



AGENCY IN THE NOVEL *WANTING MOR* (2009) BY RUKHSANA KHAN

Nada Alfi Syahrin¹, Delvi Wahyuni²

English Department

Faculty of Languages and Arts

Universitas Negeri Padang

email: nadaalfisyahrin23@gmail.com

Abstract

This research is an analysis of the novel *Wanting Mor* by Rukhsana Khan (2009). The research aims to analyze the agency shown by the main female character, Jameela, in the novel *Wanting Mor* by Rukhsana Khan (2009) as the representation of Afghan women in facing various oppressions in Afghanistan such as the patriarchal system, traditional social relation, foreign country intervention, and disability. The research data is based on agency theory by Catriona Mackenzie within feminist literary criticism. The form of this research is descriptive qualitative analysis. The data in this research was obtained from the novel *Wanting Mor* by Rukhsana Khan (2009). The results show that there are two factors lead to the emergence of Jameela's agency namely mental formation of agent and development of agent's capabilities. This research also shows that there are two manifestations of Jameela's agency namely decision-making and self-resilience.

Key words: *Agency, Oppression, Afghanistan Women*

A. INTRODUCTION

From ancient times to the present, the issue of gender equality is one of the social issues that are always fought for by people around the world. There is a stereotype about traditional gender roles where women have a weaker position and are always dependent on men considered incapable of doing things related to independence, power, and leadership. Thus, traditional gender roles have placed men at the top and women at the bottom of society.

Historically, women's efforts to obtain education or engage in politics are modern women's endeavors to reduce gender discrimination. Women have fought for and won many rights, including the right to vote, equal pay, education, and participation in the workforce. Despite has reached many achievements, women in some parts of the world especially in countries that still adhere to patriarchal

¹ English ELLSP of English Department of FBS Universitas Negeri Padang graduated on March 2024

² Lecturer of English Department of FBS Universitas Negeri Padang



systems like Afghanistan, continue to face numerous challenges and obstacles in fulfilling their roles and agency. According to Moghadam in Ghosh (2003:3), the problem of women's rights in Afghanistan is caused by various factors, namely the patriarchal system, traditional social relations, and foreign interference, which hinder social development in Afghanistan.

Oppression can be even more severe for women with disabilities. There are differences in the way women with disabilities and non-disabilities experience bullying. According to Azhar et al., (2023:86), women with disabilities tend to face double stigma, namely stigmatization because of their gender and disability which creates greater barriers to access to health, education, employment, and public facilities compared to those without disabilities. It can also increase the risk of bullying due to dependence on others and limitations in protecting themselves.

The novel *Wanting Mor* by Rukhsana Khan, which is set during the US invasion shows how Afghan women fight for their right to control and change their destiny through the female character, Jameela. Jameela is often considered different by the public because of her cleft lip. This stigma causes her to feel isolated and not accepted by her environment. Jameela's cleft lip makes her more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Her father and stepmother treated Jameela as if she was a burden and forced her to do all the household chores. Jameela then ends up in an orphanage run by the same foreign soldiers who killed so many of her family members. At the orphanage, some of Jameela's friends also belittled Jameela because of her physical disability which made Jameela not only discriminated against but also depressed and lost self-confidence. She must struggle with her own image and struggle with the hardships of the outside world. Her condition affects the way she interacts with those around her and creates emotional challenges. Jameela's cleft lip has made the discrimination she experienced even worse.

Despite facing various kinds of oppression as a disabled woman, it turns out that Jameela has the agency to face discrimination and violence. In relation to feminism, the concept of agency is often associated with the idea of the power and ability of women both individually and in groups to act actively and make decisions in society (Sen in Samman & Santos, 2009:5-6). The agency is considered very important because it can help create a more gender-neutral environment where women have the same access to education, employment, health services, and other opportunities as men. The agency can manifest in many different forms, depending on the political, social, and cultural environments in which they operate because each society has a unique and diverse context in terms of social norms, political structures, and cultural values. Vizheh et al., (2023:13), in his research highlighted that women's agency is very dependent on how cultural beliefs and social norms influence its definition. A similar statement is also found in research conducted by Mason & Smith (2000:301), who compared agencies in various countries and found that the strength of the correlation between agency domains varied greatly.

