

THE SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN KHALID HOSSEINI'S NOVEL, *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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ABSTRACT

The sufferings and oppression of women have perpetually been a popular theme as seen in various literary works. Khalid Hosseini's novel 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' depicts the entangled diegesis of two Afghani women, Mariam and Laila. They both were in marital relationship with same obstinate man Rasheed. Hosseini's women characters have been the epitome of much oppressed Afghan femininity. This paper attempts to probe into the persona and lifestyles of these women characters. It tries to provide expression to the wordless women under the grasp of patriarchy, religious and political domination and their freedom.

Keywords: *Power of Patriarchy, Political and Religious Subjugation, Sexism, power of Sisterhood*

The lives of men and women was the concern of literature, since its origin. But, we always felt that a male writer cannot do justice to the experiences of a woman, popularly known as 'ecriure feminism' and vice-versa. The gender plays a dynamic role in the 'subjugating- subjugated' phenomenon in a patriarchal set-up. Khalid Hosseini, the Afghan born, American writer proves how some male authors can successfully think in a women's perspective much better than most women themselves. He has brilliantly depicted the emotive tale of poignant womanhood under the stings of patriarchy, political and religious oppression. He was born in the city of Kabul in the year 1965. His father Nasser Hosseini was a diplomat at Afghan Foreign Ministry and his mother was a teacher of Persian Literature in Kabul. He grew up in Afghanistan, Iran, and France before moving to the United States at the age of fifteen.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is an brilliant literary work that depicts the tale of women in the horror gripped Afghanistan. Mariam and Laila represent the suffering, oppression and forbidden lives of Afghani women. All female characters in the novel including Nana, Aziza and the little daughter of Laila come across the cruelty of patriarchy. All of these women were treated unjustifiably by all the men, be it Rasheed or the Taliban. The power of patriarchy is carried out through illegitimacy, gender discrimination and marriage.

Illegitimacy is used as a major method to kill all element of self-respect of the women characters. It turns into one of the most exploited means of torture where motherhood is an obvious term for the birth of a child but fatherhood is relative. Any girl-child can be branded as a bastard

if her father refuses to accept her. The novel commences with the word 'Haram' that includes the disgraced existence of the lives of two major female characters, Mariam and Laila. Mariam is a disappointment and shame to her mother whom she renders as a social outcast. Mariam's mother is considered guilty and excluded from society. She is socially and spatially marginalized. Rejection, abandonment, unhappiness, frustrations fill her life with morbidity and severe depression. She is shocked when her own father does not let her stay in his house and she has nowhere to go. Nana is thrown off the periphery of normal living to deliver the child all alone and she passively accepts the accusations made at her. She yelled: "*He betrayed us, your beloved father. He cast us out. He cast us out of his big fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily.*" (pg.5)

Her desolation makes her so beguiled with motherhood that she becomes over possessive about her daughter who is her solitary link to the world of humans. "*You're all I have. I won't lose you to them...*" (pg.18) Oppressed by an influential man in a land where there is no hope for righteousness Nana does not want her daughter to undergo a same kind of repudiation. "*This is what it means to be a woman in this world...Learn it. Now and learn it well...a man's accusing finger always find the happiness you never had. And you don't want me to be happy. You don't want a good life for me. You are the one with the wretched heart.*" (pg.27).

Mariam inherited the patience of her mother and faced the society's brutality like she was always prepared for it. As soon as her mother died, she is made responsible and guilty of her suffering. She is forced to marry a widower much older to her. Rasheed was sixty and Mariam was just fourteen. She once again begins a life full of physical and mental torture but does not complain about it. Her husband is as "*imposing and immovable as the Safid- Koh Mountains.*" Mariam is an obedient and submissive wife who accepts wearing a *burqa* for her husband's contentment. Rasheed, her husband is an orthodox and possessive Muslim man, he warns her, "*But 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*"(pg.63) Mariam readily and willingly accepted all his orders because she felt the *burqa* protected her from the outside world. "*It was like a one-way window. Inside it she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew...all the shameful secrets of her past*"(pg.66). Unfortunately, she was born for misfortunes. Her sufferings surged when she had multiple miscarriages and could not bear a child. Nature deprived her of motherhood. Rasheed was sure that young Mariam would give birth to a baby boy but when she fails to do so, he turns into a cruel and abusive husband. He now treated her like a slave. He gave her orders and began finding faults in all her household work. "*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”.(pg.98)

Mariam never learnt to question her fate. She accepted her destiny passively. She had been subjugated in all possible manner: emotionally, socially, physically and psychologically. It is only at the end of the novel that we know what she thought in retrospect, “ *Had she been a deceitful wife? A complacent wife? A dishonourable wife? Discreditable? Vulgar? What harmful things had she done to this man to warrant his malice, his continual assaults, the relish with which he tormented her? Had she not given this man her youth? Had she ever justly deserved his meanness?*”(pg.309) Thus, Mariam surrenders to her affliction and turns taciturn.

The third female character in the novel is Laila. She comes from a very liberal background. Her father, Hakim, is a university teacher and her mother Fariba lives a normal life covering her head only with a *hijab*, rather than the traditional *burqa*. Laila was sent to a normal school and received good education. She was always encouraged by her father to concentrate on reading and build up her personality. Her father shared stories of their courtship days and how he married her mother for love which was unimaginable in Afghanistan. But, we are shocked how this educated and liberal girl is married to Rasheed, who woos her on the pretext that his wife, Mariam, is neither attractive nor fertile. Having been brought up in an atmosphere of equality of sexes, Laila is taken aback by the abusive and harsh behaviour of Rasheed. Rasheed used to shower her with love, affection and gifts only till the birth of their daughter. He starts torturing Laila with sticks and kicks because she gave birth to a baby girl.

Hosseini thus, describes Afghanistan as a land where men have complete liberty and enjoy all privileges while women are subjugated, exploited and given death penalty at the slightest provocation. Women like Mariam and Laila have an age difference of almost twenty years, yet they are tied together by destiny. Both live an abusive and tortured life. Towards the end of the novel we see that Mariam and Laila have developed a strong bonding and find comfort in each other. They even planned to run away to Kabul so that they can escape the brutality of Rasheed. One day Rasheed finds out that Laila was talking to Tariq, he was so angry that he attacked her but Mariam kills him while protecting Laila. She recollects her mother’s words, “*Like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam.*”(Pg.323) Mariam, the subjugated woman finally had the courage to kill her oppressor. She saved the lives of Laila and her children. She was like a fearless angel when she was being taken to the Ghazi stadium. Khalid Hosseini has made a gratifying description, he writes “*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, Mariam thought, that she could die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate belongings.”(Pg.361)

Thus, we find the author giving voice to the mute, marginalized women of Afghan society.

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