

Repressed state of Afghan women in Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns

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Abstract

This study delves into the critical issue of repression of Afghan women as mentioned in Khalid Hosseini's novel "A Thousand Splendid Suns." It aims to ensure that by putting into perspective Afghan women's experiences to a particular combination of historical, political, cultural factors. Considering this book, the research argues that the circumstances of violence and war in Afghanistan during an important phase in its history exacerbated the repression of its women. It will give an alternate picture of the position of Afghan women rather than broad stereotyped representations. This study will improve understanding of how Afghan women are treated.

Keywords: - Afghan Women, Khaled Hosseini, Taliban, Afghanistan

1. Introduction

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist who was born in 1965, March 4, in Kabul. He is the eldest of five siblings. His father is a diplomat in the Afghan Foreign Ministry, while his mother is a high school teacher who teaches Persian literature. He grows up in a comfortable life, loves American movies and kite flying. He spent the first years of his childhood in the capital, Kabul. In grade school, Hosseini began writing short stories. He was at his home in Kabul in 1973 when the 200-year-old Afghan monarchy was overthrown. Daud Khan, the king's cousin, declared himself president of the new republic, but a long period of instability ensued. In 1976, Hosseini's father was appointed to the embassy in Paris, and Khaled moved to France with the rest of his family. At the age of 15, he and his family were living in Paris. When the Russian invasion of Afghanistan occurred in 1980, instead of returning to Kabul, he sought political asylum and moved to San Jose. In 1984, he graduated from high school, having by this time become fluent in English. Putting aside his personal aspirations of becoming a writer, Hosseini decided to pursue medicine. In 1989, he graduates from Santa Clara University with a bachelor's degree in biology and graduates from UC San Diego School of Medicine in 1993. He has a three-year residency in internal medicine at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, and then works as an internist for three years in Los Angeles. He returns to northern California in 1999, where he joins a branch of the Kaiser Permanente Medical Group. Currently, he also returns to writing short stories, some of which are published in various literary magazines. One short story, started in 1997 and called "The Kite Runner," is rejected by The New Yorker, Atlantic Monthly, and Esquire. Four years later, Hosseini expands the short story into his first novel. Hosseini returns to Kabul in 2003, just weeks before the official publication date of The Kite Runner. The Kite Runner earns several popular and critical awards, including the Borders Original Voice Award, the San Francisco Chronicle Best Book of the Year Award,

and the South African Booker Prize. In 2006, Hosseini has been appointed as a UNHCR (the United Nations Refugee Agency) goodwill ambassador.

His second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, is published on May 22, 2007. The book's title is derived from a passage in Josephine Davis' interpretation of the work of poetry "Kabul" written by the 17th-century Iranian writer Saib Tabrizi.

The book '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*' centres on the existences of two women, Mariam, and Laila, and how their lives converge following a series of tragic events. Hosseini tries to get behind the burqa to describe the lives of two women in Kabul. The novel is set against the backdrop of instability in Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion. It also details the situation under the Taliban regime. Katherine Kervick in her review of '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*' remarks:

This novel follows the lives of two female protagonists, Mariam and Laila, and their lives and roles as women in Taliban occupied Afghanistan. The book goes into deep, personal depth of the unjust and cruel treatment of women, the suffering and discrimination that took place on women, and the abuse and violence they were forced to endure. The author, Khaled Hosseini, does not gloss over on the brutality and wickedness; he tells it how it is . . . *A Thousand Splendid Suns* allows readers to fully comprehend of how women in foreign countries are being treated, and continue to be treated to this day. It brings about awareness and reality to people who might have not known what was taking place. Hosseini explains the life of women during a time where they had limited, if any, rights. From being a child born out of wedlock, child marriages, to women being forced to wear a burqa by their controlling husbands.

The novel brings to the fore the plight of Afghan women during the long decades of conflict. It is written from women's point of view and is a representation of Afghan female mentality of these three generations. The novel has been divided into four parts that focus on individual stories. The first part is about Mariam and the story of her childhood, her family, and her disturbed married life with Rasheed. Part two is based on Laila and the death of her parents and siblings and her affair with Tariq. Part three is a depiction of the strong bond and relationship between two women Laila and Mariam. It also deals with their friendship, death of Rasheed and ultimately the sacrifice of Mariam for Laila. The last part mainly deals with Laila's relationship with Tariq.

