

A Discourse on Gender Asymmetry in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore gender disparities in Afghanistan from a South-Asian perspective. Social and cultural construction of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Srilanka is more or less similar. Women suffer at many levels i.e. domestic, social and institutional leading to dehumanizing, belittling, oppressing in sexist terms. The theme concerns widespread violence in Taliban regime outside and at the domestic front at the same time. The girls are seen as economic liability while the boys are proof of social and economic security. The socio-political conditions and male hegemony are the two oppressive instruments under which the Afghan women suffer silently. The three women characters of the novel, Mariam, Laila and Nana fall prey to political and cultural stigmas. They are silenced and made invisible objects in the hands of their father, husband and male chauvinists of the society. It is a kind of double affliction, the women of the novel are compelled to undergo the overlapping oppression of hegemonic masculinity amid social and cultural expectations. It also investigates the female characters' attempts of resistance to such discriminatory practices.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Economic- liability, Male hegemony, Dehumanizing, Taliban

The paper focuses on the cultural, social and political dimensions in shaping the construction of gender roles. Secondary status and domestic violence are what the women of these countries receive as a reward for all their hard work and nurturing. Preference of sons over daughters is a common phenomenon. In a famous essay, "Can the subaltern speak?" Spivak states, "In the context of colonial production and male dominance, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern and female is even more deeply in shadows." In the context of Afghanistan women's rights and gender apartheid have sparked numerous debates in the West as well as in the rest of the world. Hosseini's writings have drawn attention among academia, especially *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It is acknowledged for dealing heavy issues related to gender stereotyping, patriarchy, female body exile and colonialism. Biology offers up

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dichotomous male and female prototypes as determined by the nature. They are created different for the main purpose of reproduction but in the social construction, another important component of nature i.e. woman is treated as a weaker gender. This sexual drift is more prominent among third world countries in patriarchal system. It is a commentary on how a patriarchal set up tries to build a cocoon in which women are bound to undergo social denigration right from their birth.

Hosseini is a missionary in certain ways as while writing his novels, his purpose is not only to narrate a story of human suffering, but to redeem his country of all troubles and to revive its beautiful past, like it once had. These subjects of his novels are varied, they may be Afghan men, women, children caught in the web of politics, religion and terrorism. As an independent diaspora writer, Hosseini touches upon the grave issues like religion, oppression and Islamic fanaticism. He is full of apathy for groups like Taliban who are retrogressive in their approach. Though, he chooses a completely different canvas to portray the negative aspect of Taliban's repressive measures. He does not sympathize with any form of power that is not democratic in nature. Past three decades has seen chaos and anarchy and ruining of a beautiful country i.e. Afghanistan. In these years, people have been subjected to internal and external conflicts. The Soviet invasion in 1979 and the American intervention afterwards have made the nation unstable. The period in between witnessed several military coups including the rise of deadly Taliban regime.

Khaled Hosseini is a widely read author of the modern times. His works have that emphatic tone that penetrates directly into the human heart and thus evoke feelings beyond expression. Themes of his novels mostly deal with the binary opposition that separates right and wrong, redemption and loss, love and betrayal, forgiveness and revenge, powerful and weak. His works set a different benchmark for modern writers to tread on. He treats his stories as a psychotherapist does to cure his patient with care and concern. A reader cannot pick up his novels for the sake of a superficial reading as the author does not let his readers skip away. The readers are so entangled in the human misery and the day today chores of characters that they cry and laugh with them. The self-effacement of the readers with the characters put Khaled Hosseini among the category of classical writers. His characters keep witting in the subconscious of the reader and resonate after the novels are kept back to the shelf.

A Thousand Splendid Suns weave a narrative to demonstrate the plight of Afghan women. In South Asian countries, male power is perceived at the core of shaping gender under patriarchy. Through the lens of an expatriate, the author captures a real image of Afghanistan and its culture as kaleidoscope is constantly varying and rotating. The study focuses on the impact of culture, social and political dimensions in molding the gender roles. 'Subjugation', 'subordination' and stereotypical images of women in the novel occur and reoccur confirming the fact that their suffering and plight is the part and parcel of South-Asian countries. Bindu Ann Philip in her work 'Endless Endurance: A Feminist Study

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of Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2016) is of the view that "it is the reality of male dominance over women in the Afghan society that relates this novel to the feminist discourse". (781) Moreover, Philip notes that in his novel, Hosseini preserves the classical oriental characterization of Muslim man as prototypes of sexual monstrosity and hypocrisy. (792) The writer stresses the fact that "the confidence and courage come from accumulated agony and thus making them heard by ways of resilience."

