

## CONSTRUCTING DIALOGICAL SELF THROUGH FEMALE MASCULINITY IN THE TALIBAN CRICKET CLUB

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### Abstract

*This study gives an insight into how the counterhegemonic action subverts the discourse of patriarchy in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. The counter-normative behavior adopted by Rukhsana, the protagonist of the selected text, presents a sharp foil to the discourse of masculinity in Afghanistan. She weds masculinity to femaleness by wielding power and domination to it. Timeri N Murari's depiction of female masculinity in his novel *The Taliban Cricket Club*, published in 2012, is analyzed by employing Judith Jack Halberstam's queer theory with special emphasis on her concept of female masculinity. This study is qualitative in nature, and the method of textual analysis is used to get the desired results of the female masculinity in the text by employing Judith Halberstam's theory in combination with Bakhtin's (1981) dialogism and Paulo Friere's (2005) dialogical self.*

**Key Words:** Dialogical Self, Female Masculinity, Dialogism, Subjectification, *The Taliban Cricket Club*

### Introduction

Timeri N Murari is an Indian novelist, journalist, and playwright. He has published fourteen novels, including his work under study, published in 2012. This novel is about a young girl, Rukhsana, a professional journalist. She had lived in India, where she studied mass communication. She is often called to appear in the Ministry of the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, where Minister Zorak Wahidi has secret designs for her. When the Taliban allowed the cricket team to hold a tournament to participate internationally, Rukhsana arranged her team as she had been a cricket player while she lived in India. She wears a male dress and is out of her home. She finds it the only way for her brother and cousin to escape Afghanistan. In Timeri N. Murari's *The Taliban Cricket Club*, the female agency explicitly and implicitly negotiates with native social norms by reimagining masculinity to violate gender conformity, as theorized by Judith Jack Halberstam. (2018). In his book *Female Masculinity* (1998), Judith

Halberstam discusses the concept of female masculinity at length. Female masculinity can be judged concerning the idea of masculinity constructed in society. Masculinity in society is associated with power, legitimacy, and privilege (Rahimi, 2010). In a patriarchal society, these three constructs are usually associated with males, for males dominate the social structure. However, when we neutralize the relationship of power and maleness to include other strata of society, i.e., females, to control power or grab privilege and legitimacy, female masculinity takes its birth (1998, 1-2). In *The Taliban Cricket Club*, which is set in the strict patriarchal society of the Taliban, Rukhsana, the protagonist, exercises her agency by subverting the gender role to gain power, legitimacy, and privilege. She achieves this not through confrontation or the use of force but by adopting the dialogue process as posited by Bakhtin in his dialogism.

Bakhtin (1984) defines dialogism as a process of meaning-making through interaction among different societal stakeholders. In Bakhtin's original idea, dialogism is the process of meaning-making through interaction between the author, the work, and the reader. According to Bakhtin (1986), any spoken or written utterance used by people in communication is known as dialogism. He further elaborates that dialogue is a speech that is the very base of human life in society. Through dialogue, one can manipulate social norms by implementing the attributes of dialogue as postulated by Paulo Freire in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005). As theorized by Freire (2005), the concepts are appropriate for the circumstances Rukhsana faces. She is an Afghan girl who will find her way using specific pedagogy parameters. The main attributes are love and trust, achieved by demolishing the top-down hierarchy. She accepts all the rules and regulations of the Taliban government, though against her will. She repeatedly appears in the ministry on every call to build trust. At the same time, she has got a complete master plan for her life along with her family. She devises a counter-hegemonic normative strategy for the agency to change from object position to acquire the subject position, which she follows successfully. She avoids any hate speech so that the atmosphere required for dialogue might not get disturbed. Ultimately, she constructs a dialogical self through female masculinity within the patriarchal social setting of Afghanistan during the Taliban era.

#### **Research Objectives:**

1. To find the ways for specific situations offering plausibility for any counterplay and resultant resubjectification of women in the patriarchal society of Afghanistan.
2. To generate insight into the juxtaposition of the fate of women in Afghanistan and their circumstances in the outer world.

### **Research Questions:**

1. To what extent does the discourse of counter-gender adopted by the protagonist prove supportive of assuming female subjectification?
2. How uniquely does the early life experience in a foreign culture contribute to violating native archetypes of Afghanistan?

### **Literature Review**

Literature Review examines into past research relevant to the topic. It analyzes existing knowledge by summarizing previous studies, their methods, key findings, and how they contribute to the field (e.g., Khokhar et al., 2018; Maitlo et al., 2022, 2024; Soomro et al., 2023; Kalhoro et al., 2023).

