

Patriarchy and Politics of Gender in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper endeavors to analyze Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in the backdrop of Afghanistan and how the Socio-cultural extremism and religious elements continue to pose serious obstacles towards the development of women. Alongside the stated coercions imposed on Afghan women throughout the different political periods in Afghanistan, the dominant patriarchal culture in the country affects women's lives and entails more restrictions and subordinations of women. The paper illustrates the patriarchal suppression women have to endure and resistance as a coping response to domination is manifest in the women's self-sacrifice and their struggle to change the others' lives for the better. Although they very often submit to domination, their love and care for others lead them to occasionally resist against the violence.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Afghan Women, Violence, Self-sacrifice, Gender Discrimination Survival.



Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman.

–Khalid Hosseini

In Afghanistan Socio-cultural extremism and religious elements continue to pose serious obstacles towards the development of women in Afghanistan. These constraints and impediments had an immensely devastating impact on their lives, and most often

result in severely impairing quality of life and even reducing female life expectancy. Although the situation of women under the Taliban rule has been center stage, yet in several other regimes during the history of Afghanistan, the miserable plight of Afghan women can be traced. There is a history over the centuries of subjugation of Afghan women. This history of the continuous violence against women has been traced by several writers in their writings. Khalid Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is one of them.

Khaled Hosseini has been analyzing the situation of women in Afghanistan, not through the ideological formulation of before and after the Taliban, but within the larger historical context of Afghanistan. Through his perspective women can be seen as integral to the rebuilding of the Afghan nation. In Afghanistan, the process of achieving equal rights for women has been a complicated one. Their conditions depend on where they live. In rural areas, the question of female employment and education has not been an issue. They have always worked on the land and have been provided with a minimal level of education. Apart from having the roles of wives and mothers, they have played an important economic role by covering some aspects of agricultural routine, particularly planting and weeding, animal husbandry, and craft production.

Seizing power, the Taliban implemented four central policies regarding women. First, women were forbidden to hold jobs, and their sole responsibility was to bring up the next generation of Muslims. Second, they could not attend schools until the Taliban had come up with a curriculum in accordance with the basics of Islam. Third, women were forced to wear burqas. Although women were obliged to wear chadors during the Mujahidin period, the Taliban implemented the policy that women must wear burqas that cover their faces as well to completely observe the practice of wearing the hejab as recommended by Shariat. Finally, women were denied freedom

of movement. They could only leave their homes if escorted by male relatives and had to avoid contact with male strangers. If these rules were violated, the religious police would mete out punishments like public beatings and sometimes even death.

Alongside the stated coercions imposed on Afghan women throughout the different political periods in Afghanistan, the dominant patriarchal culture in the country affects women's lives and entails more restrictions and subordinations of women.

Khaled Hosseini has written about the plight of Afghan women along with the socio political scenario of Afghanistan. His novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* depicts the plight of women behind the walls of Afghanistan during several invasions in the country. The story covers three decades of anti-Soviet jihad, civil war, and Taliban tyranny through the lives of two women. Mariam is the illegitimate daughter of a prosperous Herat businessman. Banished to a small hovel outside of town, Mariam and her mother live in impoverished seclusion. Mariam's father makes periodic visits bearing gifts and visions of a wider world. Mariam comes to idolize her father, though her mother warns repeatedly against trusting him.

Mariam's childhood ends abruptly when her mother hangs herself. Her father then marries off the 15-year-old to Rashid, a 40-year-old shoemaker in Kabul. Rashid is a deeply conventional man who insists that Mariam wears a burqa, though many women are going uncovered. For a time, the marriage seems to be taking hold, but soon enough Rashid's brutish nature emerges after numerous miscarriages suffered by Mariam.

