

Human Oppression and Transformed Religion in Deborah Ellis' 'The Breadwinner'

Hasanain Ali Kareem^a, Fazel Asadi Amjad^b, ^{a,b}Faculty of Literature and Humanities/ Kharazmi University/ Iran,

Afghanistan has lived a long period of conflicts and wars in which human rights are violated. The era in which the Taliban seized power is one of the worst in terms of human rights and freedom. The violation of human rights and the restriction of freedom in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. This is one of the most important topics among the novelists' themes, including Deborah Ellis in her novel 'The Breadwinner'. Based on the views of Adorno, the authoritarian personality, this paper aims to analyse the religious and social aspects addressed by Ellis' novel. The study focuses on the events and characters who practised the extremist policies against moderate people. The study adopts the socio-religious framework to explain the impact of the transformation of religion to a "social cement" by extremists and the social and political deterioration. The aim of this transformation is to suppress any potential threat to the authority of the group that takes a distorted view of religion as a source of its authority.

Keywords: *Deborah Ellis, extremist ideology, human rights violation, the authoritarian personality*

Introduction

Social Background

Afghan society has suffered from the scourge of wars and conflicts for a long time. These wars and power struggles have had a negative impact on Afghan society and people's life. Indeed, Afghans have been persecuted and marginalised due to their cultural, social, religious, and ideological affiliations by successive regime. The worst period in Afghanistan history in terms of the violation of human rights and human oppression was the period of the Taliban regime. Juan R. I. Cole on the procedures that were followed by the Taliban to ensure their authority writes: "The overwhelmingly Pushtun Taliban took and kept power by military

means, instituting rule by militia, but their authority was enhanced by their religious charisma as holy men" (Cole, 2003). Through that period, Afghans were persecuted and marginalised because of their ideological and cultural differences with the Taliban. This persecution and restriction of freedom were not limited to a particular gender. Mary Anne Franks pointed out during the reign of the Taliban, she writes, the number of people forced into refugee camps rose into the millions, and the rape and killing of women became rampant)"Franks, 139). Both men and women suffered from extremist policies adopted by the Taliban. Many were arrested and tortured on charges that may be counterfeit or on charges that the Taliban were also committing without being held accountable.

As far as women are concerned, they have had the largest share of persecution and restriction of freedom by the Taliban. Afghan women were forced to follow the Taliban's tyrannical laws and orders. Stemming from an extremist ideology, those ruling were forcing women to leave work, not go to school, and not be outside except with a male relative. Juan R. I. Cole points out the reason behind religious extremists deliberately exclude women from public life, writes" ,radical Muslim fundamentalist code women as essentially subjective and private, and therefore excluded from the public sphere)" (Cole, 2003). These extreme policies towards women have torn the fabric of Afghan society through the absence of a critical element in this society. The decision of forcing them to leave the work has had an impact on many aspects of their life, such as education and health. All of the above has been a powerful motive for many novelists, including Deborah Ellis, who has met many Afghan women in refugee camps in Pakistan, to write about the violence and persecution that women have suffered in Afghanistan.

The Canadian writer, Deborah Ellis, is one of the best writers who inspired readers by highlighting the plight of children and their suffering in developing countries and communities. The embodiment of these sufferings in her novels enabled her to earn a worthy reputation among writers and earned her many awards. She is best known for her excellent novel ,*The Breadwinner* (2000). The title of the novel is closely associated with the protagonist, an eleven-year-old Parvana, and the role as a breadwinner of her family after her family lost their breadwinner due to the Taliban. To stress the tragedy of the Afghan family and the plight of Afghan children, in particular, in the era when the Taliban seized power, the author conducted many interviews and visited the refugee camps for Afghan families who ran away due to the persecution and oppression of the Taliban.

The novel is the story of the suffering of Parvana and her intellectual parents who were forced to leave their academic work because of the Taliban and her sister and two brothers, one of whom was killed by an explosion. To act freely in society and avoid punishment, Parvana is disguised as a boy after her father was arrested by the Taliban. Parvana finds herself facing the trouble of providing her family's essential needs as women are prohibited

from leaving their home. Other themes of the novel are courage, misery, and the child's plight after the war.

