

Living on the Edge: Women in Khalid Hosseini's Novel *The Kite Runner*

Imtiyaz Ahmad Tantray

Research Scholar (PhD)

Department of Comparative Languages and Culture

Barkatullah University, Bhopal.

Abstract: Violence against women as has been observed is an age old practice which has now become a major issue of concern in today's world. It has been witnessed that in any kind of war whether it is civil strife, communal clashes or World Wars women have been the major victims of violence, torture and humiliation. Khalid Hosseini throughout the novel *The Kite Runner* explores different issues. One among such notable issues is the representation of females. Females, as has been described by Khalid Hosseini in his notable works, can be seen as material goods, and are often shown as weak, marginalized, demeaned, and subject to many double standards in today's society and throughout earlier history. The idea of female representation has been shown in the novel *The Kite Runner*, through the development and construction of male and female characters, combined together with the setting and culture in the novel. This paper studies the vital subject of Afghan women's experience as narrated in Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. In the light of this novel, this paper argues how during a critical phase in Afghanistan's history, the conditions of violence and conflict magnified the oppression on its women.

Keywords: The Kite Runner, oppression, marginalization, violence, conflicts, relationships.

Khalid Hosseini has been one of the finest writers in the contemporary era. He is blessed with an art of writing marvellous stories. He has written three novels *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and *And the Mountain Echoed* (2013) which became best-selling novels wherein Hosseini highlights the double subjugation in the form of

patriarchal authority, ethnicity, love, poverty and the persistent conditions of violence and conflict etc which has magnified and multiplied the agonizing experiences for its women.

The novel *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hosseini is a novel published in 2003 which tells us the story of a young Afghan boy Amir, with a traumatic past, a war stricken homeland, a guilty conscience and a dark and broken future. Hosseini thought out the novel *The Kite Runner* explores different issues. One among such notable issues is the representation of females. Females, as has been described by Khalid Hosseini in his notable works, can be seen as material goods, and are often shown as weak, marginalized, demeaned, and subject to many double standards in today's society and throughout earlier history. The idea of female representation has been shown in the novel *The Kite Runner*, through the development and construction of male and female characters, combined together with the setting and culture in the novel. The same idea of marginalized female representation is also shown in other texts of English literature such as *A Lot to Learn*, *Hamlet* and other great plays, all of which used character construction as a tool to portray these ideas. The novel *The Kite Runner* highlights the ideas of females as being marginalized in many different cases. In this novel, there are only two female characters that have any back story or focus in the book that is Amir's wife Soraya, and Soraya's mother Jamila. Hassan's wife too is mentioned briefly.

The rights of women are restricted in Afghanistan which allows very little feminist activity, and the examples in *The Kite Runner* are few. Soraya's short stay with her boy friend is clear example. She leaves her family behind to run away with her lover, experimenting with drugs and sex in an American rite of passage that would have been scandalous in Afghanistan. Indeed, it is still a scandal in the local Afghan community, and Soraya's father, General Taheri, quickly tracks her down and after she lived with him for a month, her father showed up with a gun and forced her to come home; he said if she did not, he would shoot the man and himself. Thus, he brings his daughter home. After returning home, Soraya was forced to cut off all her hair and is still being shamed over it. In this way, causing the family to move from Virginia to Fremont, to escape the notoriety and his daughter Soraya returns to a life of subservience to her father. Once she refuses to honour her father's request to become a doctor or lawyer, choosing the life of a teacher instead. Thus, male dominance and patriarchal set up in the family is proved even in California that does not allow females to decide even their career. Soraya in the novel says: "My father wants me to go to law school,

my mother is always throwing hints about medical school, but I am going to be a teacher. Doesn't pay much here, but it is what I want.”(Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 151)

So, Soraya raises the issue of injustice through her past. Although she knows now that her actions were wrong, she wishes that, that event was not going to haunt her for the rest of her life. Nevertheless, Soraya's character is strengthened by her own downfalls. Hosseini, through her sufferance, demonstrates that the oppression of females is still occurrence in the Afghan community.

Hassan's mother, Sanaubar, could be considered a feminist. She chooses a life of prostitution, becoming unforgettable to more than one soldier. She deserts her family, after her son's birth, running away with a “clan of travelling singers and dancers.” She returns eventually to Baba's home of her own accord, though mostly out of necessity, but also out of an independent desire to see her son Hassan and make amends for her past. Sofia, Baba's wife, can also be considered a feminist. She teaches at local university, instead of becoming a housewife for her controlling husband. So, she must have maintained a powerful influence over him before her death.

