Exploring Marriage, Gender Inequality, and Empowerment among Nepali and Afghani Women: A Comparative Analysis of "*The Lives We Leave Behind*" with "*The Kite Runner*"

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Abstract: This research paper explores the complex interplay between marriage and gender inequality among Nepali women, spotlighting how empowerment can redefine their societal roles and enhance their quality of life. In Nepal, traditional marriage practices are often deeply entrenched in rigid gender roles, which significantly limit women's rights and opportunities. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in Arpan Sharma's "*The Lives We Leave Behind*", where the protagonist navigates the constraints of societal expectations and the quest for personal autonomy, reflecting the struggles faced by many women within this cultural context. Similarly, Khaled Hosseini's "*The Kite Runner*" illuminates the gender disparities present in Afghan society, where cultural and patriarchal forces shape the lives of female characters like Hassan's mother and Soraya. By examining the roles of education, community support and economic independence, this study delineates the various challenges Nepali and Afghani women face in their pursuit of equality and their persistent efforts to surmount these barriers. Throughout the narrative, both Arpan Sharma's and Khaled Hosseini's characters engage in transformative journeys that underscore the necessity of educational opportunities and economic empowerment, highlighting how these elements can serve as catalysts for social change. The argument posits that empowering women through increased access to education and financial resources is not merely beneficial but essential for fostering gender equality and transforming perceptions about marriage and women's roles within society. As Nepal and Afghanistan navigates the delicate balance between long-standing traditions and burgeoning modern influences, this research paper provides invaluable insights into the factors steering change in marriage practices, underlining the critical importance of education, economic autonomy and robust social support networks as echoed in both Arpan Sharma's and Khaled Hosseini's narratives.

Keywords: Marriage practices, Modernization, Gender equality, Women Empowerment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nepali culture possesses a multifaceted relationship with gender roles, significantly influencing how women are viewed and treated within the societal fabric. The Nepalese societal structure has predominantly been patriarchal, wherein men typically hold the primary decision-making power in both family and community contexts. This dominance is evident in many life spheres, including familial roles, property rights, and social expectations. Women often find themselves confined to domestic responsibilities—cooking, cleaning, and raising children—leading to limited opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Nevertheless, amid these challenges, Nepali women set an impressive standard of resilience. They have proven time and again their capability to contribute meaningfully to societal development, especially in recent decades. This paper investigates key factors contributing to women's empowerment, such as education, community support systems, and economic independence. The struggles faced by the central characters in Arpan Sharma's "*The Lives We Leave Behind*" and Khaled Hosseini's "*The Kite Runner*" echo these societal challenges, illuminating the intersection of personal aspirations and prevailing cultural norms that often constrain women's agency.

The Cultural Context of Gender Roles in Nepal

Historically, Nepali culture intertwines traditional customs and modern aspirations, creating a unique landscape for understanding women's roles. Patriarchal norms, heavily influenced by Hindu traditions and societal structures, have relegated women to secondary status. However, the trajectory of change is ever-accelerating. To better understand the underlying causes of gender inequality, it is crucial to examine the socio-cultural dynamics that shape women's experiences in Nepal.

Patriarchy and Gender Roles: Traditional Nepali society has been structured around a patriarchal model where authority, decision-making, and resource control reside predominantly with men (Malla, 2015). Women, often perceived as caregivers, face societal expectations that confine them within domestic spheres. The notion of honor and reputation tied to women's chastity and roles further reinforces these gender disparities. In *The Lives We Leave Behind*, the protagonist experiences such societal pressure, encapsulating the tension between patriarchal expectations and the desire for personal growth and fulfillment. Similarly, in *The Kite Runner*, characters like Soraya confront rigid societal expectations regarding marriage and family, illuminating how traditional gender norms can stifle women's agency.

Influence of Religion: Religion plays a vital role in shaping gender roles in Nepal. Hindu practices often assign specific duties to women, contributing to both their domestic responsibilities and their secondary status in public life (Höfer, 2004). This is mirrored in the lives of women in both Arpan Sharma's novel and Hosseini's work, where characters are often bound by cultural and religious obligations that limit their freedom and choices. For example, in *The Kite Runner*, Soraya's dreams of becoming a teacher are curtailed by her family's expectations to adhere to traditional gender roles.

Education as a Tool of Empowerment: Education is pivotal for breaking the cycle of gender inequality. Although educational access for girls has improved, disparities persist. Rural regions face particular challenges, where families often prioritize boys' education over girls' (Subedi, 2017). The characters in *The Lives We Leave Behind* illustrate the critical importance of education in their lives as they strive for empowerment and a more equitable future, emphasizing the potential of education to serve as a transformative force. In *The Kite Runner*, the theme of education also plays a crucial role, particularly through Amir's journey of self-discovery and Soraya's desire for education, which reflect the power of knowledge to challenge societal norms.