One of these studies is Anita Cutic's "Deborah Ellis's *Children in War*" (Ellis, 2001). This study deals with *The Breadwinner* from the point of gender discrimination and the different concepts of this distinction between East and West. This study distinguishes between the concept of hijab or veil from the point of view of the East, which often contradicts the point of view of the West, as a kind of restriction and limitations. The study also discusses the courage of restricted women in a society dominated by extremists, overcoming difficulties and establishing clandestine humanitarian activities. The study focuses on studying the consequences of the use of religion by the Taliban as a social organiser serving a particular group and its impact on the life of the other individual. The study is based on the analysis of the characters and events of the novel of both dominant and subordinate groups according to some of the principles contained in the theory of the authoritarian personality. Adorno proposes that in the case of religion being transformed by extremists, which he refers to as "ethnocentrists" or "authoritarian personalities", from its true essence to the only means of regulating the social life, it leads to the oppression and subjugation of the outgroup members. This transformed religion will be designed according to the aspirations and objectives of the extremist ingroup at the expense of outgroups.

In the events of the novel, Ellis points to the Taliban's use of religious authority in drawing up a new social order based on the exclusion of the outgroups. Among those excluded outgroups are moderate-minded men and subjected women. In this novel, the females are persecuted to the ingroups. Among those measures aimed at excluding women from social life is to force Parvana's mother to leave her job and stay at home, as well as Parvana to abandon her feminine appearance and be disguised as a boy to pretend not belonging to the excluded female outgroup.

Among the measures taken by the Taliban's is using their religious authority as an alternative to all authorities and the exclusion of moderate thought through suppression and marginalisation, as happened with Parvana's father, a possible threat to the authority of the dominant ingroup. Moreover, they use their religious authority to draw up a social order in which women are defined as an outgroup to be excluded—Parvana's mother as an example that must stop working. Violent and cruel methods such as flogging and detention are also applied against individuals and groups trying to violate the social rules and regulations set by the Taliban. The oppression and suppression that the Ellis' characters, which are not supportive or non-affiliated with the Taliban, have been exposed at the hands of the Taliban as a dominant group coincides with Adorno's concept of the tendency of these authoritarian individuals to deal with all those who did not belong to them as enemies.



The Research Problem

Reinterpreting religion laws from the viewpoint of hard-line religious groups and making it a social constitution may serve the ingroup and lead to the persecution of outgroups and the restriction of their freedom.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in discussing the consequences of reinterpreting religion laws according to an extremist Taliban ideology and using these laws as a social organiser which shows the opportunistic intentions of these extremist groups and also urging researchers to study the true intentions of these radical groups that use religion as a means to obtain power.

Purpose of the Study

The study attempts to investigate the consequences of using the extremist religion laws by the Taliban as an alternative to social laws and its impact on ordinary people.

The Research Questions

Was the extremely reinterpretation of religion laws to achieve equality or to serve the members of the Taliban ingroup?

What is the reason that prompted the Taliban to restrict outgroups' freedom and confiscated their basic rights?

Methodology

This study is analytically designed employing a document analysis in which social communication and characters from the Afghan community during the Taliban regime will be analysed by using the target novel *The Breadwinner* by Ellis Walker. Adorno's (1950) theory "the authoritarian personality" will be basically used to analyse the target aspects.

Theoretical Framework

Adorno's authoritarian personality theory (1950) is one of the influential theories formulated in the past half-century that discusses authoritarian personality and its impact on society. The theory is based on a comparison of high and low levels of authoritarian personalities.

The theory defines nine traits of individuals with authoritarian personalities, "conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intraception, superstition and stereotypy, power and toughness, destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity and sex". The theory contains four scales to monitor the psychological and social aspects of these personalities and their interaction with other groups.

