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## Power Struggle and Power Transactions in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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### ABSTRACT

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan writer highlights the loss of individual basic rights particularly in women during the Taliban rule at Afghanistan through *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), a story that takes place in a milieu fuelled by war under the rule of the Taliban. The siege lasted for twenty years, when women were denied their right of education and even their right to vote. The stringent and strained experiences of the Afghan women are revealed through Mariam and Laila, who suffer terribly as a result of oppression from their husband Rasheed and from the Taliban. Mariam suffers as an illegitimate and unwanted child and later, struggles with Rasheed as a belittled and barren wife, ending up as a self sacrificing woman to protect Laila. The paper analyses how Mariam and Laila join together in a Marxist-feminist retaliation against the man who has taken away their rights to love whom they want, live how they want and walk free once more, arm-in-arm as women in Kabul. Mariam and Laila are two women representatives of the women, not only in Afghanistan, but also of the whole world, who are abused of their rights and mistreated by their husbands. They prove that women are victims of the power games of men and are victims of discrimination in the societies of all countries. The Afghan society is not an exception to this.

**Key words:** Power transactions, Marxist-Feminist retaliation, social discrimination, hegemony

## Power Struggle and Power Transactions in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Women are victims of the power games of men and are victims of discrimination in the societies of all countries. The Afghan society is not an exception to this. Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan writer highlights the loss of individual basic rights particularly in women during the Taliban rule at Afghanistan. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) narrates a story that takes place in a milieu fuelled by war under the rule of the Taliban, when it encountered violation of human rights, women abuse and public flogging. The Taliban siege lasted for twenty years, when women were denied their right of education and even their right to vote. This was a stringent and strained period for the Afghan women and Hosseini reveals this through his central women characters Mariam and Laila, the wives of Rasheed, who suffer terribly as a result of the torture given by Rasheed and by the Talibans.

The Taliban establishes rules and regulations that deny women even their basic rights – even as basic as that of health care or the capacity to care for their children. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the struggles of women are depicted vividly. Mariam and Laila are Afghan women, born generations apart, yet they end up getting married to Rasheed. They share a special bond of love and concern for each other. They are both married at the age of fifteen. A marriage in Islam is usually a sacred union of two people who choose to respect and honour one another in all situations. It is usually a joyous occasion for females, intended to impart honour, pride and

contentment in their lives. In the novel, marriage is a nightmare in which both women are abused physically and mentally. The legal marrying age for women in Afghanistan is sixteen, however, people in rural areas "either ignore the law or claim they are not aware of it". Child marriages are common all over Afghan. It is believed that between sixty and eighty percent of all the marriages in Afghanistan are forced and out of these fifty-seven percent are child marriages. These marriages come are against their fundamental rights and lead to severe health risks and as a result, their babies suffer.

Mariam's existence as a *harami* (bastard) gives her a marginalized role. She understands that she is "an illegitimate person, who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance" (Hosseini 1). Hosseini proves through her "the injustice, that it is the creators of *harami* who are culpable, not the *harami*, whose only sin is being born" (1). Mariam, the social outcast dies a saint's death and she appears as a symbol of self-effacing love and hope for the future of women like Laila.

The Right to Education is denied to Afghan women. The literacy rate of women in Afghanistan is currently 14%. Women are kept at home and are denied the chance to get an education. Mariam's life proves it vividly. As Mariam's father tells her, under the rule of King Zahir Shah, Kabul was without bloodshed for 40 years. This situation changed into a terror within a few years and later, worsened with the rise of the Taliban. Laila suffered, as did many other girls who were being schooled. During the Taliban period, only three percent of women were educated. All schools for girls and universities for women were closed. This lasted for twenty years and curbed the growth of women for an entire generation. The life of Laila proves this.

The history of Afghanistan is varied and complex. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the government was highly restrictive. The lost leg of Tariq and the demise of Laila's brothers remind it. The period of Mujahideen and Najibullah were also in no way conducive to the growth of women in Afghanistan. But, the Soviet policy was positive towards women. It aimed at raising the status of women by providing them with educational and professional opportunities. In contrast, the Taliban rule denied all rights of women, not only of education, but also of movement and work. Even their fundamental right of expression in any mode is deprived off totally. Mariam and Laila remind and represent what Virginia Woolf writes of women in the beginning of the twentieth century:

Imaginatively, she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely and was the property of her husband. (51)

Both Laila and Mariam encounter a lot of challenges that curtail their development, even though they are ready to take up education and come up as dynamic and active women. Laila writes poignant poetry which never gets published. Mariam faces a father who refuses to acknowledge her, a husband who abuses her for twenty-seven years, and the need to murder her husband when he is determined to kill Laila. Though Mariam and Laila are wives who start their egoistic clashes at the beginning, their relationship matures within a few days. They are more like mother and daughter or as sisters in resisting their adverse circumstances together. Conservative and

willful as any man brought up by male-oriented society can be, Rasheed instructs Mariam on what he believes an ideal wife should be: subservient, obedient, and fertile. When Mariam proves to be unable to have children, Rasheed loses patience with her and abuses her both physically and verbally.