It is a perpetuation of pain and agony under various hierarchies. The power structures treat women more like objects than a biological phenomenon. Through story-telling, Hosseini's hopes to bring nuance, intensity and emotional subject to the familiar image of the burqa-clad women. Under Taliban hegemony, their dehumanization crosses all boundaries:

Women were denied education, the right to work, the right to move freely, access to adequate healthcare, etc. Yet I want to distance myself from the notion, popular in some circles, that the West can and should exert pressure on these countries to grant women equal rights..... This approach either directly or indirectly dismisses the complexities and nuances of the target society as dictated by its culture, traditions, customs political system, social structure and overriding faith (Book Browse qtd. in Stuhr, 4).

Through *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini introduces Mariam, Laila and Nana as they undergo various kinds of discriminations and contradictions their native culture throws in their journey. Indigenous and colonial interventions in Afghanistan taught them to be strong, docile, self-reliant, passive, hopeful, melancholic, silent and rebellious.

'Harami' is the first word in the diction of Mariam with which she is addressed by her mother. She was only five years old, first time she heard this word without comprehending the meaning of it. Nana, an epileptic mother, made her understand that she, Mariam was an illegitimate child who would never have a legitimate claim to the things which other people owe. She should not aspire for things like love, family, home and acceptance. After losing her mother at a very tender age, she is made to live with Jalil's family. Jalil, her father accepts her as a burden to the family, an unwelcome guest. In the company of strangers, she passes her time like a piece of paper floating on the surface of water. The marriage ceremony of Mariam itself is a despicable act of manipulation in Jalil's part, taking advantage of a vulnerable child. She is made to marry Rasheed who is thirty years older than Mariam.

The burqa in Islamic countries and Ghonghat in India has been a symbol of subjugation among the women of third world countries. It is pervasive symbol of plight of Afghan women under the Taliban and certain segments of Muslim society. Rasheed buys her a burqa and insists she wears it when in public. Wearing burqa takes away her peripheral vision and is initially suffocating. Mariam's reason for finding burqa comforting to wear is actually very disturbing. "She no longer worried that

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people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past.” (ATSS, 72) Rasheed is a double standard man who wants Mariam to wear burqa with no choice while he himself enjoys the pictures of porn magazines. He declares his manifesto:

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 measurement, and their husbands stand there and watch. They allow it. They think nothing of strange touching their wives’ bare feet! They think they’re being modern man intellectuals on account of their education. I suppose they don’t see that they are spoiling their own ‘nang and namoos’ their honour and pride (ATSS 69).

He does not stop here and threatens Mariam so that she succumbs to his enforcement:

“But I’m 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 women’s face is her husband’s business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand that?”

In this suffocating environment, both the wives of Rasheed Mariam and Laila struggle with bodily exile and dehumanization. According to the definition provided by Mary Douglas, the female body may represent society, culture, history and simply a private space in which a restless geographical arena. She argues:

The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its foundations can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures (Douglas, 1966).

When Mariam fails to bear him a child, the ultimate purpose of marriage among Third world countries, Rasheed marries Laila. In the contract of marriage, women are not companions or wives to their male counterparts, instead, they are reproduction machine and serving the several needs of the men at the same time. It, at the same time comforts the tortured soul of Mariam when Rasheed’s attention is diverted to Laila, his new wife, “Sex, mercifully, was a closed chapter in her own life. It had been for some time and now even the thought of those laborious sessions of lying beneath Rasheed made Mariam queasy in the gut” (ATSS, 215).