The theory suggests that individuals with authoritarian personalities tend to interact with other groups in the rigid relation of ingroup and outgroups. All groups that differ with the dominant ingroup, whether by ideology, religion, or economical, are treated as outgroups and must be subjugated. In their attempt to suppress outgroups to their authority, members of the dominant ingroup follow several procedures. One of these, ingroup members intent on disseminating negative traits that are sometimes fake about outgroups to justify their persecution. Adorno writes "Outgroups are the objects of negative opinions and hostile attitudes; ingroups are the objects of positive opinions and uncritically supportive attitudes; and it is considered that outgroups should be socially subordinate to ingroups" (Adorno, 1950). Pseudo-conservatism is also one of the procedures followed by individuals with authoritarian personalities to restrict the freedom of outgroups and get rid of their threat. Adorno comments on the tendency of individuals with the authoritarian personality to pretend to be conservative to serve only the ingroup interest, he writes "The ethnocentric conservative is the pseudo-conservative, for he betrays in his ethnocentrism a tendency antithetical to democratic values and tradition" (Adorno, 1950).

Discussion

The Use of Extremist Religious Ideas to Exclude Moderate Thought

Afghanistan has a strict cultural system that regulates its social life. Throughout different periods authorities in Afghanistan have not been able to change that cultural system. Despite the rigidity of the system, the Afghan men and women have some freedom and rights as a result of cultural tolerance and social norms. In her article on the moderate Afghan cultural system, Dupree (2002) writes "They do not make an issue of being Muslims, of exhibiting proof of their Muslimness, and abhor any tendencies toward fanaticism. This is the pillar on which Afghan culture rests" (Dupree, 2002). But with the Taliban's takeover of power, the social system disintegrated and collapsed, and an extreme religious ideology was adopted as a constitution that regulates social life in the country. Referring to the origin of the principles of the Taliban, which they declared as a social constitution, Kim Perry writes :

"Most Muslims would in no way see the Taliban's interpretation of Islam as representative of their faith, for the Taliban merged conservative Pashtun customs (practised only in some areas of the Pashtun belt of Afghanistan) with Sharia (Islamic law) to create what they

believed to be the guidelines for an ideal and just Islamic society." (Berry, 2003)

The Taliban also came to reinforce the Pashtun dominance through the participates of their extremist religion. During their rule, the former cultural laws of other groups were struck down and all the rights and liberties were abolished .Amin (1998) points out the Taliban's policy in subjecting all non-Pashtuns writes :

"It clearly changed the conflict into an ethnic power struggle of Pashtuns against non-Pashtuns, with the Shi'ite Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek peoples joining forces to defend their traditional territories in northern and central Afghanistan - especially after the Taleban's acts of ethnic cleansing of Tajiks in the areas that they had overrun north of Kabul." (Saikal, 1998)

To fulfil these intentions, the Taliban used their religious authority to exclude other groups and enforce the Pashtuns' authority and their cultures.

The Taliban aggressively imposed their extremist religious ideology on people by using harsh punishments against violators. During the Taliban's reign, religion was emptied of its human and guidance content and turned into a tool to suppress and subjugate. Alliah Brahimi is pointing out of Taliban concerns after seizing power, writes "The traditional religious establishment was not concerned with the state, but with civil society: its role was not political but instead moral and legal" (Brahimi, 2010). Ellis's *The Breadwinner*, through its events, points to several incidents in which the Taliban misused religion and employed it as a weapon against individuals who did not endorse or follow this ideology. Laws and regulations issued by the Taliban differed for each gender. Men had to grow a beard, were not allowed to go out at night and had to obey the state and its laws.

Although Parvana's father followed all these orders, he was arrested by Taliban soldiers due to his study in England and their belief that he could pose a threat to their extremist ideology. One of the soldiers addressing Parvana's father says, "Why did you go to England for Education...Afghanistan does not need your foreign ideas" (Ellis, 2001). These extremist groups are kidnapping religion from its positive essence and harnessing it to support their extremist ideology. Religion is used by those armed groups to fight against other ideologies and, especially moderate ideologues. These extremist groups considered that Parvana's father through getting his university degree from outside Afghanistan would possibly be accompanied by the adoption of an ideology contrary to their extremist ideology. Gilles Kepel has noted the extent of the destruction caused by the Taliban to state institutions during the confirmation of moral sanctions and fighting with the opposing groups; he writes, "[I]n Kabul, the Taliban did not so much take control of Afghan institutions as completely



eviscerate them, erecting in their stead only three functions: morality, commerce and war" (Gilles, 2002). Individuals who adopt a different ideology are persecuted and eliminated. Even if these individuals do not pose a threat to the ingroup's authority.