The reader throughout the novel, *The Kite Runner*, observes many grave injustices committed due to cultural conflict and the presence of Taliban in Afghanistan. One of the most notable concerning issues is the inequality and mistreatment that women face on a daily basis due to Taliban mandates in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, women are treated as inferior beings to men and are unable to stand up for themselves due to the laws that Taliban enforces. Its glaring examples, as are identified in the novel, are the wives of Amir and Hassan, Soraya and Farzana, to represent the injustices to which women in Afghanistan are subjected. Taliban implemented the laws restricting the actions and movements of women in Afghanistan especially in public places which is also described in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

The novel *The Kite Runner* is a story which throws light in the life of Amir. It begins in Amir's childhood in Afghanistan before he and his father, Baba fled out of country to the United States. Amir's mother died in childbirth, so happens with his friend Hassan who is also motherless. He was only five years old when his mother left. Therefore the central characters are all Afghan men. Although women are on the periphery, still there are a few instances when we get a glimpse inside the life of an Afghan woman. There are differences

between male and female roles in the novel. One of the big differences in men and women is that women have no voice in who they marry. This proves to be a big problem with Soraya as mentioned above and with Hassan's parents, as his mother, Sanaubar, does not want to be married to Ali, who happens to be her first cousin, nineteen (19) years older than her, disabled due to polio, and infertile. However, her father arranged the marriage to build his own reputation which results; she treats him badly and cheats on him, provides him with an illegitimate son, and then due to lack of women rights and due to the fact that she slept with another man, she runs off with a clan of travelling musicians. Her departure brought in this way, the utmost shame to both father and son, Ali and Hassan. Thus, most Afghan women do not act out in the same way in response to their father's choice.

Amir and Soraya get a chance to speak a few times before their marriage, especially when her father is not around. She has somehow learned that Amir is a writer. He is wonderstruck at how she knows that because although:

Fathers and sons could talk freely about women... no Afghan girl-no decent and *mohtaram* (honourable) Afghan girl, at least-queried her father about a young man. And no father, especially a Pashtun with *nang* (honor) and *namoos* (pride), would discuss the *mojarad* (bachelor) with his daughter, not unless the fellow in question was a *khastegar*, a suitor, who had done the honourable thing and sent his father to knock on the door. (Kerry Gray 2)

Amir and Soraya's marriage would not have been possible, if general Taheri had not given his consent. It is all upto him to decide things in family. They are still not allowed to be alone together until the marriage.

From Soraya's mother, Jamila we learn the most about the traditional role of the Afghan wives. The general Taheri never claimed to marry Jamila for the sake of love and happiness, but because of honor and lineage. He is not an amiable man. He is very controlling and aggressive. Amir finds out the Jamila, 'had once been famous in Kabul for her enchanting singing voice, though she had the talent.' As a condition of her marriage to the general, she had to agree to never again sing in public. So women are expected to give up parts of their life to please husbands or male family members. General Taheri's relationship with his wife Jamila is very unloving. He is so very cold towards her that they sleep in

separate rooms. He was often rude and would make her cry because he did not like the food she prepared for him. Soraya even remembers, “I learned that he could be pretty, such as when he’d take a bite of the *qurma* his wife placed before him, sigh, and push it away.” Juliette Simmons highlights their relationship in her essay: “People here marry for love; family name and ancestry never even come into the equation which shows that, to him, it is most important to marry for reputation, rather than love or happiness.” (Simmons Juliette 3)

The general ‘did not approve of women drinking alcohol, so Jamila did not drink and Soraya would wait until her parents were gone before having a glass of wine with her husband. Soraya particularly becomes frustrated about the double standard between what is expected of women and what is expected of men in Afghan culture and heritage. She expressed her belief to Amir: “Their sons go out to nightclubs looking for meat and get their girl friends pregnant, they have kids out of wedlock and no one says a god-damn thing. Oh, they are just men having fun! I make one mistake and suddenly everyone is talking nang and namoos, and I have to have my face rubbed in it for the rest of my life.”

There are many other examples in the novel *The Kite Runner* where these women are controlled in their decisions because that is what they are meant to do in the Afghan culture. These examples are:

1. Soraya has no choice and power to decide whether she wants to marry Amir or not. It is General Taheri who must agree that Amir is better option.
2. When Amir and Soraya speak at the flea market, they only do so when the general is not there as he would not allow it and if he finds out that they have been meeting, he likely will tell them it is not allowed for him and Soraya to do that, not even in her mother’s presence, Jamila.
3. When Baba is ill in the hospital and Soraya goes to comfort Amir he tells her she would go back because her father may go after him if he finds out she is with him.
4. When Amir first speaks to Soraya in the flea market he says that people would find it charming that he strikes up conversation with her, but would call her a ‘lochak’ for ‘not letting him go’.