Parallel to Mariam's story is that of Laila, the beautiful, vivacious 14-year-old daughter of a schoolteacher father who dreams of going to California. Laila lives a life filled with books, schooling, and hope for the future. However, as the war ravages Kabul and her parents are killed by a rocket, the two storylines emerge. Mariam is outraged that this beautiful teenager has

wormed her way into her household. However, when the baby arrives Mariam becomes enchanted with the child and gradually softens toward the mother. The story of these two women reaches its climax in an act of extraordinary generosity and self-sacrifice of Mariam.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is set in Afghanistan from the early 1960s to the early 2000s. Mariam, a young girl in the 1960s, grows up outside Herat, a small city in Afghanistan. The heroine of Hosseini's novel, Mariam is a *harami*, a bastard. She transforms from a girl who suffers a constant feeling of embarrassment and uselessness into a woman who has loved and has been loved. Her useless and unintended life can bring peace and comfort for the ones she has loved. "She thought of her entry into this world, the harami child of lowly villager, an unintended thing...yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had love and been loved back... Mariam thought, that she would die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings" (ATSS, 370)

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Khaled Hosseini portrays how strict Islamic family laws are imposed on women by forcing them to adhere to fundamental values of virginity, marriage and divorce. Author spins out the fate and sharp individual differences of his female characters to demonstrate the breath of commonalty among Muslim women in Afghan society during the drastic political upheavals of the 1970's till 2003. In this novel Taliban and Mujahideen believe that proper social order relies on the curtailment of female rights. As Rasheed proclaims his masculinity and control over his wife Mariam, "I am a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand?" (ATSS, 63). All the major female characters in the novel Nana, Mariam, Laila and Aziza suffer from the male atrocities either as a wife or a daughter.

Women are made to believe that their oppression is justified by Islamic teaching such as the concept of husband's authority over his wife. Mariam is physically abused by her husband:

"Get up," he said. "Come here. Get up"

He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it.

"Put these in your mouth"

"What?"

"Put. These. In your mouth."

"Stop it, Rasheed, I'm – "

His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in, his upper lip curled in a sneer.

"Now chew," he said.

Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes.

"CHEW" he bellowed. A gust of his smoky breath slammed against her face.

Mariam chewed. Something in the back of her mouth cracked.

"Good," Rasheed said. His cheeks were quivering. Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you have given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing else.

Then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars. (ATSS, 104)

Mariam being uneducated and illegitimate daughter of rich business man and a poor maid endures Rasheed's violence as she had internalized what her mother Nana had taught her "to endure without protest" whereas Laila being educated and spirited girl stands against domestic violence and fight for her survival and rights. Laila having been raised with a strong sense of self by her father is not willing to submit to her circumstances

as is Mariam. When she does so, it is because she has something to gain by doing so. She readily accepts Rasheed's marriage proposal because she is pregnant with Tariq's child. Miserable plight of female characters shows how religious beliefs and Islamic law practices cripple them and make them powerless. The worst part of patriarchy is that women are blamed and affected directly and indirectly for the mistakes of men. Nana endures endless sufferings just because she is a woman, as a poor epileptic girl she is abandoned by her fiancé, disowned by her father and ostracized by the society for bringing shame by becoming mother without marriage and finally discarded by Jalil Khan. Nana's fate is reflected by advise she gives to Mariam, "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam" (ATSS, 7). Mariam, "a little *harami*" as her mother calls her, suffers throughout her life without any fault of her own. As it is mentioned, "She understood.... that a *harami* was an unwanted thing; that she, Mariam was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance" (ATSS,4). When Mariam aspires to go to school Nana speaks the truth of her condition, "There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school.... Only one skill. And it's this: *tahamul*. Endure" (ATSS, 17). Aziza daughter of Laila suffers for being a girl-child. Her father Rasheed obsessed with male child refused to show affection to her and always refers to her as "that thing". The solution he provided for the family's poverty by sending Aziza to orphanage is evident the Rasheed consider her burden. He even wishes her daughter to beg whereas he takes loan to bring new clothes, toys and television for his son Zalmai.

Mariam and Laila see each other as rivals, but the feeling of rivalry changes to a warm and unconditional feeling of sisterhood love between them. Indeed, it's after the sisterly

friendship between them that they become united against the violent and brutal treatment of Rasheed, their shared husband. Laila, Rasheed's second wife, Mariam earlier rival has grown up in an educated and relatively civilized environment. She puts the first step towards Mariam to help her and show sympathy. When Rasheed is wildly intending to beat Mariam, Laila steps in and tries her best to stop Rasheed from beating, and that become the start of a sisterhood between them. Furthermore, the love between them grow that strong that finally Mariam finds her comfort in giving the last and the greatest sacrifice one can give in love. She sacrifices her life to save Laila, Tariq, her lover and the children.