2. Repressed state of Afghan women in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

This novel highlights the predicament of Afghan women who live under patriarchal oppression and the looming shadow of war. The novel traces the struggles and problems faced by four Afghan women, *Mariam, Nana, Laila, and Fariba*. The novel focuses on their problems, however, highlighting their actions, behaviour, thoughts and their role in a community, and the problems they face during their lives. In an article "*Women in Afghanistan: passive victims of the borga or active social participant?*" Elaheh Rostami Povey stated, "Women in Afghanistan have undoubtedly suffered in the years their country was subjected to Taliban rule. However, their frequent characterisation as voiceless victims of war, violence, and repression, to be liberated only by Western military intervention, is both incomplete and incorrect. (266) The visions of the Maryam and Laila characters were portrayed as Afghan women. These two Afghan women give a detailed picture of all the women who live in Afghanistan. Laila and Maryam are different characters to be called but their plight is of the same type.

In the novel, Mariam, an ethnic Tajik, is portrayed as an Afghan woman. In 1959, she was born in Herat. Her birth was the consequence of an extra-marital affair. She grows up in a little hut with just her harsh mother, Nana, a compassionate mullah, and her father, who visits once a week to accompany her fishing. Nana refers to her a “harami” because she is the illegitimate child of Jalil and his housekeeper, Nana. She remembered Nana saying, “*You are a clumsy little harami. This is my reward for everything I’ve endured. An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little harami.*” (4). One of the key causes of her misery is a strained connection between her parents. Mariam felt humiliation her whole life as a result of her birth circumstances. The term “harami” frames her upbringing as illegitimate, a reference Mariam herself makes in the novel’s last section. Because of her parents’ wickedness, she had to suffer much throughout her life till she died. Her existence is shown as being filled with misery and anguish. Nana’s stark realism instils in her a sense of desire for a better existence. Nana while scolding Mariam says to her:

What a stupid girl you are! You think you matter to him, that you are wanted in his house? You think you are 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 am the only who loves you. I’m all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I’m gone, you’ll have nothing. You will have nothing. You are nothing! (27)

Within a week of her mother’s death, they’ve married her off to a Kabul shoemaker three times her age who beats her and forces her to wear a burqa decades before the Taliban required it.

The first repression, in Mariam’s life was when Mariam’s desire to receive education. Her mother forbids her to go to school, saying, “*What’s the sense in schooling a girl like you? It’s like shining a spittoon.*” The only lesson an Afghan woman needs, Nana tells her, is how to endure. When Mariam asks, “*Endure what?*” Nana replies, “*Oh, don’t you fret about that. There won’t be any shortage of things.*” (13) The conflict between Mariam’s desire to attend school and Nana’s unwillingness to do so marks the beginning of a conversation regarding education for women that runs throughout the novel. She said to Mullah Faizullah, “*I mean a real school, akhund sahib. Like in a classroom. Like my father’s other kids.*” (12) Mariam learns early on that obtaining a formal education would not only be difficult for her, but would also be a waste of her time. Education is forbidden for girls in Afghan. Attending school for girls in Afghan is crime against Islam. Of course, the greater issue is that a woman’s obligation is her house and family. Nana says to her:

There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don’t teach it in school. Look at me . . . only one skill. And it’s this: tahamul. Endure . . . It’s our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It’s all we have. Do you understand? Besides, they’ll call you harami. They’ll say the most terrible things about you. (18)

Another suppressed incident occurs for Mariam when her mother commits suicide. when she reaches the age of 15, Mariam attempts to see her father at the house where he resides with his three wives and nine kids. She is not permitted to pass through the door. She goes home after spending the night on the doorstep to discover that her mother had hung herself. Following Nana’s death. Mariam’s journey to Herat, which culminates in Nana’s death, marks the end of her childhood as well as the loss of her innocence. Jalil took care of Mariam and wanted to retain her in his home, but his wife refused to accept Mariam. After her mother’s death, she is forced to marry a much older shoemaker and go to Kabul. In his interview, Hosseini described Mariam as “isolated in every sense of the word. She is a

woman who is detached from the day-to-day norms of human existence. Really, she just wants a connection with another human being".

