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Resisting Quietly: Strategic Agency in Contemporary Pashtun Women's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

While the body of literary feminist criticism is growing rapidly, Pashto women's short fiction is still an unexplored area, especially in relation to gendered resilience and post-war womanhood. This study explores how contemporary Pashto short fiction authored by Pashtun women articulates female agency, identity, and survival in the shadow of war and conflict. This study focuses on two short stories titled Number Thirteen by Batool Haidari and The Other Side of the Window by Homayra Rafat. It examines how Pashtun women's lives are reflected in a fictionalized yet deeply rooted portrayal of motherhood, resilience, and mourning. This study, through textual analysis, aims to unpack the recurring motifs of resistance and voice in these short narratives. Framed through Insider Feminism and Strategic Essentialism, this study foregrounds how Pashtun female authors reject frameworks of Western identity while drawing on collective identity to challenge gendered representation and emphasize cultural representation. The findings of this study reveal that Pashtun women writers of selected short narratives attempt at reclaiming their agency and navigating womanhood within the systems of war, family, and patriarchy. Ultimately, these stories serve not just as narratives but also as embodiments of cultural memory and acts of soft resilience.

Keywords: *Pashto Women Fiction, Insider Feminism, Strategic Essentialism, Post-War Womanhood, Narrative Agency*

INTRODUCTION

In stories and culture, Pashtun women are often shown not as real people. Instead, they are seen as symbols used to represent family honor or shame, rather than as individuals with their own voices. These ideas, passed down through oral traditions, patriarchal customs, and colonial writings, have often portrayed Pashtun women as passive figures. They are rarely shown as the storytellers of their own lives. Much scholarship has examined how Pashtun women have been marginalized in discourse, but most studies focus on ethnographic and political stories. The literary self-representations of Pashtun women, especially in their own short fiction, remain largely unexplored and deserve more attention. This gap is important because recent collections like *Under the Kabul Sky* and *My Pen is the Wing of a Bird* showcase new voices of Afghan women writing in Pashto. These works try to offer fresh perspectives beyond traditional narratives. The silence around this work is not accidental but reflects a wider pattern of ignoring literary forms that express feelings and ideas within home life, emotions, and cultural codes. These forms often operate quietly and are overlooked because they don't fit mainstream or public modes of expression.

This study is important because it focuses on how Pashtun women tell their own stories in ways that are deeply tied to their culture and artistic traditions. By doing so, it highlights their unique voices and creative methods of expression. Unlike open political protest, many of these stories use hints, memories, and controlled emotions. To understand them, we need a careful approach that notices these quiet and subtle ways of expressing ideas. In regions affected by war, displacement, and strict social norms, Pashto women's short fiction has become a powerful way to rethink survival, grief, motherhood, and resilience. These stories often highlight everyday struggles such as loneliness, fear, and family challenges while also showing moments of hope and resistance. Through literary expression, Pashtun women reclaim their voices and offer nuanced perspectives on life in difficult circumstances. These texts do not necessarily reject tradition but instead inhabit and reshape it from within. Understanding this dynamic helps us see Pashtun womanhood in a way that is truer to their real lives and culture. It allows readers to connect with how Pashtun women live and tell their own stories within their cultural context.

The present study focuses on two short stories from the anthology *Under a Kabul Sky: Short Fiction by Afghan Women*, translated by Elaine Kennedy. The selected short stories, *Number Thirteen* by Batool Haidari and *The Other Side of the Window* by Homayra Rafat, offer layered portrayals of female characters negotiating personal and communal trauma in war-torn settings. Both authors, writing from inside Pashtun culture, create stories that focus on women's feelings and inner lives. At the same time, they do not ignore the harsh realities of political violence, patriarchy, and memories passed down through generations. These stories, with their fragmented structures and personal voices, reveal the small but powerful struggles women face to survive. They show how being a woman is constantly reshaped amid loss and silence.

To understand these complex portrayals, this study uses ideas from insider feminism and strategic essentialism. Insider feminism, as detailed by Shahnaz Khan, highlights the ways in which Muslims and South Asian women show their strength and make choices within their own cultural and religious traditions. It does not see their agency as something that only happens by rejecting these traditions, but as something that grows from within. This view avoids simple ideas of either submission or resistance. Instead, it values how women navigate challenges, use emotional understanding, and show resilience in ways that fit their culture. Shahnaz, drawing on Gayatri Spivak's idea of strategic essentialism, shows how women sometimes use common identity traits like modesty, motherhood, or loyalty as tools to negotiate their culture. They temporarily embrace these shared categories to unite and strengthen their position in cultural or political struggles. These perspectives help us understand Pashtun womanhood without making it seem strange or perfect. Instead, they focus on its real and complex nature as shown in stories.

