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**War across Mediums: A Comparative Study of *The Outpost* and *The Patience Stone***

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**Abstract:**

This paper posits a comparative study of the creative representation of Afghan wars in two divergent genres: movie and novel. By selecting Atiq Rahimi's novel *The Patience Stone* and Rod Lurie's movie *The Outpost*, both impactful in their narration of war, the study attempts to recognize perceptions of different genres. Both mediums render the first-hand experience of people in war, partaking two different spectrums of war experience. The novel depicts the Afghan civilians' experience of living in a war zone constantly bombarded by war realities. The movie delves into the world of the American soldiers stationed at an army base camp in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan and closely follows the American soldiers' viewpoints on warfare. The comparative endeavors may seem non-objective at the outset. Different ideological formulas of commercial success drive popular movies about war at the box office. In contrast, novels on war are much more detailed, and they resonate deeply with readers for their unique expressions and portrayal of nuances of experiences of the characters. The comparative approach helps in exploring war as a patriarchal enterprise. The schisms in perspectives, narratives, and ideologies are not just the result of the medium in which they are conceived but also engage with the representation dynamics and reflect the core ideologies that govern them. The focus of the paper is to track the patriarchal manifestations in war practices, the question of women in war, and the divergence in their depiction of war.

**Keywords:** war, patriarchy, war movies, war novels, male gaze

Afghanistan's history is a cluster of multiple invasions and wars. The Russian invasion (1979-1989), Afghanistan's internal conflicts with the Taliban and warlords, and America's invasion (2001-2011) made Afghanistan a playground for European powers. Women in war is a much-discussed and contested theme. War is man's exclusive terrain in general discourses. Lina Abirafeh, in *Muslim Women in War and Crisis*, observes that women's rights were the subject of much discussion in the country's internal and external

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politics (77). In this context of Afghanistan's history of war, the portrayal of war in different genres becomes an interesting venture.

The setting of *Patience Stone* is the protagonist's house, and the narration records the brutality of the war fought for power and control by different internal forces in Afghanistan. It has the predominant voice of a woman narrator, who is a testimonial to the onslaughts of war and patriarchy. The plight of the woman in the background of war is the result of the combined forces that make the daily existence of people a difficult battle. The woman's narration offers a savage indictment of war. Her monologues demonstrate the common grounds of war and patriarchy. She has lived in fear and muteness, obeying different patriarchs: her father, husband, and mother-in-law. Her husband's injury in war immobilizes him and leaves him to be tended by the wife. The man's injury was not while he was at war. The man got shot in the neck in an inglorious, petty fight involving a soldier from his side when the latter insulted his mother. The man becomes a mute symbol for the ravages of war, and more importantly, he represents how war as a system works. He does not exist as a full-blown person, but rather, the assumptions about his character depend upon the woman's (the protagonist) account of him. The story centers around him. The title of the novel can also partially refer to him. Comatose and confined to bed, the man becomes an absorbing stone for his wife's unraveling of herself. In his living time, she had been the patient stone for all the unjust treatment she had met with in the name of patriarchy, war, and religion. Until her husband slipped into a coma, she was a *sang-e-saber*, a patience stone, of all oppressions foisted by different patriarchal structures - familial, religious, war, and cultural.

The object state of the husband tests the woman's struggle for survival. She tries to leave him but comes back amidst chaos and bombardment, "Outside, some are yelling, some crying, and some firing their Kalashnikovs, who knows where from or towards whom... just firing, firing..." (*Patience Stone* 32). She employs strenuous efforts to revive the husband from his coma. She repeats the reciting of 'Al-Qahar' all through days as a last-ditch effort. As the man takes a breath, she repeats the 'Al-Qahar.' Nursing her husband in a coma, she finds herself positioned in a novel circumstance. She talks to him for the first time in their marital life until it becomes a vent of all the accumulated brutality absorbed over the years. She confesses the darkest secrets of her childhood, the truth about her kids, and her anger and rage towards the system. The woman mulls over the changed scenario of the country and the life around her, constantly bombarded by war.

The novel equilibrates war portrayal with depictions of both parties involved: warmongers and civilians. The narration of war from a female gaze helps us see the mechanism of war tied to gender politics. The male gaze sees women as one-dimensional presences in the plots, as victims or signifiers, fitting into an assortment of roles constructed

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men for their convenience. The male gaze often presents war as an attractive venture glorifying both war and men at war. Complexity and moral ambiguity, which are two aspects of war, remain primarily absent in cinema portrayal of war, as it commodifies women into traditional roles. The female gaze uncovers the myths associated with men's portrayal of war as a game and its complexities and ambiguities.

