

Dissecting Hegemonic Masculinity in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Diksha Goyal

Post-graduate Student, University of Mumbai

ABSTRACT

Hegemonic masculinity explains the nexus between gender roles and male dominance over women and other minority men, determining their position in the social strata. Over the years, masculinity has been weighed as an amalgamation of these three attributes: strength, honor, and action. Lack of these qualities contributes to the emergence of toxic masculinity that dissects the notion further into lack of masculinity in the first place. This paper examines the existing gender roles in a contemporary patriarchal society, as depicted in Khaled Hosseini's laudable novels, *The Kite Runner*, and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Study of the former novel delves deep into Amir's struggle with internalizing the masculine codes of conduct that are set and followed by the patriarchal environment he grew up in, especially under the wing of his macho father who favors the housekeeper's boy, Hassan, more than his own son. The relationship of Amir's father with Hassan leads to the resultant jealousy felt by Amir, making him act out in toxic manners. This dissertation argues those emotions of expectations of a father and the subsequent anxiety faced by sons in making their fathers feel proud of them. It also questions the idea of hegemonic masculinity and the pressure it builds on young boys, and how inadvertently, it makes them feel different from societal "ideal" men. This idea of masculine hegemony gets furthered in Hosseini's second novel that investigates the causes of hegemonic male dominance and the consequent sexism observed in Rasheed's treatment of his wives. The research widens its scope to toxic masculinity and generational oppression of women. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to scrutinize traditional masculinity and what it really means to be masculine.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity, toxic masculinity, macho, gender roles, male dominance, sexism, patriarchy

CHAPTER: 01

Introduction to Masculinity Studies in Literature

Masculinity studies consider when and why men are in a state of crisis, or in what situations the definition of being a man changes. Masculinities alter over time in the move toward multiplicity, and certain historical moments are more stressful for men than others. These states of crisis might include transformations in the status of women, homosexuality, capital, income, or even nation, that can shape morphologies of masculinity.

Owing to many critical works questioning different identities of masculinity, homosexuality, women, transgender, the relations with race, colonialism, and ethnicity have also been given due importance. Masculinity studies that emerged under the influence of Eve Sedgwick, an American academic scholar, was invested in post-structuralist literary/cultural representation. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is best known for her 1990 work *Epistemology of the Closet* and is regarded as one of the originators of Queer Theory. It came to increasingly consider masculinity as a complex phenomenon, one that is continuously expounded by movement and change.

Stefan Horlacher, Head of Department and Chair of English Literature at Dresden University of Technology in Germany, discusses the intertwining of literature and masculinity. He argues how literature can uncover the hidden aspects of masculinity that might not be visible in daily life. While it stands true that film, music, painting, and other performative arts question masculinity, literature has its own depiction of masculinity, and hence its ways of literary analysis in the twenty-first century encompasses a crucial and vibrant wing of masculinity studies.

Early literary work on masculinities such as Coppélia Kahn's *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (1981) and Peter Schwenger's *Phallic Critiques: Masculinity and Twentieth-century Literature* (1984) prove seminal that masculinity shall be considered an important object of inquiry in literary fiction analysis. Authors and readers time and again have shown interest in the history and articulation of conceptual or theoretical elements around men and masculinity, which has influenced readings of literary masculinity today and has birthed what came to be known as "men's studies."

Work on masculinity in the 1980s often suggested that masculinity was natural or essential and normative. In his pioneering book *The Myth of Masculinity*, the psychologist Joseph Pleck points out the necessity for a systematic formulation of the Male Sex Role Identity paradigm or MSRI. Pleck explains, "sex-typed characteristics [are] organized along dimensions of psychological masculinity and/or femininity" and they "assume dimensions of the personality experienced by the individual as masculine and/or feminine." Hence, the male sex role is problematic in the sense that the traits or qualities that are associated with said role are based on nothing but societal ideas about what a man is or ought to be. These shared or constructed definitions of the male gender are far from simple.

Publication of the collection of essays *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (1987) broke new ground in the field of masculinity studies in literature. Harry Brod's essay in the volume, 'The Case for Men's Studies', set forth the new approach to what gender might mean. He voiced out that "while women's studies correct the exclusion of women from the traditional canon caused by androcentric scholarship's elevation of man as male to man as generic human, the implications of this fallacy for our understanding of men have gone largely unrecognized" (Brod 1987). This called out for a cogent view of men as gendered beings, and put into practice, or rather positioned, this emerging new field of study as "a necessary complement to women's studies" (Brod 1990).

There has been a paradigm shift in masculinity over time. To study its historical context, one must accept its plurality. In the introduction to his comprehensive historical study *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Michael S Kimmel stresses for men to rediscover their own revolution. He expresses the

two key elements of writing about men as men: “first, to chart how the definition of masculinity has changed over time; second, to explore how the experience of manhood has shaped the activities of American men” (Kimmel 1996). His study allowed for examinations of key aspects of masculinity, such as “the self-made man.” Whereas traditionally women’s history was considered as reacting to men’s history, now this direction of ascendancy could be reversed, in his words, “definitions of masculinity are historically reactive to changing definitions of femininity” (Kimmel).

The impression of masculinity theories in literature gained momentum largely due to the work of sociologist R.W. Connell, including especially her concept of “Hegemonic Masculinity” that is often considered to be the most influential theoretical concept in the history of the study of men and masculinity. Her pioneering work *Masculinities* (1995) further extended the power relations between different categories of masculinities. It also set the stage for later work in the area, such as by Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee. Their 1987 essay, ‘Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity’, discussed hegemonic masculinity at length and described it as “a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance” (Carrigan, Connell, Lee 1987).

Hegemonic masculinity, in layman's terms, explains the nexus between gender roles and male dominance over women and other minority men, determining their position in the social strata. To understand this concept from a literary microscopic lens, one needs to consider a relational model that takes power as the central organizing factor of gender. In her book *Masculinities*, Connell categorizes “the relations between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination.” Such relations are dynamic and subjected to shifts with respect to the corresponding changes in the definitions of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity can't be the same but is rather “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (Connell 2005).

Connell dissects these relations into four categories: hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization. Italian political theorist, Antonio Gramsci, described “Cultural Hegemony” as how the state and ruling capitalist class- the bourgeoisie, use cultural institutions to maintain power in capitalist societies. Modifying this understanding from a gendered perspective, Connell states precisely that hegemony is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” Then comes the establishment of the stance of subordinate masculinities also including male homosexuality. The category of complicity includes those men who may benefit from this gender hegemony but fall short of fulfilling its criteria: “Masculinities constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy, are complicit in this sense” (Connell). Marginalized masculinities are the ones that are dependent on hegemonic masculinity for authorization, for instance, race plays a part here: “in the United States, particular black athletes may be exemplars for hegemonic masculinity. But the fame and wealth of individual stars has no trickle-down effect; it does not yield social authority to black men generally” (Connell).

