunwali code* (an ancient ethnic custom and a tribal code of Afghanistan). According to this code which is based on “principles thoroughly rooted in the primacy of maintaining honor and reputation,” (Barfield 59) a woman is considered as a property of her husband. The fate of a woman is decided by the eldest male member of a family and she is supposed to marry her husband’s brother in case of widowhood. *Pashtunwali code* rests on four basic grounds: “*melmastia* (hospitality and protection to guests), *badal* (the right of blood feuds or revenge), *tureh* (bravery), and *purdah* (protection of women)” (Hayes 29).
Throughout history, the preservation of women’s honor through tribal laws often superseded any constitutional law or progressive reform that would have benefitted Afghan women. “The local customs and the negative impact of decades of war determines the position of women in modern Afghan society, ensuring, for the most part, that women remain secluded in the private sphere and have little to no involvement in public life” (Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites, 36). Even women view their identity as central to their family’s identity and not in terms of separate individual spheres. In rural areas not only for women but for men also the value of individual identity is a foreign concept. Elaheh Rostami-Povey writes, “In Afghan society, community and group identity dominates. In rural areas in particular, the concept of individual identity is non-existent” (17). Marriage adds to woman’s curtailment of freedom and she is treated as an object in the hands of men. Rostami-Povey asserts the practice of “exchanging girls and young women to settle tribal feuds or to repay debts remains ingrained” (18). In Afghanistan, male dominated local culture and the negative impact of decades of war determine the position of women and as a result women remain secluded within the four walls of their homes and have little involvement in public life. In addition, during the rule of Mujahidin and then under the Taliban women had added agonies.

One thing peculiar about Afghan society is that if on any occasion the honor of a woman is violated she is considered as a liability on the family and is usually secluded from the rest of the family members. For most Afghan girls, modesty is the most essential element of good breeding; girls are required to keep their heads down in public, to cover their heads in front of males, to be in burqa when outside their homes which is quite rare, not to talk or have an eye contact with strangers and to avoid interaction with boys. These expectations grow with the age of a girl. Moral
standards are closely linked to sexuality, and mobility, expression, and social interactions are not considered a woman’s prerogative. It is inappropriate for a man to speak to a woman on the street. Women must wear loose fitting pants under their skirts and be sure the definition of their legs is undistinguishable to avoid unwanted attention. On the other hand foreign men should note that it is inappropriate to initiate social conversation with a woman, and they should not ask a male about his wife or female relatives. Men and women should never be alone in the same room. If this happens the door should be left open. Men and women should never touch one another under any circumstances. It is also strongly advisable to wear a headscarf in public. The colours of the headscarf or the chadori (an Afghan version of burqa) depend on religion, and geographical location. People of Kabul for instance wear the mid-blue. Very religious women may wear black. The Taliban created a dress code based on religion, Muslim women wore khaki color, and Hindu women wore mustard yellow. However this distinction ended with the end of their rule. And now the color distinction has almost no value at present.

**Socio-biological base of the ‘Construction’**

Socio-biologists assert that women’s roles in child care and other domestic tasks are outcomes of biological adaptations related to reproduction. According to their theories, because pregnancy lasts nine months, mothers have an innate physical and psychic investment in the child that is far more intense than that of fathers whose role in procreation consumes less time and energy. And, because a woman can have fewer children in her lifetime than a man potentially can, she is more concerned with the survival and development of her offspring (Hubbard 3-5).
Most of such theories ignore the role of culture and socialization in the construction of women. Although sex is also a construct and not something biological because of the way it is defined and identified in the society, they dismiss the importance of acquired behaviours and learned expectations. As Ruth Hubbard writes:

Human living necessarily involves an interplay between biological and social forces. We have no way of knowing what people’s “real” biology is, because the concept has no meaning. There is no such thing as human biology in the pure. In other words, what we think of as . . . biology is a political construct, not a scientific one. (6)

In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir counters that women are not born with a maternal instinct. Through many examples she argues that many women are fearful, anxious, and distressed about the prospect of bearing and rearing a child. Therefore she alleges there are many bad mothers also. Most often, women undertake motherhood to fulfill an obligation to the marriage contract as a means to feel superior at least in one area of their lives. If she feels herself always dependent upon her husband, then having a child a woman establishes herself for a time, as the essential and necessary being in relation to the dependent child. (Hansen 4).

