

FEMININE POWER AS REPRESENTED IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S

THE THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS

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ABSTRACT

The silencing and victimization of women have forever been a theme we have come across in many of the works of literature. Not only has this been a food for thought now but has also been a topic much discussed right from the time we have started to protest against this since the early 1960s. Khalid Hosseini's **A Thousand Splendid Suns** tells the entwined story of two Afghani women, Mariam and Laila, both married to the same truculent man Rasheed. Hosseini's women characters had been the epitome of much oppressed Afghan feminine hood till they realized their power and fought for their identity. This paper attempts to delve into the psyche and lives of these women characters of Hosseini's novel which tries to be the voices of the voiceless, under the clutches of patriarchy, religion and politics and their liberation.

KEYWORDS: Power of Political, Patriarchal and Religious Subjugation, Sexism, Power of Sisterhood

INTRODUCTION

The lives of men and women were both the concern of literature since its inception, but the readers and the critics were more and more concerned with the gender of the author than the portrayal of a gender in his/her work. We feel a male writer cannot expound the experiences of a woman completely as we put it in 'écriture feminine' and vice versa. The gender plays a dynamic role in the 'subjugating – subjugated' phenomenon in a patriarchal setup. Even we can't recast the whole system of ideologies, thoughts and customs which are in practice for many centuries; we could find or frame some alternatives as some of the male authors who had successfully attempted to think in a woman's perspective than women do. Khalid Hosseini the Afghan born American writer proves this in his second seminal work *The Thousand Splendid Suns*.

AIM OF THE PAPER

The aim of this paper is to prove that gender is not a barrier in portraying the plight of women characters in fiction. Khalid Hosseini had very skillfully narrated the touching tale of ailing womanhood under the clutches of patriarchy, politics and religion. This paper also analyses how the notion of Feminist Sisterhood had been used in liberating the chained female characters in the fiction.

INTRODUCTION OF THE AUTHOR

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. His father Nasser Hosseini was a diplomat who worked with the Afghan Foreign Ministry and his mother taught Persian Literature at a high school in Kabul. He had his early childhood in affluent Wazir Arbar Khan Street of the Kabul city, a time when the women enjoyed freedom along with the men. He grew up in Afghanistan, Iran, and France before moving to the United States at age fifteen. He received his

medical degree from the University of California, San Diego and worked for a decade as a physician (5). *The Kite Runner*, his first novel was published in 2003. He was named as the goodwill envoy to UNHCR in 2006. His second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was published in May, 2007 and in 2013 he came up with his third novel *And the Mountains Echoed*. Presently he is living in California.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is an extraordinary work of literature that narrates the touching tale of womanhood in the backdrop of horror stricken Afghanistan. Afghanistan did have a belle époque when the women were given equal rights and freedom along with the men. The events that followed after the Soviet withdrawal had turned the country to a tortured and tormented land especially for the women. The United Nations Statistics Division had released some shocking reports on the condition of women in Afghanistan:

- Afghanistan is one of the most challenging places in the world to be a woman.
- Many women die in pregnancy and childbirth: 460 deaths/100,000 live births (2010)
- 85% of women have no formal education and are illiterate.
- Female 3rd level students as a % of Total: 18.0%
- Total live births per woman – average of 6
- 1 out 10 children dies before their fifth birthday.
- Life expectancy for women is 51. (6)

Afghanistan women had been marginalized trice – socially, politically and culturally. Hosseini could rightly imprint the real Afghanistan in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Mariam and Laila are the true representatives of the whole suffering, subjugated, victimized, oppressed and forbidden Afghani women. In this paper I attempted to focus on the power of patriarchy, politics and religion which takes up the role of the oppressor and the power of Sisterhood that overthrows the oppressor and liberate the womanhood.

PATRIARCHIAL SUBJUGATION

Bell Hooks in her *Understanding Patriarchy* states that “Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence”(2).

A Thousand Splendid Suns closely depicts the strong imposition of patriarchy in which women were marginalized, abandoned, betrayed, covered up, abused and punished. All of the female characters from Nana to Aziza, the little daughter of Laila encounters the brutality of patriarchy. These women characters were treated unjustly by all of the men including the Taliban. The power of patriarchy is rendered through illegitimacy, marriage, and gender discrimination.

Illegitimacy is used as a weapon to slaughter the very essence of self respect of the female characters. Illegitimacy acquires a grave meaning in a highly patriarchal society. The motherhood is an obvious term for the birth of a child but the fatherhood is relative. One individual remains as a bastard if his/her father refuses to acknowledge him/her. The unmarried Nana Mariam’s mother was sent away from Jalil’s household when they found her “belly began to swell”

(ATSS*, 9). She was abandoned by her own father who ran away to Iran in fear of shame. Finally Jalil and his family decided to hide her or in other words hide their shame in the village suburbs. Nana says: "It was a relief to your father having me out of sight" (ATSS, 9).