One advantage of this theoretical approach to gender was that it situated the gay movements and the feminist marches next to masculinity by assuming that hegemonic masculinity usually places itself negatively with respect to both gay men and women. A defining moment was that it de-essentialized masculinity: “Hegemony always refers to a historical situation, a set of circumstances in which power is won and held. The construction of hegemony is not a matter of pushing and pulling between ready-formed groupings but is partly a matter of the formation of those groupings” (Connell). This construction takes place via commercial mass media, and its portrayal of the gendered division of labor, and the state. These social relations are inextricably entangled to the gendered psyche of the people. Hence, the study of hegemonic masculinity must take both socio historical as well as psychological elements into account.

This model, as much as it was employed for literary analysis, was also widely criticized for what it lacked. Michael Flood points out the unclarity of the term hegemonic masculinity itself: “a particular configuration of gender practice related to patriarchal authority, or describes whatever type of masculinity is dominant in a given social order” (Flood 2002). Margaret Wetherell and Nigel Edley criticized the model for not assessing how the four categories “actually prescribe or regulate men’s lives” and how the model doesn't address the possibilities of minority positions having any sort of control on hegemonic ones (Wetherell, Edley, August 1999). Connell herself calls the model as “a sparse framework”, one that requires a reforming of its concept through expanded thinking about gender hierarchy, geography (including the local, regional, and global), embodiment, and the dynamics of the concept itself. Essentially, it has been intended to bring about further study.

Connell’s 1987 model of hegemonic masculinity analyzes those attitudes and practices among men that perpetuate gender inequality. In this gendered hierarchy, femininities come at the bottom. Men’s dominance over women is central to this definition, yet the counter-effects aren't just confined to women. According to Connell, masculinity comes as a prized possession exclusive to powerful men who can be identified with the term that is broadly known as "macho". These are the men who possess qualities of being assertive, aggressive (to some extent), dominant, resolute in face of a threat or in an adversity. This identity is associated with display of strength and doesn't permit acknowledgement or expression of emotions, especially those of weakness or that come with a cry for help. This sets these macho men apart from others who do not match up to this macho ideal. Hegemonic masculinity builds pressure on young boys and even on those grown-up men who are different from the societal "ideal" men and inadvertently makes them believe that they lack masculinity. In most cases, this supposed lack of masculinity leads to the emergence of 'toxic masculinity' that affects not only men but also those around them.

Toxic masculinity refers to certain cultural and social norms and behaviors stereotypically associated with manliness that have an unhealthy effect on men, women, and society in general. The field of masculinity studies has developed 'the man question' posed by Marysia Zalewski and feminist scholars into a deep interrogation of the relationship between maleness and violence. Perhaps the complexity of masculinities has often been reduced to issues of crisis and toxicity. Governments have tried to prevent extremism, particularly violent Islamism, and in so doing have produced racialized and marginalized men, as will be observed in the study of chosen texts.

As per the APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men (2018), toxic masculinity is defined as the adherence to traditional masculine norms that are harmful to men and those around them. These encompass several traits: exhibiting power over women, violence towards intimate partner(s), aggressive behavior, emotional detachment, and heterosexual self-presentation.

Power over women can be exhibited with the rejection of feminine ideals and norms that may be seen as weak or vulnerable by self-proclaimed masculine men, giving way to these men for a perceived sense of superiority and dominance over women and others who engage in feminine behaviors. Examples include crying and expressing vulnerable emotions like those of intimacy. Such were considered inappropriate and were highly stigmatized when interacting with other men (Bird 1996). This rejection of femininity is taught early on to young boys, who learn to embrace their masculinity by rejecting barbie dolls, kitchen playthings and makeup that are set apart as “more appropriate for girls” (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). In addition, introducing young boys to violent video games, and “masculine” toys such as trucks, Legos, etc. forces them to accept their masculine status, subsequently learning to act differently from and superior to girls (Morris and Ratajczak, 2019; Gansen, 2017). This learned behavior is partially accountable for grown up men to continue this exhibition of dominance over women, and at times, leads to violence against their female partners and the sexual objectification of women in general (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009; Morris and Ratajczak, 2019).

A notable facet of adherence to toxic masculinity includes establishing control over women, and failure to do so often results in violence against female partners in attempts to regain that relinquished control and more importantly, resist being controlled (Morris and Ratajczak, 2019). According to a 2020 statistical study by Rivera and Scholar, male partners are primarily responsible for the majority of instances of violence against women globally, with as many as 1 in 3 women experiencing physical or sexual violence at the hands of their male partners during their lifetimes. While it is definitely inexcusable, this intimate partner violence by men has been delineated and as much as far-fetched justified as “coping mechanisms” for many men in navigating feelings of pain and rage. This often leads them to exhibit controlling behavior over their female partners in an effort to preserve their own masculinity (Rivera and Scholar, 2020).

This pattern of behavior is elucidated by the idea of “compensatory manhood”, in which men resort to such behaviors to defend or preserve their masculinity when they fear a threat to their masculine status (Morris and Ratajczak, 2019; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). For example, a man may resort to violence when another man insults his masculinity, or when a woman challenges him, threatening his dominance. Studies have shown that those men who are surrounded by such male friends who engage in violence against women such as domestic abuse, are more likely to use violence against their female partners as well, given that many men turn to other males for support when their dating and sexual lives are stressful (Morris and Ratajczak, 2019; Schwartz and DeKeseredy, 1997).

Highlighting this, men engaging in violent behaviors to uphold their “masculine honor” when provoked, often have been “rewarded” by society in forms of praise and a sense of desire (O’Dea, Chalman, Castro Bueno, and Saucier, 2018). This reinforces the trend of societal approval of men who adhere to traditional masculine norms, gaining a sort of social rank or favorable reputation, hence honoring

violence as required and acceptable (Vandello, Ransom, Hettinger, and Askew, 2009; Cohen and Nisbett, 1994). Most common example would be of men who use violence to defend a woman from harm are often rewarded with positive social perceptions and praise, even if they lose the fight. However, according to a 2012 survey by Barnes, Brown, and Tamborski, such masculine men are found to be at higher risk of hurting themselves in these very accidents of physical brawls, or as far as committing suicide as a result of a supposed irreparable damage to their reputations (Osterman and Brown, 2011).

The call for preservation of masculine honor can even lead to competitions between men to prove their strength through winning in situations where there exists some form of conflict or challenge. Traditional masculine norms often put men and boys in aggressive and competitive situations (APA Guidelines, 2018). This can be observed in competitive sports, wherein young boys resort to verbal and physical harassment of other players in their struggle to win. This is often overlooked yet speaks volumes for what is understood as many men's internal drive to preserve their masculine honor at all costs (Rivera and Scholar, 2020). This is likely because many men tend to equate their self-worth in winning these sporting matches with acceptance from those around them (Messner, 1992).