In the novel *Wanting Mor*, Jameela is indicated to have agency that can help her face discrimination and violence in shaping her experiences and life journey.

Overall, this novel shows that an Afghan woman who despite having a disability, proves that she has the agency to fight for her rights against gender discrimination and violence. Therefore, the researcher is interested in conducting research with the title "Agency in the Novel *Wanting Mor* by Rukhsana Khan (2009) using Catriona Mackenzie's Agency theory through feminist literary criticism to analyze how agency can appear in women and in what kind of manifestation this agency can appear.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The main data used in this study is the novel *Wanting Mor* by Rukhsana Khan (2009) using a descriptive qualitative research technique which is seen as the best approach because it requires an understanding of critical thinking about the meaning of the text. The novel *Wanting Mor* by Rukhsana Khan (2009) will be examined through its quotations in the form of conversation and action between characters in the novel using the concept of agency by Catriona Mackenzie.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the concept of agency put forward by Mackenzie & Stoljar (2000:22) in her book entitled "Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self", agency can be seen at three levels. First, the process of forming desires, beliefs and attitudes based on attitudes and beliefs towards oneself by paying attention to social norms, cultural practices and social relationships. In this process, personal beliefs and goals emerged in Jameela in the form of personal values and support from closest people obtained from social relationships with her environment, such as her relationship with her mother (Mor) and her friends at the orphanage. Personal values and support from closest people then became the basis that helped Jameela build her agency. Second, through developing capabilities in competence and capacity to develop autonomy. This refers to factor that contribute to the emergence of agency. Through education, Jameela can develop her agency which can help her act independently, make decisions, and have control over herself. Education provided Jameela with the knowledge and skills to develop her expertise. Third, a person's ability to act in accordance with autonomous desires. This refers to the manifestation of agency that Jameela has. Based on the previous two levels, Jameela's manifestation of agency is formed into decision-making and self-resilience.

1. Factors Lead to the Emergence of Agency

1.1 Mental Formation of Agent

The first mental formation of the agent came through the personal values taught to Jameela by her mother. Personal values can play a role in the emergence of agency by influencing how individuals can actively shape their own identity and character, emphasizing traits or qualities outside of society's social standards. This can be seen through the following quote on page 3:

She looks peaceful and beautiful to me. She always said ,
“Jameela, if you can’t be beautiful you should at least be good.
People will appreciate that.” (Khan, 2009 p.3)

The quote shows that Jameela's mother (Mor) emphasizes the importance of inner beauty values by demonstrating a sense of agency in determining one's worth by encouraging the idea that if one cannot be physically beautiful, one should try to be good. This reflects the idea that a woman can actively shape her identity and character, emphasizing traits or qualities outside society's social standards.

This quote contains a deep message about resilience, showing that beauty lies in a person's character and actions. The drive to be good in the face of societal standards that often prioritize external beauty shows a tough mindset. It implies the power to overcome superficial judgments and focus on developing lasting inner qualities. The advice Mor provides not only empowers Jameela to navigate society's expectations but also underscores the idea that resilience can be found in the choices we make and the values we uphold.