Mariam remained as a *harami* (illegitimate) till her last breath since her wealthy father felt ashamed to acknowledge her as his daughter along with his other nine children. Her status of being a *harami* made her to lead a life of confinement in the little *kolba* (a hut) that was allotted for them to live. Nana rightly points to her daughter "A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you" (ATSS, 25). Mariam longed for love and acceptance in her whole life. Mariam longed to be with her coward father more than her brave mother. She loved and trusted him so blindly that she thought that she will be received with warmth and love if she visit him at his huge mansion where he lived happily with his "three wives and nine legitimate children" (ATSS, 47). All of her hopes went vain when she realizes that "She was being the walking, breathing embodiment of their shame"

(ATSS, 48). When Mariam became an 'orphan' Jalil and his wives were eager to make her marry and sent her away to a distant place, to Kabul that they shouldn't be bothered about her anymore. They found a groom Rasheed who was just "a little older" than Mariam. He was just another male who found her worthless.

It was common for the Afghan patriarch to decide the fate of the women folk. They decided what should they wear, where should they go, whether they should be educated or not, when and to whom should they marry and how long. The two males Jalil and Rasheed are the true agents of sexism; they could successfully implement their hegemony over the weak, helpless, female characters in the fiction. Rasheed, who was sixty, could skillful trap the fourteen year old Laila when she was orphaned and make her marry him. Bell hooks in her essay *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women* states that, "Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to bonding with men" (3). Rasheed could successfully evoke fear in his wife that without a man's company the woman can't survive along. He justifies his lust as a charity "the way I see it, I deserve a medal" (ATSS, 210).

Rasheed was in great hope that Mariam will bore him a boy child, but when she fails in the prospect of making him a father he descends to be a cruel abusive man. She was no longer treated as a wife but much lower than a slave. He gave her orders and always found faults with her cooking and other household works. When Mariam attempts to clear her point on some of his trivial arguments he turns out to show his ill temperament and arrogance.

And as her heart pounded, her mind wondered what excuse he would use that night to pounce on her. There was always something, some minor thing that would infuriate him, because no matter what she did to please him, no matter how thoroughly she submitted to his wants and demands, it wasn't enough. She could not give him his son back. In this most essential way, she had failed him – seven times she had failed him – and now she was nothing but a burden to him. She could see it in the way he looked at her, when he looked at her. She was a burden to him. (ATSS, 98)

Laila too falls from his admiration when she bore him (even it is Tariq's baby) a girl child. He always had a feeling of contempt against it and always shouted at the baby. He called Aziza 'the baby' or 'that thing' and he never showed a gesture of affection. Whenever Laila tells enthusiastically about her girl Aziza, Rasheed seems to ignore it. "Rasheed would grunt, and go back to his plate. Mariam remembered how the girl's mere presence used to over whelm

him. Everything she said used to please him, intrigue him, make him look up from his plate and nod with approval” (ATSS, 233).

Aziza, Laila’s daughter is another female figure who wither under the clutches of patriarchy. Her father hated her for being a girl and never considered her as his child. Rasheed says to Laila: "If the fancy should strike me [Rasheed]...I would be within my rights to give Aziza away" (ATSS, 282). Her condition worsens when Zalmai was born. He was treated with many privileges by his father, he bought him many gifts and toys including a television set even when they had financial crisis. It was finally Aziza who suffered for her father’s love for her little brother, she was sent to the orphanage when they suffered financial crisis.

Religious Subjugation

Religion acts as an important factor in oppressing women along with the politics in the country. Through the patriarchs and the rulers who practice Islamic religious rituals, the women folk are marginalized and suppressed. Even though Rasheed pretends to be a devout Islam his acts proves that he is not. He used to keep pornographic magazines and used to take alcohol which is forbidden for an Islam. He doesn’t observe any of the Islamic rituals properly like Ramadan, even though Islam teaches the importance of observing them. We find him sore and angry at the time of Ramadan.

Islam is a religion that gives equal rights to men and women but Rasheed never considered his wives, or gave them any recognition but he was eager to control and cover them up. Rasheed is not better than the Taliban in suppressing the women. Like them he made his wives to wear burqa the symbol of invisibility. Islam never insisted any dress code for their men and women but we Rasheed compelling his wives to wear burqua in the name of religion.

