

Legitimization of Oneself by a *Harami*: A Study of Mariam in Khaled Hosseini's Novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract: In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by Khaled Hosseini filial relationship becomes a structural principle in the sense that it is the one recurrent motif upon which the plot is based. From which it follows that the characters frequently move in and out of filial relationships. Mariam, an illegitimate child and Laila born very much within wedlock are the two female protagonists. Mariam fails to understand the love her mother Nana has for her and gets with her father Jalil. Laila yearns for her mother Fariba's attention and love, but in vain. The female figure, Laila, marginalized by *almost* all the male figures (for all practical purposes) throughout the novel, wins a **ubiquitous** presence for Mariam that the apparently more successful Laila accords her *willingly and gratefully*. My paper will be a study of this self-promotion achieved by Mariam in Hosseini's novel.

Keywords: legitimization, silence, '*ijjat*', filial bond, mother.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by Khaled Hosseini filial relationship becomes a structural principle in the sense that it is the one recurrent motif upon which the plot is based. From which it follows that the characters constantly move in and out of (sometimes being thrust out by others, against their own will) filial relationship. In the process they create parents, sons/daughters as also orphans of each other and of themselves as well. The novel is replete with bonds between parents and children, the most important of them being that between Jalil Khan and Mariam. The latter is the female protagonist of the novel. She is born outside marriage. Hosseini's novel begins with a collective act of violence against Nana and Mariam-the unwed mother and the illegitimate daughter - as a result of protective measures taken by Jalil's three wives and Jalil himself for *his/their* nine legitimate children. Jalil is one of the wealthiest, best-connected men of Herat in Afghanistan. Nana used to serve Jalil as one of his three housekeepers when this illicit relationship developed between them, and when she conceived, Jalil saved his "honour" by putting the entire responsibility (or blame) upon her. Through a face-saving deal with his wives and the furious in-laws, he built a *kolba* for her and the expected child on the outskirts of Herat. Providing her with the barest minimum for survival was all he felt incumbent upon him to get done. "His idea of penance", as Nana would comment ironically. Thus one bond between mother-and-child calling for protective measures is successfully resisted by another bond between mother-and-child, consisting of three legal wives and their nine lawful

children. Which means that by virtue of a set of *such measures* taken by them, those wives provided for their children by casting the other mother (and the baby in the womb) out -the 'other' to their zone of legitimacy. But obviously the father Jalil is also **present and active**, taking care to protect *his* bond with all those legitimate children. The helpless, resourceless Nana forms a subterranean (not easily observable by Mariam) bond with her *harami* child who is all that she has in the world while Jalil makes a great show of caring, providing for Mariam -thus *carefully building an external bond* only with her, which the latter would realize to her great shock after fifteen years of delusion.

It was with Mariam going decisively away from Nana in search of her father on her fifteenth birthday that started a chain of reactions. The bond between Jalil and Mariam got dissolved through the cruelty and hypocrisy of Jalil exposed abruptly and briefly but unmistakably in a flash of lightning, as it were. Nana, feeling totally destitute, committed suicide. And soon after a fresh bond got started posthumously, between Nana and a Mariam who was hurt-beyond-words, shocked, ashamed, aggrieved and penitent. Her stiff rejection of Jalil's false overtures after her forced and hasty marriage with a widower 30 years senior to her is **the first step** towards acknowledging Nana. It is as if so far her attitude to her betrayed mother had not been a correct one, a *legitimate* one. She is only now beginning to think of her mother as **truly her mother**, to realize her mother's love for herself-Mariam -her daughter. The more she comes to understand how Nana prevented her from going to her father's cinema hall for amusement or joining the university for higher studies only in order to protect her from being insulted because of *her bastardhood*, the more she makes her relationship with her unfortunate and exploited, but caring and protective mother, a *legitimate one*. That, in its turn, enables her to make her status as a human being increasingly firm, strong and tenable. It could be said that she comes out of the Oedipus complex and enters vigorously in the *negative Oedipus complex*. This process lasts until Mariam's death.

It would not be amiss to say that the novel is a female bildungsroman. For it shows Mariam's transition from what Lacan calls the 'symbolic order', which "is the realm of law, language, and society...the repository of generally held cultural beliefs", of which the "symbolic system is language, whose agent is the father or lawgiver, the one who has the power of naming" (Murfin and Ray, 506) to what according to Kristeva is the 'semiotic order'. But which is not really a retrograde movement in terms of the true development of Mariam's personality: because in Kristeva's theory, the symbolic is not always the most powerful mode, and the speaking being is not a stable subject. Rather, he or she is a 'subject in process':

On the contrary, the signifying economy of poetic language is specific in that the semiotic is not only a constraint as is the symbolic, but it tends to gain the upper hand at the expense of the thetic and predicative constraints of the ego's judging consciousness (*Desire in Language*, 134).

