

People's Democratic Republic of Algeria
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
Hamma Lakhdar University of El-Oued
Faculty of Arts and Languages
Department of Arts and English Language



**The Land's Greatest Treasure: Social Roles and Female
Characters in *The Breadwinner* (2017)**

**Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for Master's Degree in Literature and Civilization**

Submitted by:

DOUMI Alima

BIKI Djouhaina

Supervised by:

Dr. MEHELLOU Zohra

Board of Examiners:

Dr. MIHOUBI Assala

President

University of El-Oued

Dr. MEHELLOU Zohra

Supervisor

University of El-Oued

Dr. NESBA Asma

Examiner

University of El-Oued

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my husband, my friend, and my only support, *Alaa eddine*.

To my children, *Israa*, *Abdelrahmen*, and *Asmaa*, who patiently stood by me throughout these five years.

And to my youngest daughter, *Kamar*, who journeyed with me both in the womb and in the world as I prepared this work.

I dedicate this work to my children, *Sirine*, *Mira*, and *Wala*, whose presence gives purpose to my work and meaning to every sacrifice.

ALMA

To my husband, *Abdelhamid*, with deep gratitude for his steady support.

And to the treasured memory of my late father, a passionate language teacher, *Abdelmalik*, whose love for language planted the seeds of this journey.

DJOUHANA

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Abstract

Afghan women have captured international attention with their resilience and ability to challenge restrictive conditions. This study unveils female social roles in Afghan society, using *The Breadwinner* (2017) as a case study to explore the portrayal of female social roles and their reactions under Taliban control. This study uses a qualitative critical discourse analysis lens to address the research questions and gain a thorough understanding of gender social roles. The critical discourse method examines language in relation to the Afghan context. The aim of this dissertation is to bring to the surface the Afghan women's social experiences and to explore how the film's narratives reflect social views toward Afghan women by focusing on the portrayal of female social roles in the film. The theoretical chapter provides definitions of sex, gender, and social roles, focusing on Eastern and Western perspectives. The practical chapter examines the representation of female social roles in *The Breadwinner* (2017), in which the protagonist Parvana and her mother challenge the imposed gender norms, while her sister is depicted as a submissive, passive character restricted by the Taliban rule. Therefore, this research shows that Afghan women are able to navigate multiple roles, even those assigned to men. Women are shown switching roles from household caregivers to family breadwinners.

Key words: Afghan women, Gender, Political instability, Social role, *The Breadwinner*.

List of Abbreviations

FMF: The Feminist Majority Foundation.

RAWA: Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan.

AWN: The Afghan Women's Network

USA: The United States of America.

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General Introduction

1. Background of the Study

For decades, masculinity and femininity have been widely challenged and interrogated. Masculinity has often been linked with freedom, while femininity has been tied to restriction. Many Western feminists, including Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir, advocate and stress social gender equality worldwide. Furthermore, philosophers and gender studies specialists go beyond that and deconstruct the notion of sex and gender definitions, regardless of cultural differences, religions, moral values, and political issues.

In the context of Afghanistan, a land marked by invasions, conflicts, and wars, both men and women have been profoundly impacted. Females' social roles have been altered negatively and more noticeably throughout history. Women's behaviours, responsibilities, and roles were severely restricted in the country following the establishment of the Taliban rule. Females were banned from their basic rights, such as accessing school, university, or even going outside. Furthermore, women were excluded from social and political activities, and gender bias reached its climax (Zaki & Shedenova, 2014). Such issues are commonly discussed through media, and Western media—more specifically—has devoted its focus to the condition of Afghan women. Thus, numerous studies have started to question the social roles of women and the conflicts that impact the instability of gender.

The animated film *The Breadwinner* (2017) serves as a vital tool for shedding light on the female social roles. The events of the film take place in Kabul, where the main character, Parvana, a young girl, changes her appearance and acts as a

boy to navigate multiple social roles and challenge the gender norms. This research explores the relationship between gender and social roles through analysing the roles taken by the female characters in *The Breadwinner*.

2. Research Problem

Cinematic works play a key role in promoting social and realistic issues, occasionally shedding light on gender struggles in a specific environment. The film *The Breadwinner* (2017) addresses gender issues and the status of Afghan women as central themes. Therefore, the research problem is dedicated to analysing the depiction of social roles and female characters in the film's narrative, exploring how gender and social roles are constructed within Afghan society.

3. Research Questions

The research seeks to focus on the following research questions and unravel the core insights in each chapter:

1. How are social and gender roles shaped in Western and Eastern cultural contexts?
2. What are the societal norms and gender roles in Afghanistan?
3. How does *The Breadwinner* portray the social roles of the female characters in Afghanistan, and how do they react differently in a state of political instability?

4. Literature Review

An early review of the existing scholarly literature related to the topic of social roles and female characters in *The Breadwinner* (2017) reveals that the situation of Afghan women has piqued researchers' interest. This section encompasses studies examining the gendered social roles of women in Afghanistan. These works address the

status of women across four political regimes and explore well-known cultural practices, such as the *Bacha Posh*, as a way to enhance a family's social standing. Additionally, several studies investigate the challenges of achieving gender equality in the Afghan society, while others analyse *The Breadwinner* film to delve into the cultural, social, and gender dynamics of Afghan women.

In *Gender in Afghanistan* (2006), Moghaddam examines the challenges of achieving gender equality in Afghan society, highlighting three key obstacles: ineffective gender mainstreaming, weak women's movements, and a militarised environment. According to Moghaddam (2006), despite some progress, such as improved access to education and healthcare, Afghan women continue to face severe cultural, structural, and political constraints. He argues that gender equality in Afghanistan remains superficial and unsustainable. While the study contains rich and interesting information, there are several limitations to consider. The author predominantly focuses on the political constraints faced by Afghan women without adequately addressing their strengths within families and communities or exploring how other factors, such as ethnicity or rural-urban differences, shape their experiences.

In *The Social Changes of Women's Status in Afghanistan* (Zaki and Shedenova, 2014), the authors provided a comprehensive overview of women's status in Afghanistan across four political regimes, from democratic governance to the Taliban rule. By employing a mixed-method approach, the authors offer a balanced perspective on the subject highlighting tangible improvements in women's access to education, civil society participation, and political representation after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. While the article primarily focuses on historical and cultural factors that influence social changes in women's status in Afghanistan, it recognises women's experiences across Afghanistan's diverse regions and ethnic groups. Furthermore, the article emphasises the

need to examine international interventions and global influences on women's social status.

Deta Maria Sri Darta and Diah Kristina (2018) analysed in *The Representation of Women Characters in the Movie The Breadwinner* the portrayal of women in the animated film. The movie, based on the true story of an Afghan girl who disguises herself as a boy to support her family. The study explores the film's portrayal of women as either subordinate to men or as independent and responsible decision-makers. However, the researchers argue that Suleyman's story, narrated by the protagonist Parvana, undermines the image of a strong, self-reliant woman by implying that women cannot survive without male support. Despite the fact that the reviewed study provides insights into the film's gender representation, it has notable limitations. First, the analysis is confined to the dialogue and discourse of the protagonist, Parvana, which does not fully capture the broader representation of women in the film. Second, relying solely on critical discourse analysis to examine the film's English subtitles overlooks cultural interpretations and the deeper, non-verbal elements of the narrative. Employing additional methodologies could yield a more comprehensive understanding of the film's themes and messages.

Hamidi, Vaughan, and Bohren (2021) examine in *Perspectives on Gender Norms, Roles, and Bacha Posh Among Afghan Migrant Women in Melbourne, Australia*, how migrant Afghan women view gender roles and the Bacha Posh practice. This tradition refers to the practice where Afghan girls are dressed as boys; it is an important part of Afghan cultural dynamics. The researchers found that the transition is considered an easy method to gain some liberties and enhance the family's social standing. However, this phenomenon has not been extensively studied. The research provided valuable information about the tradition's role in the lives of Afghan people. Nevertheless, the study focused on a specific Afghan migrant community, emphasising

the need for future research into women's experiences within Afghanistan itself in the current context. It also encouraged further research into gender norms, identity, and the Bacha Posh in Afghanistan.

In the article *Gender Semiotics in the Film The Breadwinner* (Nellaety, 2024), the author employs a qualitative descriptive approach to conduct a comprehensive semiotic analysis of the film's narrative. The study uncovers both implicit and explicit messages within the film through utilising Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, specifically examining denotation, connotation, and myth. The research specifically explores the lack of equal rights for women in Afghan culture and delves into the cultural practice of Bacha Posh as a means to navigate societal restrictions. By systematically applying Barthes' semiotic model, the study promotes a deeper understanding of gender inequality and the widespread gender gap in Afghanistan.

The unstable situation in Afghanistan has attracted significant research attentions to understanding women's roles in society, and encourages further explorations to address gender issues. This study seeks to bring to the surface the Afghan women's changing status and examine gender roles and female representation in the 2017 film *The Breadwinner*. By focusing on the portrayal of women's social roles and characters in the film, this analysis aims to provide deeper insights into how cultural narratives shape and reflect societal attitudes toward Afghan women.