The personal values that give rise to Jameela's agency are also visible in the following quote:

She was full of stories. She told me once about how her father, my grandfather used to mold clay pots on his wheel back when there was peace in Afghanistan. He said what made a pot strong was the firing. If the pot came out too soon, it would crack and be useless. Mor said we're made of clay, too. Allah molded Adam from it, and we're the children of Adam. When things get bad, that's our firing. We have to be patient, trust in Allah that we will come out of it without cracking. (Khan, 2009 p.5-6)

In this quote, personal value comes from the metaphorical connection between the process of molding a clay pot and the human experience. Mor tells the story of Jameela's grandfather who made clay pots in Afghanistan during times of peace. Her grandfather emphasized that the firing process was essential to making the pot strong; if it came out too quickly, it would crack and be useless. Mor then expands this metaphor by analogizing that humans are also made of clay, like pots. Personal values emphasized include the strength to face challenges, belief in trust, and the belief that adversity is an important part of personal growth. This encourages a perspective that sees adversity as a means to build and strengthen rather than cause irreparable damage. In this context, 'resilience' refers to a person's inner strength and their ability to overcome problems. A comparison between human experience and clay pots shows that, just as clay pots require precise firing to be strong and durable, humans also face challenges and obstacles that test their resilience.

Jameela's further mental formation came through the support of those closest to her. This support came from her friends and teachers. The support of others can help increase women's agency by enabling them to take an active role in life to overcome challenges and create new opportunities. The cultural challenges Jameela faces can be seen in the following quote:

Quietly Masood says, "That was a very big test. The stronger you are, the harder Allah will test you."

I pull my porani a bit closer even though I'm not feeling cold. Mor said the prophet were always tested the worst. And then the believers. She said there's always when you either pass or fail. "Sometimes your test is a huge thing, and sometimes it's little," I say. (Khan, 2009 p.30)

The concept of women's agency is touched upon in this quote through character reflections on strength, trials, and the unpredictable nature of life's challenges. Jameela engages in conversation with Masood, who provides perspective on the importance of strength and trials in the context of faith. Masood in a loving manner, addresses Jameela, acknowledging the severity of the trials she has faced recently. Masood subtly shows Jameela's strength and abilities by saying that Allah's tests are more important for those who are more resistant. In response, Jameela instinctively appeals to Masood's point of view, manifesting it in subtle actions such as pulling her porani closer, a sign of seeking solace and protection. In this way, Masood and Jameela's exchange not only provides emotional support, but also provides an understanding of faith, strength, and the unpredictable nature of life's trials.

One of Jameela's friends also provided support to help Jameela get her agency as in the following quote:

Then she comes back, takes a closer look at me and says, "Jameela?"

I've been peeking at her through my porani, but now I raise my head.

She bends her head closer.

"All you are right?"

I wish there was some kind of surgery to mend me inside. There's a hole in me much bigger than the gap in my lip. But I can't tell Soraya that.

"What's wrong?" she says.

"I was just thinking of my father."

She sits down on my bed, her hands going limp in her lap.

"forget about him."

"Do you think it was my lip that made him leave me?" "Stop it," she says.

“There’s nothing you could have done. And you’re not the only one to be left by your father”. She looks down for a moment. “Men will leave their kids even when there’s nothing wrong with them. And the sometimes, before they can come back to get them, they die.’ She sighs . (Khan, 2009 p. 77)

The narrative in this quote is strongly anchored in the theme of support for women’s agency. An early scene shows Jameela being accosted by another character who is observing her. As the scene unfolded, Jameela, who had been secretly observing the other person through her 'porani', decided to raise her head. These physical movements indicate small but significant changes in her demeanor, indicating confidence. These actions are considered an outward manifestation of the internal impact of support, indicating that recognition and attention can increase a person's sense of self-confidence.

Soraya's response played an important role in strengthening Jameela's agency. Soraya created a supportive atmosphere by sitting on Jameela's bed and providing reassurance. Her limp hands in her lap and her sitting position indicate a willingness to empathize and be present for Jameela. Soraya's encouragement to forget Jameela's father serves as a verbal anchor, diverting attention from her self-blame. Soraya responded lovingly to Jameela when Jameela said what she thought about her father. By acknowledging Jameela's pain and sharing a broader view of her father, Soraya not only validates Jameela's emotions but also provides a narrative that normalizes the experience. This broader context has the potential to empower Jameela by helping her realize that she is not alone in her struggles.