It is apt to remember that Kristeva in her later works extends 'semiosis' (for her, the way the semiotic helps produce meaning, however polysemic) to other texts and signifying practices than those within the purview of poetic language. Even after detaching herself from Jalil, Mariam continues to be in the symbolic order represented by the clutches of Rasheed, but in her mind the semiotic order is far from absent. Mariam makes eventually a determined entry into a space where a system of signification operates, allowing her to partake of it and to grow, and to renew herself -in that she gets her bearings, first, and then wrings meaning out of a hopeless existence -by degrees.

The second step towards self-legitimization is taken by her when Mariam gives herself up to the daughter of an *ambagh*, on the sheer basis of a demand for **her** attention and affection. She is unlike Rasheed who is only stung with jealousy and suspicion towards Aziza, never once experiencing any softness towards this innocent little girl born to his wife (through another father, as he rightly guesses). Mariam comes afterwards to know that Aziza is also a *harami* like herself, but it is not that she is only *then* able to love Laila's daughter, merely out of fellow feelings. Already love has started pouring out from within her spontaneously like a fountain, in her arid love-starved world. Deep within, she is thankful for this demand upon herself. Mariam is amazed and grateful for this wonderful grace of God in the form of acceptance, or rather, adoration:

"Why have you pinned your little heart to an old, ugly hag like me?" Mariam would murmur into Aziza's hair. "Huh? I am nobody, don't you see? A *dehati*. What have I got to give you?" But Aziza only muttered contentedly and dug her face in deeper. And when she did that, Mariam swooned. Her eyes watered. Her heart took flight. And she marvelled at how, after all these years of rattling loose, she had found in this little creature the first true connection in her life of false, failed connections. (part 3, ch. 35, 226)

She also saw another astonishing thing happening -when Laila tried to defend her from a blundering, blindly angered Rasheed. This was a beginning for her: she came to see Laila not as an 'ambagh' who was a formidable rival but an amiable and tolerable fellow sufferer, a human being who could be looked upon as first, a sister, and then, a daughter. Here was **the third step** taken by Mariam in the direction of redeeming herself from the position of a persona non grata. This gesture was complemented and completed by Laila coming to see a sister first and then a mother in Mariam, too. The bonding began with a friendship, a camaraderie. They would share their chores and then snatch some time out from the tight schedule of domestic duties to sit out in the yard at nights, sipping tea and pacing out their gossip with left-over *halwa*. They would thus give themselves a break from the suffocating atmosphere of Rasheed's patriarchal house. When that had grown into a nightly ritual, one day Laila asked to braid Mariam's hair. That opened Mariam's locked heart: she started telling Laila about Jalil, Nana and everything... the hurried marriage with Rasheed and the pregnancies...the endless

cycles of hope and disappointment...Rasheed's turning on her and bringing Laila. In her turn, Laila told her all about herself, including the plan to leave. She asked Mariam to come with them.

The fourth step whereby Mariam established her bona fides is constituted by her agreeing to play the role of the (absent but necessary) mother in this adventurous journey towards escape... She was thus acquiring positions for herself in this world, (retrospectively) making herself vitally needed, indispensable, in fact. In the process she built relationships for herself from among people who are not bloodrelations, not *legitimately* connected to her. This is the saga of Mariam's quest. With "a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotested, a destiny submitted to and endured" she trudged on heavily in the journey of life, bearing a cross of travail and opposition. She moved on with unseeing eyes for any goal, as she dared not hope for much good to happen to her. What Tillie Olsen comments about silences arising from "circumstances" of being born "into the wrong class, race or sex, being denied education, becoming numbed by economic struggle, muzzled by censorship or distracted or impeded by the demands of nurturing" (quoted in Fishkin and Hedges, 5) comes to the mind. But the beauty of it is that she wanted to open up avenues for others at those very moments of oppression and repression. This may be called a **quest for the Holy Grail**. In the end, (as in Rosicrucianism) her cross does blossom into the rose of an unearthly beauty. **This** beauty she has missed all along (along with the *beauty of appearance*), i.e., the beauty of mind and of heart-indeed, a far greater beauty than the skin-deep one. As Richard Ellmann points out in *The Identity of Yeats*, in the Rosicrucian order of the Golden Dawn throughout the 'nineties

... the conjunction [of the rose & the cross] is often referred to as a 'mystic marriage', as the transfiguring ecstasy which occurs when the adept, after the long pain and self-sacrifice of the quest in this world, a world in which opposites are for ever quarrelling, finds his cross -the symbol of that struggle and opposition -suddenly blossom with the rose of love, harmony, and beauty (64).