In the domains of toxic masculinity, emotional detachment i.e., suppressing vulnerable emotions to remain "tough," is considered a sign of strength and is encouraged (Cancian, 1987). In a series of personal interviews conducted by Bird in 1996, one male participant described feelings and emotions to be "something to joke about," which is often typical in case of men (Bird, 1996; pp. 126). Having vulnerable feelings and emotions is discouraged, and in extreme cases, even leads to ostracization as expressing of such emotions are perceived to reduce the "macho" masculinity of males, further fueling forceful and aggressive feelings to regain their masculinity (Morris and Ratajczak, 2019). Moreover, men also tend to restrict emotions in settings where other men are present. For example, some male athletes heavily restrict expression of pain or fear, even in cases of serious injury (Curry, 1993). This also includes a strict avoidance of seeking help for emotional distress. Behaviors associated with traditional masculine norms such as emotional detachment often inhibit males from seeking essential psychological help or acknowledging the presence of a mental illness, which can be fastened to gender role strain (APA Guidelines, 2018). Gender role strain is a term coined by Joseph Pleck in his book *The Myth of Masculinity* (1981), wherein he clarifies it to be a psychological condition in which behavioral expectations based on one's gender negatively affect the individual and those around them.

Another component of toxic masculinity is Heterosexual self-presentation by men, as any behavior that is associated with femininity is falsely distinguished as homosexual behavior by other men (Bird, 1996; Corbett, 2001). According to Parent, Gobble, and Rochlen (2019), toxic masculinity is driven by the need to endorse homophobic and misogynistic views (e.g., rejection of feminine norms, mockery of homosexual behaviors, sexualization of women). These are linked to adherence to masculine gender role conformity and protects men who engage in these from other dominant men. Loss of masculinity and power can be a source of anxiety for many men (Corbett, 2001).

Like any other literary theory or concept, Toxic Masculinity has also been widely used, and criticized. There have been age-long debates and studies showing that toxic masculinity doesn't exist but is actually a misconstrued form of lack of masculinity. Meaning what we may classify as toxic masculinity

is really not masculine in the first place. To understand this point, one must desire to first evaluate what it really means to be masculine and/or whether this is a concept that can even be defined.

John MacInnes argues otherwise in his 1998 work *The End of Masculinity: The Confusion of Sexual Genesis and Sexual Difference in Modern Society*. He talks about the vague and contradictory present definitions of masculinity in literature. He suggests that masculinity should be comprehended as an ideology of what men should be like. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to interrogate stereotypical gender roles and interpret what it really means to be masculine. This research tries to bridge the gap between lack of masculinity and toxic masculinity and understanding how they go hand-in-hand.

This paper takes Raewyn Connell's 1987 model of hegemonic masculinity as an analytical tool for understanding patriarchal behavior and attitudes towards genders, determining their position in the social strata. It aims to understand how hegemonic masculinity puts "masculine" men in power in the hierarchical social order and how prominence of masculinity is exhibited over other masculine identities as well as over women and how this practice births the current practice of toxic masculinity. It also compares the adverse impact of hegemonic masculinity on both the male and female characters in Hosseini's novels- *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

CHAPTER: 02

Unraveling Masculine Hegemony in *The Kite Runner*

Afghan American novelist, Khaled Hosseini, is known for his descriptive language and emphatic tone, as is reflected in his exemplary novels, *The Kite Runner*, and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Hosseini was born on 4th March 1965, in Kabul, Afghanistan. He grew up in Kabul but spent quite some time in Iran and France, where his father worked at the Afghan embassy. The 1979 Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan made it impossible for Hosseini's family to move back to their homeland. When he was 15, his family moved to the United States, where Hosseini attended medical school at the University of California, San Diego and received his medical degree.

Hosseini's debut novel, *The Kite Runner*, was a work of his 4 am writing before heading out for his medical practice back in 2001. The novel was published in 2003 to much acclaimed praise for its powerful storytelling and moving emotions. It brought Hosseini wide popularity and various levels of critical and commercial success prompting him to pursue writing full-time in 2004. The novel's focus on the continuing Afghan refugee crisis led to Hosseini's advocacy as a goodwill envoy for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2006.

In 2007, three years after his first novel, Hosseini published his succeeding novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* which was inspired by his observations of women wearing burkas during his 2003 visit to Afghanistan. This was followed with the publishing of *And the Mountains Echoed* in 2013. The story records the divergence of a couple of siblings in 1950s Afghanistan. He has also illustrated a short story *Sea Prayer* (2018) based on the highly publicized death of a three-year old Syrian refugee by drowning in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015. All his works are based wholly or partly in Afghanistan featuring an Afghan protagonist.

The Kite Runner is Hosseini's historical novel which, if not autobiographical, was definitely inspired from his own life. It tells the story of Amir, a writer living in present day California, from the narrative of his younger self as the privileged son of a wealthy family in Kabul in the 1970s. Hosseini did not return to Afghanistan until 2003 when he was 38, an experience shared by Amir. The novel centers around the friendship of Amir with Hassan, son of their family servant, and the two lads' boyhood and subsequent fallout. It also depicts Amir's struggle with fostering a deeper connection with his father and coping with the haunting memories of multiple childhood traumatic events. Hosseini has set this story in his home country, Afghanistan, from the fall of the monarchy until the collapse of the Taliban regime, and in the San Francisco Bay Area, specifically in Fremont, California.

A pioneering work about the pre-Russian invasion and pre-Taliban rule of Afghanistan, *The Kite Runner* also paints the horrors of life in Afghanistan under Taliban rule and life in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Although the story is fictitious, Hosseini's novel portrays the reality of a country which most Western readers associate with mainly being home to terror cells. This humanizing story enables readers to separate Afghanistan and its people from the terror and see them for so much more that they represent and have to offer. Hosseini describes Kabul as "a growing, thriving, cosmopolitan city," where he regularly flew kites with his cousins. Additionally, it is a coming-of-age novel that features a flawed protagonist trying to find his place in turmoil and transition.

The protagonist, Amir, lives with his father Baba, and two Hazaras (minority servants) Ali and his son, Hassan, closest friend of Amir. The two boys fly kites together and read stories. Although spending an enormous amount of time together, the two live quite different lives. Hassan, being a Hazara, does household chores while Amir gets education from school. One day at school, three boys, Assef, Wali and Kamal, bully Amir but Hassan scares them away with his slingshot. Later, the winter kite-fighting tournament brings with it a tantalizing event in the lives of the two boys. Amir wins the competition and then Hassan goes to chase after the fallen kites when he gets entrapped in an alley by the three school bullies. Amir comes across Kamal and Wali holding Hassan down while Assef rapes him. Amir, bearing witness to the entire event, doesn't say a word and instead flees from the site. Afterwards, both Amir and Hassan live in pretense of it never happening, causing them to drift apart. This conscious choice of inaction paves way to future guilt, betrayal, and resentment. The repentance of the whole thing eats Amir up so much that he hides money under Hassan's mattress and falsely accuses him of stealing. Hassan doesn't deny the accusations in front of Baba and leaves the house with his father.

Owing to the changing political climate of Afghanistan due to the Soviet invasion, people started leaving the nation for good, including Amir and Baba, in 1981. The two make it to Pakistan and eventually move to Fremont, California. Years later, Baba is dead from lung cancer, lived by Amir and his wife, Soraya, when Amir gets a call from Rahim Khan in Pakistan who tells him that Hassan and his wife were executed by the Taliban, leaving behind their child, Sohrab, taken by an orphanage. Rahim Khan asks Amir to go to Kabul and find Sohrab, saying this is Amir's chance to "be good again." Amir takes on this hope to make amends and finds the orphanage where Sohrab was supposed to be but learns that he was taken by a Taliban official a month prior. This official is none other than Amir's bully and Hassan's rapist, Assef, who has clearly been assaulting Sohrab as well now. He and Amir get into a fight and Sohrab shoots Assef in the eye with his slingshot, in a similar fashion as his father did once. Amir decides to adopt Sohrab

and take him back to the US with him, but fails, leading Sohrab to attempt suicide. Sohrab survives the harm but stops speaking altogether. Amir eventually brings Sohrab to California with him, but he still remains aloof and estranged. One day, they're at a park and they spot some Afghans flying kites. Sohrab plays kite-fighting with someone's kite and cuts it, while Amir runs after the fallen kite.

