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Author (s): Hafza Arshad and Sarah Azam

Affiliation (s): Independent Researcher

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University of Management and Technology Lahore, Pakistan

Manipulated Notions of Islam Regarding Women: An Analysis of *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis under Islamic Feminism

Hafza Arshad* and Sarah Azam

Independent Researcher

Abstract

This research attempts to examine the suffocated lives of women in Afghanistan in the novel, *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis under the lens of Islamic Feminism presented by Fatema Mernissi in *Islam and Democracy*. Islam has given all the fundamental rights to women. Despite being under the protection of men, women ought to have their own individuality as both genders shall stand equal for their deeds on the day of judgement. This research identifies the manipulated notions of Islam regarding women in the respective novel through the framework of Islamic feminism. The theory emphasizes that Islam allows women to celebrate their femininity, but the misinterpretation of Quranic verses has misled Muslims into believing otherwise. Thus, the research contributes to the struggle of identifying Afghan women's rights within the outside and domestic sphere which have been demolished by men, with the aid of Islamic feminism. In *The Breadwinner*, Taliban's agenda is to set a religious narrative that women are submissive and they should be confined inside the four walls. In contrast, the reality is entirely opposite as Islam provides equal rights to both sexes on human grounds.

Keywords: culture, Islam, Islamic feminism, patriarchy, Taliban, women rights

Introduction

It is evident by the numerous historical events that women have always been the soft target in the Muslim world whether it is the cruel regime of Al-Hakim in Egypt (Mernissi, 1992), Zia's Hadood Ordinance in Pakistan (Kennedy, 1988), or the fascist reign of Taliban in Afghanistan (Ellis, 2001). patriarchs' Islam is all about the subjugation of women and their utmost aim is to confine women to the domestic chores inside the four walls (Mernissi, 1992). In this regard, Muslim women find themselves bound by the religious obligations to follow the men's instructions as they are the

*Corresponding Author: hafza.arshad306@gmail.com



superior ones according to manipulated interpretations of Quranic verses and Hadiths. However, renowned Islamic feminists like Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Fatema Mernissi, Azizah al-Hibri, Riffat Hassan, Asma Lamrabet, and Asma Barlas have taken the challenge to debunk all the flawed religious beliefs and commandments about the status of women in Islam.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, [2001](#)) under the eclectic framework of Islamic feminism presented by Fatema Mernissi in *Islam and Democracy* ([1992](#)). It also discusses and highlights the manipulated notions of Islam regarding women in the respective novel. The novel portrayed the pitiable situations of Afghan women under the chaotic leadership of Taliban. In that turbulent period, women were unable to fight the battle for their rights because they were deprived of their fundamental rights, such as education, marriage, freedom of speech, and many others in the name of religion (Islam). There in Afghan society, religion had been strongly mingled or amalgamated with the patriarchal cultural norms. Hence, it is inevitable to deal with this subject concerning the authentic teachings of Islam to detach culture from the teachings of religion. The history of feminism is very ancient. However, Islamic feminism, in recent times, is striving to voice the distressed Muslim women and is considered as necessary as black feminism because both movements manifested almost similar agendas. They aimed to voice the voiceless as both Black and Islamic feminists have taken the challenge to address the problems of women of marginalized communities. Currently, Islamic feminism has acquired the status of an inevitable branch of the postmodern wave of feminism. However, the theory has received a lot of criticism by pseudo-Islamic scholars. The movement of Islamic feminism was initiated in the reaction of those patriarchal mindsets that have the authority to mold religion as per their ease to maintain their supremacy over females. It introduced the common folks to the patriarchal politics that has been going on in the Muslim world for ages by the manipulation of religious facts (Mernissi, [1975](#)).

Furthermore, Islam has given women highly honorable, prestigious, and respectable status in its social system. Islamic spirit manifests itself in the liberation of women and maintains the sanctity and individuality of women and has abolished the repellent practice of treating females as chattel. While in the quest for their identity to celebrate their feminine instincts, Islamic

feminists explore Islamic resources from the very beginning of Islamic history to seek help from them. True Islam illustrates women's importance and value in Muslim society which has been granted to them by the Almighty. Therefore, to clarify ambiguities regarding women's status in Islam, this research will explore the novel through the lens of Islamic feminism. For this purpose, the perspective of Fatema Mernissi will be kept in view.

It is believed that *The Breadwinner* has been depicting an image of religion through the representation of Taliban which is confused and blended with the culture. It is the chauvinistic culture of Afghanistan that has convinced the masses that women are submissive and men are masters of them. However, the certitude is, that the manipulated religion has been practiced everywhere in the male-dominated Muslim state of Afghanistan. The actual elevated status of women in Islam has been made invisible by a male-dominated society by keeping women ignorant and deprived of education. Therefore, the hypocrisy of Afghan patriarchal society could also be seen clearly in the novel.