The significance of this study operates on multiple levels. At the local level, this study focuses on Pashto women's fiction. This type of cultural expression has often been ignored in mainstream literary discussions in Pakistan and Afghanistan. At the academic level, this study adds to feminist literary criticism by showing how women express their strength in quiet and culturally specific ways. It provides a different view from the usual Western-focused ideas of feminist resistance. At the global level, this study challenges one-sided views of Muslim women living in war-torn areas. It highlights their own stories, which push back against cultural erasure and unfair political stereotypes. By doing this, the study underscores how important it is to listen to women's voices and stories. It also emphasizes that understanding a culture is the key to learning about gender, memory, and survival.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The representation of Pashtun women has long been shaped by the complex interplay of colonial discourse and patriarchal tradition. Scholars have interrogated these intersecting forces through cultural, linguistic, political, and literary lenses, progressively shifting from ethnographic to feminist literary approaches over the last three decades.

Grima (1992) provides one of the first comprehensive anthropological analyses of Pashtun women's lived experiences in *The Performance of Emotion among Pashtun Women*. She argues that oral traditions kept by women of the society, particularly folktales and storytelling, act as cultural spaces where emotions are expressed and power is quietly challenged. Grima recognizes the patriarchal norms that limit Pashtun women. However, she highlights how these women creatively navigate such boundaries, expressing wit, resilience, and critique even within restrictions.

Benard (2002), in *Veiled Courage: Inside the Afghan Women's Resistance*, extends this cultural reading into political territory. She reveals how Afghan women, despite Taliban repression, become a force for change. They started running secret schools and using their roles as mothers and community members. Bernard's concept of "veiled agency" describes how outward conformity can conceal acts of resistance. This would thus lay a foundation for the later feminists who focus on culturally embedded forms of resistance.

Khan (2002), in *Aversion and Desire*, shifts the conversation toward feminist theory by proposing the concept of *insider feminism*. She draws on Spivak's strategic essentialism. She argues that Muslim women often navigate patriarchal structures tactically rather than through open defiance. Khan challenges Western feminist perspectives and advocates for approaches based on local ways of knowing. Her writings serve as a basis for comprehending how Pashtun and other South Asian women writers negotiate agency without denying their cultural or religious identities.

Sanauddin (2015), in his doctoral thesis, *Proverbs and Patriarchy,* conducts a linguistic and cultural study of more than 500 Pashto proverbs. He illustrates how common language, which depicts women as illogical, inferior, or socially unstable, encodes and perpetuates gender hierarchies. Unlike ethnographic or activist accounts, Sanauddin's work examines how language shapes thought and behaviour. He argues that these proverbs reinforce systemic misogyny by repeating and normalising harmful ideas.

Minallah (2013), writing in *Anthropology, Feminism, and Literature: Blurring Boundaries*, combines ethnography and literature to explore how Pashtun women express trauma and resistance through creative means. She revisits traditional stories like Bibi Shireenai. She argues that modern Pashtun women writers combine feminist critique with cultural memory in their retellings. For her, literature becomes a space of healing, where women reframe silence and suffering as testimony.

Rasool (2017), in *Pashtun Images in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English*, builds on this literary exploration. He observes a change in recent fiction where Pashtun women are no longer shown as passive victims. Instead, they are depicted as complex individuals navigating trauma, cultural expectations, and post-war identity. Rasool highlights the emergence of women characters who reclaim authorship over their lives, embodying both resilience and transformation. His analysis focuses on novels and poetry, with less attention to short fiction.

Salahuddin (2017), in his doctoral thesis on Pakistani women's fiction, further investigates how women's emotional and psychological landscapes operate as modes of resistance. He shows how writers

incorporate silence, loyalty, and relational ethics as feminist strategies. His work aligns with Khan's insider feminism. It deepens this approach by tracing its literary expressions, especially among writers from conservative areas like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Khan et al. (2021), in their article *Women Political Activism and Public Spaces in Pashtun Society*, highlight contemporary shifts in gendered participation. Using interviews and media analysis, they reveal how Pashtun women participate in political life. This involvement often happens through culturally accepted roles like mothers, educators, and caregivers. They argue that while these roles seem traditional, women reinterpret them to occupy and expand public space. The article confirms that wearing modest clothing or having a religious identity does not prevent political awareness or activism.