Despite evident validity in the argument that biology has a minimal role in gender determination, many people continue to enshrine the ideas of traditional gender roles. In the novels concerned, this vein runs throughout and even the modern characters show some biased attitude to an extent. At a general level, socio-biologists claim that distinctions in social behaviour of men and women are derived from instinctive genetic differences. They begin with the invalid declaration that a certain kind of behaviour is universally associated with women and then deduce the misconception that these features must be genetically programmed. They confuse the
social with genetic and tend to understand the outcomes of social conditioning as genetic.

The widely held impression that woman has been created with an ingrained imperfection which can be supplemented provided she shows her gratitude to man by compliance is historically evidenced. She is supposed to wait for a proper man who will give meaning to her life, get married to him, serve him and bear children for him.

Parents still raise their daughters for marriage rather than promoting their personal development; and the daughter sees so many advantages that she desires it herself; the result is that she is often less specialised, less solidly trained than her brothers, she is less totally committed to her profession; as such, she is doomed to remain inferior in it; and the vicious circle is knotted: this inferiority reinforces her desire to find a husband. (Beauvoir 158)

A woman needs to be intensely sympathetic, immensely charming and utterly unselfish. She has to sacrifice herself daily. “If there was chicken, she took leg; if there was a draught she sat on it- in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others” (Woolf “A Room of One’s Own” 2153). She is treated as what Virginia Woolf used for Victorian women ‘The Angel in the House’, a phrase from a poem written by Coventry Patmore (1823-1896) published in 1854-62. This ‘Angel of the House’ is enough complicated an issue which women avoid questioning although they are the real sufferers; they simply must conciliate, “they must- to put it bluntly-tell lies if they are to succeed” (Woolf 2153). She is symbolically dead and is expected to get tossed from one dependency to another without any consciousness of her own. In this context K. K. Ruthven quotes some lines from 15th century:

A woman is a worthy thyng
They do the washe and do the wrynge
A womane is a worthy wyght
She serveth a man both daye and nyght (73).

Woman in Afghan Society

To Afghan society in the novels under study, women are the emblems of cultural integrity and their bodies are the symbolic and cultural site upon which the men inscribe their moral order. Actually women in Afghanistan are not isolated entities; their fate is strongly related to and determined by historical, cultural and religious forces. As already mentioned in this chapter, Afghan women had been always sidelined as men occupy the dominant positions in all the spheres of life. In historical and religious context, Afghan women do not come out of their homes and participate in active life; any change if witnessed has been limited to elite class only. Nojomi, Mazurana and Stites write, “Today, rural Afghan women countrywide play virtually no role in selecting local leaders and have no or extremely limited involvement in decision making in their villages, communities, and homes” (85). The notion of preserving a woman’s purity has always included controlling her dress, marriage, sexuality, rights, and role in society. Through a theoretical lens, essentialism provides an explanation for the continued oppression of women who reside in war-torn, developing nations. Using this lens, Third World women become a figurative ping-pong ball shuffled between cultural essentialism and gender essentialism, incarcerating them doubly within stunted and stifled roles. Moreover, while the West criticizes certain cultural practices and the denial of women’s rights within Third World countries, the Third World countries tend to epitomize women as the symbol of cultural preservation (Narayan, “Essence of Culture” 83). In another book Uma Narayan describes the Western feminist caricature of Third World women as based on “colonialist representations” (Narayan, Dislocating Cultures 45) where
only an “authentic insider” (33) can have a proper understanding of their oppression. However, Western academic discourse, of which feminism is a part, disregards the authentic insiders and does not treat these insiders as “authentic scholars” (Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures* 149).