Interestingly, despite its 2012 publication, Timeri N. Murari's novel "The Taliban Cricket Club" seems to have been overlooked by academic research. While some brief reviews exist, no scholarly articles or critiques analyzing the book were found. Extensive searches using various academic databases yielded no relevant research to incorporate into this literature review.

A review of the novel is available on the Goodreads website. According to this review, the Taliban government ventures to create a soft image of their cruel regime. That is why the cricket tournament is scheduled. The Taliban government strives to "give the brutal regime a cloak of respectability in the world" (Goodreads). Hashmi (2015) narrated in the review that the dissenting voice is silenced in the name of propagation of virtue and prevention of vice; for that purpose, a ministry of this name is constituted. Minister Wahidi summons Rukhsana, the protagonist, every other day to discipline her role as a journalist. Wahidi goes beyond and uses force to capture Rukhsana to make her his wife as a permanent solution.

YaraQutteina, L., James-Hawkins, Laurie, Al-Khelaifi, B., & Yount, K. M. (2019) have declared *The Taliban Cricket Club* as a harrowing yet tender novel in their review, which is available on their website. The novel is moving with "an unforgettable tale of one woman's courage and guile in the face of terror and tyranny" (35). The novel is called extraordinary new fiction having "a sweeping story of love, family, resilience, and survival, featuring an unforgettable heroine determined to help her loved ones win their freedom with a bat and ball" (44).

In its review of the novel on its website, The Guardian categorizes it as a story of freedom. Set in a war-torn Kabul, "It is an intriguing question, which the author explores in this vivid novel" (The Guardian). The protagonist, who has previously written much about the Taliban abuses, finally finds a sense of freedom in sport.

Certain other media reviews posted by Book Browse on its website comment on the novel's overall plot and themes. According to the reviews given on this website, the novel has a tense and compelling story but is also uplifting, like Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. The novel contains an uncommon tale, full of imagination and empathy. Murari's entertaining tale "reaffirms the power of friendship, fellowship, and love in the face of all forms of tyranny" (Hosseinie, 2007).

Evans (2020) declares *The Taliban Cricket Club* a soaring novel of resilience, hope, strength, and tenderness. Commenting on the politics of cricket, the general view is stated that the Taliban will never embrace a game rooted in civility, fairness and equality.

These are the general comments and reviews posted on different websites. All the major platforms that contain research articles and critiques have been checked, but no data about this novel has been found. This factor makes this research more valuable as it is expected to fill the necessary gap. The concept taken up in this study is also significant vis-a-vis the plight of Afghan women in the Taliban regime.

The theoretical insights to analyze the text are Female Masculinity and Dialogical Self. These concepts have been discussed at different levels. For a better understanding of these

concepts, a certain number of articles and papers have been closely read. Some of them are mentioned here.

Jansen (2006) explores the traces of female masculinity, nationalism, and British literature and posits that masculinity is not simply restricted to maleness alone. In literature and real life, there are trends of female masculinity where women transform their gender roles, attain masculinity, and perform acts of valor and courage.

Pullen and Vachhani (2018) discuss the role of female masculinity in politics. Both argue that leadership and politics are entirely patriarchal in their structure, where the role of women is often ignored by male representation. In order to achieve competitive advantage in such situations, females need to shun their tender role and adopt the concept of female masculinity, which is hitherto absent in the political arena.

Gareth (2020) explores the theme of female masculinity in the novel *The Sagas of Icelanders*. In the story, the wife is accused by her husband of breaching fidelity and terms her a masculine woman. For this reason, he initiates legal proceedings to divorce her. The theme negotiates with the plight of women as dependent individuals assuming masculine authority. In both situations, she has to face troubles in her domestic and social life.

In his research paper on the Dialogical Self, Hermans (2001) postulates that a far-reaching decentralization is necessary to construct a new self. The self and culture are positioned according to the dominant ideology, and that ideology takes center stage. This centrality will be dissolved to replace the existing self with the newly constructed dialogical self. Khokhar (2021) studies this aspect of ideology in his study of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Hermans (2002) and Lamb (2002) discuss how the subjective self-negotiates with social domination. Such a self works with oppositions and conflicts, and thus, a more spatial domain emerges in the self with better adjustability.

In yet another article, Hermans (2003) differentiates the individual self from a dialogical self. Where the individual self is ahistorical, disembodied, and noncultural, the dialogical self is historical, socialized, and cultural. The dialogue renders the service of constructing such a desired self.