In their theory "the authoritarian personality", Adorno et al. refer to this process of stripping religion of its positive content and turning it into a tool of repression and torture by ingroup members; they write:

“The dissolution of a positive religion and its preservation in a noncommittal ideological form is due to social processes. While religion has been deprived of the intrinsic claim of truth, it has been gradually transformed into "social cement". The more this cement is needed for the maintenance of the status quo, and the more dubious its inherent truth becomes, the more obstinately is its authority upheld and the more its hostile, destructive and negative features come to the fore.” (Adorno, 1950).

The "social cement" can explain why Parvana's father was arrested, imprisoned and tortured. However, he did not violate any of the Taliban's provisions and laws, except that he holds a moderate ideology, which is considered a source of threat to their authority. The novel also refers to the Taliban burning the books they did not like or might differ with their extremist ideology. To keep them from burning, the books of Parvana's father were hidden, which could be a good reason to execute him by the Taliban.

Taliban's Religious Authority and Social Exile of Women

Despite the strict social order that governed life in Afghanistan, women exercised part of their rights, such as education, work, and going out on their own. But after the Taliban seized power and made their religious authority an alternative to social authority in organising life in Afghanistan, women suffered persecution and marginalisation. Women were forcibly removed from social life and were treated as second-class citizens bared from any social activities. The use of the transformed religion's provisions by the Taliban has had devastating effects on men or women. The danger of making religion an alternative to social power is not in the process itself, but in that religion is used by a certain group to oppress other groups.

If we come to the orders issued for women by the Taliban in the novel, most of them are aimed at removing women from the social arena and reducing their role to domestic work. Ellie writes "The Taliban had ordered all the girls and women in Afghanistan to stay inside their homes (Ellie, 2001). According to their extremist ideology, women are considered as a source of temptation and to rid of this threat, women should be confined to their homes. In her article, Mary Anne Franks points at the consequences of imprisoning women in their

homes; she writes, "Widows, who had no male relatives to accompany them in public, starved to death in their homes" (Franks, 2003). Adorno referring to this concept, writes, "The ingroup must be kept pure and strong. The only methods of doing this are to liquidate the outgroups altogether, to keep them entirely subordinated, or to segregate them in such a way as to minimise contact with the ingroups (Adorno, 1950). The Taliban, as an ingroup, liquidated women socially by denying them the opportunity to work and study. Ellis writes, "They even forbade girls to go to school" (Ellis, 2001). The Taliban also subjected women to these laws and instilled fear in their hearts when they were outside the house. Ellis refers to Parvana's fear every time she goes with her father to the market; she writes "she had kept silent and covered up her face as much as possible. She had tried her best to be invisible" (70). To reinforce the idea of exclusion, the Taliban ordered to paint the windows in black

Despite their emphasis on extremist religious ideas about men mixing with women to prevent committing sins as they claim, they were abducting and exploiting women during house searches. Ellis, in her comments, writes "young women were sometimes stolen by soldiers. They were snatched from their homes, and their families never saw them again" (Ellis, 2001). Although the penalty for adultery is public stoning according to the Taliban, the Taliban are doing horrendous acts, such as kidnapping and exploiting young women and a high probability of killing them. There is no punishment of its members who commit such crimes. Adorno comments that these religious extremists tend to interact with members of external groups, who do not belong to the Taliban differently. Even in the case of fixed religious rulings, they are strictly applied to outgroups and are usually not taken into account concerning members of the ingroup. Such acts of the duplicitous character in dealing with individuals who do not belong to the Taliban reinforce the idea of the relationship between ingroup and outgroups.