Moreover, by exploiting religion, patriarchal lords have compelled women to internalize the fact that they are subaltern and submissive. God has created them inferior to men and men have been chosen as the breadwinner of the family by the Majesty. On the other hand, Allah Almighty says in the Quran that when it comes to education and religious duties both genders are considered equal. According to Islamic teachings, men are women's protectors but there is no point here in Islam which advocates that women should be treated as second-class human beings, slaves, or midgets in the hands of men. The research aims to dissect the male-dominated practices through the lens of Islamic feminism from the perspective of Mernissi with the aid of Quranic and religious references to strengthen the argument.

The novel, *The Breadwinner* presents the structure of Afghan society which includes contradictory religious and cultural extremes. Furthermore, the plot portrayed the dilemma of religious conflicts with the influence of culture. The author criticizes the religious system and authority of Taliban from the plot, characters, and setting of the novel because during the Taliban regime, religious systems had crumbled due to stereotypical cultural prejudices. It is a fact that every culture has its own mechanism of apprehending certain things which are not within the reach of religion.



Religion and culture are two separate entities and the problem arises when both are mingled or messed up by the society.

Furthermore, the image of Afghanistan before the regime of Taliban has also been portrayed in the novel, Before the invasion of Taliban Kabul was the hot spot of central Asia. Afterwards, Taliban commanded that women would stay inside and men would perform the outside chores and duties. It depicts that society/Taliban decided that women are for domestic chores and for the pleasure of sex for the men. Furthermore, *The Breadwinner* has been dissected through the spectacle of imperialism and post-colonial feminism. It also shows how women are portrayed as ‘others’ in society.

Moreover, it has been observed in the novel that girls were forced to alter their identities and have to change their appearances and act like boys in order to become the breadwinner for their families. Otherwise, the patriarchal monsters would ruin them. It is a gruesome experience for any biological girl to live a hybrid life, especially after a certain age limit. As Mernissi says in her book “Beyond the Veil” that if Muslims think that Islamic culture or Islamic society is prestigious from others, they should prove it by their behaviors and acts. Islamic society should have to be tolerant and flexible instead of being rigid, conservative, and harmful. Islam is a modern and universal religion that does not work on a stagnant or static set of rules and belief systems, but it believes in expanding, exploring, and developing (Mernissi, [1975](#)).

Nonetheless, the Taliban’s manipulated religious practices have heavily affected the nerves of poor Afghan women who are the products of a patriarchal society. These women seem to be the believers of ‘Amor-Fati’ as they have been enduring all the hardships and sufferings by considering it the cruelty of fate. They are completely unaware of the concept of free will that is why they have been working as puppets in the hands of men. Otherwise, all human beings are equivalent to each other in the eyes of Islam despite the differences of gender, race, and class. The true spirit of Islam is manifested in the fact that it recognizes or advocates no creed or caste and no intermediary between males and females. It treats all equally as human beings as they have assigned different roles (Mernissi, [1992](#)).

Therefore, the novel portrays clearly how the situation changed in Afghanistan after the arrival of Taliban because they started to bound and trammel females. They began to imply cultural reservations about women

in the disguise of religious teachings. The real status of 'fair sex' has been diminished and eradicated from society by manipulating the religious beliefs with the culture. Culture in Afghanistan has been severely embedded with religion and women are compelled to face the terrible consequences of this mismatch blending.

Background of *The Breadwinner*

The novel, *The Breadwinner* is the creation of the acclaimed Canadian writer Deborah Ellis. It was first published in 2000 and was followed by three sequels later along with an animated movie that was launched in 2017. Ellis visited the refugee camps of Pakistan to meet and hear the stories of Afghan women for their catharsis (Ellis, [2001](#)). In those camps, she encountered a girl who had supported her family in their hard times by disguising as a boy. The girl became stuck in her story and decided to transform her excruciating story into a book. She took a challenge to introduce people to the hardships of those girls whose circumstances compelled them to go outside at a young age to earn bread and butter for their helpless families. The concept of 'bacha posh' is quite prevailing and readers can explore it while discussing the novel. The term bacha posh is associated with those girls who alter their appearances and transform themselves into a boy by trimming their hair, wearing breast binders, boys' clothes, and caps on the head (Ellis, [2001](#)).