Richardson, Rogers, and McCarroll (1998) discuss the self, human agency, and a dialogical understanding of the self. The self, which is individualized and automatous but a dialogical self, is woven into the fabric of history and culture.

### **Research Methodology**

The research is qualitative in nature, and the method of textual analysis which is done through closing reading of the text. *The Taliban Cricket Club*, a novel by Timeri N. Murari, is the primary text for the analysis. The rest of the works cited in this study are the secondary sources for the analysis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical insight to analyze the text is a combination of three theoretical concepts as theorized by Judith Jack Halberstam, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, and Paulo Freire. In his book *Female Masculinity* (1998), Halberstam has taken up the concept of masculinity and its attributes, which are always attached to males and accepted as natural. With a specific emphasis on detaching the power and privileges from male masculinity, Halberstam (1998) attaches them to females. Thus, masculinity is redefined. To get it done in a particular societal setting, one has to devise a dialogic construct, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). Paulo Freire (2005) has delineated the significance of dialogue and its certain attributes. Trust-based dialogue is of basic importance when constructing a dialogical self.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Halberstam (1998) is a proponent of the antithesis of the social construct of masculinity. The concept of masculinity is at length elaborated and neutralized, separating it from "maleness." He argues, "The very existence of masculinity women urges us to reconsider our most basic assumption about the functions, forms, and representations of masculinity and forces us to ask why the bond between men and masculinity has remained relatively secure despite the continuous assaults made by feminists, gays lesbians and gender-queer on the naturalness of gender" (45). The acceptance by females and gender conformity strengthened male masculinity over the centuries. The real challenge for any female to reclaim her own self involves resistance at different levels of domestic and social life, such as dressing, setting habits,



and self-representability. The foremost requirement is the discourse of opposition to the pervasive naturalness of male masculinity. From within a social setup, any female can only raise a dissenting voice if she has dissension in her upbringing and matured over the years. In *The Taliban Cricket Club*, the female protagonist, Rukhsana, raises their voice of disagreement with an order issued by the Taliban government. She says about her dress habits, "I dressed up in jeans and a blouse" (11). However, her mental smartness puts her in dialogical contact with the world outside her house. She does not put herself in trouble by openly violating the government's verdict. She admits, "Like all women, I existed only in the house, or else covered with my burka in the street" (11).

Against all odds, Rukhsana never relinquishes her subjective position. When other family members try to stop her from visiting the ministry, having their apprehensions and advise her, "Rukhsana, Rukhsana, then don't go there. You may not return" (11). She remains brave enough to utter, "I have to; otherwise, he'll send his police to find me" (11). The dialogue between the internal world of Rukhsana's mind and the world of objective adverse realities constantly goes on till the end to achieve the desired results. She shows conformity and never disobeys in her social life. She is not taken as hateful to the regime. She follows the conditions for dialogue as postulated by Paulo Freire, "Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. Further, he says, "No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is a commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. Moreover, this commitment because it is loving, is dialogical" (89).

Safeguarding and attaining ambitions would never have been possible had the dialogic significance not been strictly realized. The announcement of the Taliban government was, "WOMEN SHOULD ONLY BE SEEN IN THE HOUSE AND IN THE GRAVE" (20). Under such circumstances, Rukhsana thus puts out her dissenting voice, "Our role was defined only by our womb and not by our thought and feelings. All in the name of God. How does a woman believe in God when the conduits of his messages are only men" (20)? Her soul was never subjugated, but how to liberate her body while the minister Wahidi has his resolve to marry her to keep her mind and thoughts under domination. The brother of Minister Wahidi, Droon, declares the purpose behind the desire for marriage. "Droon says, 'My brother is a pious

and good man and believes he can save this woman from her bad traits" (193). The house was searched to find Rukhsana, but she could not be located despite being in the house. She changed her appearance by wearing a beard and turban and was introduced as the nephew of her mother, Babur. She maintains, "The Talib have their own interpretation of the Sharia, and if you're caught they could beat you up or even shoot you" (107).

In response to the Taliban government's announcement of a cricket tournament, Rukhsana ventures to organize a team called The Taliban Cricket Club to participate. The winning team would visit Pakistan for further training. Addressing the group of her cousins, Rukhsana says, "I will try my best to coach you until the day before the preliminary matches" (129). Along with looking after her ailing mother and avoiding any unfortunate encounters in her person with ministers' men, she actively performs the cricket coach job. She is determined to risk her life for the safe exit of her brother Jahan and cousins. She was engaged to Shaheen, who settled in the USA, but that could not materialize. Her mother died when the plan was yet to be executed. After Shaheen broke the engagement, her childhood love, Veer, arrived in Afghanistan.

