

## HOW QUIETLY WE ENDURE ALL THAT FALLS UPON US: A FEMINIST STUDY OF KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

*Hunain Sabir, Ushna Maryam Khan*

*The Department of English, GSCWU, Bahawalpur, Pakistan*

[hunainsabir95@gmail.com](mailto:hunainsabir95@gmail.com) , [ushnamaryam313@gmail.com](mailto:ushnamaryam313@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

The paper aims to identify the sexual, physical, emotional and psychological discrimination, faced by female characters in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Analyzing the works related to the paper through qualitative method of research, the paper, through the characters of Laila and Mariam, discusses the subordination and marginalization that the Afghan women have to endure. It presents the status of Afghan women as the victims of not only patriarchy but political changes, terrorism and war as well.

### INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a fight for women rights. It is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression (Hooks 1). According to Bhasin and Khan

Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women's labor, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and in society in general, and conscious action by women and men to transform the present situation (3).

According to Cuddon, feminist literary criticism is an attempt to evaluate the lives and experiences of women, portrayed in any kind of literature. It questions male domination within literature (315).

Despite many successes to defend their existence, women face enormous issues of gender discrimination in all aspects of life be it verbal or physical abuse, humiliation, compulsive behavior and conduct. Women are a constant victim oppression, adversity and abuse in and outside of their home boundaries. This oppression and discrimination can affect women physically, socially, emotionally and psychologically. Literature has a major role in revealing women's lives to broaden people's knowledge of gender discrimination and challenge this gender inequality. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is one of those literary works.

The Afghanistan history speaks that, with oppression imposed by Taliban and Mujahidin, the country is one of the strongest patriarchal societies that bear restricted, oppressed conditions for women (Moghadam 7). Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a realistic account of Afghan-women's lives in a patriarchal society, oppression and marginalization. It is a portrayal of women in a men-authoritative social setup facing injustices, discrimination and sadistic conducts. By introducing two female protagonists, Hosseini depicts in his novel, how women are ill-treated, abused and tortured in society.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

According to the introduction, the study will answer the following question:

1. How the female characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* have endured physically, socially, sexually, emotionally and psychologically?

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is

1. To find out how female characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are subordinated physically, socially, sexually, emotionally and psychologically.

2. To explore the circumstances through which these characters, Laila and Maryam, went and marginalized by the society and male characters.

### **SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This research will give a better understanding of Afghan culture for women. The motive is not to discriminate no matter how different you look, whatever your sex is. This research is document to present a clear picture of Afghan Women's endurance from Hosseini's point of view. The paper can be a motivation for future researchers to conduct further research about gender discrimination or Afghan women, and try to end this discrimination towards women, not only in Afghanistan but in every part of the world where it is observed.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The paper is conducted through qualitative method of research. To have valid and reliable data, the primary source is the English Novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini. Different journals, literary criticism and articles have also been used to analyze the data. All the related data and helpful literary material is collected through a comprehensive reading of works by previous researchers, different journals, available literary criticism and related books, and primarily by reading the text of the stories to get a better understanding. Supportive data related to the subject of the study is collected from all the available resources.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This review will broaden the ideas of future researchers about all the significant related literature related to this work, that is, to examine how women are portrayed in Afghan setup, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Novels dealing with the issues of Middle Eastern Women have become the centre of focus in today's literary vista. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a brief overview of the general situation of Afghan women. The novel is a representation of crushed women and provides an insight into the females' struggles within the context of war and deserves to be read by all (Bunce 833). When you finishes this novel you come to know how the conflicts and struggles of Afghanistan creates, destroys and steers the lives of the people (13).

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the history of a war trodden, torn land. Afghanistan has gone through a number of wars and internal clashes, which created a social habitat (Gopinath 1). Gordan and Almutairi described the novel as a study of post colonial and feminine resistance. They focused on the levels of resistance by Mariam and Laila, pointed out the gender oppression and their status in the society. They presented the battle between identification and identifying, and most importantly, 'self identity against the masculine standards' (240-247). Merrill, Paxon and Tobey state, that the Afghan family setup is 'endogamous, patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal'. The researchers argue that the novel contributes in shaping the readers' attitudes and perceptions towards Afghan women. The novel is a witness of Afghan culture and as a device of interreting Afghan women's lives and worlds (Witten n. p.).

According to Joiya, Farooq, Gill and Ghafoor, Khaled Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, is the focus on the female subaltern characters, doubly and triply marginalized by the males, system, male-dominated society and the culture. It is a surge of freedom among the females (98-99).

## ANALYSIS:

Afghan women have been facing gender equity since ages. This analysis is focusing on the discussion on Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to reveal what Afghan women endured as a result of discrimination that the society forced upon them for being women.

The novel falls into four parts; first and second parts tell the story of Mariam and Laila's lives respectively. Third part of the novel is about the shared lives and mutual understanding of both the females, living under the same roof and fighting against the cruelty and oppression forced by their husband, Rasheed. The fourth part is a recapitulation of Laila's life with Tariq.