Furthermore, the novel is set in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan and portrays the true structure of Afghan society under the cruel and chaotic governance of Taliban, as well as, the fascist, brutal, and barbaric behavior of them towards Afghan women. The dilemma is that they used religion as an excuse to mistreat the women of Afghanistan. The novel illustrates cruel social conducts through the feminine characters of the story, especially the protagonist, Parvana and her mother Fatana, as well as her sister Nooria and friend Shauzia who are in search of their rights and freedom (Ellis, [2001](#)). They have been repeatedly humiliated by Taliban throughout the novel on the basis of false religious beliefs that women are docile and must be supervised and controlled by men. The Taliban exploited Islam as a cloak to abuse and threaten women in Afghanistan.

Research Objectives

This research aims to analyze the novel "The Breadwinner" by Deborah Ellis through the lens of Fatema Mernissi's Islamic feminism to detach



religious beliefs and dogmas from cultural stereotypes that have been amalgamated in Afghan society.

This study examines the manipulation of women's status in Afghan society and discusses the status of women in light of their fundamental rights given by Islam.

Research Questions

1. How does the novel, *The Breadwinner* depict the struggles of women in Afghanistan, an Islamic state?
2. How can the depictions of female characters be interpreted through the framework of Fatema Mernissi's Islamic feminism?
3. In what ways does the portrayal of women's status and societal roles in *The Breadwinner* reflect the religious manipulation of women's rights in Afghan Islamic society?

Research Significance

The Breadwinner illustrates the structure of Afghan society, which contains irreconcilable religious and cultural extremes. Additionally, the novel's plot depicts the challenges of religious conflicts with the influence of culture. The author also critiques the Taliban's religious system and power through the novel's plot, characters, and setting. because in the regime of the Taliban religious systems had crumbled due to stereotypical cultural prejudices. Each culture indeed has its peculiar mechanism for understanding certain things that religion cannot provide. Religion and culture are two distinct entities, and trouble emerges when society mingles or misinterprets the two.

This research aims to portray the authentic and genuine image of women's status in Islam by pertaining Islamic Feminism in the novel *The Breadwinner*. Since Islamic Feminism believes in treating men and women equally on the grounds of humanity as they belong to the same species. (Mernissi, [1992](#)). Owing to this, it is inevitable to discuss the importance of women's participation in the outside world. Society cannot keep half of the population irrelevant from social matters by taking the shield of religion (Islam). Islamic society ought to be tolerant and flexible instead of being rigid and conservative for women. It is not a wise decision for the civilization and development of any country to disappear or eradicate

almost half of its community in the name of religion. That is why, Islamic feminism is introduced in the post-modern era.

Literature Review

This section aims to explore the already existing literature by following the historical, systematic, and theoretical methods of research. In this regard, this research has opted to review literary pieces of evidence most in sync with the trajectory of this research to present a multifaceted analysis. *The Breadwinner* has been explored through the lens of gender inequality with the aid of Longwe's framework of women empowerment. In this theory, Longwe proposed the five steps of equality (welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control) which ought to be accomplished to attain the status of equality (Prastyowati, [2019](#)). However, *The Breadwinner* does not fulfill these above-mentioned specific five levels of equality. Prastyowati ([2019](#)) has made this stance clear that equal rights, responsibilities, and equal opportunities for both genders do not mean that both are equal. Here equality refers to women's and men's rights according to their biological sex and they should have the right to celebrate their biological attributes.

Likewise, the protagonist of the novel, *The Breadwinner*, is an eleven-year-old girl, therefore, this novel has been explored from the perspective of children's miseries as they have been the victims of Taliban's tyrannical laws. A recent study encompasses innocent female children who suffered a lot during the reign of Taliban (Dabhade, [2021](#)). They prohibited them from visiting parks and roaming around freely in the streets of Kabul, they banned their schools, and were indulged in child labor. Child marriages and forced marriages were also very common practices in Afghanistan during the regime of Taliban. The novel portrays that the lives of Afghan children are full of sufferings, agonies, and struggles and have been suppressed and exploited in several ways (Dabhade, [2021](#)).

The worst miserable conditions of the young girls in Afghanistan during the Taliban reign were reported by authentic organizations and both electronic and print media resources. It is proven by the survey report of humanism organization that from 2000 to 2009 approximately 40% of young women, told in interviews, that they were given in marriage before the age of eighteen. Early marriages cause serious health problems among



young girls, particularly when those women are not ready to go through the experience of pregnancy (Humanium, [n.d.](#)).

Apart from this, the notions of freedom in the novel *The Breadwinner* have also been explored from the framework of young adult literature. Berlin's concept of dualistic notions of positive and negative freedom has been kept under view as in Kabul, women can only enjoy freedom by making their feminine attributes invisible rather than celebrating. Parvana disguised herself as a boy and she felt freedom for the first time in her life by altering her gender but this kind of freedom is termed as false or negative freedom (Fahrudin, [2018](#)). Additionally, *The Breadwinner*, illustrates some ethics and moral values of Afghan society as well on an individual level (hard work, serious concerns towards education and religion) and social moral values (kinship) which can be witnessed by the readers.

