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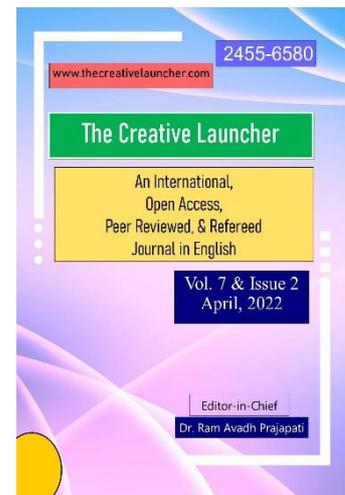
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Women of Afghanistan Mirrored through Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

Literature forms the backbone as well as the mouthpiece of almost all historical events and consequently presents the readers with a clear representation of the problems associated with

the foretold incidents. Gender has been a powerful topic, capable enough of grasping the attention of the society in every age. Women have been considered as subordinate, invaluable and minority citizens. This has been constructed by the societal norms wherein women have always been dragged to the pedestal of all sorts of discussions. Women have been deliberately suppressed to an extent that their lives turned out to be miserable in the so-called patriarchal society. The Feminist theory focuses on the understanding of the gender inequality by highlighting the most prominent themes such as sexual objectification, oppression, patriarchy and so on. Afghanistan has the same root problems. The deteriorated condition of women still persists with the passing years without any considerable change. The novel is a very clear and crisp depiction of the sufferings of female characters namely Nana, Maryam and Laila who suffer mercilessly at the hands of their male dominants. These women are tortured and threatened sexually, psychologically and mentally. The agony and anxiety involved in such practices shape the female characters of the novel and provides the readers with an overview of the gender inequality through lack of education, exemption from their rights, marital problems, unhealthy medical conditions and so on.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Patriarchy, Objectification, Oppression

Gender has been a powerful topic, capable enough of grasping the attention of the society in every age. Women have been considered as subordinate, invaluable and minority citizens. This has been constructed by the societal norms wherein women have always been dragged to the pedestal of all sorts of discussions. Women have been deliberately suppressed to an extent that their lives turned out to be miserable in the so-called patriarchal society. The Feminist theory focuses on the understanding of the gender inequality by highlighting the most prominent themes such as sexual objectification, oppression, patriarchy and so on. Afghanistan has the same root problems. The deteriorated condition of women still persists with the passing years without any considerable change. The novel is a very clear and crisp depiction of the sufferings of female characters namely Nana, Maryam and Laila who suffer mercilessly at the hands of their male dominants. These women are tortured and threatened sexually, psychologically and mentally. These unending agony and anxiety shape the female characters of the novel and provides the readers with an overview of the gender inequality through lack of education, exemption from their rights, marital problems, unhealthy medical conditions and so on.

The Afghan-American writer, Khaled Hosseini, has beautifully sketched the crooked and painful image of women of Afghanistan. Through the medium of his masterpiece, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini embraces the story of a mother-daughter, who are related not by a bond of blood but surely of emotions and eternity. The 'Patriarchal Despotism' where women are agonizingly dependent on father, husbands and especially sons have been focused upon. Hosseini also talks about the plight of women belonging to every age, their survival, exploitation and eventually gendered categorization. This novel also highlights the strengths and desires of women who struggle endlessly against patriarchy and become iconoclasts. It displays how women become the objects of gender discrimination, experience educational

deprivation and are forcefully rendered powerless, which results in self-destruction. Thus, the marginalization and subordination of women of Afghanistan has been vocalized in the novel. It has been found that women belonging to any Nation, Religion or Culture have to face different sorts of oppressions that vary in degree. Some women are courageous enough to stand against the colossus of societal toxicity, others adjust within the overarching framework and accept this cruelty as their own destiny. When we discuss the Afghan culture, we observe that in order to tame the body, you must be smart enough to tame the brain. It becomes extremely easy when you dilute the recurring and revolutionary ideas and grab the mental strength of a person. This is the art which leads the women to believe that they are incapable, servile and born to obey men. Women not only become the victim, but are genuinely trained in such a way that they also become the part of the phenomenon of repression of womanhood. Fanaticism seeps down into the roots in such a way that it leads to the self-realization of inferiority which has been deliberately injected in almost each and every woman's mind.

