

Exploring Gender Dynamics: Manifestations in Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner*

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Abstract

Inequality is a huge issue that requires much more attention to people with a various background from all of the country in the world. In communities still entrenched in an outdated paradigm, unfair actions are perpetuated against individuals solely based on differences in their race, religion, skin colour, and gender. These discriminatory practices contribute to systemic inequalities within the society. Women writers, through their powerful narratives shed light on issues such as violence, abuse, sexual harassment, and discrimination faced by women. Their writings focus on the experiences of victimization and the relentless struggle for liberation within a patriarchal society. *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that tackles themes of gender, identity, and resilience in a war-torn society. Set in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, the story follows the journey of Parvana, an eleven-year-old girl who disguises herself as a boy in order to support her family and navigate the harsh realities of her environment. The novel provides a unique lens through which to explore the manifestations of gender and the societal implications that arise from its rigid enforcement. This paper analyses the discrimination faced by women in the concept of gender in Ellis' novel *The Breadwinner*.

Keywords: gender, domestic violence, trauma, neglect.

Introduction

Gender discrimination happens virtually in all societies, across all social classes, with women particularly at risk from men they know. Violence against women, and particularly systematic rape, has frequently been used as a weapon of war against particular ethnic groups or entire population. In Afghanistan, social construction of society perpetuates a patriarchal culture that considers taboo women to be active in the public sphere. Seeing the lives of Afghan women in the 1960s when they had the freedom to move in the public sphere, went to school and worked in comparison to the era in which the Taliban regime came to power certainly had drastic change. Life for women in refugee camps is not easy. Additionally, women were no longer in control of their life decisions. The Taliban encouraged girls under the age of sixteen to get married. The Taliban appointed a violent religious police force, who often would beat women who violated the Taliban code which regulated the behaviour of women. Some of the violations which warranted a beating included a woman exposing her ankles, laughing too loud, wearing shoes that made noise when walking, and or wearing the wrong type of burkha.

Deborah Ellis, the Canadian author, is acclaimed for her book *The Breadwinner* that powerfully captures the emotional toll of gender-based trauma on children, shedding light on the urgent need to address these atrocities and provide support for survivors. *The Breadwinner* has a story about a little girl from Kabul who struggles to survive under the territory of the Taliban in Afghanistan. After her father was imprisoned by the Taliban army, she has to fight alone to support her mother and her siblings. The girl, Parvana had to survive under the rules of the Taliban that forbid women to go outside from home, she transformed herself into a boy, cut her hair, and wear boy clothes. In spite of the fact, that she always finds a way to survive and protect her identity as a woman from the Taliban. As Women, Parvana and also her friend, Shauzia experienced the up and down of life as a result of the various conflicts and wars that led to Afghanistan becoming a country that until now has not been separated from the various conflicts that ensnare.

Living under the control of Taliban group is not easy for everyone, particularly for female children. Taliban group places themselves as superior actors in the society. As a result, female children in the society which is ruled and controlled by Taliban group experience fear and lack of confidence. Even they were scared to speak aloud. This can be seen when Parvana whispered "I can read that letter as well as Father can" (*The Breadwinner* 7). She didn't dare say those words out loud. The man sitting beside her father would not want to hear her voice, nor would anyone else in the Kabul market. Parvana was there only to help her father walk to the market and back home again after work. She sat well back on the blanket, her head and most of her face covered by her chador.

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She wasn't really supposed to be outside at all. The Taliban had ordered all the girls and women in Afghanistan to stay inside their homes. They even forbade girls to go to school:

Parvana had had to leave her sixth grade class, and her sister Nooria was not allowed to go to her high school. Their mother had been kicked out of her job as a writer for a Kabul radio station. For more than a year now, they had all been stuck inside one room, along with five-year-old Maryam and two-year-old Ali. (7)

This shows the gender inequality and the traumatic experience that the children face as they are female. Female children are not supposed to pursue their education. Furthermore, they are obliged to only stay at home and do anything inside the home. The restriction made by the Taliban group causes a fear on Parvana. She feels afraid to say something louder because she worries that the Taliban people hear her. Therefore, she only whispers to express her thought. In addition, Parvana really tries to hide her face with her chador. She does not want the Taliban people know her face. She is also afraid if the Taliban people know there is a girl who goes outside alone, she will be punished by them.