The novel has been dissected through the socio-religious framework to explain the effect of the transformation of religion on the entire community. In this theory, the term "social cement" has been used for the community or group of people. In Afghanistan, Taliban threatened and manipulated innocent common folks in the name of religion by disguising themselves as holy men (Kareem & Amjad, [2020](#)). Taliban exercised their false religious authority in Afghanistan by hijacking and suppressing the modern thoughts of people as they consider them the epitome of power. Both genders equally suffered from the flout policies of Taliban. They deliberately made women to disappear from everyday life and brutally murdered or lashed those men as well who dared to speak and take a stand against the extremist policies (Kareem & Amjad, [2020](#)).

Subsequently, another study formulated the respective novel through Adorno's authoritarian personality theory. The researcher has successfully implemented the nine traits (conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-interception, superstition, stereotypy, power and toughness, authoritarian submission, destructiveness and cynicism, sex, and projectivity) of an authoritarian personality on Taliban and studied their behaviors (Dabhade, [2021](#)). Ratnasari ([2015](#)) states that research on the novel "The Breadwinner" reveals three adverse impacts of gender inequality on female children in Taliban societies that are "fear and lack of confidence, desperation and unwillingness to struggle, and dependency" (p. 293).

Furthermore, to strengthen the argument from the perspective of religion and majorly Islamic feminism, numerous books and articles have been consulted. In Mernissi's perspective, the veil ought to be considered as an option or free choice for women, no matter if it is religious belief, class, or as a symbol of national or Pan-Arab solidarity. It should not be a compulsion for women because of the pressure of patriarchal lords and any cultural pressure. Thus, women who choose to veil, it should be their choice entirely so that other people stop to sympathize with them and portray them as victims (Mernissi, [1975](#)). To acquire a better grasp of religious phenomena as well as religious and cultural conflict, the book, "Religion and Culture" by Michel Foucault was consulted. In this book, the author tries to draw a thick line between the cultural and religious duties of both the genders (Foucault, [1999](#)).

The novel *The Breadwinner* has been already scrutinized through various frameworks. However, this novel illustrates the plight and miseries of Muslim women in the Islamic state, Afghanistan; hence, the respective study adopts the framework of Islamic feminism to explain the impact of the manipulation of religion to a social cement. In her book, Fatima Mernissi affirmed the idea that women are separate individuals who could never be tamed by men. She emphasized on this point that Imams (religious bodies) have molded the religion in this way, where the modesty of women has become the linchpin of the whole socio-political system (Mernissi, [1992](#)).

Da Silva Correia de Oliveira ([2021](#)) claimed Mernissi's work "as a gateway to a more historically situated and culturally aware view of the gender question and of the evolution of postcolonial Islamic feminism in the Maghreb and in 1980s-1990s Morocco, more specifically" (p. 136). Furthermore, Mernissi has presented in her book "*Islam and Democracy*" that religious scholars only compiled those hadiths, verses, and fiqh's orders in their books which dictated to women the rights and wrongs of wearing rouge, the punishment of plucking eyebrows, and wearing tight clothes, and even the particular method to braid their hair because they are paid huge amount of money for doing such filthy acts. She states, they get paid too much oil money for preserving the benefits of hijab and the virtues of obedience (Mernissi, [1992](#)). According to Fatema Mernissi, women are silent scapegoats who are deprived of even basic rights, such as education, in a patriarchal Muslim society which is influenced by the cultural norms.



In Mernissi's perspective, the concept of illiteracy of women is traditional and it has nothing to do with religion. Mernissi revealed that for weak men, the emergence of educated women in society is like the emergence of a stranger or alien because they are happy with those women who confined themselves to the domestic chores, knitting, and weaving. If women ever demand their fundamental rights, they would become the culprits or traitors who advocate the imported or foreign agenda of 'modernity'. Hence, it is a state of Afghanistan that ignores women and treats them as second-class citizens, not the religion, as Mernissi states women also belong to God, Mosques, and the Quran, they also have rights to all of these. Islam does not demand such horrors, but an anachronistic government that can hide its archaism only by veiling them with the sacred (Mernissi, [1992](#)).

The Breadwinner portrays the story of a Muslim young girl and her sufferings while living in an Islamic state, however, this novel has not been addressed yet from the perspective of Muslim women. They are still voiceless. Therefore, Muslim women should be introduced to their rights which are given to them by Islam before the initiation of any Western women-rights organizations or feminist movements.