The transposed scenario of speaking back to the husband relocates the power dynamics in the familial setting that had earlier circumscribed her capacities to mute, obedient roles of a daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law. Her previous endurance of the unjust practices by her family transfigures into a robust articulation of her thoughts and experiences in the absence of the perennial threat of a patriarch. She tells the man that their children were not born of him. The outcome confirms the speculation of the woman that her rendering of the final truth releases her and brings her husband to life. The central ironies of the narration lie in the last scene: Firstly, the muting of the husband's voice releases the repressed voice of the woman. Secondly, the man in a coma who lies inert in all circumstances and listens to all the dark secrets of his life revives to life when he hears of her stories of cheating on him.

The novel presents the inglorious facet of war. It exposes war as a cultural product emulating patriarchal ideologies. Soldiers imbibe the primordial requirements for a man: to be rude, stringent, antipathetic towards the feminine, and ready to kill. The internal conflicts between different groups that justify violence in the name of holy war configure soldiers' approach to war. The insiders' perspective of the soldiers and civilians adds a layered depth to understanding war dynamics. The novel's central perspective engages the entangled question of women stuck in war spaces. Rahimi unconventionally presents his heroine without falling into the trap of making her a saintly figure. In the words of Khaled Hosseini, "Rahimi has broached a great Afghan taboo: the notion of a woman as a sexual being. (Introduction, *Patience Stone*). Cilja Harders writes in *Gender Relations, Violence and Conflict Transformation* (2011), "Wars are a product of social interaction, as human beings engage in dynamics of escalation. Furthermore, societies develop intricate material and symbolic structures, which "allow" the use of violence on an individual level" (135).

War's moral ambiguity, complexity, and paradoxes manifest in the characters. Soldiers loot the house that belongs to one of them. They rape married women but avoid touching prostitutes. The soldiers who enter the protagonist's house rob the wedding band from her husband but retract from the house, avoiding plundering it further, when they notice the Koran on the ground. The Afghan soldiers suddenly abandon the intention of raping the woman when the woman lies to them that she is a widow, making a living by selling her body. They insult her and threaten to kill her but leave outraged, "Come on, we're getting out of here. This is an ungodly house!" (*Patience Stone* 82). She ruminates about it before

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man, "Men like him are afraid of whores. And do you know why? I'll tell you, my *anger-e-saber*: when you fuck a whore, you don't dominate her body. It's a matter of exchange. You give her money, and she gives you pleasure. And I can tell you that she's the dominant one. It's she who is fucking you."(82). The boy soldier who comes to her for pleasure narrates to her his exploitation by other soldiers, "[...] (they) kidnapped him and put a Kalashnikov in his hands, and bells on his feet in the evenings. He makes him dance."(119). The mad woman in the neighborhood who wanders in the rubble adds another testimonial to the war atrocities. Her songs narrate her losses, "The king wept as he listened to me! He even asked my husband and son to dance to my song. They danced. The king asked them to dance the dance of the dead... they didn't know it... so he taught them by cutting off their heads and pouring boiling oil on their bodies... well, that made them dance!"(45-46)

### **Male Gaze towards the Game of War**

The movie *The Outpost* claims to be based on an actual incident. The American army established an outpost in Kamdesh, Afghanistan, in 2006 to counter insurgent attacks by the Taliban. The purpose was to connect with the locals and to stop the flow of weapons and Taliban fighters from Pakistan. Located in a remote valley, surrounded by the Hindu Kush mountains, the Outpost is also known as the Camp Custer, as the challenging terrain sabotaged the efforts of the soldiers to fight the insurgents. The location's predisposition to be watched from the hills proves to be disadvantageous to the base camp, giving the upper hand to the Taliban. The area is an antithesis of the Garden of Eden, a "shit hole" as described by the soldiers. The fast-paced action in the movie is reminiscent of video games, which again take cues from war films in which gamers are cussing, firing, and taking defenses, with intermittent scenes where they rush to save the lives of their buddies in action. The targets before them are devoid of any human trace as they shell and bombard the enemy line. There is the projection of virtuous war, a narrative built to sustain the righteousness of the invasion. The portrayal of the enemy as troublesome and inhuman with motives of pointless malevolence strengthens the narratives of waging war to establish peace. The erasure of the voices from the other end becomes important to sustain the ethical superiority of the American army. Their ideological ground for the invasion extends the Just War theory.