In spite her initial resentment of Laila, she eventually becomes a "friend and a doting substitute mother" to her as a result of the "common hardship" of being wedded to the "abusive, psychologically imposing" husband. Mariam married Rasheed only because she was fed up with Jalil's wives. She was trying to escape the miserable life from Jalil's house but luck did not favour her because her fate put her to harder life with Rasheed than before. In an article "*Resistance, a Facet of Post-colonialism in Women Characters of Khaled Hosseini's a Thousand Splendid Suns*," Marzieh Gordan stated:

"One of the most prevalent pictures of the perfect Afghan wife in the Afghan community portrayed in the novel is the role as the slave to her husband and his family members. A good wife must belong to the belongings of her husband, who in all angels is considered to be her boss. He controls her with regards to her activities and even ideas. Preferably a wife must spend her whole life to satisfy her husband, and wish for the best things in his lifestyle for him." (243)

Rasheed's heart was devoid of any love for Mariam. Mariam was in a suppressed circumstance when it became more of an extravagance than a marriage. Mariam and Rasheed's relationship is extremely complicated. She is unhappy with her marriage. She is pressured and tugged to marry him; therefore, her marriage is not joyful. Rasheed, as a controlling spouse, does not let Mariam to live her life as she desires. Rasheed is a vicious man who essentially rapes Mariam. Mariam said, "*She sucked air through her teeth and bit on the knuckle of her thumb . . . stared, wide-eyed, at the ceiling above his shoulders, shivering, lips pursed, feeling the heat of his quick breaths on her shoulder. The air between them smelled of tobacco, of onion and grilled lamb*" (76).

He constantly forces his views on her and forces her to adopt his way of life, which Mariam despises. Rasheed was paying close attention to the radio broadcast, which said that Afghan women must always remain inside their homes. They are not allowed to wander about the street. If they want to go outside the must accompanied by *amahram*. Otherwise, they will be beaten and sent home. They are forbidden from working. In Rasheed's house Mariam is imprisoned and she feels repressed "*uprooted, displaced, like an intruder on someone else's life*" (62). He gets violent to her and starts hitting her virtually every day. For Mariam, sexual love was a burden and another obligation to execute, rather than a source of love, joy, or happiness. Rasheed had yet another brutal deed to suffer without protesting. Mariam has miscarriages one after the other, and Rasheed grows increasingly upset and hostile towards her. Rasheed saw Mariam as his property and thought that Islam gave him control as well. In order to suppress Mariam more he says, "*there is no shame in this Mariam. It is what married people do. It is what the prophet himself and his wives did. There is no shame*" (76). Rasheed frequently assaults Mariam in disguise as a practitioner of Islam, whose principles he has never followed. He has her wear a burqa and used to lock her up when he had company. She does all that for Rasheed and submits to all his demands, but nothing pleases him. He is continuously looking for a way to abuse and torment her. He forced her to chew rocks:

"He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it . . . 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 lips curled in a sneer . . . through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes.” (102-103)

His personality reveals the genuine essence of a beast and is an incarnation of Wild Man as defined by White Hayden, “He is desire incarnate . . . glutton, lascivious, and promiscuous, without even consciousness of sin or perversion. His physical power conceived to increase in direct ratio to the diminution of his conscience” (167). The primary cause for their strained relationship is Mariam's inability to bear a child, particularly a male heir. The boy's desire represses Mariam seven miscarriages and believed that they were her repercussions for not paying attention to her mother when she was younger. The words of the Holy Quran were the sole thing that consoled her. Rasheed even mocked her after having a miscarriage. When Rasheed marries Laila, a fourteen-year-old girl, the friction between Mariam and her dominant husband becomes more difficult. Rasheed insults her by saying that, “*It’s a common thing and you know it. I have friends who have two, three, four wives. Your own father had three. Besides, what I’m doing now most men I know would have done long ago*” (208-209).

Rasheed began using to refer to Mariam as a ‘*dehati*’ and a ‘*harami*’ as her existence became increasingly useless in his view. Mariam was thirty-three years old at the time, but the term harami from her mother lingered in her head. All her expectations for a married life are destroyed, and she once again feels useless. She is sorry for all the sacrifices she has had to endure for her nasty and unthankful spouse. She wants to know why she has been so discredited her entire life. However, when Laila pays a visit to Rasheed's home, Mariam suspects her of taking her husband. Rasheed while praising Laila says, “*As for you, you are the queen, the malika, and this house is your palace. Anything you need done you ask Mariam and she will do it for you*” (217). Laila and Rashid's wedding has once again oppressed her. However, Mariam and Laila's friendship becomes deeper by the day. They band together in opposition to Rasheed's aggressive and abusive treatment. Mariam murdered Rasheed in order to spare Laila's life. She turned to the Taliban. She had been convicted to death for the murder of Rasheed.