Nana and Mariam carry the burden of cultural traditions. Mariam suffers rape inside marriage while Nana is raped outside wedlock. The condition of the mother and the daughter remain almost same. Laila is a cosmopolitan character who is educated and worldly-wise. Through such characters as Laila and Mariam, Hosseine draws attention to the significance of developing female consciousness in regards to the practice of bearing. In these predominantly patriarchal societies, such as the Afghan

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society, power operates its vicious hold on culturally constructed gender than biologically. Women behave according to certain codes of conduct prescribed for them. Under Taliban regime, the women of Afghanistan cease to be humans at all. They are looked down upon as mere commodity and so vulnerable. Justice can be expected from those who are in power. Women undergo extreme cases of physical and emotional 'violence' when the Taliban take over, they prescribe specific rules towards the restriction of women's rights:

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 men.
- You will not laugh in public. If you do so, you will be beaten.
- You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will loss 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-278)

Gender discrimination pervades not among the major characters of the novel but also among the miners. Rasheed abuses Laila when he finds that she has delivered a girl baby. In third world countries, a woman's value has been measured by her ability to bear children specially boys. Rasheed discriminates between Aziza and Zalmai. He dots over Zalmai and dislikes Aziza. The initial decision to send Aziza to the orphanage shows how under acute circumstances, a mother takes painful decisions in order to assure the survival of her children.

Preference for a boy child over the girl is a normal phenomenon prevalent among South Asian countries. Social acceptability and mental conditioning lead to women's wish for a boy baby. In the novel, when Mariam expecting for the first time, a woman neighbour suggests that having a son is more acceptable than having a girl because boys carry the name of the family:

"Do you want a boy or a girl first?"

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“The Minarets! Oh, what Beauty! What a gorgeous city!”

“Boy is better, Mariam Jan, they carry the family name.” (ATSS, 66)

The Afghan women also attribute in socializing and confirming patriarchal customs which further enhances in female marginalization. Rasheed is an orthodox male and prejudiced with the notion of having male child. He insists that Marian is going to give birth to a son who will bear his name. He rejects any idea or even a talk of a girl child:

“Rasheed was drumming his gloved fingers and humming a song. Every time the bus bucked over a pothole and jerked forward, his hand shot protectively over belly.”

“What about Zalmai?” he said. “It is a good Pashtun name”.

“What if it's a girl?” Mariam said”

“I think it's boy. Yes. A boy.”

“If it's a girl,” Rasheed said,” and it isn't, but, if it is a girl, then you can choose whatever name you want. (ATSS, 85)

Rasheed's behaviour towards Mariam changes sharply when Mariam did not live up to his expectations. His sudden change of temperament in treating Mariam, emphasizes the fact that a childless woman is a worthless object. Before marrying Laila, Rasheed instills the feeling of uselessness in Mariam's mind. Unfortunately, Laila's first child is a girl named Aziza. He shows no fondness for Aziza instead despises her. Frustrated, he becomes more violent beating both his wives. When Laila gives birth to a baby boy, his joy knows no bounds. His disliking for Aziza grows stronger. He shows inferior treatment to the little girl to the extent of scolding and ignoring her. On the other hand, Zalmai, the son of Rasheed receives special treatment from him:

When Zalmai was born, Rasheed had moved him into the bed he shared with Laila. He had bought him a new crib and had lions and crouching leopards, painted on the side panels. He'd paid for new clothes, new rattles, new bottles, new diapers, even though they could not afford them and Aziza's old ones were still survivable. One day, he came home with a battery run mobile, which he hung over Zalmai's crib. Little yellow and black bumblebees dangled from a sunflower, and they crinkled and squeaked when squeezed. A tune played when it was turned on. (ATSS, 288)

The fact that motherly sensibility is the strongest sentiment which is not going to change under any circumstances is obvious in gender dichotomy. Laila is all affront when Rasheed declares that he has decided to send Aziza into the street to beg at a corner. Though she rarely feels able to confront for herself, she is determined to face Rasheed if is a question of defending her daughter. Rasheed slaps her when she opposes him. She does not succumb to this and punches him back. Motherly love has the capability of transcending the adverse circumstances. Rasheed's love for Zalmai is biased and

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perverted. He thinks that he will carry forward family's legacy. Laila's love for her children is balanced. When Nana insists that Mariam is valueless to Jalil, she asserts:

What stupid girls you are! you think you matter to him, that you're wanted in his house? You think you're a daughter to him? That he is going to take you in? Let me tell you something. 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. I'm the only one who loves you. I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I am gone you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing (ATSS, 17).

Only after observing Rasheed's aggressive and violent behaviour towards Laila, Mariam could at last transcend her sense of uselessness. The power of self-sacrifice to protect a loved one, Mariam, "who never shows any sign of rebellion against Rasheed and his barbarous beating, gained courage to fight back and ultimately kills Rasheed "before he takes Laila's life for lying to him about her past relationship with Tariq." (Philip, 797)

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