Research Methodology

Through the qualitative research method, an in-depth textual analysis of the primary text, *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis has been made through the theory of feminism, professed in Islamic feminism. Apart from the mentioned sources, various research articles have been utilized as secondary resources. Moreover, the research has fulfilled its aim to present a detailed analysis with logical relation to the themes and the title of the research in an attempt to prove the contention of the research. The introduction part strived to give an insight into the subject under consideration while discussing the background, research objectives, questions, significance, and theoretical framework, in detail, to lay the ground for the research. Aim of the literature review has been to focus on the previously conducted research on primary and secondary resources that aid in paving a way to identify a research gap as well as limitations attached to this research. This respective study has conducted an in-depth analysis of the selective characters and themes of the novel *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, [2001](#)) in order to answer the research questions in accordance with the objective and aim of the study. Lastly, an effort has been made to drive all the arguments towards the conclusion, while revisiting the research objectives and significance to

highlight the relevance of the research within the context of the current debate and its contribution in the realm of postmodernism as Islamic feminism is the product of a post-modern wave of feminism.

Analysis

This textual analysis of *The Breadwinner* is fragmented into five broad themes for the data analysis as it is the finest way to attain the targeted aim. While proceeding further, *The Breadwinner* has been dissected with the aid of Islamic feminism in this research as the novel portrays an Islamic state where women are the victims of injustice, and one can witness the brutal and barbaric behavior of Taliban towards them. Thus, it is inevitable to discuss the text with reference to the religion (Islam) to comprehend women's rights in Islam.

Subjugation of Women and Impact of Patriarchal Oppression on Women's Lives

Subjugation of women is one of the mainstream themes of the novel, *The Breadwinner*, as it has been seen that they are living as subordinates in the society under the control of men. Afghan women were living in a dystopian society where Taliban wanted to imprison women in their houses. As Ellis stated in the novel, "Be quiet!" ordered one of the guards. "You should not be here! Go from this place! Go back to your home!" (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 33). They used to treat women as 'others' in the society. Furthermore, in general, honor is always associated with women. Therefore, it is also considered a taboo in Afghanistan that if a woman lives independently or goes outside alone or without male counterpart, she will surely stain the honor of the family. As stated in the novel, "Who is your father? Who is your husband? They will be punished for letting you walk the street like that!" (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 45). Taliban bounded common laymen to not help those women who came outside alone, no matter what "Buses were not permitted to carry women who did not have a man with them" (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 29). This practice is not new, it is a tradition of Muslim states to oppress and suppress women in times of crisis. Afghanistan borrowed the idea of banning transportation of women from Baghdad and Cairo, as it was clearly ordered that "... put ban on women leaving their homes, and especially on their using the same means of transportation as men, reducing them to a state of immobility in capitals like Cairo and Baghdad..." (Mernissi, [1992](#), p. 154).



Similarly, Taliban have been depicted in the novel as badly beating those women who came in the alleys without any male representative. Indeed, “Parvana had seen shopkeepers beaten for serving women inside their shops” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 43). Ridiculously women were not allowed to go outside without men but they could move around the entire country with a permission letter from any male relative as stated in the novel, “I give permission for my wife to be outside” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 30). This is how Taliban have subjugated women in Afghanistan. However, such restrictions caused problems for women who had no masculine figure in their lives, who were widows with daughters, and those whose husbands and young sons were in foreign countries for the sake of bread and butter. Mernissi subtly demonstrated this miserable landscape in the following words, “As for the violence in the ancestral cities, it was women who were its quietest victims and most silent scapegoats” (Mernissi, [1992](#), p. 153). Moreover, it has been seen in the novel that as a result of war and explosions in Afghanistan, several people lost their lives and the ones who survived, lost either of their body parts. Since Taliban banned women from going outside, people started to sell the artificial legs of females because they thought that it was the best way to utilize those prosthetic legs and entirely restrict them inside the four walls. As mentioned in the novel, “You're not going anywhere, so why do you need a leg?” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 9). The subjugation of women is traditional in the Muslim world as Al-Hakim, the caliph of Egypt, did almost a similar act to make women’s appearance invisible as stated, “... he forbade them to go to the public baths and put an end to manufacture of shoes for women. Many opposed his orders and were killed” (Mernissi, [1992](#), p. 154).

Furthermore, Taliban thought that amidst war, marriage was the only safe haven for women, they pressurized people to marry their daughters otherwise they would abduct them. As, Ellis showed in the novel that, “Nooria covered herself completely with her chador and scrunched herself into a small ball. Young women were sometimes stolen by soldiers. They were snatched from their homes, and their families never saw them again” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 22). The ratio of forced marriages, early marriages, and marital rapes increased rapidly during the reign of Taliban. Aunt Weera says to Parvana that “In some parts of the country, girls your age are getting married and having babies” (Ellis [2001](#), p. 124).