In short, the quote explains the transformative impact of support on the agency. It underscores the importance of recognition, empathy, and shared experiences to foster resilience and empower individuals to navigate their emotional landscape through shared interactions and discussions.

1.2 Development of Agent’s Capabilities

Agency in women can emerge because of education because it can enable women to have control over their personal lives. In this novel, Jameela is very aware that education is important to improve her welfare. It can be seen from this quote:

I could learn to read if I just had the chance. Mor always wished it for me but there was no school in the village, and she had grown up during the war when there was no such thing as school, so she couldn’t teach me herself. (Khan, 2009 p.18)

In this quote, the statement about 'Mor' (Jameela's mother) who shares the same desire for Jameela's education, highlights the systemic challenges caused by society. The absence of schools in villages is a significant obstacle, highlighting structural limitations that can hinder the development of agency. This quote also deepens the exploration of the impact of historical circumstances on education through Mor's background. The revelation that Mor grew up in a period marked by war, not only underscores the challenges she faced in her educational journey but also explains her inability to personally convey knowledge to Jameela. However, Jameela's desire to acquire reading skills shows how important education is to building agency. The statement suggests that education can be transformational by giving individuals the tools to increase their freedom and find better ways to navigate the world.

The statement 'I could learn to read if I had the chance,' paints a picture of the possibility of personal growth through education. Jameela shows that she has the ability to learn and that one of the obstacles is the lack of education opportunities. This idea emphasizes the empowering nature of education and positions it as the main factor determining a person's ability and right to choose.

The impact of education on women also can be seen through this quote:

Soraya turns to Baba and my stepmother. "Khalaa Kareema is one of the teachers. She says Jameela is the best student she's ever had. She even thinks Jameela will be a teacher one day." (Khan, 2009 p. 103)

With reference to the teacher, Khalaa Kareema, and Jameela, this quote shows the impact of education on women's agency. This statement shows that education allows individuals like Jameela to develop their potential and aspire to become teachers. The transformative influence of education on Jameela's personal development and academic achievement is demonstrated by the recognition her teachers gave Jameela as the 'best student'. This image underscores the idea that education not only provides knowledge but also fosters a sense of agency, enabling individuals to pursue future roles that can contribute to the improvement of society. The analysis also indicates that Jameela underwent a transformation of agency from overt agency (learning covertly) to becoming covert agency (pursuing education in school). Liberating education can elevate individuals to positions where they can contribute actively to their communities, Jameela's prospects as a teacher are proof of that. This narrative shows the great role of education in cultivating agency in achieving goals and success.

2. The Manifestations of Agency

Based on agency theory, the third level is the ability of an agent to act. Researchers found that Jameela already has agency which is manifested in the form of decision-making and self-resilience with the following analysis

2.1 Decision-Making

The agency plays an important role in the decision-making process by enabling people to engage in it and influence their choices. Jameela is indicated to have the ability to make decisions based on her own wishes. The decision-making conducted by Jameela indicates that her agency is open (overt agency) because these decisions will later influence the way Jameela faces the challenges she goes through. Jameela's decision is first seen in the following quote on page 63:

“Oh Jameela, such good news! That was an army surgeon! He’s going to fix your lip. He says it’s just cleft, a small problem, easy to fix.”

My lip can be fixed?

I don’t know what to say

(...)

“Is everything all right? Don’t you want our lip to be fixed?”

Something in me wakes up.

“Oh, yes! I’ve never wanted anything more.” My words shock me. They just burst out of me. (Khan, 2009 p.63)

This quote underscores the importance of recognition, empathy, and shared experiences to foster resilience and empower individuals to navigate their emotional landscape through shared interactions and discussions. Jameela's response, 'Oh, yes! I've never wanted anything more,' showing agency in the form of a decision-making process. The words that came out of her mouth showed a sincere and spontaneous choice to take advantage of the opportunity to repair her cleft lip. In this quote, Jameela's decision-making is an important moment to show how agency influences her decision. She quickly and firmly expressed her strong desire to undergo surgery. This indicates a transition from initial uncertainty to a clear and positive decision to achieve her goals.