I have customers, Mariam, men, who bring their wives to my shop. The women come uncovered; they talk to me directly, look me in the eye without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their knees. Sometimes they even put their feet in front of me, the women do, for measurements, and their husbands stand there and watch. They allow it. They think nothing of a stranger touching their wives’ bare feet! They think they’re being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education, I suppose. They don’t see that they’re spoiling their own *nang* and *namoos*, their honor and pride. (ATSS, 69)

So he believes a woman is an object that shouldn’t be visible to others, they are ought to be covered up. Mariam like any other Afghani women had to live a life of confinement. Her reason for finding the burqa comforting to wear is actually very disturbing: “She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past” (ATSS, 72). Mariam mistook the restriction imposed on her by her husband as a token of love. He never introduced her to his friends; he just kept her aside as if she doesn’t require an attention. It is well portrayed at the instance of Eid.

They had Eid visitors at the house. They were all men, friends of Rasheed’s. When the knock came, Mariam knew to go upstairs to her room and close the door.....Mariam didn’t mind. in truth, she was even flattered. Rasheed saw sanctity in what they had together. Her honor, her *namoos*, was something worth guarding to him. She felt prized by his protectiveness. Treasured and significant (ATSS, 80).

Rasheed act as a beguiling patriarch who uses religion to enforce his wishes over the powerless women in the fiction. He forces himself on Mariam and excuses himself “There is no shame in this Mariam”, he said, slurring a little. “It’s what married people do. It’s what the Prophet and his wives did. There is no shame” (ATSS, 76).

Jalil and Rasheed use the religion as an agent to exercise their personal fancies on the women. Islam have given provision for men to practice polygamy under restricted conditions, but many men took it as an opportunity to have a liaison life. Jalil who was married thrice was not condemned even by his family when they found that he had slept with the house maid Nana. Though Mariam showed her disapproval for Rasheed's second marriage with Laila he ignored her and moved on with his decision. He just casually says her that many of his friends have four or five wives.

Political Subjugation

The politics in Afghanistan had been acting as machinery in excruciating the womenfolk. Whether it is the monarchy, foreign occupation or the Taliban dictatorship the plight of the women were similar. There was a time when they enjoyed many privileges in the society like education, university degree, job and the out most freedom to do what they wish. We will wonder at the pathetic fate of women who had enjoyed much of freedom and liberty before the Taliban take over in the country.

These women were all swinging handbags and rustling skirts. Mariam even spotted one smoking behind the wheel of a car. Their nails were long, polished pink or orange, their lips red as tulips. They walked in high heels, and quickly, as if on perpetually urgent business. They wore dark sunglasses, and, when they breezed by, Mariam caught a whiff of their perfume. She imagined that they all had university degrees, which they worked in office buildings, behind desks of their own, where they typed and smoked and made important people. These women mystified Mariam. They made her aware of her own lowliness, her plain looks, her lack of aspirations, and her ignorance of so many things. (ATSS, 74)

But the political situation changed upside down and so the condition of the women got worsen. It is the women who were always victimized in a political unrest situation. The Soviet withdrawal resulted in the power struggle between different groups in the country that finally ended with the Taliban reign. Women in war-torn societies face specific and devastating forms of sexual violence, which are sometimes deployed systematically to achieve military or political objectives.

There was looting, murder, and, increasingly, rape, which was used to intimidate civilians and reward militiamen. Mariam heard of women who were killing themselves out of fear of being raped, and of men who, in the name of honor, would kill their wives or daughters if they'd been raped by militia. (ATSS, 247)

When Mariam and Laila planned to escape from their tyrant husband they were caught up by the police who accused them of travelling alone without a mahram. The strict laws enforced by the Taliban give men a privilege to ill-treat and abuse women. Rasheed gives an account of the Taliban with an admiration for them.

They were a guerrilla force...made up of young Pashtun men whose families had fled to Pakistan during the war against the Soviets. Most of them had been raised – some even born – in refugee camps along the Pakistani border, and in Pakistani madrasas, where they were schooled in *Shari'a* by mullahs. Their leader was a mysterious, illiterate, one-eyed recluse named Mullah Omar, who... called himself *Ameer-ul-Mumineen*, Leader of the Faithful. (ATSS, 266)

The regime of Taliban (1996-2001) gave nothing but traumatizing experience for the women. They used religion

as a weapon to control the women and imposed many restrictions on them. Taliban interpreted Koran in such a way that they could implement their rules and laws easily. They used burqa to cover up the very existence of women and treated them only as objects that tempt men. Taliban encounters the women folk with a list of forbiddance:

Attention women

You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets.

If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative.

If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home.

You will not under any circumstances, show your face.

You will cover with burqa when outside.

If you do not, you will be severely beaten.

Cosmetics are forbidden.

Jewelry is forbidden.

You will not wear charming clothes.

You will not speak unless spoken to.

You will not make eye contact with man.

You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.

You will not paint your nails. If you do you will lose a finger.

Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for

Girls will be closed immediately.

Women are forbidden from working.

If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death.

Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar. (ATSS, 271)

Education was forbidden for the citizens of Afghanistan as the Taliban felt that education will infest western culture in the people which was against the laws of Islam. In the pre-Talibanic era rich girls enjoyed the freedom to get education. Laila the educated, aspiring daughter of a college teacher as well as Jalil's other daughters were educated in good schools at Herat. Their parents believed that it is only through education that they could make their children safe. Hakim Laila's father had considered his daughter's education as the important thing in his life. He says, "Marriage can wait, education cannot...Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance" (ATSS, 114). Even Mariam aspire to go to school when she heard of Jalil's daughters are attending one she could afford as she was a harami child. Her only encounter with books was through the Koran tutorials given by Mullah Faizullah, the only male character in the fiction who truly loved and cared for her. Taliban succeeded in oppressing the women folk through forbidding their opportunity to get education. In the name of religion they could make the women to sit at home

and lead a life closer to deadness.

There were separate hospitals for men and women in the Talibanic Afghanistan and even in the case of emergency no women were treated in the hospitals for men. Hosseini narrates such an instance in his novel where Laila was in advent of her second delivery. The condition of such hospitals were so pathetic, they had no clean water, no medication, no electricity, no good doctors. In the Rabia Balkhi hospital Laila was given a caesarian operation without having anesthesia this point to the terrific condition of discrimination against women by Taliban.

Power of Sisterhood

The strong bonding developed between Mariam and Laila could be equated with the idea of Feminist Sisterhood. "The term sisterhood is used among feminists to express the connection of women who are not biologically related but are bonded in solidarity. The sisterhood of women often refers to their feminism, their participation in the women's movement, their support of other women or their recognition of female qualities that are unique to women's nature. The use of the word sisterhood implies that women relate to one another in ways that are distinct from how they relate to" (7).

Mariam hated Laila for losing her husband to a little girl. They used to abuse each other calling each other many names until they realized that they are undergoing the same tragic fate under this abusive man and then they started to realize each other and started to share their strength of endurance to each other. According to Bell Hooks, "it is sexism that leads women to feel threatened by another without cause. While sexism teaches women to be sex objects for men, it is also manifest when women have repudiated this role feel contemptuous and superior in relation to those women who have not... Sexism teaches women woman hating and both consciously and unconsciously we act out this hatred in our daily contact with another (3).

Mariam who called Laila a "thieving whore" later becomes a mother figure for her. The strong bonding developed between these two characters serves as a comfort for each other. Laila and Mariam, both of them shared their sorrows as they shared their house hold duties and stood for each other whenever their husband became intolerable towards them. Mariam took care of Aziza like a grandmother looked after her grandchild. Laila inspires Mariam to take control of her destiny. Mariam and Laila become so close to each other that they both find themselves in each other "Laila began to laugh, and Mariam joined in. They laughed like this at each other's reflection in the mirror, their eyes tearing, and the moment was so natural, so effortless, that suddenly Mariam started telling her about Jalil, and Nana, and the jinn" (ATSS, 249).

When they both felt intolerable to the physical abuse of their husband both of them plan to run away to Kabul with Aziza. But when both of them fail to reach success it turns out to be an instance of brutality on them by Rasheed.

And later when Rasheed finds out that Laila had talked to a man (Tariq) he becomes infuriated and was about to kill Laila in a fit of rage, Mariam, defending Laila, kills Rasheed. It is the strength that Mariam gains from her relationship with Laila that make her to stay behind to accept the inevitable punishment that will be meted out to her. As she faces the end of her life she remembers words her mother had told her: "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam" (ATSS, 323).

Mariam the much oppressed and subjugated woman finally kills her oppressor. It is her love for Laila and her children that made her to do this brave act. Even she was portrayed as a powerless woman who was treated unjustly by the

fate, acquires the power to free herself from all the barbed wires that winds around her since her harami birth. She was no more afraid or frightened when she was taken to the Ghazi stadium for her final verdict.

Mariam wished for so much in those final moments. Yet as she closed her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the harami child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Miriam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate belongings. (ATSS, 361)

Mariam is a Christ figure in the novel. Even Mariam had been subjugated and marginalized since her birth she resurrects like a phoenix and marks her existence before the world. The peace and happiness that Laila and her children enjoy is nothing other than a most precious gift given by Mariam. When she succumbs to the death, she is actually living her life in its fullest at the hearts of Laila and her children.

CONCLUSIONS

Khalid Hosseini through his novel *The Thousand Splendid Suns* had voiced for the voiceless, victimized Afghan women. He could successfully implement the idea of Feminist Sisterhood that seeks solidarity of women to overthrow the political, religious and patriarchy in the fiction. Both Mariam and Laila stands for the subjugated women hood, and the sisterhood that they shared gave them hope to fight back against all suppressions and finally hold their dreams. The novel is truly a tribute for subjugated woman hood.

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