2.1 Hegemonic Masculinity in the Novel

Among the novel's many themes of politics, trauma and redemption, there is also hegemonic masculinity that runs significantly through its pages. Masculine hegemony has always been a discussion of great importance as it includes numerous other relevant issues such as patriarchy, gender inequality, male dominance, violence against women, toxic masculinity, etc. *The Kite Runner* is a contemporary classic novel that exhibits these concerns surrounding masculinity, giving an insight into hegemonic masculinity as an ideology which has birthed multiple issues.

From the novel's very first chapters, Amir's struggle with adjusting and placing himself in the traditional Afghan society is pitiable. The readers can notice his failure with internalizing the masculine codes of conduct that are set and followed by the environment he grew up in, especially under his father's wing, who is someone he considers to be an ideal Afghan man.

My father was a force of nature, a towering Pashtun specimen with a thick beard, a wayward crop of curly brown hair as unruly as the man himself, hands that looked capable of uprooting a willow tree, and a black glare that would "drop the devil to his knees begging for mercy," as Rahim Khan used to say. (Hosseini 12-13)

Amir has not only glorified his father's masculinity but also mythologized it, making the concept somewhat unattainable for him.

"Masculinity is a standardized container, fixed by biology, into which all "normal" men are placed, something "natural" that can even be measured in terms of psychological traits and physical attributes" (Beynon, 2002:2). By reducing masculinity into a container that is constructed of a set of traits and behaviors culturally set by the society for males, such as assertive, protective, and physically and emotionally strong, a definition of gender is created to place men into boxes, to compartmentalize them. Another term that fits this compartmentalization is "macho", that is associated with a display of strength and doesn't permit acknowledgement or expression of emotions showing weakness.

An incident would be during the Buzkashi tournament in which a skilled chapandaz (horseman) picks up a goat carcass and tries to drop it into a special circle while the other horsemen harass him. Baba takes Amir to the tournament where they witness a chapandaz lying motionless in "a pool of his blood soaking through the sand." Amir is shocked by the violence of the sport: "I began to cry. I cried all the way back home. I remember how Baba's hands clenched around the steering wheel. Clenched and unclenched. Mostly, I will never forget Baba's valiant efforts to conceal the disgusted look on his face as he drove in silence." (Hosseini 20)

This scene poses three main observations: first, the male audience enjoying a deadly and gruesome sport as a display of strength and valor of not only the players of the sport but also of their own; second, Baba not only suppresses his own vulnerable emotions but is also disgusted when Amir is seen throwing a fit; and third, this exhibition of male violence at its peak and other males just standing by and enjoying it could be a foreshadowing and one of the possible explanations of why Amir doesn't react to violence against Hassan in the later pages.

2.2 Lack of Masculinity and Manliness

According to R Connell, masculinity comes as a prized possession exclusively to powerful men that sets them apart from others who don't match up to this ideal macho criteria. Such kind of hegemonic masculinity builds pressure on young boys and inadvertently makes them believe that they lack masculinity and are not "real men". Amir is way less competitive, more emotional and loves to read and write poems and stories rather than playing sports.

Of course, marrying a poet was one thing, but fathering a son who preferred burying his face in poetry books to hunting...well, that wasn't how Baba had envisioned it, I suppose. Real men didn't read poetry – and God forbid they should ever write it! Real men – real boys – played soccer just as Baba had when he had been young... He signed me up for soccer teams to stir the same passion in me. But I was pathetic, a blundering liability to my own team. (Hosseini 19)

Amir isn't the masculine Pashtun his father wanted. He is neither an athlete like Baba nor has any of his fierceness. Baba's manliness isn't lost on Amir as Amir tries his best to connect with his father and acquire some of his masculinity and ultimately, his respect. Hosseini depicts this by making many references to the Western world, typically because the West idolizes their male heroes to be inexplicably strong, broody and those winning over the audience with their ridiculous heights of endurance. It isn't a surprise then that Amir and Baba share a love for Western cinema. "We saw our first Western together, Rio Bravo with John Wayne, at the Cinema Park, across the street from my favorite bookstore. I remember begging Baba to take us to Iran so we could meet John Wayne" (Hosseini 25).

Baba's love for these films is self-explanatory as they affirm his brand of masculinity. Such masculinity resonates with Amir too as he grew up with Baba who preached him a similar kind of masculinity. This leaves the boy with a sense of wanting to be like one of those men to develop a deeper relationship with his father, the kind that he always saw between Hassan and Baba.

2.3 Masculine Honor and Pride- *nang* and *namoos*

Hassan, in Amir's eyes, is a symbol of what a man should be like. He is a fearless protector of Amir in front of other kids, and Baba can surely depend on him for any of his needs. These qualities always made Hassan more favorable in the eyes of Baba that resulted in the jealousy faced by Amir, making him act out in an utter act of betrayal. The paradox between the two kids is a crucial point to reflect on while demonstrating the dimensions of hegemonic masculinity. Amir's standoffish behavior is also at display when he just watches Hassan being raped by Assef and then abandons him there.

I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That's what I told myself as I turned my back to the alley, to Hassan. That's what I made myself believe. I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he? (Hosseini 72-73)

Amir's attempt at winning his father's love and respect leads to disastrous consequences. He believes that if he brings back the fallen blue kite that Hassan was chasing after, he would earn his father's praise that usually was in store for Hassan. Following this incident, Amir wins the kite-fighting tournament and was also successful at fostering a closer relationship with his father. But the concept that is lost on the child is that of masculine honor and bravery, that his father speaks highly of. "'Remember this," Baba said, pointing at me, "The man is a Pashtun to the root. He has nang and namoos." Nang. Namooos. Honor and pride. The tenets of Pashtun men. Especially when it came to the chastity of a wife. Or a daughter" (Hosseini 134).

Here, Baba sings the importance of the two pillars of masculinity: pride and honor. But possession of these ideas by men about their own identity affect their female counterparts as well in the sense that women need to be pure for men. This stems root in the stereotypical idea of a man's honor and dignity being dependent on the purity of his wife and daughter. But the irony in Baba's teaching here is that he played a part in stealing Ali's honor by sleeping with his wife, Sanaubar, also ultimately destroying his own honor as well. This makes the readers wonder if there are any honorable men in this novel but at all. Or are these men only limited to the Western movies Amir and Baba love to watch?