The agency allows Jameela to make her own decisions and stick to those decisions, which can be seen through the following quote on page 106:

Astaghfirullah!

I take a deep breath.

“I hope you find a good place, Baba, but I can’t go with you.”

“Yes you can! That witch, she knows she can’t keep you. Not when your own father has come. We can leave right now. Nothing can stop us.”

He starts to get up, but this time I’m the one who grasps his arm to stop him.

“No, Baba. I didn’t say it right. It’s not that I can go with you. It’s that I won’t go with you. I’m staying here.”

For a long time Baba just stares at me. The expression on his face gradually changes from the shock to rage. Then he glances at the door.

That’s right. He can’t do anything to me. Not all with those people in the other room. But still, I have to get out of his reach. I get to my feet and put on my chadri. “Assalamualaikum, Baba.” Peace be upon you. And I mean it. (Khan,2009 p.106)

In this quote, the manifestation of agency can be seen from the impact of decision-making made by the main female character. Against the backdrop of an emotional atmosphere, Jameela takes a firm stand by asserting her autonomy through the strong statement, 'I can't go with you.' This decision-making signifies an overt act of Agency. Jameela asserts her agency through the line “It's not like I can go with you. It's that I won't go with you. I'm staying here.”

The agency is not only visible in Jameela's verbal expressions but also in her physical actions. The act of grasping her father's arm to stop his movement symbolizes a real affirmation of her decision. The impact of Jameela's decision becomes clearer when her father's emotions fluctuate from shock to anger. The greeting, 'Assalamualaikum, Baba,' has different layers of meaning. This not only reflects cultural separation but also a declaration of peace in the face of conflict showing the strength that radiates from Jameela's decision.

This scene encapsulates the profound impact of individual agency on family relationships, traditions, and personal identity. The decisions made by the heroine are a testament to the power of one's ability to make choices and assert one's autonomy, even in the face of family demands and emotional stress.

2.2 Self-Resilience

Besides decision-making, Jameela's agency is manifested through self-resilience. Resilience is an important characteristic that enables women to face the difficulties they face. Jameela is indicated to have self-resilience which can be known through the various challenges she faces.

Another quote that supports self-resilience in Jameela can be seen through the quote on page 6 below:

I'm so tired but I can't sleep. This time yesterday she was alive. What if I had gone to her straight away this morning? What if I had stayed by her bed? What if I'd run to get the doctor in the next village? No. What if can drive you crazy. What if opens the door to shaitan. Insha Allah, it will be better in the morning. If only I can sleep. If only I can get through tonight. (Khan, 2009 p.6)

This quote shows the emotional struggle that Jameela is going through. The repetitive phrase 'What if' shows a tendency to think too much, causing feelings of guilt towards oneself. This line also expresses Jameela's struggle to come to terms with the past, acknowledging unstable thinking and potential negative influences. However, Jameela quickly realized that this assumption could open the door to Satan, which was understood as a metaphor for negative thoughts that could disturb a person's mind. The sentence 'Insha Allah, it will be better in the morning' brings a glimmer of hope and resilience, as well as belief which is an important aspect of self-resilience.

In short, this quote shows how agency influences self-resilience by telling about feelings of guilt, regret, and the desire to enjoy oneself when something important is lost. The interplay between 'What if' questions, religious prayers, and expressions of longing for a better future convey the complex emotional landscape of Jameela's journey towards healing and acceptance.