As a girl child Parvana suffers a lot to act in the Taliban society. Her behaviours are limited by the Taliban's rules. She is not confident to speak louder and disclose her presence. She does not trust herself to show up in front of the Taliban people. As a result:

Parvana hopes for her invisibility. Parvana would slump down further on the blanket and try to make herself look smaller. She was afraid to look up at the soldiers. She had seen what they did, especially to women, the way they would whip and beat someone they thought should be punished. Sitting in the marketplace day after day, she had seen a lot. When the Taliban were around, what she wanted most of all was to be invisible. (Ellis, 2000: 8-9)

Parvana does not have confidence at all to see the Taliban soldiers. She does not want make them aware about her presence. The Taliban's mistreatment to women does not only generate fear on Parvana, but it also causes a feeling of insecurity on her. Parvana is afraid to be whipped and beaten once the Taliban soldiers know she is a girl. Parvana does not want to get these mistreatment, so she hopes that they never see her. She is very afraid if she is captured by them.

Because of the situation of the family she was asked by asked by Nooria and her mother to disguise herself as a boy. Yet, she does not agree about this idea. Parvana had forgotten. Suddenly she was scared:

Everyone would see her face! They would know she wasn't a boy! She turned around to plead with her mother. "Don't make me do this!" "You see?" Nooria said in her nastiest voice. "I told you she was too scared." "It's easy to call someone else scared when you're safe inside your home all the time!" Parvana shot back. She spun around and went outside, slamming the door behind her. (70)

Parvana is afraid that the Taliban soldiers may know her true identity as a girl. She is too frightened to think about that possibility. She is not confident to go outside without her chador that covers her face. Hence, Parvana opposes her mother's and Nooria's suggestion to disguise as a boy. She does not have a belief that the plan will work and the Taliban soldiers will trust her as a boy. She begs her mother not to ask her disguise as a boy. But her situation has made her to oblige the idea of her mother. Parvana has some reasons for trying to hide her identify as a girl. She is a child who gets little exposure to get in touch with the outside world. She even knows the crappy punishment she will get if she is captured by the Taliban soldiers. Therefore, it is common for her to be so scared to go outside alone without something which can be used to hide her face. The writer has indicated the pathetic situation of the young girl in the society.

Parvana, being a girl, faces significant limitations in her ability to navigate within the constraints of Taliban society. When she assumes the disguise of a boy and starts working as a letter reader, her anxiety and fear become palpable. She struggles to maintain composure, unable to act with the calmness expected. Her apprehension is evident as she averts her gaze when someone approaches, sensing their presence before actually seeing them, especially when a man casts a shadow upon her by positioning himself between her and the sun:

Turning her head, she saw the dark turban that was the uniform of the Taliban. A rifle was slung across his chest as casually as her father's shoulder bag had been slung across hers. Parvana began to tremble. "You are a letter reader?" he asked in Pashtu. Parvana tried to answer, but she couldn't find her voice. Instead, she nodded. (76-77)

When Parvana sees one of the Taliban soldiers who brings a weapon stops at her spot as a letter reader, she begins to worry and act nervously. Parvana does not offer her service to the man. Instead, her body is shaken because she is too frightened to see the presence of Taliban soldier. Furthermore, Parvana cannot say anything to answer the man's question. She nods her head instead of answering, meaning that it is yes. She is unable to control her thought and action to act as what it should be. Parvana shows several actions and behaviours that signify the restriction to women's movement made by the Taliban group. The rule that really hampers women's movement is they cannot go outside of their house freely. Therefore, whenever the Taliban soldiers know there are women who are outside without acceptable reasons, they will get severe physical punishment.

The gender inequality prevailed in the society generates other harms on female children's life. The other harms of gender inequality to female children are fear and unwillingness to struggle. People who are desperate lose a hope that there will be a better change in the future. Therefore, the fear and worry eventually creates further impact that is unwillingness to struggle in order to survive. They stuck on a passive state not to do anything because they believe that any action they do will not bring any result. Female children in Taliban society face the difficult time in dealing with gender inequality. The fear and struggle of Nooria is represented as follows: "How can we be brave?" Nooria asked. "We can't even go outside. How can we lead men into battle? I've seen enough war. I don't want to see any more" (29). The imposition of restrictions on women going outside has profoundly impacted Nooria's sense of bravery. She finds herself constantly questioning her ability to lead in the war, a clear indication of her doubting her potential to bring about meaningful change. The fear she experiences is evident in her persistent uncertainty, leading her to ultimately abandon any hope of exhibiting the courage required to lead in battle. Her demeanour and expressions betray her lack of motivation to venture outside, revealing a reluctance to witness the horrors of war again. Consequently, she refrains from making any efforts to improve the situation or strive for a better condition for herself and others.