Ullah et al. (2023), in *Controversial Portrayal of Women in Pashto Proverbs*, revisit the linguistic terrain discovered earlier by Sanauddin. They conceptualise proverbs as "cultural scripts" that shape and reimagine female behaviour and license patriarchal control. However, they note a discursive shift: younger Pashtun women increasingly challenge these proverbial norms. They have started using social media and education to reclaim narrative agency. Their work reflects a generational evolution in both the reception and resistance of misogynistic cultural codes.

Shah (2023), in *Redefining the Role of Pakistani Women Writers in the 21st Century*, provides a comprehensive analysis of feminist literary interventions. She contends that Pakistani women writers no longer rely solely on Western feminist idioms. They have instead started to produce contextually grounded critiques. Such that it emerges from within cultural frameworks. Shah identifies this approach as an evolved form of insider feminism. It blends emotional intimacy, social critique, and narrative experimentation. Her work suggests that literature has become a privileged space where women reimagine themselves not only as survivors but as intellectual agents.

Together, these studies reveal a shift in how Pashtun women are portrayed. They have moved from passive stereotypes to complex expressions of culturally rooted resistance. Earlier ethnographic and linguistic research highlighted the oppressive systems affecting women's lives. More recent literary and feminist work focuses on their agency, transformation, and control over their own stories. Yet despite this growing scholarship, limited attention has been paid to how Pashtun women writers use short fiction to narrate female agency in contexts of war, survival, and cultural negotiation.

This study fills that gap by examining contemporary Pashto women's short stories through the lens of insider feminism and strategic essentialism. By doing so, it highlights how women write themselves into history not through defiance but through layered storytelling, subtle resistance, and contextually rooted forms of power.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws on strategic essentialism and Muslim feminist perspectives articulated by Shahnaz Khan in her book Aversion and Desire: Negotiating Muslim Female Identity in the Diaspora (2002), which modifies and contextualizes Gayatri Spivak's theory of strategic essentialism. According to Spivak, strategic essentialism is a short-term, deliberate political strategy in which underrepresented groups, despite their internal differences, adopt simplified collective identities to obtain representation. Khan tries to extend this framework into the lived realities of Muslim women, acknowledging that while the category "Muslim" is *"fluid, mobile, and shifting,"* she draws *"upon Gayatri Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism and thus enter[s] the debate about the forces that organize the world in fundamental ways.*

For entering the category, Muslim helps me claim my voice and find a space for myself in Canada" (Khan, 2002, p. xv).

Khan views strategic essentialism as *"part of a strategy to identify and engage with regional, situation-specific, and global struggles. The vision includes religious as well as nonreligious resistance"* (Khan, 2002, p. xxii). She employs the category Muslim as *"a starting point"* to provide "a static definitive answer, and to *"understand the fluidity of cultural expressions, particularly those within diasporic communities"* (Khan, 2002, p. xxiii).

Instead of evaluating Muslim women's decisions in light of Western liberal feminist ideals, Khan contends that they should be interpreted within the contexts of their culture and religion.

She demonstrates how women navigate complex negotiations within what she calls the *"third space"*—a hybridized zone where *"progressive politics cannot emerge from either Islam or Orientalism but in the in-between hybridized third space"* (Khan, 2002, p. 21).In the described third space, women *"resist, contest, and collude through individual and collaborative strategies in the process of cultural, political, and economic empowerment"* (Khan, 2002, p. xxi).

Khan uses in-depth ethnographic interviews to reclaim women's culturally embedded practices as acts of agency instead of submissiveness. Her interviewees exhibit complex coping and survival mechanisms in patriarchal societies. For example, customs like veils, arranged marriages, or displays of maternal devotion can be used as means of upholding dignity, negotiating autonomy, and establishing moral authority. According to Karima, one of her interviewees, *"I liked it [living under the Khomeini regime] for the cover-up... the hejab, because it is comfortable and gives rahat [peace]*" (Khan, 2002, p. 71). Similarly, Tuzeen, another interviewee, articulates maternal devotion as a source of authority: *"Women have the most important job... raising children; that means raising the culture... I think there is nothing, nothing more important, more respectful... than to bring up a child"* (Khan, 2002, p. 114).

Khan's framework illustrates how women strategically engage with cultural and religious norms to assert their agency. *"I pick and choose from Islam what I want to do and what I want to practice,... what I agree with and understand,"* as one interviewee, Iram, puts it (Khan, 2002, p. 51). This exemplifies the *"shifting and mobile strategies"* that Khan describes, according to which women's lives are *"situated at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion"* (Khan, 2002, p. xvi).

According to Khan, these kinds of negotiations represent active, situated forms of resistance rather than victimization. She asserts that the way *"individual women negotiate the contradictions in their lives suggests a plurality of ways of performing Muslim identity and/or responding to being positioned as Muslim in North America. Their negotiations challenge the regulatory notions of culture and religion as fixed and static"* (Khan, 2002, p. xxi). By engaging in these discussions, women *"initiate new signifiers and symbols of identities as they forge novel possibilities by defying prescriptions and expectations"* (Khan, 2002, p. 127).