Cultural Norms vs. Religious Obligations

Women, in the novel, are the victims of injustice and one can witness the brutal and barbaric behavior of Taliban towards them in the name of religion. Mernissi states that “Women rights are problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Quran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition but simply because those rights conflict with the interest of a male elite” (Mernissi, [1991](#), p. 120). Taliban commanded women to stay inside their homes without any appropriate religious ideology behind confiding them, "You should not be here! Go from this place! Go back to your home!" (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 33). Thus, this practice should be considered a cultural norm or a patriarchal oppression but not a religious obligation. Women's value cannot be denied in Islam because being a mother she has paradise beneath her feet, being a daughter, she is called a blessing (Rehmat) and in the guise of a wife she is considered a partner. Hence, in the Islamic perspective, women are not submissive at all, but patriarchal society made them believe that they are inferior by manipulating religious beliefs. There is a solid purpose of patriarchal politics and cultural conspiracy behind the association of adjectives, such as sensibility, delicacy, and fragility with women. Taliban manipulated women by molding religious teachings and language and made them internalize this false belief that they are weaker, emotional, and short-sighted than men. Thus, it has been clarified that the brutality and cruelty of men are not religious but rather cultural.

Taliban emerged as a religious entity in Afghanistan because the word ‘Taliban’ means religious scholars. To attain this title, they transformed themselves physically by wearing religious attires (for instance, turbans) and had long beard but their practices were entirely opposite. Parvana's father told her that religion was about teaching people how to be better human beings and how to be kinder. This is demonstrated in words, "The Taliban are not making Afghanistan a kinder place to live!" (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 7).

Furthermore, every woman was compelled to wear a veil without discrimination of age because otherwise they would be considered a threat to the vulnerable ‘eman’ of fragile men. Men cannot control their ‘id’ when women are around so, the ultimate solution to this problem is to ban women from going outside. Especially in Kabul, windows were banned in houses because it was believed that women could distract men through windows as



well, “The Taliban had ordered all windows painted over with black paint so that no one could see the women inside” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 28). In this regard, Mernissi wrote in her study,

Traditionally women were the designated victims of the rituals for reestablishing equilibrium. As soon as the city showed sign of disorder, the ruler ordered women to stay at home Will it be the women living in the Muslim city who will pay the price ...? (Mernissi, [1992](#), p. 9)

Islam has ordered both men and women to control their gaze and cover themselves with veil or hijab, respectively. Sadly, men convoluted the teachings to their own favors. In this regard, the critic states that, “Handsome men were forced to veil their beauty under a protective, mask-like heavy turban to avoid being pursued by women in Mecca” (Mernissi, [1975](#), p. 9).

Religion has been manipulated with the influence of culture in Afghanistan. One can have an idea of women’s frustration of wearing a burqa from the following statement of the novel because it was cultural pressure, not a religious obligation. Nooria says in the novel, “As soon as I get out of Taliban territory, I’m going to throw off my burqa and tear it into a million pieces” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 122). The ultimate aim behind the compulsion of the veil was to control the freedom and individuality of poor women, “It is not just a scrap of cloth; it is a division of labor. It sends women back to the kitchen” (Mernissi, [1992](#), p. 165). The veil can be symbolized in terms of Marxism as a way to limit women’s opportunities to earn in Afghanistan. Therefore, ‘pardah’ is one of the considerable reasons behind women’s unemployment and due to this, they are financially dependent on men. “Hijab is a metaphor for the hudud (boundaries)...” (Mernissi, [1992](#), p. 8). Whereas it is a misconception that women with veil are weak and vulnerable, but Mernissi has negated this concept out loud with the example in her book, “Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society”. She writes, “The justice minister brought a bill banning face-covering to the assembly. Muslim women wearing veil decided to rush to the media to protest, which means that they are not as fragile as the French minister thinks” (Mernissi, [1975](#), p. 16). The veil should be a choice both in the East and West. Yet in Afghanistan, ‘shapeshifting’ was the only solution for women to go outside and work as demonstrated in the text, “They turned her into a boy. Being a boy, you’ll be able to move in and out of the market,

buy what we need, and nobody will refrain you” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 151). It is very problematic for a biological girl to survive or behave like a boy in society in order to support her family and also to guard her sisters and mothers. The disguising of the protagonist is termed as a blessing in these words, “Parvana is a boy now. Maryam will be safe” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 74). Such girls have been known as bacha-posh (shapeshifting) in Afghanistan and it is a rebellious act against the patriarchal practices.