Taliban's Cruelty as a Means to Maintain Authority

Since the Taliban came with the authority of extreme religious ideology to replace social authority, they need means to apply the provisions of that authority. The Taliban adopted two methods, either to manipulate the ideas of men or to use harsh punishment against those who reject that power and violate the laws. In any case, the Taliban excluded women from the first method because they did not seek to include women in their ranks. Women are subjected to torture and repression every time they are outside the home. The novel refers to several incidents in which the female characters in the novel were tortured and beaten by the Taliban. The women are even used as a "scapegoat" for law enforcement and instilling fear in the hearts of opponents.

The novel refers to another accident that Parvana and her mother were discriminated against and oppressed by the Taliban. When she decided to go to the jail to look for her husband, Parvana's mother and her daughter were forced to walk to the prison because it was not allowed for women to ride the bus. Ellis writes, "The prison was a long way from their home. Buses were not permitted to carry any women who did not have a man with them" (Ellis, 2001). They have been treated cruelly by the Taliban because they have violated their orders by going out alone without a man and have objected to arresting Parvana's father. Minakshi Das in her article on the Taliban's harsh punishments writes, "Adultery offences by women are punishable by death via stoning, and women who violate the law by appearing in public without male chaperones face stoning or public beatings" (Das, 2006). Adorno suggests that the reason behind the use of harsh Punishments against members of outgroups may stem from the individual's belief in the need to punish some people, accompanied by the general support and encouragement of the ingroup members for that belief. Individuals with authoritarian figures such as the Taliban believe they are the source of legislation and ethics in Afghanistan. Therefore, they tend to punish members of outgroups for believing that these individuals violate ethical laws.

One of the disadvantages of replacing social authority with extreme religious authority of the Taliban is to prevent girls' education and to prevent women from working. This measure deprives many families of earning their living, especially that a large number of families have lost their men who were the breadwinner. Niloufar Pourzand referring to the Taliban's ban writes, "[T]his ban will be lifted once they can ensure the security of girls to study and women to work and the provision of Islamic conditions for such activities, principally segregation" (Pourzand, 1999). Because of this prohibition, some girls were forced to change their appearance to look like boys to be able to work and bring basic necessities for their families. In the case of Parvana and her friend Shauzia, they were forced to change their appearance and work in the market.

Speaking of why women are prevented from education and learning, Adorno assumes that exaggerated fear of individuals with authoritarian personalities, if they did not force outgroups to subject to their authority, from compelling to submit to the authority of these outgroups. Some of the Taliban and its members are not literate, while there are women who have a good level of education, such as the mother of Parvana and her friend as mentioned in the novel. Hence, the fear of women and their knowledge pushed the Taliban to get rid of their threat by confining them to home. Women's power due to their knowledge could expose their fake religious ideology and become a source of the danger, especially since most educated women have been working as teachers.

Despite the Taliban's severe restrictions on women's freedom and violation of their rights, the novel refers to several incidents of women's rejection of these unjust laws. Aisha Ahmed

refers to the role of educated Afghan women in rejecting that ban and working together to defend themselves: "educated, urban Afghan women were better able to organise among themselves and articulate their plight to the international community" (Ahmed, 2006). The change of Parvana and her friend Shauzia in appearance, to boys to be able to move and work freely is considered one of the forms of rejection. Parvana's mother addresses her daughter and says, "As a boy, you'll be able to move in and out of the market, buy what we need, and no one will stop you" (Ellis, 2001). Despite the family's need for Parvana to meet their necessities, the question of her change was a challenge to those extreme provisions.

The formation of a secret school for the education of children by Parvana's mother and her friend is another challenge to those provisions. In her article ,Elaheh Rostami referring to those secret workshops for women in the Taliban era writes" ,During Taliban rule, the Women's Association of Afghanistan funded and managed secret sewing, knitting, and handicraft courses for women" (Rostami, 2003). The formation of a group of women, including Parvana's mother, to write the tragic events the country was going through during the Taliban regime is another challenge .Adono suggests that one of the reasons for the alienation of society and members of the outgroups from the Taliban's extremist religion is because of the duplication of their dealings with the members of the outgroups compared to the members of their ingroup, and the grabs of religion from its absolute truth into something far from that for personal interests. Through the events of the novel, the Taliban used their extreme religious authority for personal interests and issued orders that contradict the truth and essence of religion. That extreme religion was used by the Taliban for personal interests, a shelter to hide in when needed, and a sword on the necks of members of outgroups .This explains the purpose of these groups by using religion as a trench at the time of threat