*Samira and Samir* (Siba Shakib) is set in post Soviet Afghanistan when there was a powerful struggle among the warlords belonging to different ethnic groups and when the Taliban movement came to power. Unlike the other novel by S. Shakib, women here have not been shown so sharply affected by the war. The cultural set up and historical patriarchal traditions are what stand in the way of women in the novel. The novel is a clear reflection of Beauvoir’s assertion “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (*The Second Sex* 293) as Samira who is brought up as a boy and throughout her life proves to be a strong deconstruct to the image of ‘woman’ created. She proves throughout the novel that a woman is not in any sense inferior to man provided she is brought up at par with him. Samira proves to be a denial of and defiance to the feminine frame set by the Afghan society.

She belongs to the *kuchi* tribe of the Hazara group of Afghanistan who are among the most backward and illiterate people and about whom Siba writes, “They are savages, they know neither law nor reason, friend or enemy” (*Samira and Samir* 14). The only thing they know is that the first child must be a son and he must be taken to the holy rock in the mountains; the rock which has been there for centuries and has passed from firstborn sons of firstborn sons. In the context of the Arab countries, which have to a large extend the similar social and cultural set up like Afghanistan, Beauvoir writes, “there was massive infanticide among Arabs: as soon as they were born, girls were thrown into ditches. Accepting a female child is an act
of generosity on the father's part; the woman enters such societies only through a kind of grace bestowed on her, and not legitimately like males" (The Second Sex 94). In the novel the commander says, "Only if it is a son does it have the right to live" (Shakib, Samira and Samir 10). The commander knows that the people will now talk behind his back that he was not a real man as his first child is not a boy. A first born son is a father's masculinity affidavit.

Samira is held culpable for being a girl as Daria wishes, "Instead of being born a girl you had been born dead" (Shakib, Samira and Samir 18). To keep his head high, the commander decides to keep the sex of his child a secret and says "We will give her the name Samira, we will call her Samir, he says, lowers his eyes, does not look at Daria, says so that people think you have given me a son" (Shakib, Samira and Samir 2). The commander might have got rid of his girl-son but "the rock's law and his father's father say his first born child must be a son" (Shakib, Samira and Samir 23). Naming Samira as Samir in itself unfolds the mind of the commander and its imprisonment in the cultural norms which decides where he falls short of and where the culture proves to be a far stronger force than the man. This episode proves that man is also a puppet in the hands of culture and no matter how hard he may strive to come out of this grip, he fails. The commander is shown as not so harsh on Daria. Usually the blame is pinned onto a woman to have given birth to a girl and she is punished for this but Daria's giving birth to Samira doesn't bring any catastrophe of this sort to her. However he rebukes her, "It is your fault that the first child you pulled out of your body was not a real boy. It is your fault that I have no son that I can take with me to the rock. It is your fault that I shall no longer be ruler of the upland" (Shakib, Samira and Samir 30).
Man’s transcendence is not only psycho-social but also biological. He knows how not to feel the throes of pain and a woman’s pain remains exclusive. It is a contradictory belief that a son’s birth is testimony to father’s masculinity which subsumes father’s biological responsibility for the determination of the sex of the child. On the other hand, woman is penalized for the birth of a female child and loses her teeth and is denied the normal sexual practice that can impregnate her with a child.

Gender-based Demarcation

In the socio-cultural site in *Samira and Samir* there is a strong demarcation between the two territories which are hierarchically stratified; all what is frivolous and negative has been associated with the woman and whatever is normal and positive with the men. Women are supposed to be shy, caring, responsive, dreaming and beautiful whereas men as tough, coarse, ‘insolent’, wild and brave. And anything other than the status quo is treated as threat and is dealt with severely. The basic problem form a male point of view is, “... because they find it strange for a woman to behave like a man” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 274). When Samira questions Bashir, “… do you think a girl can have as much strength as a boy? Walk like a boy? Go to school, go to the bazaar, strike deals, haggle, spit, fight, sit with men in the teahouse, hunt, play *buzkashi*, do all that and everything else like a boy, like a real boy, even though she is a girl” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 172), he is stunned and asks, “What? What do you mean by that” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 172) with a loud and shrill voice. In fact this is not what is expected from a woman at all and Bashir’s reaction portrays this in very bold terms. In fact this boundary between the two sexes
is gender based where the attributes and behavioural patterns are clearly labeled. A further passage from *Samira and Samir* elucidates this aspect:

... her soft features that have hardened because she is outside all the day, rides wildly, climbs on the mountains, because she shoots, fights with the other boys, because she chops wood, because she has become a boy. Her child’s beautiful dark eyes glitter wildly, her little nose has become wide and hard because she has fights with the other boys, her beautiful lips are course and torn because she always bites them, because she always has the short whip for *buzkashi* game or the reins of her horse between her teeth. (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 88)

**Education: A Male Prerogative**

Samira is considered capable for education only because she is living in the boy’s guise otherwise even the grandfather might have had a different opinion. Only the teacher shows some real sense as he tells Samira, “People think girls do not need to be able to read and write. They think girls are not as clever as boys. And because girls eventually turn into women, people there is no point in girls going to school because they cannot use their knowledge later on anyway” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 131). At another place the novelist writes about Commander Rashid who assumes the role of patriarch after the death of Samira’s father that it is unnecessary for women to be able to read and write. The Commander does not see the point of it. “He thinks girls must follow their men and bring up their children” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 255). Samira does not even know what a school means and asks “What is school” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 116) and the answer specifies education as male prerogative only. Her grandfather replies, “School is a place where lots of boys learn lots of new things” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 116). It would have been more interesting to see the grandfather’s reaction had he come to know Samira’s secret.
Siba Shakib debunks the stereotype of woman through Samira’s character and her intention is no doubt clear in her message that it is not the sex of a person which stands in her or his way but it is the way how a person is brought up in a society. Bashir, who according to the social set up is supposed to dominate Samira, follows her until he knows she is a girl. Siba writes, “Samira knows Bashir will follow her. Samira says Bashir do this and he does it, she says, do that, and he does that” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 174). Samira with the same body that she is born with can command respect and be a natural leader for Bashir and others. Samira proves to be far better than the other men particularly in the areas supposedly considered men’s but Samira herself does not like this enforced gender bending as she says, “I don’t like men who pretend to be women. And I don’t like men who put their arms around other men” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 186). However for her there are limited gender options, she has to be either this or that. Another very important aspect of her personality is caring and loving nature. There is not a single instance in the novel where she is cruel at heart in spite of all the difficulties she faces. It can be claimed that Siba Shakib conforms to the image of the woman constructed. It may also be possible to say that she wants to show the humane side of a person.

**Trans-gendering and the Dilemma**

Samira lives the life of a man more successfully than a real man. Her mother aptly puts it about her, “A woman who lives the life of men more successfully than any man I have ever known” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 235). She shows the traits which are socially identified with men like “She rises to her feet, spits, wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, leaves the boys and girls sitting in the meadow, stamps off” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 49). Siba Shakib says with a marked tone of
irony that Samira proves, “As brave as a real boy” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 52). At many places in the novel she swallows down the tears and comes out as a man as the society demands, “A real man does not cry” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 56). She gives a harsh retort to the stereotypical image of woman and performs those acts which are manly in the eyes of the people:

Samira sharpens the already sharpened knife, gives one last, merciful sip of water to the animal, which after all has been created by God, grips it by the legs, jerks them out from under its body so that it falls on to the ground, presses her knee to her chest, puts the knife to its neck, whispers a mute *be-isme-Allah*, and with the quick cut slits the sheep’s throat. (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 70)

She is the best *buzkashi* player in her tribe. She is the invincible rider who is hard and strong enough to defeat anybody. Samira’s case affirms that women are no way weaker than a man in any respect.