Laila, an ethnic Tajik born in Kabul in 1978, is another character whose oppression is depicted in the novel. After her elder brothers are killed in the Afghan-Soviet War, she is raised by educated parents who teach her, initially at school and eventually at home when Kabul becomes too unsafe. She is the only girl in her family and is often mistreated by her mother, as well as facing gender prejudice. Laila's mother misses her boys who perished in Afghanistan during the conflict. She grew raised in Kabul and has a good bond with Tariq, a child in her neighbourhood.

The tragic circumstances bring Laila into the life of Mariam and Rasheed. They rescue and bring her to their home. She is forced to marry Rasheed in order to protect herself and her unborn child. Due to the violent war that takes place, Laila's house is struck by a bomb and both her parents are left dead. After the death of her parents and supposed death of Tariq. Rasheed's passion also takes Laila. Mariam is first irritated because she believes her area has been infringed upon. Laila and Mariam's marriage has been fraught with difficulties and abuse. At the end of the novel, Laila returns to Kabul becomes a schoolteacher at an orphanage.

Despite being conscious of the societal limits between men and women in Afghan society, they finally begin a love relationship. During this period, Afghanistan is at war, and Kabul is pounded by rocket assaults. Tariq's family decides to evacuate the city, and their tearful goodbye culminates with them making love. Laila's family likewise chooses to leave Kabul, but while they are packing, a missile smashes their home, killing her parents and badly wounding Laila. Rasheed and Mariam eventually

adopt Laila. One incident shows strict laws, Laila is told by a policeman, *"It is a crime for a woman to run away. We see a lot of it . . . you can be imprisoned for running away"* (259).

Like Mariam and Laila are two of many Afghan women forced to marry Rashid, an undesired boyfriend. Mariam is forced to marry Rasheed at the age of fifteen by her illegitimate father Jalil's family. Second, because she is an orphan and pregnant, Laila is compelled to marry. When Mariam and Laila become pregnant, Rasheed hopes for a boy. When Mariam miscarries and Laila gives birth to a girl called Aziza, he becomes unkind and rude to them. Rasheed certainly treats Zalmai and Aziza differently when Laila's second kid, Zalmai, is born. Even when he is bankrupt, he buys Zalmai toys, new clothes, and other items.

Afghan women should not use cosmetics, jewellery, or nail paint in order to maintain their honour and pride. Furthermore, they should always wear a burqa, a garment that covers the entire body, including the face, when they go out. Because it causes women discomfort, the burqa becomes a symbol of women's subjugation. When Laila and Mariam wear it, they find it difficult to eat, to see well, and to move. It's thick and unsettling.

Nana's repressed narrative is also depicted in the novel. Jalil employed Nana as a servant. She is the most compelling character in the narrative since she has been insulted, abandoned, and imprisoned in a hut by her owner. She said to Mariam, *"I was a pokeroor. A mugwort. You too. And you weren't even born yet."* (7) Even though she had done nothing wrong, it was Jalil who had wronged her. Nana was a sexual object to Jalil. Nana experienced a lot as a result of their sexy connection. She is stigmatised and alienated from society because she is perceived to be guilty. She feels disregarded and abandoned, which adds to her frustration. When her own father disowns her, tragedy strikes. She is abandoned in the village to deliver the kid alone. Nana is extremely resentful and recognises the truth in both men and tradition. Throughout these years of conflict, she has only learnt one thing: tahamul, which means the ability to persevere. She feels that women like her can only live if they have tahamul, or perseverance.

Mariam is the consequence of a relationship of the two, and Jalil's preference for his wife and legitimate children makes her resentful of him. Mariam's mother is Nana, and the two of them reside in a kolba in a small town near Herat. Nana frequently recounts having the jinn inside her; the novel implies that she suffers from mental health issues for which she declines to be medicated. Nana was constantly afraid that Mariam would abandon her, and as a result of Jalil's cold relationship with her, she became a psychological patient. Her actions and relationship with her daughter, Mariam, grew strained as a result of her mental illness. Mariam is Nana's lone link to the outside world. Once she leaves the home for the first time on her own to locate Jalil on her fifteenth birthday. When Mariam declines to stay with Nana, she commits suicide. Her constrained circumstance forces her to commit this atrocity.

3. Conclusion: -

Afghan women like Maryam, Naina, and Laila have tragic experiences to tell since they are among the most vulnerable victims of the violence. The agony and persecution of these women spread. These women endured greatly as a result of physical and mental challenges. Hosseini constructed a cast of real Afghan women personalities whose spirits remain intact throughout the narrative. From the perspective of Afghan womanhood, the study in this work illustrates the oppressed situation of Afghan women in quest of their own identity and suffering struggle.

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