2.4 Politics and the Real Men

Baba's ideas of masculinity also impact the way he perceives politics. He tells Amir that real men are those who take action instead of just talking or gossiping as that is limited to "old women". "'There are only three real men in this world, Amir," he'd say. He'd count them off on his fingers: America the brash savior, Britain, and Israel" (Hosseini 116). The irony doesn't go unnoticed when Hosseini places Baba in America where he doesn't get to throw lavish parties or build orphanages but is diminished into a gas station worker. And let's not forget that the reason behind their move to America is the invasion by the Soviet Union which is quite a violent example of a masculine country taking action.

2.5 Masculinity and Women

Hosseini portrays Afghan life from a masculine angle, with a very observant absence of female characters except only a handful. Amir is a young boy craving for a feminine touch most likely due to never being around any women.

I kissed her cheek and pulled away from the curb. As I drove, I wondered why I was different. Maybe it was because I had been raised by men; I hadn't grown up around women and had never been exposed firsthand to the double standard with which Afghan society sometimes treated them. Maybe it was because Baba had been such an unusual Afghan father, a liberal who had lived by his own rules, a maverick who had disregarded or embraced societal customs as he had seen fit. (Hosseini 165)

In this scene, Amir has just dropped off his wife, Soraya, and he questions the double standard women are subjected to in Afghan society. This passage also points out just how masculine Amir's household and upbringing were and how that had affected him. Growing up in an environment of emotional disbarment would have made him feel all the more isolated. It is evident how much Amir desires for a feminine mentor in his house. He grows up reading his mother's books and even gets inspired to write his own poetry instead of taking after his father's love for sports.

Patriarchy, which is sexist by its definition, positions men as the center of all social organizations and women as their subordinates. It constructs gender roles in favor of men and grants men ultimate supremacy. Hussey (2003:8) says, "Not surprisingly, those advantaged by the social institution of gender want to maintain the status quo." To men, patriarchal hegemony is an effective tool to dominate and pressurize other groups of sex. "Men who have received the benefits of gender practices always try to maintain this product of culture to sustain the prevailing position over their opposite sex."

Hosseini, in his novel, also exposes mistreatment of women in relation to traditions, beliefs, behaviors, politics that are ruled by hegemonic masculinity in third world countries. He interrogates the status of Afghan women by bringing to light what men do to establish control over women. Most demeaning practice being treatment of women as a sexual commodity, as is exemplified with the character of Sanaubar who is a Hazara woman. She doesn't have a voice in terms of choosing her lifestyle and is forced by her father to marry Ali. This is done to enforce that once a woman belongs to a man, she has no choice but to submit herself to him, again establishing her subordinateness.

Once a woman is subjected to this position, her freedom and growth is restricted with numerous rules foisted by her male counterparts. For example, wearing a burqa is imposed upon women to hide them from the male gaze of other men. This is discussed at length in the next chapter.

CHAPTER: 03

Unveiling Toxic Masculinity in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Khaled Hosseini's second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is an account of his observations of women wearing burqas during his first visit to his homeland Afghanistan in 2003. "I went to Kabul, and I recall seeing these burqa-clad women sitting at street corners, with four, five, six children, begging for change. I remember watching them walking in pairs up the street, trailed by their children in ragged clothes, and wondering how life had brought them to that point" (Hosseini 2007 Interview). Upon speaking with these women, he found their stories of resilience remarkable, and had tried to weave the saga of two fictional women, Mariam and Laila, wives of an abusive husband in his novel.

Continuing in the same political and social climate of Afghanistan as depicted in *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* borrows its tension in the air and presents the radical shifts in the lives of characters and the relationships they forge. It's an epic multi-generational story of Afghan women and their uncanny struggle in the war-torn neighborhoods of Kabul from the early 1960s to the early 2000s. Mariam, a harami girl born to Nana and Jalil out of wedlock, grows up outside Herat, a small city in Afghanistan. Mariam has had complicated feelings about her parents and has always just wanted to connect with someone. One day she leaves her home to meet with her father against Nana's wishes. Nana,

upon feeling abandoned, warns her that “when I'm gone you'll have nothing... You are nothing!” Dramatically enough, when she comes back home, Mariam finds Nana dead. Nana's suicide brings with it hell for Mariam as her father marries her off to Rasheed, a widowed shoemaker in Kabul who's thirty years older than her. As Mariam suffers multiple miscarriages, Rasheed torments her physically and verbally, blaming her for not being able to replace the son he lost in his first marriage.

A few years later, Rasheed brings home Laila who has lost her parents to a fire mishap, and is pregnant with her lover Tariq's child, a fact that is unknown to Rasheed. The inspiration for Rasheed's character is drawn from Hosseini's encounter with an Afghan man who “had a very sweet, subservient wife and had not yet informed her that he was planning to marry again” (Foley). Coming back to the novel, Mariam is initially threatened by Laila's sudden presence but when Laila births a baby girl Aziza, Mariam finds in her the connection she was longing for. The two women become allies against Rasheed's abuse. Laila finally gives Rasheed his desired male heir, Zalmai. After years of torture, Laila finds Tariq standing at her door, whom she believed to be dead, a lie fed to her by Abdul Sharif who was hired by Rasheed. When Rasheed learns about Tariq's visit, he beats Laila, making Mariam take her first step against Rasheed's brutality. With the force of pent-up trauma and abuse, she kills him with a shovel and with him, his curtailment. The next day, she surrenders to the Taliban in order to help Laila and her children escape with Tariq to Pakistan. It is this ultimate act of sacrifice and courage by Mariam, that inspires Laila to summon her strength to defy the tyrannical society. Following the US invasion, she returns to Herat in the promise of a better future for her family and the city. She attempts to understand Mariam's life better and uses her inheritance to aid an orphanage in Kabul. Towards the end, when she gets pregnant, she decides that if she is blessed with a girl, she'll name her Mariam.

3.1 Historical Context

The resonance of Afghanistan's history doesn't just serve as the backdrop for the novel but is deeply intertwined into the characters' storylines, actions they take and the events that follow. The Taliban was the aftermath of the 1978 Afghan war which lasted till 1992. Afghanistan's new government failed to establish civil order, and many Afghans found solidarity in the religious rhetoric of the Mujahideen resistance in southern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. They soon formed a militia group that associated itself with being ultraconservative with Sharia Law and took political, religious, and social control, and quickly grew into the movement now known as the Taliban. By late 1996 the Taliban had seized the capital city of Kabul.

The progression of the plot of the novel relates to the reverberations of the war. For instance, both Mariam and Laila are born during either the takedown or the establishment of a regime or faction. As the violence in the country grows, so does the torture within the walls of Rasheed's home. The more oppressive the Taliban becomes; the more Rasheed restricts Mariam and Laila's movements. All these events were historical repercussions that manifest themselves into the lives of characters. Even their ethnic identities become indistinctive from the political factions.

Taliban's policies were creating a brutally repressive regime, exercising the near-total exclusion of women from any array of public or social life, including education and employment. Many regulations were enforced upon women, like being expected to wear burqas, and be escorted by male family members

at all times. The law guaranteed all the power to men over women and children of the house. The ones defying these were subjected to harsh criminal punishments publicly, which is epitomized by Mariam's execution in the stadium. As Laila reminisces in the words of her deceased mother,

The freedoms and opportunities that women had enjoyed between 1978 and 1992 were a thing of the past now—Laila could still remember Babi saying of those years of communist rule, it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan, Laila. Since the Mujahideen takeover in April 1992, Afghanistan's name had been changed to the Islamic State of Afghanistan. (Hosseini 232)

This signifies that to tell the tale of an Afghan, one must take into consideration the political unrest that has deeply affected their own lives. One can't separate the local and international powers that were ruling them, such as in the September of 2001, when Laila and Tariq saw the attacks on the World Trade Center on the television screen, they got impacted too.