Discrimination, irrespective of any particular field or object, is in itself a very unscrupulous entity that creates a huge gulf between anything. Gender discrimination comes in various forms and incarnations. The women of Afghanistan are persecuted over and over again. This goes unnoticed, as this trend has become the part and parcel of the social structure. Availability of freedom is almost null and to mention here, the orthodox traditions add to the already existing bigotry. Men become the oppressors, who are benefited by the helplessness of women in their country. "God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. Western doctors and their science have proven this. This is why we require only one male witness but two female ones" (Hosseini 355). Women, consistently face discriminations and they accept everything easily. They are marginalized, subordinated and subjected to violence. Most of the women accept all of this silently, yet there exist some extraordinary women who choose to fight back and struggle against this discrimination. Everything that happens to Mariam can be traced back to the psychological abuse inflicted upon her by her mother Nana, her father Jalil and even by the society once she falls pregnant with an illegitimate child. Another form of direct violence is that which occurs when one of the partners do not give consent for any sort of act.

Violence remains one of the most obvious forms of gender discrimination. It includes thrashing, kicking etc., leaving behind negative impacts on the victims that can be physical, psychological or sexual. "If she was lucky, she was given a tongue-lashing or a single kick to the rear, a shove in the back. Other times, she met with assortments of wooden clubs, fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps, often fists" (Hosseini 313). In the novel, the female characters experience rape and marital molestation. Rasheed is the most abusive character. He is also the extremely authoritative character in charge of both Mariam and Laila, two of his wives. He abuses them physically, verbally and mentally in the novel which occurs innumerable times. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays two such kinds of women, who design their own fate by choosing two different paths. On one hand, Maryam's mother Nana faced patriarchal discrimination and she accepted this without showing any problem. But Maryam and Laila

opposed this, struggled against the evil and freed themselves from the clutches of gender despotism and discrimination.

Education shapes the thoughts and ideas of human brain required specially by women in today's scenario in order to stand strong and fight for their own needs. It boosts up confidence, regenerates women to start believing in themselves and increases the consciousness about equality that exists between men and women. Hosseini emphasizes the importance of education in women. Education is directly proportional to the endurance of women. Education highlights the rights and proper uses of the strength that is deliberately crushed by the patriarchal society and its norms. Thus, education is the strongest weapon which can be used against the epitome of discrimination. In the novel, Hosseini mentions the aspect of education in a very just and beautiful manner. He uses Laila's character to prove that education never goes in vain. Laila's father taught her about the significance of education for women and its social impact.

Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very, very bright girl. Truly, you are. You can be anything you want, Laila. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance. (Hosseini 114)

The power of education as well as the difference education can make for a society is sketched in the novel. Education not only stands as one of the most promising solution to the problems but also a way to prevent many of the problems from ever happening again in the future. The constantly recurring theme is the lack of education in females and also the societal discomfort caused due to this gulf. Educated women can also empower others. Laila raises Mariam's awareness and motivate her to struggle against the abuses that had been bestowed upon her by her husband. later on Laila volunteers to teach in an orphanage. By fighting against the injustices of Rasheed, Laila and Mariam eventually freed themselves from sufferings and by becoming a teacher, Laila provided a better life for future generations of Afghanistan. Hosseini depicts a hopeful portrait of Kabul as shown through the state of the orphanage, Laila's role as a school teacher and her pregnancy. The orphanage symbolizes the changes which might become the embodiment of the bright future of Afghanistan's female counterparts. "Laila passes beneath the sign and enters the classroom. The children are taking their seats, flipping notebooks open, chattering" (Hosseini 401).