Economic Independence: Economic empowerment is a key factor in achieving gender equality. While women contribute substantially to agriculture—an essential part of the economy—they often lack legal rights to own land or resources (World Bank, 2022). Sharma's narrative also highlights the struggles of women who engage in informal economic activities, portraying their efforts to achieve autonomy within restrictive socio-economic structures. In *The Kite Runner*, economic challenges are evident as Soraya faces obstacles related to her family's financial status, demonstrating how economic factors can hinder women's opportunities and independence.

Barriers to Gender Equality in Nepal

As this research paper evolves, it is crucial to address the specific barriers that continue to hinder gender equality in Nepal.

Education Disparities: The following analysis dives deeper into educational inequalities women encounter in rural regions. Families may choose to invest in a son's education while relegating daughters to household chores. This practice results in lower literacy rates among women, consequently limiting their future opportunities. The historical preference for male children, viewed as assets, complicates girls' situations, who are often perceived as economic burdens (Wagle, 2020). Characters in *The Lives We Leave Behind* and *The Kite Runner* navigate these educational disparities, emphasizing the urgent need for societal shifts that value girls' education equally.

Early Marriage: As a culturally rooted practice, child marriage poses a significant barrier to gender equality. Reports indicate that many girls are married off as teenagers, disrupting their education and exposing them to health risks from early pregnancies (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). The implications of early marriage extend beyond personal health; they permeate the socio-economic fabric, impacting community development. This theme is poignantly addressed in Sharma's novel, where the characters face the consequences of early marriage, highlighting its pervasive impact on their lives and dreams. In *The Kite Runner*, early marriage is also a critical issue that constrains women's aspirations, as seen with Soraya's experiences and the societal stigma attached to her past.

Informal Sector Engagement: Much of women's economic participation occurs within the informal sector, where they engage in farming and small-scale trading without the safety of legal recognition. For instance, women farmers, who contribute significantly to agricultural productivity, frequently do not own the lands they work on or have access to financial resources (Asian Development Bank, 2019). The term "informal sector" resonates with the realities depicted in *The Lives We Leave Behind*, where female characters grapple with economic precarity, seeking opportunities for empowerment despite systemic barriers. This theme is also echoed in *The Kite Runner*, where economic instability is a recurring motif that affects women's ability to thrive.

Cultural Practices and Social Norms: Festivals and cultural rituals often reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. Women are expected to perform specific cultural roles, highlighting their domestic responsibilities and perpetuating societal perceptions that their value lies in obedience and domesticity (Mishra, 2021). Arpan Sharma's narrative critiques these cultural expectations, illustrating how women resist and redefine their roles within these limiting frameworks. Likewise, *The Kite Runner* depicts the weight of cultural expectations placed upon women, particularly in the context of honor and family reputation, challenging characters like Soraya to negotiate their identities within these constraints.

Legal and Institutional Frameworks: Although there are progressive legal frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality, the enforcement of such laws remains inconsistent. Societal stigma often deters women from seeking justice for violations against them, such as domestic violence or inheritance disputes (Sharma, 2022). Furthermore, many women remain unaware of their legal rights, which further exacerbates their vulnerability. This struggle for knowledge and empowerment is echoed in the characters' journeys in *The Lives We Leave Behind*, who must navigate both societal and legal barriers to assert their rights. In *The Kite Runner*, the issue of legal protection for women is also brought to the forefront, as the societal norms limit their recourse for justice.

Political Participation: Women's representation in political offices is slowly improving, aided by the implementation of quotas. However, significant barriers, including gender-based violence and discrimination, still undermine women's political engagement. Women's voices are essential in policymaking, yet entrenched cultural attitudes often restrict their participation in political discourse (Geirbo, 2020). In *The Lives We Leave Behind*, the political landscape is portrayed as a battleground for women's rights, reflecting both progress and the persistent challenges that they face in achieving equal representation in decision-making processes. *The Kite Runner* similarly illustrates the struggles of women to gain a foothold in political spheres, underscoring the importance of their voices in advocating for change.

Empowerment and Change

Empowerment emerges as a central theme in addressing the inequalities faced by Nepali women. Strategic interventions encompassing education, economic independence, community support, and legal awareness can contribute to transformative change.

Educational Initiatives: Non-governmental organizations have taken significant steps in promoting girls' education. Programs that offer scholarships, mentorship, and vocational training can dramatically alter women's economic prospects (Tiwari, 2019). Education equips women with the knowledge necessary to advocate for themselves and seek opportunities outside their traditional roles. This is mirrored in *The Kite Runner*, where education was a means of liberation for both male and female characters, signifying hope for an empowered future.

Economic Empowerment Programs: Initiatives aimed at improving women's access to resources and financial tools are paramount. Microfinance programs that cater to women can offer them the economic independence needed to impact their communities. For instance, programs focusing on women farmers can facilitate access to land ownership and provide training in sustainable agricultural practices (Nepal Agricultural Research Council, 2020). In *The Kite Runner*, the theme of economic hardship serves as a reminder of the need for systematic support of women's economic endeavors.