Two things deeply resonate with disturbing questions about the representation of war in this movie. Firstly, it is near to the total absence of women's voices and portraying the war as a men's game. One of the women shown on screen is raped and murdered, the charges of which fall on American soldiers. The commander quickly denies the charges and still pays relief to assuage the local people. Soldiers talk of their women in their leisure. Amid gore and killings, the soldiers on both sides take recourse to memories of women, family, love, and sex: talking to their women in between wars, keeping themselves alive with the dreams of returning home to their families, sniffing the panties of women, keeping photographs of

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their loved ones. The references to women bear connotations of men's desire in different forms. They become the signifiers of male desires portended to them. However, the film has many lacunae. The movie manifests the dominant ideologies of popular cinema - men as the signified and women as signifiers. As Laura Mulvey observes about cinema, "(the movie) codes the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" 805); the women serve as objects of scopophilic gaze even in their absence. There are some weird incidents where a soldier takes a photo of another soldier's wife and masturbates. The soldier learns about it, and he punishes him by asking him to push up. In the novel *Patience Stone*, a soldier sniffs at the bra of the woman whose house he enters, intending to rape her. Mulvey explains the element that ensures success for movies with dominant ideology as it "[...] satisfies the primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect" (807). She explains that the spectators in the cinema combine "[...] the repression of their exhibitionism and the projection of the repressed desire onto the performer" (807).

Secondly, the Afghan presence in the movie takes very few semiotic cues: the call for prayer, the Azan, the bullets coming from the hills, and a few leaders who are non-communicable or whose language of communication is entirely undecipherable to the military base in Kamdesh. The locals are understood only with the help of a translator. The movie does not include an Afghan voice that is heard or understood, nor does it give a picture of the actual situation on their side. The American soldiers fight a battle spurred by the malicious intent of the enemies. On the other hand, they fight to bring peace and order and check insurgency. The total erasure of the other voice, the absence of characters who can give an accurate picture of the other side, and the mismatch in the motives on the sides exaggerate the differences and work favorably for the American side. Throughout the movie, the only Afghan who speaks with the army and understands their language is the one who supports them.

The predominance of cuss words in the military vocabulary of the soldiers gives out the semiotic and semantic predominance of certain things like fighting, courage, death, and home in the minds of the soldiers. The word 'fuck' figures in almost all the sentences of the soldiers. Their vocabulary and response to the act of insurgence are similar to those of people engaged in video games. The movie follows the journey motif, the archetypal hero/heroes who are on a grand mission to kill the mischief mongers, 'motherfuckers', and 'bastards' targeted in cinematic style.

Thus, the Afghan force or the counterforce becomes a mute symbol, the arch nemesis of the American soldiers who take war as a game. Amidst the violence and mindless cussing, there are incidents that serve to reflect the tender, humanitarian side of the American soldiers.

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characters' actions, like acts of service, friendship, and sacrifice, project the high moral standards of soldiers, which is an essential ingredient for the commercial success of a war movie.

The movie excludes the presence of Afghan civilians in their terrain except for a few characters who do not have a full-fledged presence in the film. The movie also upholds the right manner of war actions. The American woman denies its role in the rape and murder of a local woman but still agrees to pay relief money to appease the tribals. The refute is substantiating the precision of the targeted killing of the enemies. The ideologies conforming to warfare rule out any scope for moral ambiguity in the movie that glorifies war, American strategies of waging war, and the light, playful fighting treating war as a game. The movie's inversion of the core realities of war outside the Outpost submerges the movie in artificially created scenes intended to eulogize the bravery, friendship, and values of the American soldiers. The actions of male characters, to look at women as commodified objects, serve as the leitmotif in the movie. The male characters are the onlookers, with the power of the male gaze to look at war. The novel provides a direct alternative narrative to dismantle the male gaze with the female gaze. The woman in the novel sees through the patriarchal system that creates war. The woman can see through what the male gaze constructs war and, as an alternative, offers her immobilized husband the benefit of the doubt through the female gaze.

Some of the similar contents in the projection of war in both the novel and the movies are the firm ideological grip of patriarchal ideologies that govern war. Secondly, masculinity is an accompanying element of war in both projections. The projections show it to be an ideal venerated by patriarchy. Distinct social institutions are in cogitation of patriarchy and comply with its core tenets. The most significant point of departure is in the manner of representation and ideological bases that both genres exploit. The novel's primary mode of depiction is by creating the soundscape of war. The movie *The Outpost* depends upon visuals to render war. The visuals capture the rawness of war. It is a graphic portrayal of the nuances of war, bloodshed, and disasters, picturized in vivid details. The movie presents the unending reinforcement of Afghan insurgents as stock villains putting themselves out to disturb the American soldiers. The narration shaped by Western ideologies strips the film of its moral ambiguity. The movie often seems like a deliberate, artificial construction of war scenes.

As Daniel Lieberfeld remarks, "The morality, politics, memory, and even the sensory experience of war are all contradictory, complex, and ambiguous" (571); the film and the novel give a concrete, experiential outlook on war. Both genres sufficiently present the psychological price paid by soldiers in war. Women are outsiders in war's vocabulary and contexts. However, there is a significant divergence in the war portrayal in the novel. The movie *Outpost* presents war as a men's game without any role or place for women. The

most critical thematic and ideological difference distinguishing a novel from a film on war is that it contests the myths and popular assumptions concerning the war that the movie *The Outpost* supports and subscribes to the attraction of war in the popular imagination.

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