Jameela's personal values and mindset also influence Jameela's resilience in facing her life's challenges as can be seen in the following quote:

Maybe things will be all right. Didn't Khalaa at the other place seem like she would be terrible? And wasn't I able to win her over with hard work? Why should it be so different with my new stepmother? She has more reason to like me. If I can't be beautiful at least I should be good. I'll work hard and I'll do it without complaining (Khan,2009 p.28)

This quote shows a proactive and determined mindset, as well as a strong sense of self-resilience that comes from agency. Jameela started with an optimistic outlook and pondered the possibility that everything would turn out well. Previous experiences with Khalaa at other place serve as a reminder that difficulties can be overcome with effort and hard work. This comparison inspires the belief that Jameela has the power to change her relationship and circumstances. When someone chooses to concentrate on personal qualities such as kindness, they demonstrate a desire to improve themselves and realize that their actions can influence the perceptions of others. Agency and determination to face challenges with a positive and

diligent attitude are increasingly emphasized, demonstrating the transformative power of individual resilience in the face of uncertainty

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The novel *'Wanting Mor'* by Rukhsana Khan (2009) describes how Afghan women use their agency to face the oppression that occurs in Afghanistan. This agency is represented by the main female character, Jameela, who succeeds in establishing her agency in fighting the patriarchal system. The researcher has found several findings related to agency in Afghan women. The first is the factors that lead to the emergence of women's agency and the second is the manifestation of Afghan women's agency.

Jameela's agency then manifests in the form of decision-making which becomes the turning point in her life. Her courage in making the decision to refuse her father's request shows that Jameela has agency where she can no longer be limited by her patriarchal father. Another manifestation of her agency is self-resilience as the result of various factors driving the emergence of agencies which shows her steadfastness in facing various obstacles in life as an Afghan woman. Jameela's ability to accept change, learn from difficult experiences, and continue to grow as an individual demonstrating her ability to learn from life and strengthen herself through those experiences is an example of her self-resilience.

Overall, despite facing multiple oppressions, women with disabilities can exhibit remarkable agency. Jameela navigates societal norms and demeaning expectations related to her disability by cultivating a positive self-belief, acquiring skills and knowledge, and enhancing her capacity for autonomous action. Her resilience and agency create inspiration about individual strength and endurance, demonstrating that autonomy and freedom can be achieved amid seemingly insurmountable barriers. She proves that disability is not an absolute obstacle to independence because of her intelligence, perseverance, and adaptability.

It is hoped that this research can be input for future researchers who are interested in analyzing related topics and are expected to be useful for the progress of education in general. The suggestions for future researchers should be to deepen the factors driving the emergence of agency and the various forms of its manifestation in more detail considering that this research cannot fully describe women's problems in Afghanistan.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed-Ghosh, H. (2003). A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan. *Journal of Women's Studies*, 4(3), 3,7,10. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol4/iss3/1>
- Azhar, J. K., Hidayat, E. N., & Raharjo, S. T. (2023). Kekerasan Seksual: Perempuan Disabilitas Rentan Menjadi Korban. *Share Social Work Journal*, 13(1), 86. <https://doi.org/10.45814/share.v13i1.46543>
- Khan, R. (2009). *Wanting Mor*. Toronto: Groundwood Books.
- Mackenzie, C., & Stoljar, N. (2000). *Relational Autonomy : Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. England: Oxford University Press.
- Mason, K. O., & Smith, H. L. (2000). Husbands' Versus Wives' Fertility Goals And Use of Contraception: The Influence of Gender Context in Five Asian Countries. *Demography*, 37(3), 301
- Samman, E., & Santos, M. E. (2009). Agency and Empowerment: A Review of Concepts, Indicators and Empirical Evidence. *Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative (OPHI)*, 10a. <http://www.ophi.org.uk>
- Vizheh, M., Rapport, F., Braithwaite, J., & Zurynski, Y. (2023). The Impact of Women's Agency on Accessing and Using Maternal Healthcare Services: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. In *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (Vol. 20, Issue 5, p. 13). MDPI. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20053966>