Conclusion

The oppression of humans has become a pervasive state in the present day. The intentions and objectives of human oppression by different authorities may vary. In the present paper, the study found that the process of turning religion by extremist groups from its positive character to a means of persecuting humans and restricting social freedom is another means of oppression. Most of the events and the characters *in The Breadwinner* have demonstrated the use of extremist religious ideology by the Taliban as a mean of social oppression. These oppression actions due to the Taliban against the outgroups in the novel are consistent with Adorno's ideas and opinions about the authoritarian personality and its methods of subjugating and persecuting the other. The study found that what was presented by Ellis about the rejection of moderate thought and the exclusion of females from the social arena was aimed at eliminating the potential threat to the authority of the Taliban, as the dominant ingroup. The transformation of Parvana's appearance from a girl into a boy gave her a chance



to quit her rank as a member of the persecuted outgroup for a less threatening group to the Taliban. Adorno points out that members of the dominant group tend to use violence against outgroups that may pose a threat to them. This explains the reason why Parvana was allowed to work when she changed her appearance into a boy. The study found that religion has been transformed by the Taliban from its truth and positive character into "social cement," to rob the outgroups and women in particular of their rights and freedom.

Results of the Study

Reinterpreting religious rulings, according to Taliban extremist ideology, was intended to exclude other rival groups which may form a threat to their authority.

The purpose of restricting the freedom of individuals who are not affiliated with the Taliban, whether they are males or females, was not to preserve religious customs and traditions as declared by the Taliban, but rather for opportunistic interests aimed at obtaining authority and maintain it.

The purpose of using harsh punishments against members of outgroups, especially women, was to make them a scapegoat for other individuals who had the intention to violate those laws set by the Taliban.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, T.W., Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson and R. Nevitt Sanford (1950). *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Ahmed, Aisham(2006). "Afghan WomenThe State of Legal Rights and Security". *Policy Perspectives*, 3.1 p. 25-41.
- Amin Saikal,(1998) :Afghanistan's ethnic conflict, *Survival*, 40 (2) p.114-126.
- Berry, K. (2003). The Symbolic use of Afghan Women in the war on terror. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 27(2), 137-160.
- Berry, Kim.(2003). The Symbolic Use of Afghn Women in The War on Terror. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 27.2 p. 137-160.
- Brahimi, Allia.(2010).*The Taliban's Evolving Ideology*. Oxford: LSE Global Governance.
- Cole, Juan R. I.(2003). The Taliban, Women, and the Hegelian Private Sphere. *Social Research*, 70.3 p. 771-808.
- Cutic, Anita.(2017) *Deborah Ellis's Children in War*. University of Alberta.
- Das, Minakshi.(2006). *Taliban's War on Women: live experiences on Afghan Women in Transit on Ethnicity and their identity*. London: Asia Research Center.
- Dupree, N. (2002). Cultural Heritage and National Identity in Afghanistan. *Third World Quarterly*, 23(5), 977-989
- Ellis, Deborah.(2001). *The Breadwinner*. Toronto: Ground wood books.
- Franks, Mary Anne. (2003). "Obscene Undersides: Women and Evil between the Taliban and the United States". *Hypatia*, 18(1). 135-156.
- Gilles, Kepel.(2002). *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Harper, Helen.(2007) :*Studying Masculinity(ies) in Books about Girls*. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 30.2 p. 508-530.
- Pourzand, Niloufar.(1999). The Problematic Female Education, Ethnicity and National Identity in Afghanistan (1920-1999). *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, 43.1 p. 73-82.



Povey, Elaheh Rostami.(2003). Women in Afghanistan: Passive Victims of the borga or Active Social Participants?. *Development in Practice*, 13.2/3 p. 266-277.