In this study, Pashtun women characters in short fiction are analyzed using Khan's Muslim feminist framework and strategic essentialism. These characters frequently play the roles expected of them by society—mothers, caregivers, modest wives—not as a sign of subservience, but rather as coping strategies and emotional control mechanisms. Khan's theoretical understanding enables us to comprehend that these women are *"not passively receiving Islamic or dominant cultural practices but are actively engaging with their circumstances in complex and contradictory ways" (Khan, 2002, p. 127).* Through culturally understandable acts of resilience, the chosen stories demonstrate how Pashtun women deal with trauma,

identity, and sociopolitical erasure following Khan's theory of the *"hybridized third space,"* where *"translation and interpretation determine how lives are lived and narratives are told and retold" (Khan, 2002, p. 20).*

This framework, therefore, aids in reading these stories not just as representations of suffering but also as places of negotiation where resistance and identity are constantly reshaped in response to patriarchy, war, and cultural memory. Such negotiations, as Khan demonstrates, are *"individual and collaborative strategies of resistance, contestation, and collaboration in the process of cultural, political, and economic empowerment" (Khan, 2002, p. 127)*, creating opportunities to understand women's agency in culturally limited yet dynamic contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses qualitative textual analysis based on Catherine Belsey's approach. It reads literary texts not just for their content but as structured sites of ideology, discourse, and subjectivity. Catherine Belsey argues that literature does not simply reflect reality. Instead, it creates meaning through language, genre, and intertextual connections. This makes literature a rich area for studying how culture and ideology are formed and expressed. Catherine Belsey, in *Critical Practice,* argues that literary texts must be read as "sites of struggle" where dominant meanings are both reinforced and challenged. This means close reading should go beyond just identifying themes; it should trace how meaning is created through contradictions, signification, and ideological positions within the narrative. Drawing on this framework, the selected texts- Batool Haidari's *Number Thirteen* and Homayra Rafat's *The Other Side of the Window*- are viewed as narrative spaces where discussions of war, womanhood, and cultural resilience are expressed through text. These stories are analyzed intertextually, focusing on elements like narrative voice, structure, imagery, silence, and dialogue as techniques through which Pashtun women claim agency within restrictive cultural settings. Shahnaz Khan's adaptation of Gayatri Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism offers a key perspective: the female characters in these stories do not reject cultural norms but instead use and reshape them as deliberate tools. This approach aims to show that meaning lies not only in what is expressed but also in how it is conveyed through acts like modesty, mourning, memory, or maternal presence. These expressions gain political importance when viewed within the larger social and historical contexts of conflict and gendered marginalization.

DISCUSSION

Number Thirteen

Batool Haidari's short story *Number Thirteen* was first published in Afghanistan. It was later translated into English by Elaine Kennedy in *Under a Kabul Sky* (2022). The story explores themes of erasure, endurance, and gendered survival in post-conflict Afghanistan. Haidari's use of a posthumous narrator is not simply a narrative device but a textual manifestation of what Shahnaz Khan calls *"negotiating the contradictions"* of cultural identity and gendered trauma within systems that erase the subject (Khan, 2002, p. xxi). It is a deliberate literary strategy that distances readers from direct trauma while compelling them to confront its lasting emotional aftermath. Catherine Belsey might say that this broken and distant narrative shows ideological conflict. It highlights the tension between institutional violence and personal memory. It also shows the struggle between forced silence and ongoing individual experience. The protagonist, who is already dead, tells her story from inside the morgue. She is surrounded by other bodies, which feel quietly familiar to her. She says, *"My chador had landed quite a way off and was covered with dust. I hope someone will put it back on me"* (Haidari, 2022, p. 2). "I liked it [living under the Khomeini regime] for the cover-up... the hejab, because it is comfortable and gives rahat [peace]"

(Khan, 2002, p. 71) is how Karima describes Khan's insistence on modesty, even after death. Instead, what could seem like patriarchal conformity turns out to be a tactic for maintaining autonomy and dignity in settings where agency is restricted. Also, Her such comments show not only fear but also a usual sense of acceptance. This chilling calm reflects a death that is not abrupt but gradual-resulting from prolonged abandonment, social neglect, and the erosion of personhood well before physical death. Haidari thus creates a narrative space where death functions less as an end and more as a condition that women endure.