In the novel *The Kite Runner*, Amir the central figure, grew up alone without an influence of a woman on his life. This connects interestingly to Muslim traditions, because

much like the tradition prior to the 20th century in Europe and America, single parent-families mostly comprised fathers and their children. The mom and her children is a new phenomenon in the western culture as well as the Muslim culture.

Women as portrayed in the novel from chapters 13 to 22 in Afghan culture are morally weak. The idea of women's being morally weak is proved in the beginning of the book by the leaving of Hassan's mother and Soraya's history with running off with another man. There is lack of women's role in the novel. As well, the lack of women playing a major role in the novel gives the idea that women are not as important in the Afghan culture as men are.

Amir and Soraya in chapter 13, attend a wedding for Soraya's uncle. Both of them at the wedding overhear other women describing the bride, knowing very well that they are comparing her to Soraya. Hosseini reminds us of how women are viewed in the Afghan culture, and how they are harshly criticized for their actions. In Soraya's case though, "that was four years ago and three thousand miles away and I am still hearing them." (Hosseini 189) Amir in chapter 16 finds out that Hassan's mother Sanaubar returned to the estate to find Hassan. She arrived weak, with sores on her arms and knife cuts on her face. Her arrival reminds us of how she left Hassan after he was born and how immoral she was in her youth; as well her state of introduction can be interpreted as representation of women being weak. Thus, at the end, in this section both positive and negative aspects of Afghan women are given. They can be interpreted as weak, because of Soraya's running off with a stranger and Sanaubar leaving Hassan and Ali. Simultaneously, they can also be seen as loving and caring, because of their caring of Sohrab and Baba.

In Afghanistan, if you are a man, you are superior to all others. But if you are a woman, you are considered second class. If a woman succeeds in something, these are the encouraging sentences she will receive: what a manly thing you did! You are so manly! Now, if a man does something wrong or inappropriate, here are the adjectives used to describe him: girly, womanly, wearing women bracelets and submissive-to-women.

Baba explains to Amir specific actions that would make him a patriarch. Baba explains this to Amir by saying: "When you kill a man, you steal a life," Baba said. "You steal his wife's right to a husband; rob his children of a father. When you tell a lie, you steal

someone's right to the truth. When you cheat, you steal the right to fairness. Do you see?" (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 16)

Since Baba's mind is of a patriarch, he wants his son, Amir to become a patriarch as well. Thus, his reason for passing on is considered to be wisdom that he is giving to Amir, Baba sees feminine qualities in Amir, for that reason, he wants to bring in patriarchal qualities in him so that when Amir is an adult, he can take his decisions over women and children and become the head of the family.

Further, when Amir and Hassan walk past the military barracks and some soldiers heckle Hassan. Hassan's mom was known by the soldier because for her appearance and a little free with her favours as is evident from the text: "I knew your mother, did you know that? I knew her real good. I took her from behind by the creek over there." (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 06-07) Thus, dehumanization is evident in the way soldiers treat women in the Afghan society.

The characters in the novel support their stereotypical gender roles. This is seen when Amir sees his father crying and it scares him because he believes that men do not cry as is supported from the text: "Then I saw Baba do something I had never seen him do before. He cried. It scared me a little, seeing a grown man sob. Father was not supposed to cry." (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 107) Women living in Afghanistan are not allowed to speak at a high volume.

"Farzana once asked the vendor how much the potatoes cost, but he did not hear her... So she asked louder and suddenly a young Talib ran over and hit her on the thighs with his wooden stick... He was screaming at her and cursing and saying the Ministry of Vice and Virtue does not allow women to speak loudly." (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 216)

Through this study, it is found that women have the power that lies inside to struggle for their happiness. This struggle is found in the life of Soraya, her mother Jamila in the novel *The Kite Runner*. Thus, the oppression women experience is not a miserable thing which has to be wept out, but it is something that has to be fought back. The struggle and bravery which has done by Soraya and her mother Jamila in determining their life implement power feminism.

WORKS CITED

Hosseini, Khalid. *The Kite Runner*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group
A Division of Penguin Group, 2003. Print.

Gray, Kerry. *Quotes About Gender Inequality in The Kite Runner*. Internet:
study.com. p 2.

Manchanda, Ritu. *Women, War and Peace in South Asia*. New Delhi: sage
Publications, 2001. 136. Print.

Simmons, Juliette. *The Kite Runner: How are Women in Afghan Culture
Shown in The Kite Runner?* (Internet: KiteRunnerdiary. Blogspot.in.), Sunday
4 November, 2012. 3. Print.