This is the beauty of a mother figure. Once she agrees to play at being the mother to Laila, *this script* sticks to her. She is not the biological mother but is nevertheless as beautiful and glorious and pure a mother as Virgin Mary holding and beholding the Infant Christ. Like Mother Mary, her motherly role is multiple. It started with her attachment for Aziza prompted obviously by a nascent intimacy with Laila:

The years had not been kind to Mariam. But perhaps, she thought, there were kinder years waiting still. A new life, a life in which she would find the blessings that Nana had said a *harami* like her would never see. Two new flowers had unexpectedly sprouted in her life, and, as Mariam watched the snow coming down, she pictured Mullah Faizullah twirling his *tasbeh* beads, leaning in and whispering to her in his soft, tremulous voice, *But it is God Who has planted them, Mariam jo. And it is His will that you tend to them. It is His will, my girl.* (part 3, ch. 35, 229)

By the time she decides to kill Rasheed, she has witnessed and taken part in certain things; she feels related to some people for whom she must provide, take protective measures. She does **something very needful** by removing the one obstacle to all and sundry: Rasheed. Now she can indeed count a few people as her near and dear ones, who will cherish her memory always, with love and gratitude. Apart from Aziza, she has become a mother for both Laila and Tariq... The motherly instinct is roused in her about Laila and everything surrounding her, in fact. Cixous has aptly put it: "a woman is never far from 'mother'... there is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk..." (252). Even Zalmai is provided for by Mariam in the sense that Rasheed's affection and influence would have made him a spoilt child only, adding one more to the population of the patriarchal society of the likes of Rasheed, which would never happen with a caring, circumspect Tariq. This is, then, **the last and final, necessary step** taken by Mariam towards establishing her credentials, in a manner of speaking.

At the same time she has vindicated her existence as a woman who takes a decision and *thereby makes things happen* in the patriarchal world. When she decides to kill her husband for Laila, she does not do it only for the sake of her *newly found daughter*. Prior to that she has observed him on several occasions and dismissed him (deep within her heart) as unworthy of herself. One telling instance is her chance discovery of the gun and the collection of pornographic magazines when she happens to open the top drawer of his dresser. Questions come to her mind about, **among other things**, his finicky insistence on the so-called virtue / honour of a woman that must be maintained at any cost by the male folk related to her - jealousy about the *ijjat'* of Mariam, and contempt regarding the lack of '*abru*' of other women (part 1, ch.12, 74-77)! But then she is an Amazon with a difference, taking things lying down for a long while, and then deciding to put an end to it all. She is normally not a woman vying for a public space; she is resourceless and 'silenced'. She spends her life within the very narrowly charted domestic space available to her, as a 'castrated' woman, but wins for herself in the end recognition and remembrance well beyond that domestic space. This is possible by virtue of her prioritizing the dream fulfilment of Laila, Tariq and Zaman in multiple ways. She **participates** in the end, in both the domestic and public spaces, as a free-thinking individual, by bringing about changes *without any political empowerment* in very difficult political times. Meanwhile a self-realization slowly comes to Jalil and he tries to rebuild the bond with Mariam by expressing regret and repentance. The father in him does provide for the bastard child, at par with his other children, at a time when a tsunami is up in the politico-economic-social scenario of the then Kabul in particular and Afghanistan in general. But this awakening comes too late to Jalil for either of them to benefit from what should have been a healing process, by making them *truly related to each other* at last. But in a way Jalil enables Mariam to **complete** her provisional act for Laila. By receiving as Mariam's legacy what was bequeathed by Jalil to Mariam, Laila is enabled *in her turn* to take protective measures for the

children in the orphanage who regard her as a mother figure and many of whom **actually** call her 'mother'. It would be relevant and revealing to remember at this point how at fifteen, Mariam begins a very brief marital bond with Rasheed, ruptured by her failure to become a mother. She forms a filial bond with her first aborted issue, to whom she accords a proper burial with the suede coat that Rasheed had bought for the baby (who was to be a son, of course). With all the seven miscarriages that she had in her marital life, Mariam must have undergone helplessly and with growing desperation repetitions of the same formation and dissolution of a filial bond.

By the end of the novel, however, she has become instrumental to the fulfilment at multiple planes of the wishes of her surrogate daughter as also of various dreams of many other dramatis personae of the turbulent politico-social melodrama of Afghanistan. So much so that **they all belong now** to the intimate circle of this one persona branded so long as the 'other'. Having shown empowerment coming to Mariam from within, the novel proceeds farther, to show how acting towards all like the Providence, Mariam becomes a 'Meta-mother' figure. She becomes the true embodiment of the three 'D's', i.e. Dāna, Damana, and Dayā - acted out by the great Indian sage Dadhichi as narrated in the *Vāyu Purāna*. She has given, she has won victory over the erring, evil forces as also controlled her own passions in order to enable herself to make self-sacrifice, and she has been kind, taken pity. The female figure marginalized by the male figures (for all practical purposes) throughout the novel, finally wrests her way to the centre.

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