5. Aims of the Study

This research intends to understand the concepts of gender and social roles, focusing on how several factors influence them. The study aims to provide clear insights into women's social and gendered roles from both Western and Afghan perspectives. While using the animated film *The Breadwinner* as a case study, this research seeks to bring to the surface the Afghan women's experiences through the eyes of Afghan girls,

mothers, and families. Moreover, the analysis aims to provide how the film's narratives shape and reflect social views toward Afghan women by focusing on the portrayal of female social roles and characters in the film.

6. Significance of the Study

This work adds to the previous studies that use the film as a case study to address gender social roles in Afghanistan. By exploring the social roles, the study seeks to establish a solid foundation of knowledge in the field of literature, offering a deeper understanding of how gender dynamics are portrayed in films and how these portrayals mirror broader societal issues. Moreover, the research draws attention to the female struggles under wars and harsh political conflicts in Afghanistan and offers a balanced analysis of gendered social issues from Western and Eastern viewpoints. This work contributes to several research studies on the media representation of gender social roles.

7. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative critical discourse analysis lens to address the research questions and interpret the results. The approach enables us to gain a thorough understanding of Afghan women's social roles. Additionally, it allows us to explore the meaning of gendered social roles from both Afghan and Western perspectives. Furthermore, the use of the critical discourse analysis examines the portrayal of female characters in *The Breadwinner*. This method supports this investigation by analysing language and discourse within the narrative, providing critical insights into the depiction of Afghan women.

8. Dissertation Structure

The dissertation is divided into two chapters, the first chapter, "Unveiling Afghan Social Roles: Between Identity and Expectation," functions as a theoretical

framework to explain the gender social role through defining gender, sex, and social role. The chapter traces back the historical context of gender roles and explores gender perspectives from Afghan and Western points of view.

The second chapter, “Afghanistan’s Greatest Treasure: *The Breadwinner* Film as a Case Study,” examines the representation of female characters in the film and how the war affects their social roles. It addresses how each female character reacts to the Afghan gender rules. The chapter closes by outlining some of the critical aspects of the film.

CHAPTER ONE

Unveiling Afghan Social Roles: Between Identity and Expectation

1. Chapter One: Unveiling Afghan Social Roles: Between Identity and Expectation

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Introduction

The concepts of masculinity and femininity have undergone crucial changes throughout history, particularly under globalisation and modernisation. Therefore, philosophers have shifted their focus towards questioning the notion of sex and gender. This shift challenges the belief that human natures are divided into male and female sexes, and that gender is an interpretation of biological sex. Yilmazçoban (2020) highlights that "in the literature, sex means men and women in terms of biological aspects. It is the basic characteristics of man and woman that originate from their essence, creation, and nature" (p. 189). This reinforces the idea that male and female behaviours like actions, responsibilities, roles, gestures, attitudes, habits, and dress codes exist within specific gender roles. As a result, masculinity has often been linked with freedom, while femininity, particularly women's roles, has been tied to restriction.

Eastern and Western societies have distinct perspectives, influencing how gender roles are maintained. These differences in mindset reinforce specific societal expectations for male and female responsibilities. The Western mindset is individualistic, prioritising the individual over family and society. Its laws prohibit gender discrimination, ensuring equal opportunities for women. Thus, the emphasis on personal rights reinforces individual freedoms and gender equality (Yilmazçoban, 2020). On the other hand, the Eastern mindset is collectivist, in which family and community are considered the foundation of social life, while the individual's independence is limited in favor of collective harmony. Eastern mindset affects how traditional gender roles are often maintained, with a clear distinction between male and female responsibilities in family and society (Yilmazçoban).

This chapter carefully demonstrates the evolving definitions of sex, gender, and social roles, tracing how historical transformations have altered gender roles across

different periods. Finally, it examines the contrasting gender perspectives in the West, particularly in the United States, and gender viewpoints in the East, through the lens of Afghanistan's context.

1.1. Definitions of Sex and Gender

Since the mid-20th century, capitalist, Marxist, modernist, and feminist ideas have increasingly shaped Western perspectives on gender and sex (Yılmazçoban, 2020). Many scholars have stressed that the definitions of sex and gender are complex, debated, and influenced by historical, cultural, and political contexts. The meanings of these terms vary widely; however, most available definitions are shaped by Western discourse. Some scholars use gender and sex interchangeably, while others draw clear distinctions between them, viewing sex as a biological category and gender as a social construct.

In *The Second Sex* (1949), the French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir tackles the meaning of sex and gender, drawing a clear distinction between the two. She defines sex as the biological and anatomical attributes that differentiate males from females, while gender is a social and cultural construct. De Beauvoir claims that gender is not a natural result of sex. She challenges the idea that biology dictates social roles by stating: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949, p. 14). According to De Beauvoir, individuals are not born with a fixed gender; they become gendered through social and cultural influences. She also asserts that there are no guarantees that the person who becomes a woman is necessarily female. Overall, De Beauvoir clearly explains that individuals become women due to social compulsion, which has no relation to sex.

However, the American philosopher Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), rejects the notion that gender

and sex are fixed and binary categories or that male and female identities are based on biological sex. She offers a new analysis and understanding of gender and sex. Butler introduced the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender is not a fixed trait; instead, it is socially and culturally developed. The author considers the repetition of behaviours, acts, and gestures that maintain and define specific gender identities, stating that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 179). This indicates Butler’s claim that repetitive actions and behaviours performed to fit social norms and expectations contribute to the formation of gender identity. This aligns with her argument that gender is defined by what a person is doing rather than being, as she states in her book: “gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act [...] a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’” (1990, p. 33). This assertion reinforces her concept of gender performativity and highlights how performance mainly determines gender and sex within a cultural norm.

Moreover, Butler deconstructed De Beauvoir’s idea that sex is biologically determined, claiming that even sex is not natural. Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) stated that “perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (p. 11). Butler contends that sex is determined through laws, medical practices, language, and discourse, and cultural interpretations of bodies, all of which maintain and reinforce specific sex identities. As a result, she affirms that there can be no difference between sex and gender and that the definition of sex is related to gender, with both being results of sociocultural processes.

From another perspective, in her book, *Masculinities* (2005), Raewyn Connell defines gender as a social concept that relates to bodies and the actions of bodies. She asserts that “gender is a social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do” (p. 71). Connell argues that biology might affect our bodies; however, society has a crucial power to redefine what gender means. She argues that gender is not solely determined by biological sex but is also shaped by cultural, social, and historical factors.

To fully understand the meaning of gender, Connell proposes a model that looks at it from three perspectives, stating that “We need at least a three-fold model of the structure of gender, distinguishing relations of power, production, and cathexis (emotional attachment)” (2005, p. 74). She suggests that gender derives from power distribution between different social categories. For instance, men may hold more social authority, while women may face discrimination. Secondly, gender affects how work and resources are distributed in society. For example, women have often been excluded from certain types of work or unpaid for their labour, whereas men have been seen as the primary earners in many societies. Thirdly, she mentions cathexis as a dimension that looks at how people emotionally relate to their gender identity and how others perceive them. These three areas of gender explain how gender goes beyond biology.

Connell (2005) emphasises that gender cannot be understood in isolation when she says:

Because gender is a way of structuring social practice in general, not a special type of practice, it is unavoidably involved with other social structures. It is now common to say that gender 'intersects' - better, interacts - with race and class. We might add that it constantly interacts with nationality or position in the world order. (p.75)

According to Connell, gender intersects with other social structures like race, identity, and class. For instance, a white woman may experience gender differently than a woman of colour due to the influence of racial discrimination.

1.2. Social and Gender Roles

For decades, scholars across disciplines, including Simone de Beauvoir, Erving Goffman, and Alice Eagly, explored fundamental questions about human nature, particularly gender and social roles. Those prominent figures significantly contributed to exploring social performances and the behavioral differences between men and women.

De Beauvoir (1949) provides a philosophical understanding of gender roles by highlighting that “opinions about the respective roles of the two sexes have varied greatly; they were initially devoid of any scientific basis and only reflected social myths” (p. 45). In more precise terms, gender roles have historically been shaped by societal myths rather than scientific truths. This indicates how cultural myths traditionally reinforce gender roles without relying on substantial scientific evidence.

Whereas De Beauvoir presents social roles as culturally constructed narratives, Erving Goffman, in his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), explores the concept of social roles through the lens of dramaturgy. He argues that individuals perform roles like actors on stage and adapt their behaviour to align with societal expectations. Goffman states:

Defining social roles? as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audiences or to an audience of the same persons. (p. 9)

The author describes this idea further using the concept of the front, which refers to the public performance that individuals present to others. According to Goffman, “The front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (1956, p.13). This front consists of appearance, manner, and setting, all of which individuals manage to shape how others identify them.