The title of the novel takes its homage in the poem "Kabul" by the 17th-century poet Saib Tabrizi. In lines 15-16, Tabrizi writes, "One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs/ And the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls." His poem is a love song to the city of Kabul, the same city that birthed Laila and Mariam's bond, and the city that, while ravaged by war, pulls Laila back to it to rebuild a better tomorrow. The novel's themes of gender roles, family dynamics, and its symbols like the burqa interweave with Afghanistan's history, which is discussed from the lens of hegemonic masculinity.

3.2 Hegemonic Masculinity in the Novel

Masculinity doesn't confine itself to the biological orientation of an individual, rather it refers to their gender and their characteristics, irrespective of their sex. The society that Khaled Hosseini portrays in his novel is a patriarchal society, one that strives on male-dominance and inequality. This stems from the misconception of gender identity by the individuals living in said society.

Rasheed is portrayed as the epitome of hegemonic masculinity. His compulsive need to exert his power over women is a classic characteristic of a hegemonic male. His physical and mental abuse of both his wives, Mariam, and Laila, is horrendous. He doesn't miss an opportunity to criticize them to solidify his absolutist monarchy power in the house.

"Soon, Rasheed returns with a handful of pebbles and forces Mariam's mouth open and stuffs them in. He then orders her to chew the pebbles. In her fear, she does as he asks, breaking the molars in the back of her mouth. He tells her, "Now you know what your rice tastes like"" (Hosseini 94). Rasheed's hunger for consolidating power as a traditionalist man turns him into a brutal monster.

Hegemonic masculinity is a concept that has been passed down through generations, manipulating men and women to get sculpted in this cycle of toxicity. Rasheed ensures to inculcate in his son, Zalmai, with the same upbringing of dominance over women. He encourages Zalmai to talk back to his mother. This remarkably reveals that perhaps Rasheed was born with the same mentality as well. This only leads to loss— of life for Rasheed, and identity for Zalmai.

Hosseini hoped to create a microscopic character with Rasheed with multiple layers to him. “Rasheed's the embodiment of the patriarchal, tribal character. In writing him, I didn't want to write him as an irredeemable villain. He is a reprehensible person, but there are moments of humanity, such as his love for his son” (Foley).

3.3 Pride equals Male Heir

According to Rasheed, power and pride can be achieved with the birth of a male heir for which he married thrice, and it's only in his third time that his wish is fulfilled when Zalmai is born. His idea of a woman's purpose is closeted until she is able to birth a son. If she didn't give him male heirs, she was rendered useless. He torments and blames Mariam for not being able to give him a son. This solidifies Nana's advice to Mariam in the novel early on— “Nana said, "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam.”” (Hosseini 7)

Rasheed's utter disregard towards Mariam's feelings after her miscarriages shows him as an irrational male who is obsessed with attaining power and superiority which blocks him from considering any scientific explanation behind the miscarriages.

The idea of male heirs isn't lost on Laila either. In this patriarchal society where sons are equivalent to pride, Laila lives in the shadows of her two brothers who are heroic war martyrs. “She would never leave her mark on Mammy's heart the way her brothers had, because Mammy's heart was like a pallid beach where Laila's footprints would forever wash away beneath the waves of sorrow that swelled and crashed, swelled and crashed.” (Hosseini 130)

The beach metaphor here used by Laila implies her feelings of insignificance and possible jealousy that her mother will never care for her the same way she did for her sons, even though Laila is the child who survived and is taking care of her mother through grief.

3.4 Masculine Honor and Reputation

Another trademark of hegemonic masculinity is exhibiting masculine honor at all times, even in adversity, especially then. Even when Rasheed loses his possession in war, he sees to it that his honor remains intact. When he realizes he can't sustain everyone upon suffering such a financial blow, he decides to send his daughter to an orphanage. Both Rasheed and the Taliban manipulate the fear of poverty to maintain their dominant position- seems fitting since they're both corrupt male authorities.

Yet again Hosseini's readers witness Afghan men's insecurity of protecting their *nang* and *namoos* here— “The point is, I am your husband now, and it falls on me to guard not only your honor but ours, yes, our nang and namoos. That is the husband's burden. You let me worry about that.” (Hosseini 200)

This conversation is Rasheed's supposed attempt at chivalry but is actually a classic psychological power move. By tying his wife's honor to his own, he's basically claiming his ownership over her. The word “honor” here is a stand-in for the word “reputation.” In accordance with him, manipulation and control are the only way that could safeguard Laila's honor and thereby his own. By controlling her every

move, he assures that she does nothing that could tarnish his reputation in the community. This also establishes his hegemonic dominant role in the household and Laila's submissive one.

Reputation comes across as a double-edged sword here. Rasheed uses it to his advantage to control his wives, and Nana uses it as a means to cause shame to Mariam. She says to Mariam “you are a clumsy little harami” as she blames Mariam for the pain she has brought upon her by being born; and when she fears losing Mariam, she says, “How dare you abandon me like this, you treacherous little harami.” Jalil’s shame in accepting Mariam as his legitimate daughter is what coerces Mariam to marry Rasheed and the events that follow.

3.5 Rasheed’s Gun- the Symbol of Power

Rasheed’s gun is the physical testimony of his power. Mariam is the first to discover it along with the dirty magazines in his drawer and is disgusted at learning that violence and sex hold utter regard to her new husband. However, when she comes across the pictures of Rasheed's dead wife and son, she feels a soft corner for him. On a profound level, one can analyze that Rasheed has transmuted the trauma from his previous marriage in toxic ways. To him, his masculinity hinges on possessing power by whatever means necessary, owning a gun being one of them. Owing to the fragility of his masculinity, he makes use of the gun to intimidate not only his wives but also others.

As the novel progresses, we see the power dynamics at play when gunshots and rockets echo outside Rasheed's home, and he grows more violent and turns to his gun to show power. To Rasheed, this power depended on instilling fear, whether of physical violence or emotional hurt. He brazenly shoots into the street as the violence in Kabul forces him to stay home from work, the one place where he can display his value. The most violently unstable scenario is when he puts his gun in Laila's mouth when she rejects his command to send Aziza to beg on the streets. The refusal by Laila to Rasheed's command marks her standing her ground. This makes Rasheed fear his power being threatened in his own home, which makes him vulnerable to capture his power back by showing Laila who is in-charge. This mirrors how the Taliban uses its authoritarian power to prevent women from partaking in any degree of public life; this keeps them from speaking out against their oppression. In the novel's climax, Rasheed's power is ultimately stripped off him when Mariam takes his life before he can use the gun to protect and defend himself.