Five years old Mariam's story starts in 1964. She is an illegitimate child, living with her mother, Nana. Nana did not let Mariam to attend school but she has regular visits from the village mullah who teaches her to read, write and recite Koran. Mariam compares her mother's strictness and stern attitude with her father's cheerfulness and gift, the father who disowned her for his legitimate family and honor. Ten years later, she walks away from kolba to the village of Gul Daman to find her father, or to say, her identity. Laila, a nine years old girl, born with the spring of communist's takeover of Kabul in 1978. Laila enjoyed all the freedom that Mariam didn't.

Mariam was forced to marry Rasheed, a cruel and ugly man, at the age of 15. He broke Mariam's spirit of life and liberty, abused her and confined her to the four walls of his prison which he called home. During the wars of 1980-1990, a rocket destroyed Laila's home, her parents and ultimately her life. This and her unexpected pregnancy forced Laila to marry Rasheed, husband of Mariam, Laila's neighbor who saved her life and provided her shelter for his own benefit. Both these women are presented as a true picture of Afghan women. Women are oppressed at all levels be it education, marriage, childbirth, or physical, mental or sexual abuse.

Nana represents the first generation of marginalized women. The story starts with the rejection of Nana by Jalil, Mariam's father. Her sternness stalks from her rejections in life. First rejected by her fiancé after an epileptic fit then rejected by her own father and Jalil after she got pregnant by Jalil's illegitimate child. She reassures Mariam with a little sense of security and comfort. Nana lost her freedom and self respect at the hands of Jalil, society and family. Though he does not do any physical or verbal abuse on Nana, but his behavior and rejection has deep scars on her soul. She is psychologically suffering from the fact that Jalil disowned her to live alone in kolba for his family and honor. His psychological torment is viewed when she abused Mariam and called her 'harami' (Bastard). At her bitter experience with men and life, she teaches Mariam 'Learn this now and learn this well my daughter; like a compass needle that always points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman' (Hosseini 7).

Jalil saved his reputation by casting out pregnant Nana out of his house. He does not fulfill his promise to take Mariam with him instead he marries off her to elderly Rasheed, against her wish, just to maintain his position in his family and society.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* the women have very different educational sagacity. Mariam is tutored by a Mullah of the village to read and write, and when she asks her mother to attend school, Nana tells her that the only lesson she needs to learn is to 'endure'. This shows that their social setup for women was made to learn endurance from

a very early age. Thus Mariam is never permitted to attend school. Later, the Taliban claimed that home schooling is not permitted either. Any scholarly or religious teaching must be done secretly.

Marriage, rather forced marriage, is another recurring theme to depict women oppression in the novel. Fifteen years old Mariam is forced to marry Rasheed who is 40 at that time, trice matured than her. Jalil, in order to save his reputation in society and family married her off. She was bound to accept this misfortune, constrained marriage.

Female is a piece of man's patrimony... is losing herself, female is lost. She doesn't possess anything, female is not raised to nobility of a man; she herself is a piece of man's patrimony, first her father's and after that her husband's (Beauvoir 93).

Child marriage is a common issue in Afghan society so is polygamy. As Rasheed says to Mariam, "don't be so dramatic. It's a common thing... I have friends who have two, three even four wives. Your own father had three. And I'm doing this now most of the men had done this long ago" (Hosseini 208-209).

Honor is the foundation on which the Afghan society is built. To judge the morality of women, this patriarchal society has some standards. This is the reason why Rasheed forced Mariam to wear burqa and cover herself because 'a woman's face is her husband's business only' (Hosseini 69). Men who were liberal were mocked by their culture. This so-called *nang and namoos* (pride and honor) is another factor that marginalized women, taking away the liberty to even walk confidently.

I have customers, Mariam, who come with their wives to my shop. They come uncovered, they talk to me directly, look directly into my eyes without shame. They wear makeup and skirts show off their knees... their husbands stand and watch. They allow it. They think they are being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education. They don't see that they're spoiling their nang and namoos, their honor and pride... (Hosseini 69).

Same was imposed on Laila when she married Rasheed. Laila married Rasheed because she got pregnant with Tariq's illegitimate child. In order to save her child and life, she agreed to be Rasheed's second wife. The reason on the part of Rasheed to marry Laila was to have a child because his first wife, Mairam, was failed to give him any.

Childbearing is another issue in Afghan society. Women are severely punished when they fail to produce strong, healthy sons. The main aim of the relationship is to bring forth male children. Thus, female status is judged by the ability of women to produce males. Edward describes the relationship between Afghan institution of family and marriage in term of child birth, and not only child birth but birth of a male child. On one hand it is a symbol of pride, on the other, highlights the male dominion (n. p.). When Aziza was born, Rasheed pointed his violent behavior towards Laila as well because she has given birth to a girl. This can also be seen in Rasheed's preference for Zalmai, Laila and Rasheed's child, over Azziza.