In short, Goffman (1956) argues that people carefully control their front by managing their appearance, manners, and environment to create a specific impression. Individuals shape their behaviour based on their environment and those they interact with, ensuring that their performance fits with social expectations. His theory highlights how individuals actively navigate social expectations rather than being merely shaped by societal structures.

Similarly, Alice Eagly – An American social psychologist – builds upon this by explaining how societal expectations shape behaviour, specifically regarding gender roles. Eagly and Wood (2012) define gender roles in their chapter on Social role theory in the Handbook of *Theories of Social Psychology* as “shared beliefs about men’s and women’s attributes” that coexist with specific roles shaped by family relationships (e.g., mother, son) and occupations (e.g., secretary, firefighter)” (p. 469). The writers point out that gender roles refer to the set of behaviours and responsibilities that society expects from individuals based on their gender identity. These expectations facilitate the development of sex differences and lead to the unequal distribution of male and female roles within society. While societal expectations shape gender roles, biological factors may also contribute to such an equation. Eagly & Wood (2012) argue that hormones and physical differences, such as strength, can contribute to the division of labour, influencing the individuals' roles within society. However, they emphasise that societal

expectations exert a greater impact on how gender roles are shaped over time. For instance, the family is the first institution to influence behaviour, followed by the educational system, broader social institutions, and the workplace. These structures reinforce gendered expectations, contributing to the persistence of gender roles across generations.

Eagly & Wood (2012) further argue that differences between men and women emerge from social roles. She asserts that: “sex differences and similarities in behavior reflect gender role beliefs that, in turn, represent people’s perceptions of men’s and women’s social roles in the society in which they live” (p. 459). This suggests that individuals’ actions and behaviours are largely shaped by their social status, with expected behaviours being assigned according to their roles. The writers also expand upon this concept by arguing that social and gender roles are not fixed but vary across different cultures. Eagly & Wood (2012) assert that:

Sex differences and similarities take a variety of forms, depending on men’s and women’s roles in society, which in turn reflect the more distal factors of male and female physical attributes, in combination with socioeconomic and cultural conditions. Roles, in turn, affect behavior through the immediate, proximal causes of hormonal regulation, self-regulation by gender identities, and social regulation by others’ sanctions and rewards. It follows that female and male psychology is not fixed but emerges from interactions across multiple biological and sociocultural factors. (p. 470)

Eagly & Wood (2012) demonstrate that social and gender roles vary across cultures, indicating that they are adaptable and shaped by cultural structures. These roles differ significantly between individualistic and collectivist societies. For example, in individualistic societies, gender roles are often more fluid, allowing men and women to

share responsibilities more equally. In contrast, collectivist or interdependent societies tend to uphold more defined gender roles, reinforcing traditional expectations based on shared social values. Additionally, external factors such as war and conflict can directly reshape social roles either increasing women's participation in society or, conversely, leading to greater marginalisation. Similarly, economic crises may alter gender roles by shifting work responsibilities for both men and women. Meanwhile, legal and political movements, such as feminism, along with broader social transformations, have played a pivotal role in redefining gender roles over time. These aspects collectively contribute to the ongoing evolution of both social and gender roles, demonstrating their dynamic nature in response to societal needs and cultural contexts.

As a result, social roles can be understood as a set of expectations regarding behaviour, responsibilities, and norms associated with specific social positions. Various factors affect these roles, including cultural narratives, historical influences, and different aspects of personal life, such as family dynamics, workplace settings, social interactions, and educational environments.

Gender roles are not static; they have evolved in response to social, economic, political, and cultural shifts. Nevertheless, fully understanding gendered social roles requires reviewing their historical background and the key events that have shaped their development.

1.3. Historical Context of Gender Roles

Gerda Lerner (1986) argues in *The Creation of Patriarchy* that history is not merely the past but what has been recorded and interpreted. She states that historical narratives have been largely shaped by men, focusing on male experiences while often overlooking the contributions and perspectives of women. Major global events have

continuously shaped and reshaped gender roles, challenging traditional norms and leading to significant transformations, particularly for women. This section examines how the World Wars, colonialism, and technological advancements altered societal expectations, redefined labour roles, and influenced gender equality over time.

From a traditional perspective, men were expected to be strong, brave, and responsible for protecting their families, serving primarily as breadwinners. During wartime, they were required to fight in battles and defend their countries, while women and children remained at home. However, as global conflicts escalated, the demand for labour increased, leading to significant changes in social and economic roles. Before the first global war, American women's rights were severely restricted. For instance, married women had limited control over their property, wages, and financial decisions, and obtaining a divorce was challenging (Mauk and Oakland,2009).

Nevertheless, some changes can be noticed concerning gender roles during the first war. World War I created new opportunities for women in the workforce. As Thébaud (2014) notes, wartime economies required a larger labour force, significantly increasing female employment. In Britain, the number of working women increased by 50%, while in France, it rose by 20%. Women took on roles in factories, transportation services, healthcare, and administrative positions, demonstrating their ability to perform tasks previously reserved for men. Similarly, in the United States, wartime necessities expanded women's participation in the workforce and fuelled suffrage movements. This ultimately led to the 19th Amendment, which granted political rights, including the right to vote. For example, white women gained the right to vote in 1920, but women of colour continued to face legal barriers until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Mauk & Oakland, 2009).

The changes initiated during World War I continued to develop during World War II. As men were conscripted into military service, women's participation in the workforce was no longer seen as temporary but as essential to economic stability. Women entered various industries, including manufacturing, transportation, and engineering. Haines et al (2016) observe that this period led to increased employment opportunities, higher wages for women, and greater workforce participation. By 2014, women represented 47% of the U.S. workforce, compared to 38% in the mid-1980s (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). In addition to employment, women began to break barriers in sports, education, and politics. Meanwhile, men's roles remained relatively stable, indicating a long-term shift towards greater gender inclusivity. However, post-war propaganda encouraged a return to domestic life, reinforcing traditional gender norms. Despite this pushback, the war laid the groundwork for later feminist movements advocating workplace equality (Pitt, 2021).

Yet, true gender equality required further legal and social reforms. In the decades following World War II, legislative and cultural developments reinforced the shift towards more equitable gender roles. Mauk and Oakland's book *American Civilization: An Introduction* (2009) covers all core studies on American topics and contains essential historical background, which helps to offer valuable insights about gender roles. For instance, the Equal Pay Act of 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 aimed to reduce workplace inequalities. Earlier achievements, such as Britain's election of its first female prime minister in 1979 and the ordination of the first female priest in the same year, further demonstrated progress in gender equality (Oakland, 2020).

Colonialism played a significant role in shaping gender norms across different societies. According to Ghosh (2004), many African and Asian communities

had egalitarian gender structures, with more balanced gender roles within society, before European colonisation. However, colonial rule reinforced class and gender distinctions, imposing new ideologies that restricted gender roles. As the Indian literary theorist Gayatri Spivak (1988) argues, colonialism actively worked to silence the voices of non-Western women and marginalise their struggles. Colonialism also integrated race, class, and sexuality into social hierarchies, pushing women into domestic roles and limiting their participation in public life.

Although many women in colonised societies had previously held active economic and social roles, European rule often redefined these roles, confining them to the private sphere and reinforcing patriarchal structures. Also, colonial education systems reinforced European narratives, prioritising boys' education in Western ideas while preparing girls for domesticity (Ghosh, 2004). This system restricted women's access to higher education and excluded them from public and political spheres.

In response to these historical shifts, the rise of technology and digital communication has significantly altered gender roles. UNESCO (2007) affirms that "The United States' Science and Engineering Equal Opportunity Act (1980) states that men and women must have equal opportunities in education, training, and employment in scientific and technical fields" (p. 141, Box 5.2). The transition from industrial labour to knowledge-based work has created new opportunities for women, reducing the emphasis on physical strength in employment and giving men and women equal opportunities. In summary, technological and digital revolutions have also influenced the reshaping of gender dynamics.

From the impact of global wars and colonialism to the influence of digital advancements, gender roles have evolved across diverse cultural and national contexts. In light of these historical transformations, the focus now shifts to examine gender

perspectives in the West, primarily through the lens of the United States, followed by a deeper exploration of the East, with Afghan society as a key example.

1.4. American and Afghan Gender Perspectives

Throughout history, men and women have been assigned different roles. While these roles vary across cultures, certain common patterns can be observed worldwide. Men have generally been seen as leaders and primary breadwinners within their families. Their strength allows them to participate in wars and relate them to careers that require physical strength and authority, such as engineering, politics, and the military. On the contrary, women have been expected to be good mothers and perfect housewives. They are responsible for housework and the caregivers of their children (Eagly and Wood, 2012). Aristotle argued that women were essentially lesser or incomplete men in certain qualities, as reflected in his statement: 'The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities' (quoted in De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 25). This perspective has historically contributed to limiting women to caregiving and service professions such as teaching, nursing, and social work. Owing to various socio-cultural and historical factors, gender roles for men and women differ significantly between Western and Eastern societies.