Rasheed spat at Mariam. He swung the belt, testing it against his own thigh... Mariam backpedaled again... Rasheed raised the belt again and this time came at Mariam. Then an astonishing thing happened: The girl lunged at him. She grabbed his arm with both hands and tried to drag him down, but she could do no more than dangle from it. She did succeed in slowing Rasheed's progress towards Mariam...you win. You win. Don't do this. Please, Rasheed, no beating! Please don't do this... in the end Mariam knew that there would be no beating, not that night... He stayed that way a few moments longer, arm raised, chest heaving, a fine sheen of sweat filming his brow... He threw Mariam one last, murderous stare, and gave the girl a shove in the back on the way out. (ATSS, 241)

Mariam remembers that during twenty seven years of life with Rasheed, she lost lots of freedom, including her, honor, dignity, identity, freedom and now Rasheed is going to take Laila from her. She never wants that to happen.

In the toolshed, Mariam grabbed the shovel. Rasheed didn't notice her coming back into the room ... *he is going to kill her*, she thought. He really meant to. And Mariam could not, would not, allow that to happen. He'd taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too... she raised it... She said his name. She wanted him to see. Rasheed... she hit him across the temple. The blow knocked him

off Laila... Mariam brought down the shovel. This time, she gave it everything she had. (ATSS, 349)

Mariam, the disgraced and bastard creature owns dignity. She proves it by the extraordinary act of generosity and sacrifice. For twenty seven years, she remains silent and enduring to make her husband contended. She does whatever she is asked. But her husband never brings any change in his brutal and violent treatment of her. The endurance of twenty seven years life with Rasheed teach her this fact that during all those years she has just been a fool. Moreover, the strong feeling of love that grows between Laila, the children and her teaches her this reality that if she can do something for the good of Laila and the children it means her wishes in life are fulfilled. That would mean she has lived an honorable life. Eventually, all the experiences and lessons that she learned during the troublesome life with Rasheed gives her the ability to make a decision that belongs to her own self. During the twenty seven years Rasheed has taken lots of thing from her. And now she is trying to kill Laila, but Mariam won't let that to happen. She "brought down the shovel. This time, she gave it everything she had." (Husseini, 349) She kills Rasheed. She gains that freedom for Laila and the children. Her generosity for the betterment of Laila and the children's lives are limitless.

Mariam gives another sacrifice. She asks Laila and the children to leave the city and go to Pakistan for their safety, and she stays at home until the Taliban come and arrest her. She doesn't agree to escape with Laila and the children because Mariam believes that if they are caught together, Taliban will create problem for Laila too. By giving these sacrifices Mariam feels contented. She says: "For me it ends here. There's nothing more I want. Everything I'd never wished for as a little girl you've already given me. You and your children have made me so very happy. It's all right, Laila jo. This is all right. Don't be sad." (ATSS, 359)

Thus, resistance as a coping response to domination is manifest in the women's self-sacrifice and their struggle to change the others' lives for the better. Although they very often submit to domination, their love and care for others lead them to occasionally resist against the violence. In this regard, Mariam and Laila are perceived as acting heroically. However, their transformation, the capacity to act of the women is restricted to their innate, feminine strength and resilience as mother. As a matter of fact, their common, strong sense of motherhood helps to obliterate their sense of detachment and rivalry and underlies their sense of connection. As such, although the women occasionally demonstrate transformed powerful behaviour, it does not go beyond their maternalistic sense of responsibility.

The hardships and long years of adversity had not been negative and destructive, indeed such illusion and misrecognition serve a positive accommodation that allow them to find a greater meaning in life. Through the oppressive years of their lives their fragmented identity, selfhood and the notion of belonging to others lead them towards a unified vision of selfhood and developed self-awareness. The change in their identity, awareness and selfhood accompanies changes their lives and also in the lives of people around them. In other words, the unified selfhood and identity that they gain becomes the source of changes in their life.

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