The story's use of a numerical identity, naming the protagonist only as Number Thirteen, serves as a textual symbol of institutional dehumanization. This choice highlights the reduction of individual identity to a mere number within oppressive systems. The protagonist's reduction to a number is not just a symbol of loss; it is a discursive act that renders her invisible and interchangeable. As the narrator observes, *"The only thing that mattered was the number nailed to the door"* (Haidari, 2022, p. 2). This underscores how institutional systems erase personal names, memories, and family connections. She does, however, engage in what Khan refers to as *"individual and collaborative strategies of resistance, contestation, and collaboration in the process of cultural, political, and economic empowerment" (Khan, 2002, p. 127)* by sharing her narrative. She has no name, yet her voice endures. This supports Khan's assertion that women are "actively engaging with their circumstances in complex and contradictory ways rather than passively receiving Islamic or dominant cultural practices" (Khan, 2002, p. 127). She reconstructs her identity through relationships that are emotionally legible and significant within her cultural context, even after death, by holding onto memories of her daughter and Ismail.Within Khan's framework of insider feminism, the loss of the protagonist's name reflects the wider cultural silencing of women's identities under patriarchal systems. However, the story challenges this silencing by giving the character a voice, even after death.

The morgue serves as a symbolic space of gendered suspension, where the protagonist dwells between memory and oblivion, individuality and anonymity. Despite this erasure, the story introduces subtle disruptions. The narrator reflects, remembers, and regrets—textual markers of selfhood that resist total disappearance. The tension between erasure and endurance is key to the narrative's expression of both insider feminism and strategic essentialism. The narrator's concern for modesty after death—her hope that someone will cover her with her chador—could be mistaken for internalized patriarchal norms. However, as Khan argues, these expressions of cultural femininity often represent not submission but the maintenance of dignity and moral identity within established social norms. The narrator's persistent search for Ismail, her husband, despite her arrest and disappearance, serves as an additional act of emotional agency rooted in familiar relational roles. Her longing for protection and hope for her child's safety should be understood not as submission but as culturally meaningful resistance. This is a survival strategy within oppressive systems. As Spivak would suggest, the narrator adopts these essentialized roles-modest wife, grieving mother, selfless caregiver-not to surrender but to persist. In this created space, the protagonist *"resist, contest, and collude through individual and collaborative strategies in the process of cultural, political, and economic empowerment" (Khan, 2002, p. xxi).* Haidari's story shows how these identities, though framed by tradition, are actively mobilised to preserve emotional coherence and human worth in the face of systemic dehumanization.

The narrator's embrace of culturally recognizable identities, especially as a modest woman and grieving mother, can be analyzed through the concept of strategic essentialism. This approach enables marginalized individuals to temporarily occupy simplified identity categories. Doing so helps them gain protection, legitimacy, or narrative agency within the dominant structure. In *Number Thirteen*, the narrator does not openly reject traditional roles. Instead, she subtly invokes them, even after death, to preserve her sense of self within systems that otherwise erase her. Her ongoing concern for modesty-*"I hope someone will put [the chador] back on me"*-and her enduring maternal grief-*"If only I hadn't locked*

the door…"-do not indicate submission. Rather, they represent a refusal to allow institutions to dictate the terms of her humanity (Haidari, 2022, pp. 2–3). These identity positions, while culturally prescribed, are strategically upheld to assert emotional presence and relational dignity. As Khan argues, Muslim women may embrace these roles not as acts of submission to patriarchal norms but as intentional, context-specific affirmations of survival.

Haidari's narrative mirrors this logic by constructing a character who, though stripped of name, autonomy, and life, still articulates memory, care, and longing through the very categories imposed upon her. Strategic essentialism, then, becomes a mode of resistance precisely because it speaks the language of the dominant order while quietly redefining its meaning from within. Haidari's narrative reflects this logic by creating a character who, despite losing her name, autonomy, and life, continues to express memory, care, and longing through the very identities imposed on her. Strategic essentialism thus serves as a form of resistance because it uses the language of the dominant system while subtly transforming its meaning from within.

The story's closing lines deepen this emotional complexity: *"I wish I had brought her with me when I went. If only I hadn't locked the door..."* (Haidari, 2022, p. 3). The maternal bond, left unresolved and untouched by death, stands as the final assertion of selfhood that surpasses institutional anonymity. This maternal remorse is a gendered act of remembrance that upholds the narrator's moral agency; it is not just a personal one. The narrator's function as mother becomes the last aspect of her identity that remains intact, much like Tuzeen in Khan's study states, *"Women have the most important job... bringing up children... there is nothing more respectful" (Khan, 2002, p. 114).* According to this perspective, motherhood is a culturally rooted act of survival and dignity rather than just a patriarchal role. In Belsey's framework, this unspoken grief-expressed through indirect confession-creates a rupture in the text's otherwise detached tone. Here, language reveals emotion despite its restrained style. The protagonist, despite being stripped of name and future, retains the capacity for memory and mourning. Through this structural limitation and thematic depth, *Number Thirteen* provides not only a critique of war and abandonment but also a model of narrative survival. Haidari does not depict overt defiance; instead, she portrays subtle resistance and resilience embodied in silence, modesty, and care. The narrator does not flee; she endures-strategically, contextually, and, importantly, on her own terms.