Afghanistan's society lacks proper medication facilities especially for women. From the beginning of the text, we find that Maryam's mother Nana suffered pain and had to give birth to her child on her own and without any assistance.

When the pain got bad, I'd bite the pillow and scream into it until I was hoarse. And still no one came to wipe my face or give me a drink of water. And you, Mariam jo, you were in no rush. Almost two days you made me lay on that cold floor. I didn't eat or sleep, all I did was push and pray that you would come out. (Hosseini 11)

Even Maryam herself faced such situations, wherein she had miscarriages and no proper care or health facilities were provided to her. Laila, while giving birth to her second child was rushed

to the hospital, but unfortunately there was shortage of anaesthesia and the medicines required by a pregnant woman. Laila had no other choice, so she underwent the surgery without becoming unconscious. “Tell me what’s going on!” Laila said. She had propped herself up on the elbows. The doctor took a breath, then told Laila that the hospital had no anesthetic. “But if we delay, you will lose your baby”. “Then cut me open” Laila said. She dropped herself back on the bed and drew up her knees. “Cut me open and give me my baby” (Hosseini 283). The amount of agony which she had to encounter is unmatched and can never be explained.

The condition and status of the women of Afghanistan has been portrayed through the characters and situations narrated in the novel. This is not fictional as reality says that health is not prioritized. Women are not allowed to be treated by a male doctor rather women are left behind to die without any proper treatment. Hospitals have been distorted by the horrible effects of war, and the leftover staff and doctors are so less in number that they cannot take care of every single person. “This hospital no longer treats women” (Hosseini 278). A country like Afghanistan, which has been torn by war, suffers the after effects that are again maximized for a woman. These creatures are forced to inflict pain upon themselves and remain bound to their fate that breaks them through all sorts of means available in the society.

The strength and courage that was shown by Mariam and Laila to struggle against the different kinds of discriminations was not easy to be carried on those feminine shoulders. Their consciousness, education and sisterhood in combination encouraged them to fight against the giant monument of patriarchy. The educated Laila actually influenced Mariam and on the contrary, the patience shown by Mariam helped Laila. Afghan women such as Nana, Mariam and Laila represent the women who suffer from complex gender discriminations. An unjust patriarchal system has strongly influenced most women to be submissive, accept oppression by keeping their tongues tied in silence and become an embodiment of pain and abuse.

Liberation can only become possible if the suppressed mentality of women gets replaced by hope of obtaining freedom. The subjugation and deprivation of females has a very vivid portrait in the novel. The clutches of patriarchy hold women strongly and capture even the ideas which deal with their freedom from slavery and abuse. Women are often referred to the designation of being second citizens who need to follow the rules set by the superior male patriarchs. One of the best examples of this male patriarch is Rasheed. He constantly inflicts pain and mistreats both of his wives, Mariam and Laila. Forces them to follow his orders, cover themselves, cook properly for him, even make love whenever he demands.

“Lying beneath his cold sheets that night, she watched him pull the curtains shut. She was shaking even before his fingers worked her shirt buttons, tugged at the drawstring of her trousers. He was agitated.” (Hosseini 214)

If these rules are not followed properly, he thrashes them badly. The only way to freedom is patience. This has been successfully and undoubtedly proved by Mariam and Laila. The deeply embedded differences are extremely difficult to be diminished. Afghanistan as shown in the story falls in the emergency wherein the society faces a desperate requirement of being educated and women need to be empowered in order to detach their composure from such chaos.

The study and analysis of the novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, carries the readers to a very realistic world and the deteriorated condition of the psyche of the deprived personalities of women in Afghanistan. A huge number of problems have been enlisted which need to be highlighted and discussed in order to find solutions for the sufferings and inhumane conditions of women. Education turns out to be the most important tool that definitely promises a complete end to the mental torture and bondage of the mind. The belittled feminine composure has been due to the underlying reasons which must not be ignored. Thus, the lost and repressed identity of innumerable women in Afghanistan can be saved from torture.

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