1.4.1. American Gender Perspective

The Western perspective on gender has evolved significantly over time. Historically, the American society was largely patriarchal, with a clear distinction between men's and women's roles (Gerda Lerner, 1986). Then, a group of Western white middle-class women started to ask for their rights and founded feminism, which, according to the International Women's Development Agency, "is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. It's about respecting diverse women's

experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving to empower all women to realize their full rights.” Feminism has undergone four major waves to become the movement known today.

In *Feminism, An Overview*, Javeed Ahmad Rania (2017) defines feminism and delves into its four waves that deal with different aspects of the same feminist issues. The first wave movement started in the 19th and early 20th century and focused on legal and political rights such as women’s suffrage (the right to vote), education, and property rights. The second wave, which began in the 1960s, expanded to legal and social rights for women, such as workplace and reproductive rights. The third wave started in the 1990s and advocated social justice for women by addressing the diverse experiences of women across different racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The fourth wave of feminism, which emerged around 2010, is characterised by its strong online presence and the use of digital technology, particularly social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The wave focuses on sexual harassment women face in the workplace.

Feminist campaigns have been a major historical and social change for women’s rights. These movements emerged as a reaction against patriarchal society and have played a crucial role in promoting women’s rights. In the USA, women have gained rights that have aligned their status more closely with men. They now have greater access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and political decision-making, marking substantial strides toward gender equality (Mauk & Oakland, 2009).

By the late 1990s, women-owned businesses expanded significantly, particularly in healthcare, where they controlled between 50% and 75% of facilities by 2006. Women also made notable gains in politics, achieving record representation in state legislatures, governorships, and Congress. In 2008, Hillary Clinton nearly secured

the Democratic presidential nomination, making history as the first highly competitive female candidate (Mauk & Oakland, 2009).

Feminism initially arose in response to the patriarchal system. However, it has shifted from its main goals and adopted a white-centric perspective. Sherri Liska defines white feminism as: “the white-centricity and western domination of feminist discourse, a discourse which, while liberating the women of the white middle class, often neglects and silences women of colour in the West and across the globe” (2015, p.1). In other words, white feminism focuses on the experiences of white middle-class women and marginalises the voices and struggles of women of colour from different racial backgrounds. Moreover, in her book *Against White Feminism, Notes on Disruption* (2021), Rafia Zakaria argues that:

White women have taken for themselves the right to speak for all women, occasionally allowing a woman of colour to speak but only when she can do so in the tone and language of white women, adopting the priorities, causes and arguments of whiteness. (p.10)

To put it another way, white women have often assumed the authority to represent all women, occasionally permitting women of colour to speak, but only when they adopt the tone, language, and priorities of white women, aligning with white-centred causes.

Furthermore, the Indian literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her groundbreaking essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), famously articulated the concept of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (p.92). She discussed how imperial powers often portray women in colonised societies as vulnerable victims

who need to be rescued from the supposed barbarity of their own cultures, thereby justifying Western intervention.

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said defines modern Orientalism as a Western-created discourse that emphasises Western domination over Eastern societies. In a 1998 interview with Sut Jhally, Edward Said characterises American Orientalism as more politically charged and indirect. He explains that, unlike traditional colonial powers, the United States exerts influence without a direct colonial role. Orientals were dehumanized and portrayed as demons and villains who only understand the language of force (Said, 1998). Following the 9/11 attacks, this Orientalist stereotype continued in reality, as the events were linked to Muslims and Arabs.

Today, feminism aims to save the women of the third world, who are considered oppressed, illiterate, and helpless. It adopts a discriminatory perspective, emphasising differences while disregarding religions, beliefs, cultures, traditions, and long-established social and political structures that have developed over centuries (Yılmazçoban, 2020). This is particularly evident in the case of Muslim women, especially Afghan women, which will be discussed next.

1.4.2. Afghan Gender Perspective

Gender in Afghanistan has experienced significant fluctuations over time, shaped by a complex interplay of religious, cultural, legal, and political forces. These factors have been at the heart of the tension between liberal groups seeking change and conservative factions aiming to preserve traditional values. Women's rights and gender roles have seen periods of progress followed by severe setbacks.

Religion has been a powerful force, forging and dividing roles between men and women. Afghanistan's legal system is partially based on Islamic law (Sharia) in

which men are *Nafaqah* providers, who are obliged to provide for all the needs of the wife and children, while women are responsible for housework (Echavez et al, 2016). Elaheh Rostami-Povey in her book *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion*, emphasises that “Too often, Islamic culture and religion are considered to be the primary agents determining the identities of women in Muslim-majority societies and are used to justify war, occupation and invasion” (2007, p. 8). Whereas Islam gives women the right to education and work, false religious interpretations limit women’s participation in the workforce and forbid them from pursuing further education. In the Afghan society, gender roles are deeply influenced by both traditional and Islamic teachings (Echavez et al, 2016).

In addition to religion, gender roles in Afghanistan are affected by tribal codes, and this is exemplified by the Pashtunwali, which is an official Pashtun tribal code. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society: Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbeks, and many other groups. However, the Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group (Ahmad et al,2018). The Pashtuns have historically played a dominant role in Afghan politics, and many Afghan rulers, including the Taliban leadership, have been Pashtuns (Laub,2014). Pashtunwali links back to the 17th century before the spread of Islam, it dominates the social connections of south-eastern Afghanistan (Hawkins, 2009). In his article, Hawkins comments on the tribal code as follows:

Modern Afghanistan has changed little from 1897 when Winston Churchill fought in a punitive expedition on the Afghan border against the Pashtuns. Today, as in Churchill’s era, Afghanistan is remarkable for the tribal code that permeates the countryside and nowhere is this more defined than in south-eastern Afghanistan, where Pashtun culture overshadows central government authority

and the local rule of law. Pashtun culture is dictated by a common law, a set of values, a code, and a manner of living termed 'Pashtunwali'. (p.16)

To clarify this point further, Pashtunwali is a set of tenets that guide how Afghans should live, interact, and behave in a society. It suggests that all people are equal and no individual has superiority over others. However, it also reinforces certain patriarchal structures. For instance, women in Afghan society are viewed through their relationships with male relatives, such as fathers, brothers, and husbands. Due to some traditional codes, families pressure women into marriage. If women refuse the arranged marriage, they may face a backlash, including threats from their families or communities. Furthermore, tribal codes oppose women's inheritance rights and prevent them from leaving the house unless accompanied (Hawkins, 2009).

From an Orientalist point of view, religion and traditional practices were considered barriers to gender equality, though contradictions were found between them. Islam gives women all their rights, from education to work to inheritance rights (Echavez et al, 2016). Rostamy-Povey (2007) an Iranian researcher affirms that women are also allowed to refuse or accept marriage because consent is an essential part of Islam:

According to Islamic law, women should not be forced into marriage, and their consent is always necessary. When a minor has been married without this consent, she can ask for her marriage to be annulled upon reaching the age of majority. Despite this law, commanders and warlords forced women to marry them against their will and consent. (p. 22)

Moreover, various organisations have significantly influenced gender roles in Afghanistan. The U.S. has used the issue of women's rights as part of its broader foreign policy objectives. In this context, following the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan,

Laura Bush, the first lady at the time, in her November 16th, 2001, radio address declared, “the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (Berry,2003, p.137). She emphasised that the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan was not only about combating terrorism but also about supporting the rights of Afghan women. In these circumstances, many organisations emerged to defend women’s rights, including the Feminist American Organisation, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, and the Afghan Women’s Network.

Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) was founded in Kabul in 1977 as an independent organisation advocating for women’s rights in Afghanistan. The group was established by several Afghan intellectual women under the leadership of the Afghan feminist and activist Meena Keshwar Kamal, the founder of RAWA. It aims to engage Afghan women in political and social activism (About RAWA. n.d). According to the WomenAid International’s website, RAWA has consistently spoken out against the Afghan regime for violating human rights. It established a hospital and opened schools.

The Afghan Women’s Network (AWN) was founded in 1995 to support Afghan women’s cooperation and integration. It provides a stable platform for the growth of women’s organisations active in the country. It functions as an umbrella organisation, coordinating projects on gender-based violence and girls’ education (About AWN. n.d).

Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) was one of the feminist American organisations that claimed to save Afghan women. According to its official website, the Feminist Majority Foundation was established in 1989. It focuses its activism on women’s equality, reproductive health, and non-violence (About FMF n.d). In 1997, the FMF developed its campaign to stop gender apartheid in Afghanistan. By

misrepresenting facts, the FMF attempted to directly attribute blame to the Taliban regime for the dire conditions of Afghan women. The organisation not only disregarded the voices of Afghan women but also significantly contributed to justifying the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (Rich, 2014).