3.6 Masculinity as a Ploy in Politics

There's a scene in chapter 37 where Rasheed and Mariam are discussing new political updates—“Rasheed laughed. Mariam heard the answer in his laugh: that in the eyes of the Taliban, being a communist and the leader of the dreaded KHAD made Najibullah only slightly more contemptible than a woman.” (Hosseini 249)

Rasheed’s laughter here hints that he is in favor of the oppressive laws of the Taliban, many of which were enforced to control women. While the Taliban wasn't killing women outright, their laws were enforced to show they considered women “contemptible.”

3.7 Reconstruction of Masculinity

Not all male characters in the novel can be classified as toxic. The elderly Mullah Faizullah, Tariq, and Hakim are in fact shown to be the opposite of toxic masculinity. They deal with women in nurturing ways making them know that they can achieve anything they set their hearts to. Rasheed classed these men as "soft men" (Hosseini 63). "Marriage can wait. Education cannot. You can be anything you want Laila. I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as men, maybe even more." (Hosseini 103)

Laila's father, Babu/Hakim's perspective towards masculinity akin to his culture differed from the political times he was living in. Multiple times, he respected and adhered to the opinions of his wife and daughter. During the war crisis, when everyone was fleeing Afghanistan, he didn't vacate his home simply because his wife didn't wish to.

Growing up in Hakim's shadow is Tariq, whose idea of masculinity was also developed and reconstructed. He was highly respectful of women, especially Laila, his wife. Upon Rasheed's death, he takes on the responsibility of Laila and both her children, step-fathering one of them. At the end of the novel, he brings Laila back to their native land to uplift the society they grew up in. This again showcases how masculinity is perceived and practiced differently in different households.

Another example of a progressive male character is Zaman who believes in the education of women and secretly runs a school during the Taliban regime, knowing fully well the severity of punishments he was exposing himself to. Hosseini deliberately put these characters to serve in contrast to those like Rasheed who is the walking representative of toxic masculinity.

3.8 Intergenerational Suppression of Women

"Masculinity and femininity are relational concepts, which only have meaning in relation to each other" (Buscher, 2005:5). When discussing the existence of masculinity, it is impossible for the discussion to not be accompanied by femininity because the two share an interdependent relationship. "The ideas of masculinity and femininity exist only in comparative relation to one another. In other words, femininity does not exist independently of masculinity and vice versa" (Knapp, Muller, & Quiros, 2009:1). Also, they serve as binary opposites to each other because both have their own traits and behaviors opposing one another.

"Despite her rants against him when he wasn't around, Nana was subdued and mannerly when Jalil visited... She did not look at him directly and never used coarse language around him" (Hosseini 20). This description of Nana's subdued behavior in the presence of Jalil, her male counterpart, reflects the acceptable traits and characteristics that display femininity, especially in contrast to masculinity. Such a mannerism of shyness, modesty, and ultimately, suppression on the woman's part speaks of the controlled subjugation that is felt in the presence of a hegemonic male figure.

The character of Nana acts as a magnifying glass into how patriarchy brainwashes and suppresses women through generations. "What's the sense schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon..."

There's 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" (Hosseini 17).

Nana's voice in these lines screams the muteness of generations of silent women. These are the ones in the backdrop, hidden behind their veils, whose voices go unheard through the crooked walls they're confined to. The endurance of these very women affects the generations of women that come after them.

There's no sugarcoating when it comes to Nana's advice to Mariam, it is raw and comes from a place of experience. In her own ways, she prepares Mariam for being born in a male-dominated world. Before Nana kills herself, she leaves Mariam with her final monologue as an expression of her love and sacrifice for her— "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." (Hosseini 26)

The females in these patriarchal communities succumb to adjust and endure the toxicity and hence, they grow old preaching the same toxic values inherent to them. How these women view themselves and their capabilities is restricted by what is permissible to them. Gradually, their natural talents get erased from their memory, and what's left is inherent toxicity that they further impose upon their daughters during motherhood.

3.9 Burqa- the Veil of Control

When the Taliban take over the city, they impose burqa upon women as a part of their new Sharia law. These new laws allow the Taliban to control women's bodies, how they present themselves and how they're perceived. While the burqa is used as a means for repression by the Taliban, for some Islamic women, it can be a symbol of comfort. For instance, Mariam seeks comfort in not being eyed in public. Having been shamed as harami her whole childhood, she uses the burqa as a shield to protect her from hurtful assumptions. With the burqa on, there's no way for people to know what she looks like and thus they can't get to her past.

Laila, who grew up with more freedom than Mariam, is horrified at this enforcement. Rasheed, who previously forced Mariam into the burqa, supports these new laws by the Taliban, sharing the similar belief that women should be controlled. Even while Laila is giving birth in Chapter 39, the female doctor says, ""They want us to operate in burqa," the doctor explained, motioning with her head to the nurse at the door. "She keeps watch. She sees them coming; I cover."" (Hosseini 259)

Here, the woman's resoluteness in an oppressive situation is an inspiration to other women who are trying to break free. It is also a condemnation of the Taliban's ridiculous regulations. This shows the extent to which men in power exercise their control over women to establish and maintain their position of dominance.

CHAPTER: 04**Mirroring the Effects of Hegemonic Masculinity on both Male and Female Characters: A Comparative Analysis of the Two Novels**

Hegemonic Masculinity does not just mean masculine superiority, but it is more about gender relations and how different genders view each other. Hence, this doesn't apply to male gender only, rather it is concerned with the placing of men in the hierarchical gender order. This society has metamorphosed itself time and again, but men have always maintained the topmost position in almost every stratum. Usually, these are certain groups of men who associate themselves with possession of wealth and power or are granted said power by the society, putting them in dominant positions. These men then legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance. Raewyn Connell, in her 1987 model of hegemonic masculinity, analyzes those attitudes and practices among men that perpetuate gender inequality. In this model of gendered hierarchy, femininities come at the bottom. But, not far above, come other 'submissive men' who lack the characteristics that are exclusively set aside for men.

Hosseini sets both his novels in the patriarchal society of Afghanistan depicting, through his characters, how hegemonic masculinity has impacted generations of men and women. One can witness, from the preceding chapter, the extent to which men in power exercise their control over women to establish and maintain their position of dominance. This is evident in the treatment of women at the hands of their own men in house and of the Taliban in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Hosseini has deliberately placed his two protagonists- Mariam and Laila- the two women under such circumstances to highlight the parallelism in the behavior of men and the threat posed by their power dynamics.

The first male figure in Mariam's life, her father Jalil, can be dissected as a hegemonic male himself. He's given a dominant aura since the beginning of the novel, which can be seen through the difference in Nana's behavior in his presence and absence. The only times Nana can hurl abuses at him is when he's not around. In his presence, Nana is reduced to a mute doll trained to behave. Nana's muteness advocates for the prolonged silence of generations of women who have been ingrained with this concept of male dominance.

This dominance isn't away from insecurity either. When Mariam is being compelled to marry Rasheed, she looks in desperation at Jalil for him to object, to "say something". "Then Jalil did, in a thin threadbare voice. "Goddamn it, Mariam, don't do this to me," he said as though he was the one to whom something was being done" (Hosseini 2007, pg 46). Hosseini's comment in these lines mocks men like Jalil, the men who sing praises of their courage but when the time comes to take action, they fail to do so. The phrase *don't do this to me* is an indictment of how these men can very easily play victim when put in situations that are uncomfortable for them, which pose a threat to their masculinity.