Analyzing *Number Thirteen* through the lens of authorship uncovers not only a story of fictionalized trauma but also a nuanced act of literary resistance by Batool Haidari. As a woman writing from within a war-torn society, Haidari is deeply connected to the world she depicts; she is entwined with its fractures and silences. Her storytelling thus creates a symbolic community imagined space where marginalized women, silenced by institutional and patriarchal violence, can find voice and recognition. This narration of her own experience becomes a literary enactment of the *"third space"* Khan describes, where *"progressive politics cannot emerge from either Islam or Orientalism but in the in-between hybridized third space" (Khan, 2002, p. 21).* Drawing on Shahnaz Khan's concept of insider feminism, Haidari's work does not reject cultural frameworks but speaks from within them, using emotional restraint, modesty, and grief as expressions of strength. Like her protagonist, the author does not shout but insists, carefully navigating social expectations while resisting the erasure of female experience. In doing so, she embodies what Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism allows: the creation of a temporary collective identity-here, through fiction-where women gain rhetorical and emotional agency without abandoning their cultural roots. Haidari's literary voice is therefore both a creative act and a political gesture: soft, strategic, and quietly defiant, shaped by someone who, like her characters, has lived on the margins of power and found a way to speak from that position. Her narration thus becomes, in Khan's terms, a *"novel possibility"* forged through the *"initiation of new signifiers and symbols of identities" (Khan, 2002, p. 127).*

The Other Side of the Window

Homayra Rafat's poignant short story *"The Other Side of the Window"* appears in the anthology *Under a Kabul Sky: Short Fiction by Afghan Women* (translated into English by Elaine Kennedy, 2022). With its creative structure, the story is told in four layers: a young woman's (Aycha) monologue, a third-person commentary on daily life, the private thoughts of a grieving mother, and passages from the diary of Hamid, a young man drafted into the military. Rafat's story examines the effects of war on family ties, the weight of survival, the silent tenacity of women, and the eerie persistence of memory and loss against the backdrop of Afghanistan's tumultuous years of war and military conscription. Through its fragmented structure, the story captures the collective trauma of a society where personal grief, political violence, and gendered suffering are deeply intertwined. Rafat's writing style blends emotional restraint with flashes of raw vulnerability, making the narrative both culturally grounded and universally resonant with experiences of displacement, endurance, and fragmented identity.

The narrative begins with Aycha, a young woman caught between recollections of her deceased lover, Hamid, and an upcoming marriage that she does not want. Her monologue exposes the profound wounds caused by forced migration, patriarchal coercion, and loss. The second section switches to a third-person point of view, showing a chilly, snowy day where mundane household tasks blend with somber recollections of Hamid's absence, signifying the emotional detachment of survival. The viewpoint of Hamid's mother is presented in the third section; her unwavering hope, sorrow, and powerlessness mirror the ongoing suffering of women left behind by war. In the fourth and last section, an unidentified narrator finds Hamid's bloodstained diary and reads passages about his forced military service, his meager acts of defiance, his desire for home and Aycha, and his eventual death or disappearance at the front. Collectively, the four stories paint a picture of lives uprooted, the enduring power of memory, and the gentle yet tenacious fortitude of women in the face of war and cultural destruction. The narrator Aycha's emotional displacement is vividly captured in her fixation on the window and rain: *"I've been sitting in front of the window and looking into the neighbour's courtyard from morning till night... Even the sky is shedding tears for me... No, I don't like the rain. It reminds me of the past, it reminds me of Hamid" (Rafat, 2022, p.1).* This is a linguistic depiction of stranded womanhood rather than just a depressing gesture. Khan refers to this liminality as a *"third space"* a place where women, confined by patriarchy and uprooted by war, *"resist, contest, and collude"* with prevailing standards while creating alternative forms of subjectivity (Khan, 2002, p. xxi).. This imagery illustrates how the war uproots her identity, securing it in memory and grief rather than the here and now. The window turns into a symbolic boundary between the outside world, which goes on without her beloved Hamid, and her inner world of loss. Her continual waiting and observation represent the precarious situation that many women in conflict zones find themselves in—trapped between presence and absence, hope and despair. This emotional displacement reframes womanhood as a fluid, brittle state moulded by loss and longing rather than as a fixed role. The narrator's identity is shattered, illustrating how war affects women's lives on a psychological and emotional level in addition to their physical ones. Her incapacity to participate in day-to-day activities (*"I don't do anything all day"*) *(Rafat, 2022, p.2)* demonstrates how the effects of war permeate private spheres like the home and the heart. Khan contends that culturally rooted behaviors like waiting, longing, and mourning should be seen as *"a plurality of ways of performing Muslim identity" rather than being written off as inactivity (Khan, 2002, p. xxi).* Therefore, Aycha's emotional captivity is a cultural act that maintains memory in the absence of justice rather than only a result of sadness.This portrayal is consistent with postwar narratives that highlight the emotional scars that women bear, redefining survival as a complex negotiation of memory, waiting, and emotional endurance.