One thing which is noteworthy in Shakib’s novels is that although women suffer but they never give up. Samira, Daria and Shirin Gol suffer; they are subjugated and victimized by war, man, poverty, history, culture and God’s fury but they remain bold till the end. Same is the case with Khaled Hossieni’s Mariam and Laila. Though Shirin Gol loses but Samira, Mariam, Laila and Daria not only win but also substantiate one of the major themes in *Samira and Samir* that success is not the matter of strength but of practice. Even Shirin Gol cannot be called a loser as she fights throughout her life. Like Shirin-Gol, Mariam too succeeds in granting Laila and her family a peaceful and happy life. Siba Shakib believes in the strength of women, and in the spirit of female friendship as it is the only consolation for them in the novels. Samira comes out as a defeated but strong lady. She is strong because she endures much; she is defeated because she has to leave the village. She comes up to
the expectations of all, her father, her mother, and her one armed grandfather, Gol-Sar, Bashir and all the other villagers. She is strong because she does everything right and does not accept defeat. She swallows her tears and always fights back. She deserves appreciation throughout the novel and particularly towards the end when she manages to kill ‘Gol-Sar’s Samir’. Above all she breaks the myth of the ‘Angel of the House’ and proves that there is no essential difference between a man and a woman and that it is the society which attributes specific characteristics to the sexes. The way Samira takes the charge of her mother and later her father gives an appropriate answer to the one sided image of woman created by her tribe. Feeding and protection is the man’s work in the novel and “Spreading out the bedding is women’s work” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 74) but she takes care of her family but and Bashir as well who is effeminate and in a sharp contrast to her. Her bravery gets man demonstrated when commander Rashid foresees the possibility that, “You might be able to teach him [Bashir] to be a real boy” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 129). This episode makes fun of the dichotomy where female is kept at the periphery and male at the center. Samira’s life puts the phrase ‘the weaker sex’ into question.

It can be taken as an established fact, as already discussed in the beginning of this chapter, that the kind of parenting a child is given depends on its sex and the child also responds accordingly. This difference become so marked that it somehow shifts its position from cultures to nature and anything short of it is considered illogical and abnormal. It is at this stage of life from where the plinth of gender construction in placed as Judith Lorber writes, “For an individual, gender construction starts with assignment to a sex category on the basis of what the genitalia look like at birth. Then babies are dressed or adorned in a way that displays the category because parents don’t want to be constantly asked whether their baby is a girl or a boy” (289). In this
context the parenting of a transsexual individual poses a serious problem and makes an interesting study in the form of this novel.

Samira is a born victim of patriarchal society as she gets utterly confused between her sexual identity of a boy and a girl. The trauma increases with the age and at one stage becomes so intense that she stays inside her hut for days together. She always feels afraid of being discovered a girl in the guise of a boy. Samira was not conscious of her identity and her sex. She does not know the difference between a boy and a girl. She is in love with the word ‘boy’ as her father use to call her until she sees something dangles between a boy’s legs which she has not seen before and she questions him “what do you need that for?” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 51) and she gets the reply- a reply which changed the course of her life- that “all real boys have one” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 51). Samira asks her mother, “am I not a real boy” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 52). This question forms the crux of the novel as it underlines Samira’s identity crises and victimization. Samira henceforth keeps asking, ‘who am I?’ She becomes the victim of her father’s tradition, of the patriarchal fiber of her tribe, of her mistake of being a girl, of not being a boy and of not being the ‘first-born son’ of her father. The real test starts now as she is to live the life of Samir, ‘the brave boy’; the difference she was not aware of till now. She is to have a dual identity which would gradually get obliterated because she could neither be Samira nor Samir to her full.

Samira is caught in the crises of her body which is highlighted by the writer throughout the novel. Shakib perhaps wants to convey that it is the body which is one of the reasons which give men an excuse to look down upon women. Here Samira feels defeated due to her body which needs to be kept a secret. At the climax of the
novel Samira feels that with the passage of time it will become difficult for her to maintain identity as Samir. She realizes that her “breasts are getting bigger and bigger” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 145) making it difficult for her to conceal her identity. Thus again her body becomes her limitation and she feels defeated. Even in the case of man the issue of the body is there when Olfat says, “our commander is not a real man himself. He has only fathered a single son, and he has lost his manhood as well” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 72). Manhood is identified with power and thus dominance. Body issue is therefore there in the novel in broad terms and has been taken up as a construct as the sex has been. Body and sex are interrelated and thus the construction of one leads to the construction to the other.