Community Support Systems: Community initiatives play a substantial role in advocating for women's rights. Collaborations between local communities and NGOs can yield substantial progress in reshaping social norms and fostering an inclusive environment where women's contributions are valued – for instance, through community dialogues that challenge preconceived notions of gender roles. Hosseini's work shows the power of community bonds, as seen through the friendships and alliances formed among women, which can offer essential support systems.

Legal Rights Awareness: Educating women about their legal rights represents a critical step toward empowerment. Legal literacy programs can enable women to understand their rights concerning inheritance and property ownership, equipping them to challenge patriarchal norms within their communities effectively (League of Women Voters of Nepal, 2021). Similarly, *The Kite Runner* highlights the need for awareness of rights among female characters, who must navigate complex societal structures to assert their dignity and freedom.

Political Mobilization: Fostering political participation is another vital area of focus. Training and support for women aspiring to enter politics will enhance their representation and influence within governance structures. Efforts to encourage women in leadership roles can also diminish the barriers they face in public life (Bhandari, 2020). *The Kite Runner* emphasizes the importance of women asserting their agency within both familial and political realms, reflecting the potential of female leadership to instigate meaningful change.

Barriers for Afghani women's

Cultural norms: Cultural norms in Afghani society impact women's lives. These kinds of norms dictate that women are just made to do the domestic responsibility or roles such as doing households things from morning to evening, raising children, while on the other hand, men are seen as the breadwinners and decision makers of the family.

In many communities, there is strict emphasis on modesty and honor towards the rigid and specific dress code and also for behavior expectated of women in society. They only mention them to wear only 'burqa' and 'hijab' for their whole life and avoiding to go in public places without their husbands or their male guardian's restriction only limits the mobility of women to participate in social activities, and educational and economic fields.

These cultural norms create a challenging environment from all the Afghani women who wanted to live freely and wanted to do something in their lives.

Education access: Education access for Afghani women is very difficult and challenging, they have to face multiple challenges that severally limit their opportunities for learning several things and also for their personal development. There is a significant barrier to enroll in school, particularly in rural areas, where the education system may be scare or non-existent. we all see this thing in our daily life that parent priorities boys more than girls for education, believing in that son's education is more valuable which leads to less enrollment for girls in schools. Cultural attitude often consider girl's education to be unnecessary. They believe women's role is to do the households things and marry or manage the primary roles, which diminishes the value of education.

Legal restrictions: In Afghanistan, the legal restriction is the major factor in the lives of women. Women in Afghanistan have been historically confined to their homes. Especially during the Taliban rule, the new rules and laws have been implemented that deeply restricted women's freedom in many areas. All these restrictions create an environment of gender inequality and oppression making it difficult for women to survive in Afghanistan. Women have been denied access to achieve their professional goals in their lives.

Violence and Harassment: In Afghanistan, violence and harassment against women are pervasive issue that especially affect their day-to-day daily lives. Females face various forms of violence like domestic violence, sexual assault, and also public harassment. Many women face and suffer abuse at the hand of their husbands and from their family members. In Afghanistan, the legal protection and laws against domestic violence are often very weak or poor, they leave the victim with very little resource. Women not only face physical intimidation but also the verbal abuse. In a nutshell, incidents of violence and harassment against females in Afghanistan, create a climate of oppressions and fear, stopping them to live freely and achieve their dreams, pursue their education and engage in society. Also, Afghanistan lacks in its health care facilities, women are denied the reproductive health services, maternal care and also mental health support.

These barriers faced by women in Afghanistan create significant problems and obstacles to achieve their dreams of gender equality. The restriction on education prevents them to gain knowledge in their respective personal and professional field. Moreover, the lack of support system such as the legal aid and shelters makes it difficult to or escape from the abusive situation.

2. CONCLUSION

To Conclude, this research affirms the intricate relationship between marriage, gender inequality, and the status of Nepali and Afghani women. While traditional marriage practices rooted in patriarchal values continue to influence women's lives, a burgeoning movement toward empowerment—cultivated through education, economic independence, and community support—promises transformative change. Prioritizing girls' education is imperative for breaking the cycle of inequality. By investing in education, communities can equip young women with the tools necessary for self-advocacy and personal development. Alongside education, enhancing economic participation and increasing legal awareness empowers women to navigate complex societal structures effectively.

Despite promising shifts in political representation, ongoing barriers require persistent efforts to dismantle entrenched social and cultural obstacles to women's empowerment. Achieving gender equality goes beyond equity; it represents a critical pathway toward sustainable development and societal progress.

As Nepali women assert their rights and advocate for change, they redefine societal narratives surrounding marriage and gender roles. For Nepal to achieve gender equality and reshape the landscape of marriage, collaborative efforts involving governmental bodies, NGOs, and local communities are crucial. By prioritizing inclusivity and equity within policymaking initiatives, society can nurture an environment where both women and men can thrive equally in pursuing a just and equitable future. Like the characters in both **"The Lives We Leave Behind" and "The Kite Runner"**, women's resilience and collective strength play a pivotal role in reshaping societal narratives and paving the way for a more equitable future.

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