Education as a Tool of Resistance

Taliban were threatened by education because they knew that it was the only tool that could deteriorate their hegemony as they themselves were illiterate. To some extent, the lack of education among the Taliban and the hindrances in the way of getting education for the rest of the population is the root cause of all the issues in Afghanistan. It is stated that “... accustomed to the idea that the illiteracy of women is also traditional” (Mernissi, [1992](#), p. 163).

Mernissi exclaims that the Taliban were illiterate and did not know about the basics of Islam. “... the Taliban were discredited when their representatives showed how little they knew about Islam and the Pharaohs” (Mernissi, [1992](#), p. 10). Moreover, it has been seen in the novel as well that they did not know how to read and write even it could be witnessed in the novel that they usually came to educated people like Parvana’s father and asked them to read and write for them, as stated, “I will look for you when it is time to write a reply” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 3).

Taliban often visited the houses of the literate class of society and burnt their books which were against their beliefs. It depicts that they were far away from the light of knowledge. Hence, this notion affirms the ideology that Taliban’s regime has multiple similarities with Hitler’s regime because he also ordered to burn those books that were written against his fascist agendas. As mentioned in the text, “some were English books about history and literature. They were kept hidden because the Taliban burned books they didn't like” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 24). Thus, illiteracy could be one of the reasons that they favored and promoted violence and bloodshed in the name of Islam, while Islam teaches the lesson of peace and forgiveness.

Women in Afghanistan have been deprived of basic rights, such as education and freedom of speech as depicted by the characters in the novel, “She didn't dare say those words out loud” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 1). Hence, it is

the ignorance of Taliban that made them feel threatened by the educated people and especially by the educated women. They shut the schools all over Afghanistan and “the Taliban had ordered all the girls and women in Afghanistan to stay inside their homes. They even forbade girls to go to school” (Ellis, 2001, p.1). It was considered a crime to teach the women in Afghanistan and they charged a severe punishment on those who were convicted of teaching girls in houses or somewhere else. They arrested Parvana’s father because they doubted that he was promoting foreign agendas in Afghanistan by teaching his daughters secretly. He was interrogated and asked, "Why did you go to England for your education?" the soldiers yelled at Father. "Afghanistan doesn't need your foreign ideas!" (Ellis, 2001, p. 23). While on the other side, Islam says that education is for both men and women. It shows that the culture of Afghanistan is against women’s education, not Islam. “They put restrictions on every basic necessity of women like their education, careers, attires, and mobility of females even within the city” (Ellis, 2001, p. 23). Conclusively, lack of education leads society towards numerous social evils.

Afghanistan Before the Regime of Taliban

Afghanistan was entirely different before the arrival of Taliban, education was common , and natives were used to living peacefully and happily with their families Also, “Kabul was the hot spot of central Asia," Parvana's mother and father used to say” (Ellis, 2001, p. 129). Taliban have ceased women's professional careers in Afghanistan as they were all fired from their offices as per the command of Taliban. It is stated in the novel by Mrs. Weera that “I won this in an athletics competition. It means I was the fastest woman runner in all of Afghanistan!” (Ellis, 2001, p. 73). Before the Taliban’s regime, women were used to doing jobs, such as media, education, and sports.

Moreover, in *The Breadwinner* the writer has also given few glimpses of Afghanistan which was Taliban-free and encouraged women's empowerment while writing. The novel illustrates that before the emergence and revelation of Taliban’s Islam, women like Mrs. Weera and Parvana’s mother, Fatana were not just confined to their houses. Mrs. Weera was a physical education teacher and Fatana worked with the magazine but Taliban compelled them to leave their jobs and stay in houses, which was problematic and difficult for them. It was one of the reasons behind Fatana’s frustration because she had the spirit to do something for her state but

suddenly state started to treat her as a crippled citizen who is not worthy of anything. The following words demonstrate her feelings, “Ever since she had been forced out of her job, Mother's temper grew shorter every day” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 16).

Patriarchal Misinterpretation of Islamic Teachings and Women's Rights in Islam

Misinterpretation of Islamic teachings by Taliban was the problem of all evils in Afghanistan. The novel, *The Breadwinner*, provides multiple pieces of evidence of misinterpretation of Islamic teachings. One such example was the trend of early and forced marriages in Afghanistan. “In some parts of the country, girls your age are getting married and having babies” (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 130). While Islam declared the appropriate age of women for marriage about fourteen hundred years ago and gave great importance to the consent of girls in marriage. According to the true directions of Islam, Nikah or marriage without the girl's consent is considered void or nullified. “... the Taliban were discredited when their representatives showed how little they knew about Islam and the Pharaohs” (Mernissi, [1992](#), p. 10). The hypocrisy of the Taliban could be analyzed from this point that they decided that public stoning would be the punishment or penalty for adultery but ironically, they indulged themselves in horrendous acts of abduction and exploitation and killing of young women.