The narrator's forced marriage serves as a striking example of how patriarchal cultural norms rob women of their autonomy: *"The night my father gave him my hand, I cried so hard that my father got angry and*

gave me a serious whipping with his belt... My father asked how much time I needed to choose a husband. He said that if I was really his daughter, I'd marry that man. Otherwise, I should leave home." (Rafat, 2022, p.3). In this passage, the daughter's desires are violently suppressed, demonstrating the harsh enforcement of patriarchal authority. Her internal turmoil and tears, however, indicate a kind of agency within oppression. By navigating her position through emotional endurance and silent suffering rather than overt rebellion, she embodies insider feminism's emphasis on women's intricate navigating of cultural constraints. In contrast to Western notions of resistance, Khan maintains that Muslim women's acts must be interpreted in light of their culture and context*: "Progressive politics cannot emerge from either Islam or Orientalism but in the in-between hybridized third space" (Khan, 2002, p. 21).* She is forced to comply with her father's demand, but her anguish and personal grief indicate that she does not entirely accept the identity that has been forced upon her. This conflict between resistance and obedience emphasizes how women's agency frequently shows up subtly, through endurance and emotional expression rather than overt conflict. The narrator's experience is representative of the larger reality faced by many women who have to balance their own desires with those of their families and society. Her narrative acknowledges the cultural background that influences and restricts women's choices while criticizing patriarchal control. One major manifestation of enduring womanhood is maternal grief: *"My mother's constant question-her sole question-torments me: 'Have you heard from Hamid?' My chest tightens every time I answer 'no.' I'd rather die than say 'no.'" (Rafat, 2022, p.5)* The mother's relentless questioning reveals the intense emotional labour mothers endure while waiting for news of their children during wartime. Her loss is not unique to her but also representative of the innumerable women who persevere by providing care and holding onto hope in the face of adversity. She responded with tears, *"Every child is his mother's own,"* capturing the universality of maternal suffering in a moving way. *"If anything happens to Hamid, no one could give us their child to replace him." (Rafat, 2022, p.17)* The narrative emphasizes that the protagonist's mother's predicament is one that all mothers have been dealing with for years: a never-ending cycle of loss, fear, and irreplaceable love. The narrator's fragmented memories illustrate a psychological survival strategy: *"I don't remember when or how Hamid got behind the woodpile in the shed... Now, years later, I'm unable to think about the day the officers searched the house or the state my mother, Hamid, and I were in." (Rafat, 2022, p.9)* The way that trauma shatters memory and identity is reflected in this uncertainty. The fragmented narrative structure reflects the disjointed experience of living through war and loss, in which clear, linear memories are frequently unavailable.

Furthermore, through strategic essentialism, Pashtun female characters temporarily assume culturally prescribed roles in order to assert agency and fend off erasure, navigating patriarchal constraints and wartime trauma. The narrator's mother, for example, plays the role of a bereaved matriarch obsessed with her son Hamid's disappearance, a socially sanctioned identity that conceals her subversive refusal to accept his assumed death. Her ritualized vigilance—staring out the window, demanding to see Hamid's body, and consulting clairvoyants—conforms to Pashtun cultural expectations of maternal devotion while allowing her to resist closure: *"She demanded to see Hamid, if not alive, then his body. (Rafat, 2022, p.16)"* By using her grief as a form of persistence, she questions the state's erasure of soldiers like Hamid, transforming passive waiting into a quiet rebellion against institutional indifference. The mother's reliance on religious and supernatural practices demonstrates strategic essentialism. Within a patriarchal framework, she legitimizes her disobedience by framing it through culturally legible rituals, such as burning talismans and praying for Hamid's return. She uses Pashtun mourning customs to protest the normalization of loss and subverts societal expectations of closure when she declines a funeral: *"She did not want a funeral." (Rafat, 2022, p.26)*By combining conformity with subdued resistance, her actions demonstrate how essentialized roles, such as the pious, suffering mother, can be repurposed to critique systemic violence. This intricacy is clarified by Khan's formulation of strategic essentialism, which states

that women can "*gain access to space and authority that they might otherwise be denied" by embracing "essentialized identities" (Khan, 2002, p. xv).*