Afghanistan has experienced profound political shifts over history, evolving from a monarchy to a republic and later undergoing multiple regime changes. These transformations were driven by internal conflicts and foreign interventions, which shaped the country's modern history. The first government that attempted to modernise society and show interest in women's rights in Afghanistan was King Amanullah Khan's government, which ruled from 1919 to 1929. He opened the first schools for girls and allowed women to create organisations. He also sent a group of young women to receive training in Turkey. King Amanullah Khan crafted a new constitution for Afghanistan that guaranteed civil rights for all. These reforms provoked conservative groups, resulting in his exile. Then, during the government of Dr. Mohammad Najibullah (1987-1992), the situation of women in Afghanistan was relatively better compared to later periods. Due to women's political participation and closeness to the government, Afghan women had better positions in the family, political, and economic spheres (Eide, 2016).

Following the fall of Dr. Najibullah's government, social conditions in Afghanistan deteriorated significantly during the Mujahideen leadership (1992-1996) and the civil war period. During this time, women became deprived of political rights, and the gender gap started to widen. Meanwhile, a great number of men lost their lives, leaving numerous widows who were forced to beg for survival. Rape was widespread, and rates of suicide among women increased (Eide, 2016).

Moreover, the gender gap increased during the Taliban Emirate. The Taliban is an Islamic fundamentalist political movement in Afghanistan that ruled from 1996 to

2001. During this period, women lived in a prison-like situation (Zaki & Shedenova, 2014). Rostami-Povey describes how Afghan women played a crucial role during periods of war: “A number of women worked for the aid agencies and also continued carpet weaving and handicraft production” (2007, p. 21). Many Afghan women were able to work in aid agencies, organisations that provide humanitarian assistance, despite the difficult circumstances they continued their traditional work in carpet weaving and handicraft production, which are essential sources of income for Afghan families. Under the Taliban, women were not allowed to go outside of their homes or attend school. They lived in constant fear of the Taliban, who punished anyone who did not adhere to their strict rules (Zaki & Shedenova, 2014). An Afghan woman describes the severe hardships and challenges they endure:

They imposed the *chaddari* [a type of full-body veil] on women and punished those women who did not obey its law. Sometimes they would beat women in the street, and nobody could do anything. People just stood and watched. They had a stick with a lead at the end of it to beat women to cover themselves. (quoted in Rostamy-Povey, 2007, p. 27)

Furthermore, Under the Taliban government, gender differences reached their climax. Women were excluded from social and political activities (Zaki & Shedenova, 2014). The Taliban banned women’s voices from the radio and prevented the display of any images of women (Nehan, 2022). Under the Taliban rule, girls found difficulties in going outside, while boys were given opportunities that were not available to girls. To overcome this gender bias, a practice known as Basha Posh was created. This cultural practice involves some families dressing their daughters as boys to address social and economic challenges. When a girl becomes a Basha Posh, she cuts her hair

and takes on a male name. Her status is elevated; she can play outside, attend school, and even work (Zaki & Shedenova, 2014).

In her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013), Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod argues that the Taliban oppresses women but critiques how Afghan women are depicted in Western media. She claims that these portrayals oversimplify female experiences, reducing them to isolated images. Western narratives often attribute Afghan women's struggles solely to Islam or culture, ignoring the role of foreign interventions. She highlights how events such as the Soviet occupation, the subsequent civil war, and the mujahideen era significantly contributed to the country's instability and the challenges women face today.

Conclusion

Through examining the concepts of sex, gender, and social roles, this chapter highlighted the key factors shaping gender fluctuations, emphasising how historical and cultural expectations affected social roles. Throughout history, moving from key events such as global wars and colonialism to the impact of digital advancement has shed light on the evolution of women's roles across different periods and contexts.

Moving from feminism to modern Orientalism, this section examines how feminism affected women's rights in the American context, how the West adopts a white-focused perspective (white feminism), and considers those who do not fit the American view as oppressed.

In a similar vein, the rights of Afghan women have experienced many ups and downs due to local conflicts and foreign interventions, particularly under the Taliban government. This context forms the basis of our case study on how social roles and

female characters are depicted in *The Breadwinner* (2017). These points will be discussed thoroughly in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

Afghanistan's Greatest Treasure:

The Breadwinner Film as a Case Study

2. Chapter Two: Afghanistan’s Greatest Treasure: The Breadwinner Film as a Case Study

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Introduction

The current chapter applies the information highlighted in the theoretical part about sex, gender, and gendered social roles to examine the female social roles in *The Breadwinner* (2017). In this chapter, we will explore the intersection of gender and conflict, analysing how war reshapes social roles in Afghanistan. We will focus on how war creates opportunities for some characters to challenge gendered identities, while for others, it reinforces traditional roles. Using critical discourse analysis, this chapter examines the characters in relation to the context. The film's characters will be studied to shed light on *The Breadwinner's* depiction of female social roles in Afghanistan. This section explores how each female character—the mother Fatima, the sister Soraya, and the protagonist Parvana—is represented and treated, focusing on how they react differently to the same situation. It also examines how societal norms shape and control their behaviours, influencing how they respond to their struggles.

Overview of the Film

The Breadwinner is a family animated drama released in 2017, directed by Irish actress Nora Twomey and produced by Angelina Jolie. The film is based on the best-selling novel by Canadian author Deborah Ellis, who drew inspiration from her real-life experiences in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule in 2001. The film is based on true stories inspired by Ellis's interviews with Afghan women and girls in refugee camps in Pakistan during the late 1990s (IBBY Canada, 2020). It was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature and won several other awards; critics praised it for its powerful storytelling and effective depiction of life under oppressive conditions.

The director of *The Breadwinner* (2017), Nora Twomey is known for her unique hand-drawn animation style and her focus on folklore and human rights issues.

In one of her interviews (2017), Twomey explains that the film was brought to life through the collaborative efforts of a talented team, combining traditional animation techniques with cultural research and authentic storytelling. She describes the filmmaking process in several stages. First, they adapted Deborah Ellis's novel into a screenplay to design the film's unique visual style. Second, they ensured authenticity in the characters' voices by casting and recording voices from Afghan and international actors. Third, Cartoon Saloon used 2D hand-drawn animation to create expressive visuals that reflect Afghan life. Next, to enhance the emotional depth within the film, they mixed traditional Afghan music with Western orchestral elements (Cartoon Saloon, Aircraft Pictures, & Melusine Productions, 2017).

The 94-minute film weaves two narratives. First, Parvana's real-life struggles as a main character living in Taliban-controlled Kabul, Afghanistan. When her father is unjustly arrested, Parvana's family is left without a male guardian. Under the Taliban restrictions, women are not allowed to leave the house without a male. This severely affects Parvana's family, leaving them without access to food or water. To support her family, Parvana cuts her hair and disguises herself as a boy as the only way to move freely, buy necessities, and work to secure her father's release. The second fantasy narrative is a story of a young boy who battles an evil elephant king. Parvana narrates this imaginary story to comfort her brother and to express her inner strength. In addition, several other characters play significant roles within the film. First, Fatima, Parvana's mother, is portrayed as a resilient woman who strives to hold her family together. Second, Parvana's friend Shauzia, who also disguises herself as a boy to survive. Third, her father, Nurullah, is a former teacher and a storyteller. Then, Soraya, Parvana's older sister, is a submissive, passive character restricted by Taliban rule. Razaq, the kind Taliban soldier. And finally, Idrees, the cruel Taliban soldier.

In *The Breadwinner* (2017), the development of the plot highlights the contrasting social roles of female characters, ranging from those subjugated by patriarchal norms to those who negotiate their voice and assert their independence. The film serves as a window into life in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, shedding light on issues of gender discrimination. It also serves as a mass communication medium for conveying cultural messages to all audiences.

2.1. War and Gender

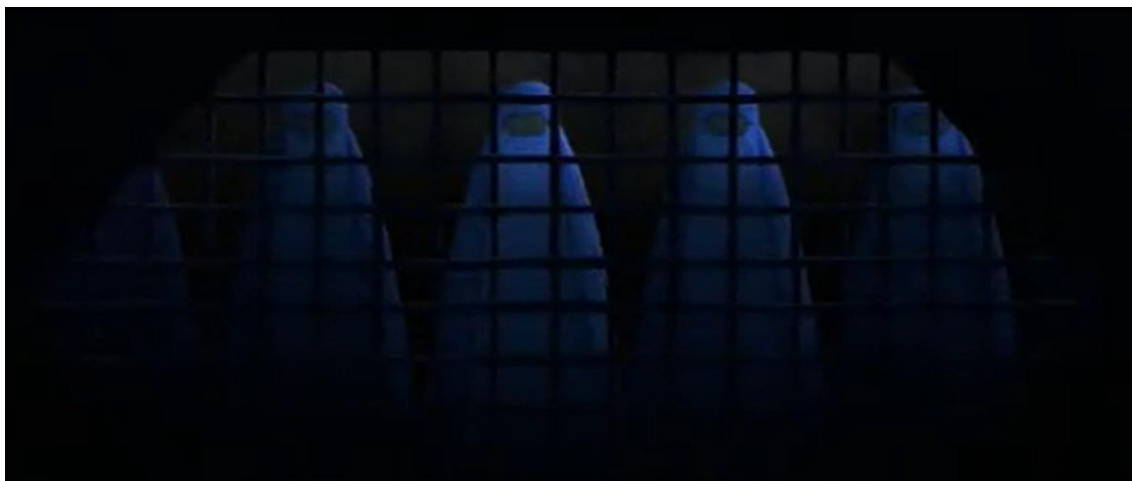
The Breadwinner (2017) highlights the profound influence of war on gender roles in Afghanistan, providing a clear contradiction and deeply rooted bias between male and female social roles. Women's roles are portrayed as highly constrained, facing multiple social, cultural, and legal barriers.