Rukhsana adopts a dialogical approach by presenting antithesis to the ideological structure followed for years after years. To bridge the gap amongst different factions and to be considerable for her fellow countrymen, she says, "We have many divisions among us, why add religion to break our backs? So much evil has slipped into religion, and we'll never be rid of it" (189). Similarly, she uses the game of cricket for dialogue, saying, "Cricket is drama, it is theatre" (190). This is the version of dialogue announced by the government for the sake of a moderate image at the international level. She assumes so much power, an attribute specific to masculinity, and in this case, it is female masculinity, that the minister and his brother Droon become helpless. "I don't understand the power of this woman that your mouth shut' Droon told us, 'She is the only woman" (192). The confrontation at any stage could prove catastrophic for Rukhsana. Paulo Freire posited the attribute dialogue in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire says that the world can be changed according to one's changeout dialogic communication. He says, "Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false



words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it" (88).

The tournament day was at hand, and the schedule was finalized, "The first match was set to start at eleven, and we reached the stadium by ten thirty to limber up and study the opposition" (223). Rukhsana herself was dressed up to play, assuming the name Babur, wearing a beard and turban. "The Taliban Cricket Club will play the Azlam Cricket Club" (227). Veer, the would-be husband of Rukhsana, is also part of the team, meaning thereby, husband and wife maintain no patriarchal hierarchy as enforced by The Taliban government. By defeating Azlam Cricket Club, the final was against The Afghan State Cricket Team. Minister Wahidi and his brother Droon were present, and a representative from ICC, Markwick, was deputed as an observer. It was the last catch taken by Babur (Rukhsana), which was the decisive moment in declaring the Taliban Cricket Club victorious. When ICC observer Markwick shakes hands, Babur's gloves are still on.

Things got quite difficult when Minister Wahidi clarified that the state team would visit Pakistan as things had already been settled with Pakistani authorities. Wahidi and his brother Droon were sure to capture Rukhsana the next day as she allegedly returned from Mazar e Sharif. The immediate bold decision was made, followed by exact implementation. The papers and dresses of the State Team were captured while the entire team was in the bathroom. Thus, the team was locked in the bathroom, and The Taliban Cricket Club took the bus waiting outside to take the Afghan team to the airport. Rukhsana, in the shape of a true follower of the Taliban regime, having a full beard and turban by the name Babur, remained firm, exercising power and authority. Thus, they safely landed at Karachi, never to return. On reaching Karachi, she changed her appearance to become Rukhsana and flew to New Delhi with Veer to marry him there.

To sum up, it can be said that the protagonist, a female, constructs a dialogical self to acquire female masculinity. Whatever came in the way, the resolve remained so unflinching that the ultimate end set is achieved in the face of all odds. It is the result of dialogue within and with the outer world that the circumstances could be molded for a safe exit from the suffocation of Afghanistan. Rukhsana truly keeps dialogue by herself, representing herself and being in a close circle. She utilizes her agency as theorized by Freire, "But while to say the true word—which is

work, which is praxis—is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone" (88). Rukhsana does not hire any advocate or representative because she uses her right of self-expression to accomplish the significant dialogue task. On dialogue, Freire says, "Dialogue is thus an existential necessity" (88).

## Conclusion

According to Paulo Freire, dialogue presupposes some need on the part of the dialogue maker. The issue Rukhsana addresses is that she needs a safe exit. She regulates her habits and determines her course of action to shun female objectification. Hence, she carries out continuous dialogue and remains constant. She never designs a top-down hierarchy while living in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. She truthfully trails Freire's concepts. Freire says, "Self Sufficiency is incompatible with dialogue. Men and women who lack humility (or have lost it) cannot come to people, cannot be their partner in naming the world" (90). The dealing of Rukhsana with the Taliban representatives in the patriarchal setting of Afghanistan all along the plot remains objective-oriented. That is why she never becomes violent. She constructs a dialogical self through female masculinity. The counter gender, practically followed by Rukhsana, supported her till the last. Despite being a female, she developed a subject from within to decide her fate. Her early life experiences in New Delhi contributed a lot to achieving her goal of female subjectification. The willing submission to the native patriarchal setting of Afghanistan by females leaves them with no agency left to raise a dissenting voice. Rukhsana, unlike most of the female population in Afghanistan, attained this unachievable task because she had first-hand experience in another culture.

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