

Feministic Reading of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Khaled Hosseini born on March 4, 1965 is an Afghan-born American novelist and physician. He has published three novels, most notably his 2003 debut *The Kite Runner*, all of which are at least partially set in Afghanistan and feature an Afghan as the protagonist. Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, was published in 2007, and is also set in Afghanistan. The story addresses many of the same issues as Hosseini's first, but takes a more feminine perspective.

A Thousand Splendid Suns tells the intertwined stories of the two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, both married to the same abusive man, during the years of the Soviet occupation, then the civil war and the Taliban dictatorship. The novel focuses on subjugation and objectification of Afghan women under patriarchy and Taliban regime.

Feminism is a diverse collection of social theories, political movements, ideologies that define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal and social rights for women. Throughout history feminists all around the globe have fought for gender equity and women's

rights. Feminists strongly believe that women and men should have equal rights. The issue of feminism and gender equity has been raised through the characters of Mariam and Laila.

The story begins in 1974, as Mariam, an illegitimate child of a wealthy businessman from Herat, is growing up with her mother, Nana. Nana is the first woman we meet in the novel who has become the prey of male villainy. Nana worked as a housekeeper in Jalil's house until she was impregnated and abandoned by him. Nana is an outcast she has been violated, discarded by her master. Nana sees the truth of both men and traditions thus is deeply embittered as she expresses, "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 27). She tries to open her daughters eyes to this wisdom, "Learn this now and learn this well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam" (7).

Following her mother's death, Mariam is left alone. Reluctantly Jalil takes her to his home where under pressure from his family, Jalil marries off 15 year old Mariam to Rasheed, a brutish cobbler 30 years older than her. In his house Mariam feels, ". . . , uprooted, displaced, like an intruder on someone else's life" (56). Initially Rasheed's treatment towards Mariam is soft but when she suffers the miscarriage losing her child, Rasheed's behavior altogether changes. In bed he is violent and partially rapes her. He torches her in the name of Islam whose teachings he barely follows. He forces her to wear burqa and lock herself up when he has visitors. Repeated miscarriages dash Rashid's hope of fathering a son, and he subjects Mariam to cruel acts of

physical punishment. Mariam becomes pregnant seven successive times, but is never able to carry a child to terms, and Rasheed gradually becomes more abusive.

Rashid a typical Patriarch in a deep rooted patriarchal society treats Mariam as an object. He is the embodiment of wild man in Medieval texts as described by Hayden white, "He is desire incarnate... glutton, lascivious, and promiscuous, without even conscious of sin or perversion. His physical power conceived to increase in direct ratio to the diminution of his conscience" (167). Rasheed's verbal and physical abuses of powerless Mariam is due to her failure to give him a son to hold his name, which is hardly her fault, but this is how a traditional culture sees it.

However she internalizes and endures Rasheed's physical and psychological dominance as destiny. However, at the end Mariam is not a silenced, peripheral self. She effaces the overwhelming male presence of Rasheed, turns into a rebel female and comes out of her typical feminine cocoon.

Unlike Mariam, Laila on the other hand is living a free and emancipated life. Laila goes to school and is aware about her rights. She is lucky to have the support of two liberal minded men, a father and a boyfriend, both of whom have taught her how to stand for her rights. Her father believes that education is the absolute top priority. He says to Laila, "marriage can wait, education can't... You're a very, very bright girl... when this war is over; Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, may be even more. Because society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila, no chance." (Hosseini 114)

But Laila's freedom does not last long. She loses all her family in war and is compelled to marry Rasheed. In the beginning Rasheed treats her with care but then Laila commits the unforgivable sin of giving Rasheed a daughter, not a son. In Afghanistan a woman's value has been measured by her ability to bear children especially boys. From here on she becomes the target of Rasheed's abuse and torture in the same way as Mariam. She is ruthlessly beaten, subjected to extreme violence. Laila obeys her husband as he often warns her and her children of sending out to the streets.

Unlike Mariam, however, Laila resists. She dares to talk back to her husband. She even tries to resist when her husband wants to beat her. She is questioning, she argues, and sometimes also gets aggressive and violent against her husband. She is educated and knows her rights and position in the society, "Laila is the representation of the women of Afghanistan who through their struggle against violence prove that they still have a spirit to challenge their discriminatory, biased and downtrodden image" (Akhtar, Rouf, Ikram, and Raees 116).

Women in Afghanistan did not suffer only under patriarchy but also became soft target of the religious bigotry under Taliban regime. The conquest of Taliban only added to the Titanic sufferings of Afghan women. The harsh Taliban regime misinterpreted the religious dictums to strengthen the oppression on women. As we see in novel the Taliban frequently carry out executions, flogging and shooting of women who are accused of breaking the orders. One such victim is Mariam herself. Women's world is curtailed to their houses.

The Taliban law of 'Sharia' gives Rasheed an opportunity to subjugate and to exercise control over his wives, ". . . there isn't a court in this God forsaken country that will hold me accountable for what I will do" (Hosseini 265). A man has right to punish a woman of his household as he sees proper without interference from law as is proven by an officer's words to Laila, "what a man does in his home is his business... as a matter of policy, we do not interfere with private family matters, *humshera*" (260).

Under the Taliban regime, "Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately . . . Women are forbidden from working . . . You will not speak unless spoken to . . . You will not laugh in public" (271). All these laws are propounded in the name of Islam. However all these orders go contrary to the teachings of Islam. According to the teachings of Islam, education is very important. The very first word of Quran commanded the believers to 'read'. This command did not distinguish between male and female. The first wife of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) was a successful businesswoman. Prophet (PBUH) said, "seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (Sunan Ibn Majah 229). This applies to both men and women. Hence these laws are only to belittle, disgrace, and confine the freedom of women. These laws only add to the exploitation of women already inflicted by the patriarchy.

The women throughout the novel are treated very poorly with little or no respect and have no rights to decision making either at home or in society. They are, "born in all ages to suffer, generation after generation pass away. But the real pictures of women's sufferings doesn't

change. Characters like Nana, Mariam and Laila are born to only expiate their curse of being women. "(Jana 8)

However the novel, towards the end kindles a ray of hope for all those women who have been suffering under the male dominance and are deprived of all freedom. The novel gives voice to those women whose voice has been muffled by the illegitimate patriarchal authority. Mariam and Laila, finally take the cudgels towards their emancipation and overcome their subjugation. The actions of these women show their strength to endure things and to retaliate against the man who has taken away their rights to live according to their own choice. The novel ends with a happy note where the bloody war has ended, the Taliban rule vanished and women feel secured and emancipated, where schools are reopened for the girls and women are free to work.

Works Cited

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