Through the father's storytelling, the film indicates that before the rise of the Taliban regime, Afghan women and girls enjoyed wider access to public spaces, education, and employment. In the market scene, the father narrates that "when I was young, Parvana, I knew what peace felt like. Children went to school, and women went to university" (Twomey, 2017, 00:04:10). The father affirms that women's role is affected by war and political conditions, also, the invasions of empires play a crucial role in deteriorating the societal position of women.

The scene further demonstrates that the Taliban's power resulted in significant limitations to these freedoms. This is emphasised throughout the father's narrative, where a Taliban official declares that "We have determined specific dignity for women! Women should not go outside and attract unnecessary attention! If a woman shows herself, she will be cursed by Islamic Sharia and should never expect to go to heaven" (Twomey, 2017, 00:04:54). This declaration asserts how females' roles

changed dramatically, imposing gender distinctions. It reveals how war and political conflicts are directly influencing gender's social expectations and redefine women's societal roles. This recalls what was explained in the previous chapter about Alice Eagly and Wendy Wood's theory (2012) that gender roles are not biologically determined but are shaped by social structures, historical events, and divisions of labour. According to Eagly and Wood (2012), conflict and socio-political instability can noticeably reshape gender roles, often increasing restrictions on women, while encouraging resilience and empowerment. The film represents this dynamic by portraying how war has reinforced male-dominant norms in Afghan society, confining women to domestic roles while excluding them from educational and economic opportunities.

Figure 2. 1 : Veiled Women Behind Bars (Twomey, 2017, 00:04:57)



Moreover, *The Breadwinner* (2017) depicts Kabul as a war zone, displaying military aircraft and tanks, which reflects the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. As noted in Chapter One, the intervention was justified through liberating Afghan women's discourse (Rich, 2014). However, Western feminist approaches ignored the local cultural and religious values, and this lack of consideration escalated conflicts with the conservative Taliban regime. Western feminism made efforts to improve women's rights, sometimes in more complicated ways. As a result of the conflict, many women

lost their husbands, became widows, and endured immense hardship, ultimately intensifying gender-based oppression rather than improving it (Eide,2016).

Figure 2. 2 : Parvana and Shauzia Stand on a Tank in Kabul (Twomey, 2017, 00:48:59)



Finally, *The Breadwinner* (2017) attempts to shed light on how war and political instability are key factors that negatively redefine gender roles. These conflicts lead to marginalising women’s voices in Afghanistan. The film highlights how these factors increase barriers and restrictions on women’s social status, opportunities, and mobility.

2.2. Afghan Females the Greatest Treasure

Based on *The Breadwinner’s* (2017) discussion, it is obvious that the film is set in a state of war centring around female experiences, mainly the mother, the sister, and the protagonist Parvana. Through the use of CDA, this section will relate the roles played by the female character and the context of Afghanistan under the Taliban rule, focusing on the different roles assigned to each of them, Fatima as the Guardian, Soraya as the Submissive, and Parvana as the breadwinner.

2.2.1. Fatima as the Guardian Mother

Fatima is Parvana's mother. She has two daughters, Parvana and Soraya, and two sons, Zaki and Suleyman, the latter of whom has passed away. Fatima was a writer, but due to the Taliban's restrictions, she was confined to domestic life. Initially, she is depicted as a devoted housewife who cooks and cares for her family. She is a protective mother, often reminding Parvana of the dangers outside. However, when Taliban take her husband to prison, she decides to protest by going out to find him, despite knowing that going outside without a *mahram*, i.e., a male relative such as her father or brother, is not allowed according to the Taliban law. This act reflects her bravery, as she refuses to remain passive in the face of danger. When Fatima decides to defy the Taliban law and goes outside without a male relative, Taliban thugs violate and beat her in the street, and no one dares to intervene or defend her. Fatima faces challenges that closely portray the experiences of Afghan women. As explored thoroughly in the First Chapter, under the Taliban government women could not leave their homes without wearing their burqa or being accompanied by relatives (Zaki & Shedenova, 2014). The severe challenges that Fatima faces represent a pivotal turning point in her character's development. She returns home physically weak, emotionally upset, and feeling helpless.

After all doors are closed in her face, Fatima transforms from a fearful mother, once hesitant to let her daughter go outside, to a more withdrawn figure who ultimately allows Parvana to step outside. Fatima is forced to rely on Parvana and permits her to disguise herself as a boy to provide for the family. Later, to secure her family's future, Fatima writes a letter to her relatives, pleading, "Please take us out of Kabul, that we may have a chance of survival. We will not be a burden to you. We are skilled and strong and need little by the way of means" (Twomey, 2017, 00:39:19).

Fatima's letter reflects the family's desperate situation following her husband's arrest. She begs for help, expressing that they feel unsafe and unprotected, and even proposes her eldest daughter, Soraya, as a bride for their son. She assures them that they can rely on themselves and will not be a burden.

One of the key moments that highlights Fatima's resistance is when she refuses to leave Parvana behind when she is suddenly forced to travel to another city. She says to her male cousin: "I am not leaving without Parvana! We have to wait!" (Twomey, 2017, 00:70:50). Fatima gathers her strength and overcomes the inner fear of the strict laws, a fear instilled in her by the Taliban, all for the sake of saving her family. This act of defiance shows her determination to protect and care for her children, even in the face of the immense danger of being beaten again by the Taliban members. Furthermore, in the scene where Fatima defies her relative and refuses to go with him, she demonstrates her courage and resilience and reflects her success in adopting the role of a protector and guardian parent.

Besides her role as a protector of the family, Fatima assumes the role of a storyteller as she narrates a story to Parvana to calm her down. After her father being arrested, Parvana experienced a sense of disappointment and hopelessness, and her mother begins the fictional tale with the phrase: "They say it doesn't always rain the way it thunders" (Twomey, 2017, 00:44:50). In the context of the story, Fatima gives Parvana a message of hope, telling her that the hard times caused by the Taliban, symbolised by the thunder, will not last forever. She believes that the future might turn out better than it seems now. Through this story, Fatima is passing down strength to Parvana, helping her find the courage to face their difficult reality, reminding her that circumstances can change, and not everything is as it appears on the surface.

Fatima was an educated woman, but with the onset of the Taliban regime, she lacked the stamina to step out of her domestic prison. She begins as a quiet, passive mother, restricted by the oppressive regime. However, as time passes, she gathers the courage to take risks and protect her children. Fatima's character is depicted as experiencing a significant change, from a submissive veiled woman, who is beaten in the street just because she steps outside, to a brave woman who goes outside without a burqa and defies her relative to search for Parvana. Her character symbolises the strength and resilience of Afghan women living under oppressive conditions. It shows how they, despite being constrained by societal norms, can rise to protect their families and challenge the restrictions imposed on them.

Figure 2.3 : Fatima Assumes the Role of a Brave Parent. (Twomey, 2017, 00:75:21)



2.2.2. Soraya as a Submissive Character

Soraya is Fatima's older daughter. She represents a crucial aspect of the struggles faced by Afghan women under the Taliban rule, although her presence in the film is limited. Soraya is a passive character who is confined to domestic roles, spending most of her time indoors, as the Taliban's laws prevent women from leaving the house

without a male guardian. She is often seen helping her mother with housework, which highlights the traditional expectations placed on girls in this patriarchal society.

This aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's argument (1949), which asserts that women are made, not born, through social compulsion, and that their roles are shaped by societal expectations, rather than biological sex. Within this context, society imposes specific roles on Soraya, expecting her to do housework, remain at home, and marry at a certain age without her consent. Soraya's character serves as a contrast to Parvana's bravery. While Soraya remains passive and subdued, Parvana challenges these societal norms, stepping outside her prescribed role to take action and defy the limitations placed on her as a girl in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, Soraya conforms to the expectations of the patriarchal system. To save her family, she is obliged to marry her cousin, offering herself as a sacrifice to the demands of a male-dominated system. This is evident when her mother prepares beautiful clothes for the wedding, yet Soraya remains unhappy. As discussed by Rostamy-Povey (2007), Afghan society is influenced by tribal codes that force women into marriage, disregarding the fact that Islam grants women the right to accept or refuse a marriage, as consent is a fundamental principle in Islamic law.

Soraya is deeply influenced by the patriarchy and traditional gender roles, which make her more submissive. This is depicted in several scenes in the film. In one scene, for instance, she forbids Parvana from eating raisins, insisting that she leave them for her youngest brother, reinforcing the idea that women should sacrifice their needs for men. In another scene, Soraya tells Parvana: "Go change Suleyman's clothes or you will make them dirty" (Twomey, 2017, 00:29:13) demonstrating how she glorifies her brother as a male even after his death. This reflects her internalisation of patriarchal values and her role as a caretaker, tasked with maintaining order within the household.