Finally, the story depicts writing and memory as forms of silent resistance to the erasure of war. When the bloodstained notebook is found, the narrator insists, *"Look at what I found! A little notebook." (Rafat, 2022, p.23)* Although Hamid wrote the words, they are preserved and read by women, who carry his memory and, by extension, their own emotional histories. Reading becomes a feminized ritual of witnessing, insisting that even unnamed, unclaimed losses are worth remembering. What Khan refers to as the creation of *"new signifiers and symbols of identity" is dramatized in this moment (Khan, 2002, p. 127).* By retaining both the narrator's emotional reality and Hamid's erased past, the work turns into a counterarchive. This act of healing—reading, remembering, and grieving—shows that women may regain agency even in roles that are limited. Reading a man's words as a woman turns into a political act, reclaiming one's voice and refusing to remain silent. Through this quiet act, the women resist both the literal death of loved ones and the metaphorical death of memory, showcasing memory as an essential weapon of female resilience within and against patriarchal erasure.

Viewed through a metatextual lens, *The Other Side of the Window* is not merely a narrative about war, grief, and memory. It also functions as a deliberate act of self-reclamation by Homayra Rafat. Writing within a context where women's voices and visibility are systematically restricted, Rafat resists what Shahnaz Khan terms "being with the lot"-the homogenizing silence that reduces women to collective anonymity in narratives of suffering. Instead, through storytelling itself, she claims a space that is simultaneously literary, political, and emotional. Although her characters are confined to waiting rooms, windows, and rituals, Rafat's authorial voice breaks through these boundaries by naming, narrating, and remembering. In Spivak's terms, her writing serves as a strategic act: a temporary essentializing of grief and gender that enables her to speak not only for her characters but through them. The fragmented structure, shifting voices, and focus on female endurance reflect the author's engagement with silence-using fiction to transform invisibility into presence. The end product is a very complex narrative that embodies what Khan refers to as *"individual and collaborative strategies of resistance, contestation, and collaboration" in both form and content (Khan, 2002, p. 127).* By writing this story, Rafat does not simply depict trauma; she redefines its conditions by embedding her voice within the fabric of loss, thereby resisting erasure and asserting herself as a woman who remembers, mourns, and speaks.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate how contemporary short fiction written by Pashtun and Afghan women themselves tells the lived experiences of Pashtun women regarding war, displacement, womanhood, and resiliency. Through an analysis of Homayra Rafat's The Other Side of the Window and Batool Haidari's Number Thirteen, the study revealed how literary narratives serve as acts of agency, cultural memory, and survival in addition to reflecting trauma. The study, which drew on insider feminism and strategic essentialism, emphasized how Pashtun women characters—and consequently, their writers—renounce cultural norms, complete erasure, and reassert identity within patriarchal and war-torn frameworks. The stories demonstrate subtle forms of resilience, such as emotional loyalty, motherhood, caregiving, memory preservation, and silent endurance, in place of overt rebellion. Although culturally coded as traditional or modest, they emerge as powerful strategies for emotional survival and cultural continuity. Instead of using external or universal feminist models, the analysis highlighted the significance of interpreting Pashtun women's agency within their unique cultural and historical contexts through the lens of insider feminism. Analyzing how deep inner autonomy and emotional resistance could coexist with external conformity to cultural roles, such as being a devout daughter, modest woman, or grieving mother—also required a thorough understanding of strategic essentialism. Through their writing,

Haidari and Rafat both depicted these negotiations and took part in them, reclaiming voice, dignity, and memory through the act of storytelling. The study thus shows that Pashtun women's short fiction is a site of identity-making, resistance, and resilience rather than merely a chronicle of suffering.

Future research might examine a wider range of Pashto women's fiction, particularly works written in the Pashto language, to identify common or differing modes of resistance across various linguistic and regional settings. Comparative analyses of Afghan and Pakistani Pashtun women's narratives could enhance our understanding of how geography, language, and local politics influence the forms of agency accessible to women writers. Moreover, interdisciplinary methods that combine feminist literary theory with oral history, trauma studies, or ethnographic research could provide deeper insights into the ways narrative and memory serve as instruments of resilience in post-conflict societies.

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