As the male child makes ancestors immortal, they are no less than a blessing for Afghan families. When once Laila visited Rasheed's maker shop, he touched her belly and said 'swelling so quickly... it's going to be a big boy. My son wil be a pahlwan!' (Hosseini 247). He was so adamant that it should only be boy.



On one hand women were crushed at the hands of their husbands for child bearing, they suffered the issue of health care in their country on the other. The Afghan women were not allowed to go to a male doctor neither to get treatment from a female doctor. When Laila was ready to give birth to Zalmai, her baby boy, the hospitals refused to deal her. ‘The hospital no longer treats women’, the guard barked (Hosseini 278). The only hospital which deals with women was not having proper medication and anesthetics. Laila’s cesarean is portrayed so realistically by Hosseini, to portray the condition of women suffrage in Afghanistan. Laila was to be operated without any proper anesthetics or medication. The women showed magnificent strength and power during the horrified Taliban reign;

... ‘cut me open’, Laila said. She dropped back on bed and drew her knees up... ‘cut me open and give me my baby’ (Hosseini 259).

The pregnancies are presented as a hope in the novel. Mariam’s pregnancies are a hope to get away from her bleak living situation. Laila’s pregnancy with Aziza is her hope to stay positive even after Tariq’s death.

After Taliban took over Kabul, they ordered to paint women’s house windows, black. They forced women to wear burqa or chadari – which covered the whole body leaving only a small opening to see through. They prohibited the girls and women to be examined and treated by male physicians and banned females doctors and nurses from working. They prohibited females to step outside their houses. They must be accompanied by their males. In short, making their life a living hell than it already was.

Besides all these major issues, Afghan women are constant victims of physical and verbal violence. Physical violence includes slapping, pinching, biting, burning, fisting, kicking and detainment (WCLRF 26). In chapter 33, we see how Mariam has strong fear from Rasheed’s disposition when he was carrying his brown leather belt and ‘Mariam slides out of her bed and began backpedaling, her arms instinctively crossed over her chest where he often strikes her first (Hosseini 255). We also find Rasheed’s violence over Laila, ‘and then he is on Laila, pummeling her chest, her head, her belly with fists, tearing at her hair, throwing her to the wall... Rasheed pushes Laila to the ground and begin kicking her (Hosseini 326).

Verbal violence consists of humiliation, isolation, and insult of victimized person. According to the WCLRF, the defects are often mentioned as ‘these are sometimes accompanied by a series of threats such as murder, divorce and threatening them for re-marriage’ (27). After a series of miscarriages, Rasheed has got changed;

Most nights when he comes home, he hardly talks anymore. He eats, smoke, goes to bed, sometimes comes back in the middle of the night for a brief and of late, quite rough session of coupling (Hosseini 100).

He stopped talking to Mariam, in answer to her question ‘Are you angry with me?’ (Hosseini 100), he only sighs and does actions that psychologically disturbed Mariam. This shows that Afghan women were forced to endure the consequence for being born ‘women’. When Taliban came to Afghanistan, the manipulation they claim over women’s lives was just an extreme form of what they were already enduring.

Just as Mariam and Laila experienced abuse from Rasheed in their home and from random men as they venture out on the streets of

Kabul, the country has abused and traumatized by outside forces (Stuhr 55).

From Nana to Aziza, every female generation fell victim to the male authoritative, cruel society, sometimes at the hands of father, sometimes at the hands of husband. Aziza was sent to an orphanage when Rasheed was suffering from financial crisis. This shows the gender discrimination between a girl child and a boy child. Aziza was sent to orphanage and not Zalmai just because she was a girl.

At the end, both Mariam and Laila's lives came together despite of their different upbringings, with a shared hope for the survival of their family. Their story runs corresponding to the story of Afghanistan over four decades.

## CONCLUSION

**“Only one skill. And it's this: tahamul. Endure.”** Mullah Faizullah said. (Hosseini 18).

The lives of Afghan women were confined to this one word 'Endure'. They were taught to endure, they were made to endure, they were forced to endure, and they became the symbol of endurance. Hosseini, through the characters of Laila and Mariam, enlightened the challenging life of Afghan woman. Afghanistan is a patriarchal society, where all the decisions are made by male members, including household, family, child education and residence (Rahimi n. p.)

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a picture of gender inequalities, condemning life under Taliban rule, rape, discrimination, separation, war, no work, no word and inferiority of women (Shapiro 48).

Mariam and her mother Nana became the archetypes who never demands for her own self and sacrifices everything for others. For them, the only way to survive in a male oriented society is 'endurance'.

Hosseini's women appear to be urged by the outside forces, familial and societal, having little chance of influencing their own fortunes and lives, yet they are neither helpless nor passive, they propel against everything that falls upon them. They make choices and accept whatever consequences they have to face to meet the desired ends.

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