Essentialist view is that some attributes are determined from the very birth of a person; they are ‘natural’ and related with the biological differences between the two sexes. They tend to think on these terms no matter how far they go in terming themselves as the champions of women’s emancipation. Though exceptions have been always there but in the novel we hardly find any exceptional example as almost all the male characters have the same attitude. However Samira poses as a serious threat to this facet of essentialism when she says to Bashir, “You think it is God’s work to make a real boy out of me? That is not true. Whatever I am, or I am not, I myself made me” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 166). When Bashir responds with a typical masculine answer, “Some things are as they are, and cannot be changed” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 166) Samira replies in very harsh words, “Who said that? Where is that written” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 166)? In this regard the story of the girl and the calf which Samira narrates to Bashir needs a mention as the girl in the story proves like Samira that it is a not a matter of strength but of practice to gain success. The girl points to the king, “Your deeds deserve no admiration . . . If a person
practises the same thing over and over again, his success is guaranteed. Your success is not a result of your strength and your courage, but the result of practice and experience" (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 168). The king although does not agree at this stage and orders to kill her but later on when she showcases her strength gained through practice. The king falls flat and is proved wrong. He seeks forgiveness and marries her. The story gains an allegorical importance in getting to the roots of Samira’s case who, like the girl in the story, proves this view wrong and comes out as a winner. Samira does not only win her case but also leaves the structure of essentialist view shattered and collapsed.

**Sexuality as an Issue**

Samira’s sexual orientation is also related with her enforced gender bending as sexual preference of an individual depends on his/her upbringing. Many a times in the novel one feels that Samira’s is herself not able to decide whom she should feel attracted to. This also adds to her problem at a psychological level. Judith Lorber comments, “Sex doesn’t come into play again until puberty, but by that time, sexual feelings and desires and practices have been shaped by gendered norms and expectations” (289), acquires importance in Samira’s case. Sexually Samira is equally inclined towards Gol-sar as well as Bashir sexually. Her conscience asks her again and again “Do you like the sister more than the brother” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 200). Her sexually motivated encounters with both sister and brother somehow give weight to this observation. On the part of Gol-sar this act is quite normal because for her Samira is a real man. At one place, “Samira looks at her, wants to touch her, wants to stroke her. She does not know why she wants this” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 160). Samira is herself not able to see the reason behind this liking and she
does feel disturbed as, “She does not know what is happening to her, more than that she does not want to know” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 60).

Another instance comes to light in Samira’s encounter with the girl prostitute where, “The only thing that Samira sees clearly is the bare breasts of the former girl prostitute. The only thought that has room in her head is the question of how it can be that she liked what she saw” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 152). When viewed from another facet she is interested in Bashir also as she somehow feels good when she is kissed by him at the time of her accident. At a later encounter, “She feels her body as she has never felt it before, she sinks into Bashir’s arms, drowns in his caresses, in his pleasure” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 243).

Bashir accepts Samira as a homosexual partner and makes love to her thinking that she is a man. But once he comes face to face with the reality he feels ashamed about his act. One can infer that he is quite comfortable with homosexuality but not with heterosexuality of this strange nature. There is a vague suggestion in the novel that he makes love to Samira out of his affection, however the explanation does not holds much ground. When the secret of her being a woman is revealed to him, the typical Afghan man in him wakes up and he shows his anger at her manly activities. He cannot have sympathy for Samira because Samira’s burden has increased now as after his discovery she will have to live as Samir in front of Gol-Sar and others and as Samira in front of him. Those actions which were earlier appreciated by him and which he used to follow are seen with contempt by him; he says in anger, “Stop that…. The throwing, the carving. The squatting on stones like a man. The walking up and down, like a man, being Samir. You should behave like a woman. You should behave like Samira” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 246). The man in him comes to
senses and his sudden change reflects the essentialist dichotomization of the sexes. The novelist portrays him as a typical man who takes everything related to a woman for granted. Bashir wants Samira to come into the man made world by marrying him and cutting herself to the frame of a socially constructed woman. This action on his part makes Samira realize that he too is after all a child of the culture and she comes to a stage where she is to make a choice between her love and freedom.