Soraya does not play a major role in the film, but her character is incredibly significant. She represents the silent suffering of Afghan women under the Taliban regime—women who have no choice but to conform to the limited rules assigned to them, either out of fear or necessity. Soraya’s submission to these rules reflects the reality many women face in oppressive societies, where they are forced to accept their roles without the opportunity to challenge them. Her character subtly shows how the Taliban’s rule causes deep emotional and mental pain for women, highlighting how they often endure their suffering in silence without saying anything.

Figure 2. 4 : Soraya Doing Domestic Roles (Twomey, 2017, 00:23:02)



2.2.3. Parvana as the Breadwinner

The central character in the film is Parvana, an eleven-year-old Muslim girl with green eyes and long black hair. Throughout the film, Parvana is obliged to take on two opposing social roles due to the restrictive social norms in Afghanistan. To begin with, Parvana shares a close bond with her father. He was a teacher before the Taliban took control of the region. At the opening scene of the film, Parvana adopts a limited role by assisting her father in the market, supporting him as he walks, and helping to

carry his belongings. In this scene, she is shown sitting beside him in the centre of the market, a public space from which women and girls are typically forbidden (Zaki & Shedenova, 2014). Her presence as the only girl in such a setting causes her to feel anxious, fearful, and uncomfortable. Parvana and her father often need to justify her presence to the Taliban soldiers, explaining that her assistance is important because he has lost a leg during the Soviet war. Parvana is literate because she used to receive a secret education from her father through storytelling. Yet, her role in society remains extremely limited, as she is not allowed to speak loudly or express herself openly. In one particular scene, a Taliban boy named Idrees, portrayed as violent and hostile, yells at her in the market, questioning her presence in a public space: “Why is this girl shouting?” and her father answers that “She’s only a child. She meant nothing by it” to which Idrees claims that “She’s drawing attention to herself!” His companion Razaq adds that: “She should be at home, not displaying herself in the market.” In response, Parvana’s father, Nurullah justifies saying “I have no son at home, except an infant. I need my daughter to help me” (Twomey, 2017, 00:05:50).

Figure 2.5: Parvana and Nurullah Confronting Idrees in the Market (Twomey,2017,00:05:50)



A turning point occurs when her father is arrested without reason, and her feelings of sadness and loss are clearly shown. Parvana starts to take over her father’s

role as a storyteller, offering comfort to her younger brother Zaki. She narrates stories to give him psychological protection and emotional support, as her father used to do with her. Parvana's role changes significantly as she takes on new responsibilities, including risking her safety to fetch water daily to protect her mother and sister from thirst and poor hygiene. Despite her efforts, she remains unable even to obtain bread. Because when Parvana moves outside, she is often chased by the Taliban's men, forced to run back home to avoid capture. Additionally, the restrictions are not imposed only on women but also on men in how to deal with women. For example, the merchants in the market are banned from selling to women or girls, as doing so would cause severe consequences from the Taliban group.

These circumstances force Parvana to make a courageous decision by cutting her hair and wearing the clothes of her late brother to change her appearance as a boy. This was the only option available to her under the Taliban rule. By doing so, Parvana, the tiny girl, sacrifices her femininity and childhood, adopting a male role. She changes her name from Parvana, which means "butterfly" and symbolises freedom, to Artech, meaning "fire" a name that conveys strength and power. Through this transformation, she gains some authority and the freedom to move through public spaces. She switched roles from a little daughter to the breadwinner for her family during a time of severe oppression, instead of remaining inactive and surrendering to the situation. By changing her appearance, Parvana becomes increasingly courageous and less submissive. She undertakes hard physical labour such as lifting and transporting heavy boxes, which are typically considered jobs for men. She continues selling goods while also reading and writing for illiterate Afghans. One day, Parvana meets Razzaq, a

kind but uneducated Taliban member. When he asks her to read a letter, the little girl gently breaks the news of his wife's death.

Figure 2. 6 : Cutting Parvana's Hair Toward a New Role (Twomey,2017,00:23:51)



Her change into a boy allows her to meet a friend, Shauzia, another girl disguised as a boy. They influence one another through their shared experiences. In one scene, Parvana and Shauzia are nearly recognised by Idrees. When he becomes suspicious, Parvana displays great courage by standing up to him and striking him with a rock. The two girls then escape, choosing to jump from a high cliff rather than being captured. This moment powerfully shows their bravery and determination to secure their hidden identities and preserve the freedom they have attained through their disguises.

Parvana's adaptation of a boy personality reflects a cultural practice in Afghanistan known as Bacha Posh. This tradition became widespread under the Taliban rule, while girls faced strict regulations, boys were granted more freedom and opportunities. As discussed in the previous chapter, Bacha Posh emerged from the country's gender bias roles, as it enabled girls to navigate daily life openly and helped them adapt to social and economic challenges in Afghan life. Parvana's experience of assuming a boy identity aligns with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity

(1990). Butler argues that gender is not inherent, but rather a set of repeated behaviours, actions, and performances that construct specific gender identities. Parvana's ability to embody a boy role, by simply changing her haircut, clothes, and gestures, allowed her to conform to the expectations of her society. Nonetheless, despite this transformation, she internally remains a girl. This supports Butler's claim that gender is not a fixed or inherent state, but something fluid and performed. It is not determined by what a person is, but by what a person does.

The main character's experience as a Bacha Posh led her to navigate two contrasting roles. On the one hand, she takes on the role of an adult male breadwinner in public; on the other, she remains a young girl and storyteller within the private sphere of her household. Storytelling reflects Parvana's journey and struggles, serving as a powerful emotional tool that allows her to maintain her voice and express her inner strength. Oral stories also provide hope and comfort for her family while preserving her father's tradition. Nevertheless, the use of the literary technique story within a story reveals Parvana's realisation that females cannot survive without males in Afghanistan. In the film, the elephant story plays a significant role where Parvana makes up a male hero, giving him the name of her brother Suleyman, because she sees herself in his image. The creation of a male gender hero not only reflects Parvana's understanding within the community surrounding, but also her internal imagination, realising that the only way to survive and achieve heroism is to obtain a masculine identity rather than being with a feminine identity.

Furthermore, Parvana becomes determined to rescue her father. First, she attempts to bribe a prison guard to secure his release, but her efforts are unsuccessful. After that, Parvana bravely goes to the prison despite the danger and the declaration of war. Razzaq informs her that she must leave after sunset, but she chooses to remain,

waiting for him to bring her father. She continues to narrate the story in her mind during the waiting time, as storytelling becomes her source of support, hope, and strength. Eventually, Razzaq arrives with her father by his side. Parvana resumes the narrative her father had begun in the opening scene, which memorialises the civilisation and resilience of Afghanistan and its people, recounting:

We are a land whose people are its greatest treasure. We are at the edges of empires at war with each other. We are a fractured land in the claws of the Hindu Kush mountains, scorched by the fiery eyes of the northern deserts (Twomey,2017,01:24:46).

With difficulty and slow breath, Nurullah replies: “Black rubble earth against ice peaks. We are... Ariana, the land of the noble” (Twomey, 2017, 01:25:14). This narrative transfers Afghanistan's cultural heritage and reinforces the courage and resilience of the Afghan people. It can be seen as a survival narrative; it connects deeply to the cultural values and legend. Throughout the film, the expression 'the greatest treasure' reflects the idea that the true value of a nation lies in the women who carry society forward, even when their voices are silenced. The true treasure is found in the everyday people's lives, dreams, struggles, and hopes, especially women, who endure and resist despite hardship.

The film concluded with Parvana's words: “Raise your words, not your voice. It is rain that makes the flowers grow, not thunder” (Twomey,2017,01:25:27). These closing words are a quote by Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, a 13th-century Persian poet. The quote suggests that a person can have an impact with the pearls of wisdom of words, not the level of voice (Saad & Seif, 2021). In the context of the film, the quote emphasises the importance of women's discourse and thoughts, drawing attention to the idea that women can hold power even when their voices are silenced.

The depiction of Parvana's courage and determination throughout the film is inspiring to the audience. Her change from a little daughter to a brave adult provider for her family shows both the challenges she comes across and her inner strength. Parvana builds a journey with dignity and intention. She is not doing less in either role as a girl or as a male breadwinner. She carries bravery, ambition, and love all at once.

2.3. Unveiling the Hidden Side of the Film

Despite the fact that *the Breadwinner* is a Western production by a Canadian writer, the film influenced the Afghan audience and received great acceptance. According to Colorado Public Radio, the author, Ruchi Kumar (2018), clarifies that *The Breadwinner* successfully illustrates the Afghan experiences from the late 1960s to 2001. Furthermore, many viewers approved of the strong female characters and expressed admiration, affirming that the film is deeply emotional and profound. Since the film was inspired by a true story witnessed in an Afghan refugee camp, the Afghan audience felt proud to have stories told from their home country's point of view. However, the following passages present the reactions to the film from a different angle, addressing various critical perspectives.