Rasheed imposes his power on Mariam and later on Laila too. He becomes the embodiment of “terrorism of power” (Ashcroft 18). Ashcroft tells, “The subaltern does need to speak out of otherness to speak as the other” (46). The ‘otherness’ in Mariam and Laila is never revealed and no support is given to them in any form. Mariam was once an independent girl. But the male dominated society makes her into a silent woman. In the first chapters of the book, Mariam brandishes feminist independence and strikes out on her own without a male escort into the city to find her father, who has not shown up to take her out on her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday as promised. Mariam and Laila join together in Marxist-feminist retaliation against the man who has taken away their rights to love whom they want, live how they want and walk free once more, arm-in-arm as women in Kabul. Mariam grows from being an unwanted child to a belittled and barren wife. From a feminist perspective, Mariam’s role as a woman and caregiver is thwarted by her inability to conceive and she is oppressed cruelly.

From the Marxist angle, her lack of hierarchical birthright puts her in a lower class. The class and gender struggle in any society is exposed by Hosseini through the suffering of Mariam and Laila. Towards the end of the novel, we learn that Laila is forced to leave her daughter in an orphanage and Mariam is given death punishment cruelly for murdering her husband. Irrespective of the rulers of Afghanistan, men have complete power over their wives and then, the Taliban makes it as a strict law. Wife-beating, murder, loss of their control on their own

children, and humiliation for even exposing their ankle are only a few of the many degrading practices on women in Afghanistan. They continue even today.

Mariam and Laila are two women representatives of the women, not only in Afghanistan, but also of the whole world, who are abused of their rights and mistreated by their husbands. Hosseini blends the experiences of these women with his imagination in creating a fascinating microcosm of Afghan family life. He shows us the interior lives of the suffering women "living beneath their identity-diminishing burkhas" (201). The rights of a human being, the rights of a woman, the rights of a child and the rights of expression in any mode are limited, violated and crushed mercilessly.

Due to the worsening situation, the citizens of Afghanistan are forced to find an escape. Acts of terrorism and warfare make Afghanistan a dangerous place to live in. But Mariam and Laila are deprived of their rights even to escape to Pakistan or to any other country, because they are without a male companion. As soon as the Taliban came to power, women were banished from the work force, weren't allowed to be seen outside without a mahram (male relative). A woman, if caught alone on the street, "would be beaten and sent home" (Hosseini 248). This was the beginning of the end for women rights. A male was not to treat a female for any reason. The only female doctors available would be far from the town's centre and in a remote area with just the minimal resources. Laila's delivery is a testimony to their lack of basic facilities in life. Laila and her family with Aziza, Rasheed and Mariam go to Rabia Balkhi Hospital. "They had no clean water...no oxygen, no medications, no electricity" (Hosseini 255). Laila is pregnant with Zalamai and has to go to this very hospital to deliver him. Her baby was delivered with the doctor cutting her open without anaesthetics. Many other pregnant women suffered the same

fate. Talibans enjoy absolute power and this hegemony is highlighted by Hosseini. In modern terms, we understand that,

Hegemony is the power of the ruling class.... Domination is thus exerted not by force, but by a more subtle and inclusive power over the economy, and by which the ruling class's interest is presented as the common interest and thus comes to be taken for granted" (Ashcroft et al 116)

Hosseini also describes other restrictions placed on women which are not in any way an exaggerated report at all. Women, under the Taliban reign were severely beaten for various "crimes". They would be beaten for not wearing the full burqa and having their ankles exposed. Burqas are expensive and many women are unable to afford them. Situations were such that women would leave their houses one by one so they could share the garments. Mariam explains her feelings when she wears Burqa for the first time. "The padded head piece felt tight and heavy on her skull and it was a strange seeing the world through a mesh screen. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth" (Hosseini 71). Women were also assaulted for making a sound, laughing, the sounds of their footsteps, not praying five times a day, making eye contact and all public places that started with "women" were changed to more acceptable words.

Some Taliban militants would go as far as to killing women in public to make an example of them. Often times, women were charged with crimes they would not commit. Young and old women were all treated in the same violent fashion. There are many cases in which "they chopped off hands" because they suspected a crime (Hosseini 318). Islam is a religion which defends human rights and holds women as equals. The Talibans misused the power that they had



taken and established with their despicable practices. The novel “examines power relations which obtain in texts and in life with a view to breaking them down seeing reading as a political act and showing the extent of patriarchy” (Barry 134).

The paper brings out the agonized voices of women like Mariam and Laila. Mariam ends her life with no redemption, but with the satisfaction of her own sacrifice in freeing Laila from the clutches of Rasheed. Though political and social power transactions toss both the women in the novel, Laila ends up in happiness with her union with Tariq. She has the pleasure of living with her children and the pleasure of serving the children in the orphanage. Though Mariam falls a victim to patriarchy, Hosseini draws the end of the novel with a hope for the women of the future, through Laila.

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