Another form of discomfort by a hegemonic male is on display when Rasheed, in his macho-ness, is evidently uncomfortable with Mariam's crying without being able to comprehend her difficulty with adjusting to her new life in his home. "Stop your crying, now. I mean it... That's one thing I can't stand, the sound of a woman crying. I'm sorry. I've no patience for it" (Hosseini 2007, pg 54). From this point on, he starts exhibiting his masculinity masked as emotional detachment. When he senses that Mariam might be afraid of him, he asks her "'you're shaking. Maybe I scare you. Do I scare you? Are you

frightened of me?" Mariam wasn't looking at him, but she could hear something slyly playful in these questions, like a needling" (Hosseini 2007, pg 55). This conversation suggests that Rasheed desired Mariam to admit that she's afraid of him, which would seal the deal on their dominant-submissive relationship.

According to a 2019 critical study on violence against women by E W Morris and K Ratajczak, this behavior is taught early on to young boys, who learn to embrace their masculinity by rejecting femininity, subsequently learning to act differently from and superior to girls. This learned behavior is partially accountable for grown up men to continue their exhibition of dominance over women, and at times, leads to violence against their female partners (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009; Morris and Ratajczak, 2019).

Even the act of forcing a burqa on Mariam by Rasheed is a twisted power move. He plots his play by first shaming the women who don't wear burqas: "The women come uncovered, they talk to me directly, look me in the eye without shame" (Hosseini 2007, pg 63). This is done to rule these women out as "modern women" who lack shame, the kind of women he doesn't want Mariam to turn into. Then he reprimands those "soft men" who "allow" their wives to be modern. "It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife" (Hosseini 2007, pg 63). This is a trademark manner of treating women like a commodity to be in possession and control of at all times. This scene brings to Mariam "a sensation of shrinking... imposing and immovable" (Hosseini 2007, pg 64). Hosseini describes her experience of first trying the burqa as "unnerving." "She did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth" (Hosseini 2007, pg 65). Additionally, this is a passing remark to the silencing of Mariam.

This manipulation by Rasheed of Mariam into accepting the burqa isn't the slightest bit different from what the Taliban was doing to exert its control over women. Taliban made use of the Quran verses and manipulated them as it saw fit. It imposed burqa and male chaperoning upon women to steal their ability to decide for themselves, rendering them useless. Whereas according to the holy text, these were a means of protection, not oppression. In case of adherence to such obligations, women were subjected to brutal criminal punishments. These punishments were public to invoke more fear into the brains of those women who were remotely thinking of defying dictatorship. This atmosphere of dictatorship is similar to what men at homes had created for their wives. Rasheed's torment towards Mariam and Laila, when he feels he has lost control on them, is an attempt at regaining that relinquished control and more importantly, an attempt to prevent being controlled. According to the aforementioned study by Morris and Ratajczak, men resort to such behaviors to defend or preserve their masculinity when they fear a threat to their masculine status, a behavioral pattern they described as "compensatory manhood."

Men's dominance over women is central to the definition of hegemonic masculinity, yet the counter-effects aren't just confined to women. According to Connell, masculinity comes as a prized possession exclusive to powerful men who display extreme toughness and assertion and are resolute in face of a threat or in an adversity. Such a "macho" masculinity builds pressure on young boys and even on those grown-up men who are different from the societal "ideal" men and unwittingly makes them believe that they lack masculinity. In most cases, this supposed lack of masculinity leads to the emergence

of toxic masculinity, which is also a threat to men themselves. As seen in *The Kite Runner*, Amir spends his entire childhood taking questionable measures to win the approval of his father.

Amir's consideration of his father to be the ideal afghani man and attempting to be more like him, pressurizes Amir into glorifying his father's masculinity to the extent that it becomes an unattainable object for him. His father's rejection of him and his feminine touch obviously doesn't help his case. The most disheartening of such times is when Amir overhears his father saying: "If I hadn't seen the doctor pull him out of my wife with my own eyes, I'd never believe he's my son" (Hosseini 2003, pg 22). The next morning, Amir snaps at Hassan, albeit guilty about it, this incident slightly hints to his dislike for Hassan for having to share his father with him.

Readers can observe Amir's longing to forge a connection with his father when he lies to him about Hassan having fever runs, just so he could have his father "all to himself" on their time at the Ghargha Lake. The next day, at the opening ceremony of the orphanage, Amir's excitement in possessing his father's hat during his speech is his way to declare to the world: "he was my father, my baba" (Hosseini 2003, pg 14).

By putting his father on a pedestal, Amir didn't just try to morph into him, but at the failure of achieving likewise, he blamed himself and developed a jealousy towards Hassan, jeopardizing Hassan's life. Amir running after the fallen kite that Hassan was chasing is a desperate attempt at winning his emotionally distant father's love and respect. It's almost as if his father is the metaphorical kite that Amir is running towards. But in all his feeble trials at gaining his father's masculinity, Amir didn't try to learn or inculcate in himself the strength and valor that his father sings praises of. As a hegemonic male himself, Amir's father preached *nang* and *namoos*, which is what Hosseini explained as the pride and honor of Afghani men, a concept lost on the poor boy. This proclaims that the mere possession of the qualities associated with masculinity doesn't guarantee manliness or the lack of which wouldn't be recast into toxicity.

By comparing the effects of toxic masculinity on both the male and female characters of the two novels, it is conclusive that toxic masculinity affects not only men but also those around them. This study examines how hegemonic masculinity works in favor of those men in power and legitimizes their interests. However, it only takes into account the effects of hegemonic masculinity and doesn't get into the root cause of its emergence. A psychological study of the two novels shall be encouraged to get these answers. Whatever may the cause be, being a masculine man isn't necessarily toxic in itself, but how that masculinity is expressed or not expressed is what puts the concept under judgment.

The research also weighs in on the long-debated question of what the society perceives as toxic masculinity is actually a lack of masculinity. Meaning what we may classify as toxic masculinity is really not masculine in the first place. The analysis of the subject concludes that both are, in retrospect, derivative of each other. This research tries to bridge the gap between lack of masculinity and toxic masculinity and understanding how they go hand-in-hand. Where there is a lack of masculinity, there will be an inadvertent emergence of toxicity.

The study also interrogates the traditional gender roles that are at work in the patriarchal society as depicted in the chosen texts, but it doesn't question their relevance in the current times. It also limits itself in explaining what being a man means. But is such a counterintuitive concept even definable in this society of variables? John Maclnnes argues otherwise in his 1998 work *The End of Masculinity: The Confusion of Sexual Genesis and Sexual Difference in Modern Society*, wherein he criticizes the vague and contradictory present definitions of masculinity in literature.

The field of masculinities is the one with multiple definitions and derivations and would remain so as the gender roles and the power dynamics between the sexes evolve. Hence, it can be inferred that masculinity shouldn't be restricted to its definitions of what a man is but instead should be comprehended as an ideology of how a man should be.

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