To begin with, the Indonesian researchers Darta and Kristina (2018) commend the film's success in the embodiment of Afghan women and in supporting the female actions to liberate themselves. However, the imaginary story of Suleyman told by Parvana distorts the image of a strong woman, as it relies on a male hero as the only source of emotional comfort and strength during hard moments. The authors claim that this scene reflects how deeply patriarchy is rooted within Afghan society. Pointing out how women cannot survive without men to the extent that Parvana's brother still lives as a hope, even after he passed away.

the Afghan author, Kochai (2018), published an article condemning the film's orientalist narratives by hyper-victimising Muslim women's conditions in Afghanistan. The writer argues that *The Breadwinner* can be considered as an indirect support of imperialist intervention. The film, according to Kochai (2018), lacks cultural and historical accuracy, and it barely mentions the Civil War, which negatively affected women in Afghanistan. The author suggests that the film neglects how the US funded and armed several groups that took part in the Civil War, and how it cost the lives of Afghan civilians; instead, the film notes how Nurallah lost his leg during the Soviet war. Moreover, the article highlights how the film enables Parvana to save her father only during the war and in the middle of the chaos of dropping bombs, but not a single civilian death is shown in this scene. In reality, conservative estimates report that more than 3,000 Afghan civilians were killed in Operation Enduring Freedom launched by the United States as the initial War on Terror (2001), which led to a deterioration of the families' situations in the country. Finally, the author claims that in the scene when Parvana's father narrates the history of Afghanistan, Islam is only mentioned in relation to repression and to the arrival of the Taliban regime. The writer notes that throughout the film, Islam and the sharia are repeatedly depicted as external evils that have consumed the streets of Kabul.

In a similar vein, the Pakistani authors, Jabeen and Akhtar Khan (2021), in their article *Orientalist Perspectives in Ellis's Breadwinner Trilogy*, in which the film is based, question the way the work represents sacred things in Islam in an odd manner. For instance, Fatima's veil is shown as an obstacle that hinders her steps and prevents her from fulfilling her social roles. She even uses the father's stick to show how the burqa made the mother as crippled as Parvana's father, reflecting by that a Western view that relates the burqa to shame and uselessness.

Similarly, in her article *Representations of Muslim Trauma in The Breadwinner* (2023), Dr. Hosein criticises the two narratives of the film. First, she condemns how the film puts emphasis on Islam and depicts it as an oppressive religion that humiliates girls and women without mentioning that the Taliban members do not represent authentic Islam. In contrast to Islamic Sharia, the Taliban group imposed strict rules, beat women in public spaces, and inferiorise them. Second, the author questions a scene where Parvana's father tells the story about Afghanistan's history. The scene shows camels, even though Afghanistan is not in the Middle East. This scene depicts an Orientalist aspect as discussed by Said (1978) in which the West has historically portrayed the East as a single entity, ignoring its complexity and cultural diversity. The author argues that this scene oversimplifies Afghanistan culture by relating it to the Middle East without taking into consideration that each Eastern country has its own culture and identity.

To sum up, *The Breadwinner* skilfully attracts the audience's attention by portraying the Afghan girls' experiences under the harsh circumstances. As a result, the animated film brought various responses and critical viewpoints. Some welcomed and approved the film, whereas others criticised it and viewed it from a different lens as a subtle tool of achieving Orientalism and justifying imperialistic intervention. The film paints an incomplete picture of the Afghan experience and simplifies historical and cultural formation.

Conclusion

The Breadwinner (2017) conveys that, worldwide, women experience different roles shaped and affected by various social and cultural conditions. The film demonstrates how wars in Afghanistan have imposed strict laws and constraints on women. These restrictions define and complicate a female's role to the extent that she

cannot perform even the simplest of tasks. However, the film also portrays female characters facing these harsh conditions with determination and persistence.

The film showcases a range of female characters who respond differently to social circumstances. Some, like Soraya, surrender to social restrictions, indicating a profound sense of being confined. Others, such as Parvana and Fatima, strive to fulfil multiple active roles as they struggle to challenge various barriers.

Throughout the film, women are shown moving between multiple roles, such as household caregivers and family breadwinners. They are depicted as a symbol of resistance, strength, sacrifice, and courage. Female characters are presented as capable of navigating these roles successfully and holding various responsibilities, often embodying all of them at once as the backbone of any family.

General Conclusion

Based on a thorough literature review of sex, gender, and social roles, this research has aimed to uncover the hidden dimensions of gender roles in Eastern and Western societies. The study focused on the structure of Afghan society and the multiple factors that affect gender dynamics. The work is devoted to revealing the social roles of female characters in *The Breadwinner* (2017), exploring by that their varied responses to conflict and oppression.

The first chapter attempted to define the concepts of sex and gender, highlighting the complexity of their definitions and the debates of their meanings among various scholars. This section also provided definitions of gendered social roles, unravelling the various social, political, cultural, and economic factors that affect social roles and create a gender bias. Additionally, the chapter traced the historical evolution of gender roles, showing how global wars, colonialism, and technological advancement reshape gender dynamics and lead to important transformations. Moving to a more detailed study, the first chapter showcased how gender roles differ significantly between Western and Eastern societies. Through the feminist movement, the Americans launched a gender identity debate, adopted a white centric perspective, and considered those who do not fit the American view as oppressed. However, in Afghanistan, gender experienced significant fluctuation, shaped by religious, cultural, and political forces.

The second chapter illuminated female characters in *The Breadwinner* (2017) in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule. Analysing the film shows that social roles in Afghanistan are divided into two contrasting categories, from those who are submissive to those who are brave and resilient. The film confirms that conflicts have a major influence on redefining gender roles in Afghanistan. Thus, political instability

imprisoned women in their houses and limited their social roles. Further, reading between the lines unveils the Orientalist view of the film, in which they depict Islam as an oppressive religion that humiliates women. The work relates sacred things, like the burqa, to shame, uselessness, and dependence.

Beyond its focus on the social roles of female characters, the film also engages in broader discussions. One key theme is the use of women's rights as a justification for the U.S. involvement, where Western Feminism sought to "save" brown women from brown men and impose a vision of gender equality without considering religious and cultural differences. This white-centric perspective negatively affects Eastern women, as it imposes an external framework that may not align with their lived realities. Western perspectives often advocate for women to attain equal social and legal status to men. During the film, the female protagonists successfully assume tasks traditionally assigned to men, such as lifting heavy boxes, selling goods, and providing for their families. From a Western lens, social roles should not be strictly gendered, and women are fully capable of performing a wide range of roles.

Gender studies need further investigations, as most of the existing research focuses on Western feminist frameworks and sidelines the local gender discourse of the Eastern world. The Western point of view adopts a discriminatory perspective while disregarding the religions, beliefs, cultures, and traditions of the non-Western context, which emphasises the need for deeper insight into the field.

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ملخص

تعتبر النساء الأفغانيات كنزا عظيما لامتهن، فقد استحوذن على اهتمام دولي بفضل صمودهن وقدرتهن على تحدي الظروف القاسية. تكشف هذه الدراسة عن الأدوار الاجتماعية للإناث في المجتمع الأفغاني، باستخدام فيلم *المعيل* (2017) كدراسة حالة لاستكشاف تصوير الأدوار الاجتماعية للإناث وردود أفعالهن تحت سيطرة طالبان. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على منهجية الخطاب النقدي النوعي لمعالجة أسئلة البحث واكتساب فهم شامل للأدوار الاجتماعية للجنسين. تحلل منهجية الخطاب النقدي اللغة وعلاقتها بالسياق الأفغاني. تهدف هذه الأطروحة إلى إبراز التجارب الاجتماعية للمرأة الأفغانية واستكشاف كيف تعكس سرديات الفيلم وجهات النظر الاجتماعية تجاه المرأة الأفغانية من خلال التركيز على تصوير الأدوار الاجتماعية للإناث في الفيلم. يتضمن الفصل النظري تعريفات للجنس والنوع والأدوار الاجتماعية، مع التركيز على وجهات النظر الشرقية والغربية. كما يتناول الفصل التطبيقي الأدوار الاجتماعية الأنثوية في فيلم *المعيل* (2017)، حيث تتحدى بطلة الفيلم بارفانا ووالدتها الأعراف الجندرية المفروضة، بينما تُصوّر أختها كشخصية خاضعة ومقيدة بحكم طالبان. بناء على ذلك، يُظهر هذا البحث أن النساء الأفغانيات قادرات على القيام بشتى الأدوار حتى التي طالما كانت حكرا على الرجال. كما يظهر الفيلم ان النساء لهن القدرة على التحول من رعاية الاسرة الى اعالتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المرأة الأفغانية، النوع الاجتماعي، عدم الاستقرار السياسي، الدور الاجتماعي، المعيل