Samira is not able to come to terms with Bashir’s definition of a woman. From a social point of view she is supposed to get into the fold of a conventional woman but, “She does not know how to live without fishing and hunting, without going to school or the bazaar, without all that and much else” (Shakib, Samira and Samir 271). There is some effort on her part to come to terms with the masculine world around her but she is not able to subdue the ‘free Samir’ living inside her. “She does not want to act like a man. She wants to stop being a man, she wants to be a woman. A real woman … in the evening she collects woods, lights the fire, spreads out the blankets, unpacks the bread and cheese, puts the pot on fire, sits beside it, puts tea in the port, fills the glass, hands it to Bashir” (Shakib, Samira and Samir 277-278). The role assignment of husband and wife in an Afghan family as evidenced in the Commander’s household in the beginning of the novel is re-indorsed in Bashir’s expectations from Samira by the end. Bashir loses the already meek chances of living a life of a typical Afghan husband with Samira. As expected Samira chooses freedom and leaves her love behind; love which made her weak for a moment. Her choice to choose freedom substantiates her strength and courage from which she strayed for a moment.
An Important Role Played by War

War plays an important role in the novels not only as a setting but as an important character. In *Samira and Samir* there are only some passing references unlike the other three novels. On one hand it works against Samira by making her life miserable due to her father's lost of manhood and later on his death. It brings poverty and grief as she has to leave her uplands and move towards the plains. It is the war which makes her grandfather invalid and leads her to go out to earn livelihood. But on the other hand it is the war which gives her an opportunity to prove herself in comparison with other men in the novel. Had there been no war Samira would not have to take care of her mother and she would not have to come out of her tent too often which was no doubt indispensable to break the construct of woman. War gives her a symbolic courage by denying her entry into the frame created for the woman. Thus war helps her to break the stereotype regarding woman in the novel as it gives her a chance to prove her worth in all the fields of life. The most important role played by the war is that it kills 'Samir'. Had it not been there it would have been very difficult for her to come out of this predicament. It was due to the war only that the villagers believe that their Samir had stepped on a mine in pursuit of saving hadji's sheep. Though the above assessment never means that war is in any sense justified in the novel.

Gol-Sar's character gives the reader some real insight about how a woman feels with reference to her relationship with man. She is quite conscious about the disparity between the roles assigned to the two sexes. Although she lacks the strength she is somewhere like Shirin-Gol (*Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*) and Laila (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*) and is in a sharp contrast to Firouza and the
girl prostitute. In fact it is through her character that Siba Shakib throws ample light on the status of women in Afghan society in general and Hazara tribe in particular. In her talk to Samira she says, “That is not fair. You must know that girls understand much more than you men think” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 158). These lines uttered by her forms a very important strain of the novel and are in a way a message to the men like the Commander, Olfat, Bashir and Commander Rashid who take women as dumb creators and think that they are just an object of desire. These men are in a sense the representatives of the tribal culture of the Hazaras. Gol-sar’s asks, “Do you think it is easy to see my brother being able to do whatever he wants? He does everything. Yet I am allowed to do nothing” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 160). Another question is more important and revealing as well when she asks his Samir “Am I not a human being? Does the same blood not flow through my veins as flows through my brother’s veins? What is different about me” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 160)?

The novel ends in what may be called an open ending where readers can draw their own conclusions:

She swings on to the back of her father’s stallion, urges him on, leaves the Hindu Kush and Bashir behind, doesn’t swallow down her tears, weeps. Weeps until her weeping turns to laughter. It is a laughter that she doesn’t lose quickly, laughter that will stay with her for a long time. It is the laughter of a woman. A real woman. It is the laughter of Samira. (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 280)


Hubbard, Ruth. "Social Effects of some Contemporary Myths about Women." 