The same kind of fear can be seen in Parvana when she is asked by Nooria to get some foods for her family:

"We're out of food," Nooria told Parvana. "Don't tell me. Tell Mother. She's the grown up. She has to get us some." "I don't want to bother her." "Then I'll tell her." Parvana went over to Mother's to shake and gently shook her. "We're out of food." There was no response. "Mother, there's no food left." Mother pulled away. Parvana started to shake her again. (51)

Nooria signs Parvana that they no longer have food. It means that Nooria wants Parvana to go out and get some foods for her family. Parvana rejects Nooria's request because she thinks that she does not have responsibility to get them some food since she is a child. She believes that it is her mother's job. She rejects it because getting the foods means that she has to go out of her house. It means that she will face the danger outside of being punished by the Taliban when she is caught up that she is a girl. Parvana does not want this thing happen to her. Therefore, she does not want to go out. Parvana is struggling a lot and so she does not want to help her family even though her mother who is not in a good condition. She gives the entire burden to her mother who is helpless.

Ellis indicates another female character who is scared to go out. It is Shauzia. Shauzia is Parvana's classmate whom she meets in the market. Similar to Parvana, Shauzia also disguises herself as a boy. Shauzia's fear and unwillingness to struggles are portrayed as: "You'll leave your family? How will they eat?" "I can't help that!" Shauzia's voice rose and caught, as she tried not to cry, "I just have to get out of here. I know that makes me a bad person, but what else can I do? I'll die if I have to stay here!" (127). This implies the Shauzia's fear and desperation who wants to go from Kabul. She thinks that she cannot do anything to change the condition. She believes that staying in Kabul only gives harms. She has to disguise as boy to live there and she gains threats wherever she goes. The Taliban soldiers will catch her and simply kill her whenever they know Shauzia is not a real boy. Shauzia's outlook on her future in Kabul is filled with hopelessness, as she feels utterly powerless to improve her circumstances. Recognizing the limitations imposed upon her as a girl in Taliban society, she becomes determined to escape from Kabul in search of a better life. Her decision to leave reflects her inability to find a viable solution to the suffering she endures.

Feeling helpless, Shauzia lacks the motivation to address the challenges she faces, and this despair prevents her from trying to cope with her problems. As a result, she resigns herself to the events that unfold without making any attempts to resist or fight back against her difficult circumstances. The weight of her situation leaves her feeling like she has no control over her life and future. Nooria tries to overcome the fear and quests to lead a peaceful life. Even after she starts her secret school, she still does not feel better to live in the Taliban society:

Nooria nodded. "Look at my life here, Parvana. I hate living under the Taliban. I'm tired of looking after the little ones. My school classes happen so seldom, they're of almost no value. There's no future for me here. At least in Mazar I can go to school, walk the streets without having to wear a burqa, and get a job when I've completed school. Maybe in Mazar I can have some kind of life. Yes, I want to do this." (136)

Nooria complains to Parvana for living under the rule of Taliban people. She is tired of anything. It is tiresome to take care of her brother. She does not enjoy her teaching activity. She thinks that there is no future for her in Kabul. Similar to Shauzia, Nooria wants to escape from Kabul. She believes that in Mazar, her life will be better. She can pursue her education and job. She can go outside freely without burqa. These things are the regulations that the Taliban made to women. These make Nooria surrender to live in Kabul. Nooria also does not have attempts to do a real action to make a better condition of life. Under the Taliban rule, women and female children should work even harder to survive in Kabul.

Living under the rule of Taliban group which places men in higher hierarchy than women is not a simple thing. The Taliban soldiers order all women including female children to stay inside the room and punish them whenever they disobey the rule. The only ones who can freely go outside are men. Therefore, the responsibility of becoming a breadwinner and doing other activities outside the house is given to only men instead of women. It is indeed harmful to

women and female children. When there are no men, women and female children should survive by their own capability. Yet, the Taliban does not give them a chance to even go outside.

Parvana's struggles against gender inequality do not mean that she directly fights for the equality for women. She does not do a campaign or protest. She also does not voice her idea about equality in the parliament. Her struggles against gender inequality mean that she fights against the Taliban's rules that limit women to do anything which is supposed to be done by only men. Her struggles imply that even a female child is able to do the jobs that supposed to be done by men. Hence, Parvana's struggles against gender inequality consist of disguising as a boy to become a breadwinner and fulfil other needs of the family, optimizing her attempts to save her family, encouraging her family, and helping other women to survive. Through the central character Ellis has portrayed the sufferings of the women in the society only because they are born as the subordinate sex.

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