Taliban permitted women to visit markets with their baby boys as for them those infants who could not walk on their own and rely on their mothers' milk are considered their protectors (*mehram*). They did not even allow widows to earn their livelihood or survival. A critic quoted that, “widows, who had no male relatives to accompany them in public, starved to death in their homes” (Franks, [2003](#), p. 140). From this situation, one can have an idea that it could not be the teachings of Islam which celebrates humanity and whose central message is tolerance, peace, and kindness. The Almighty says, “Mercy is what your lord hath prescribed for himself” (Quran). Moreover, Islam is a universal religion and numerous changes have happened according to the requirements of present or modern times so, how it could stay stagnant or conservative on women's rights? Islamic culture has a moderate and practical way of looking at the matters of life, it does not consist of a rigid set of rules.



Furthermore, it has been proven from the novel's multiple events that Taliban were not practicing Muslims, they strived to legalize the tyrannical patriarchal and cultural practices in society in the disguise of Islam. It is prohibited in Islam to touch any *na-mehram* but Taliban were found involved in physical violence and torture against women, "she had seen what they did, especially to women, the way they would whip and beat someone they thought should be punished" (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 2). If one reviews or analyzes the situation impartially, it would be clarified that Taliban were not the leaders of Islam nor did they strive to promote the Islamic teachings, instead their aim was only to subjugate women. "... that religion was about teaching people how to be better human beings, how to be kinder. The Taliban are not making Afghanistan a kinder place to live!" (Ellis, [2001](#), p. 7). While, the Prophet (S.A.W.) emphasized thrice in his last sermon that, "Treat women well" (Sahih Al-Bukhari, [1997](#), p. 3331). It seems that the Prophet (PBUH) stressed on this matter that prevails in current era where humiliation and subjugation of women have been very common. Men use hijab as a medium to marginalize and suppress women in society and for this purpose, they have reinterpreted religion according to their own extremist Taliban ideology rather than Islamic laws and ideology.

Most Muslims would in no way see the Taliban's interpretation of Islam as representative of their faith, the Taliban merged conservative Pashtun customs with Sharia to create what they believed to be the guidelines for an ideal and just Islamic society. (Berry, [2003](#), p. 140)

Moreover, the novel portrays the true structure of Afghan society where manipulated Islam is in practice and women are considered worthless who do not have their own individuality. Taliban have picked only a few religious orders and they molded and manipulated those hadiths and Quranic verses to use against the fundamental rights of women. They quote this verse repeatedly that, "and stay in your houses. Bedizen not yourselves with the bedizenment of the time of ignorance" (Al-Ahzab, 39:33). They manipulate it more by saying that women are born to please men and to increase the generation. While according to the explanation of this *ayah*, the Almighty is ordering to dismiss or defy the false practices of the era of ignorance rather than to shut women inside.

They proclaimed that Islam does not allow women to go outside and earn money. They should focus on doing domestic chores and they should

not be concerned with the outside world. However, if one looks back at the ancient history of Islam where it could be seen that in the era of the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H), women went outside for several purposes and reasons. Even though they were used to take part in wars, Hazrat Ume-Ammarah's services to Islam are unforgettable. Similarly, the Prophet's wife, Hazrat Ayesha led the war of Jamal after the Prophet's demise. Meanwhile, Muslim scholars only address this aspect in their sermons that obedience, acquiescence, and subservience are the attributes of perfect women.

Conclusion

Conclusively, this study has fulfilled its aim to develop a thorough argument about the manipulation of religion in Afghanistan, particularly in the Taliban's regime. The research findings illustrate that the real essence of Islam has been demolished in the state of Afghanistan, its actual teachings and beliefs have been polluted or influenced by cultural prejudices and patriarchal norms, which have bound women to behave like puppets. In a hegemonic environment, women lack emotions and intellect, therefore, they could not claim individuality. Additionally, the objective of research to distinguish religious beliefs and dogmas from cultural stereotypes has been successfully attained.

However, this research has only covered one aspect of the novel and it still can be reviewed from several other perspectives, such as the hazardous effects of war on society, how inequality leads society towards numerous social evils, and criticism on the Taliban's regime apart from religion. Moreover, the role of religious and political extremism in the deterioration of society is also an essential aspect of the novel. Thus, these are a few aspects that can be explored by future researchers who want to do research on *The Breadwinner*.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data availability is not applicable as no new data was created.

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