

THE PLIGHT OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN THE NOVEL “A *THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*” BY KHALED HOSSEINI

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the domination and the subordination of women in Khaled Hosseini's "A Thousand Splendid Suns". It is a novel portraying the patriarchal Afghan society and the treatment of women by the authoritative male clan. The novel depicts the plight of the women who undergone oppression and torturous life through the male power the novel revolves around the lives of Mariam and Laila who were tormented and plagued by the insensitive actions of the male power and by the Taliban as well. The tradition of Afghan society denies women their share of social political and economic rights and also worsens their legal domestic life. The novel portrays the male chauvinism which gives no room for decisions, choices and dreams of women. Behind every silent burqa in Afghanistan is an individual with hidden history.

Afghanistan, located in south central Asia, has existed in its present conditions since the mid-1700s when the tribal factions of the country were united under one leader. The history of Afghanistan is marked by political instability, particularly during the last 30 years of prolonged war, infrastructure collapse, and restrictive political regimes. The situation of women in Afghanistan has been dismal during this period. Their status was undermined during the Soviet occupation and under subsequent regimes; in fact, the violation of Afghan women's human rights is considered to have been at its worst in the early 1990s. Women's rights were further eroded when the Taliban came into power in 1996. Yet the plight of Afghan women was barely covered by the Western mainstream media until the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September, 2001 drew strategic interest toward Afghanistan. Despite the teachings of the religious leaders stressing upon tolerance, peace and brotherhood, the world has

seen unprecedented violence and there has been no let-up in the violence and extremist activities. In the twentieth century, the world has witnessed two World Wars causing unimaginable destruction and is constantly under the threat of nuclear holocaust. All the nations of the world have been a witness to a severe devastation and destruction caused by violence in one way or the other – be it the Spanish Civil War, Talibanisation of Afghanistan, recent massacre in Paris and an innumerable ethnic massive carnages round the globe.

Khaled Hosseini has been one of the finest writers in the contemporary era. He belongs to Kabul, Afghanistan but soon after the soviet invasion in his country his family moved to Paris. Currently he is living in US where he has been working as a doctor and writer both. He is blessed with an art of writing marvellous stories. His books *The Kite Runner* (2004), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and *The Mountains Echoed* (2013) are became bestselling novels. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has been a heart rending story of two women being tortured in the hands of dominating husband. Hosseini says, “When I began writing *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, I found myself thinking about those resilient women over and over. Though no one woman that I met in Kabul inspired either Laila or Mariam, their voices, faces and their incredible stories were always with me, and a good part of my inspiration for this novel came from their collective spirit”. The way women were treated in Afghanistan during the Taliban era was inhuman and undignified. Hosseini says, “It is undeniable that the treatment of women in some Muslim countries-including my own-has been dismal. The evidence is simply overwhelming. In Afghanistan under the Taliban, women were denied education, the right to work, the right to move freely, access to adequate healthcare, etc.” The novel opens with an introduction of Mariam, an Afghan girl growing up in a small village on the outskirts of Herat. She lives with her mother, Nana, an embittered woman who is frequently resentful towards her daughter whom she bore out of wedlock. Mariam keeps herself busy with lessons in reading and writing from Mullah Faizullah, an elderly kind-hearted cleric, who weekly visits Mariam’s wealthy father, Jalil. Mariam has heard of her father’s other wives and children, who live with him at his splendid home in Herat, but has never visited them due to the stigma of her being an illegitimate child.

On her fifteenth birthday in 1974, Mariam wants her father to take her to see *Pinocchio* at the movie theatre that he owns. When Jalil fails to show up, Mariam decides to travel to Herat for the first time in her life and go to her father’s house in person. Jalil refuses to see her, and she ends up sleeping

outdoors on the porch. In the morning, Mariam returns home to find that her mother has hanged herself out of fear assuming that her daughter has deceived her. Mariam is taken to live in her father's house, where she feels isolated and spends most of her time alone in her room. Jalil and his wives quickly arrange for her to be married to an older widower named Rasheed, who is middle class shoemaker in Kabul "In the mirror Mariam had her first glimpse of Rasheed; the big square, ruddy face; the hooked nose; the flushed cheeks that gave the impression of sly cheerfulness; the watery, bloodshot eyes; the crowded teeth, the front two pushed together like a gabled roof; the low hairline, barely two fingers widths above the bushy eyebrows; the wall of thick, coarse, salt and pepper hair."(2) When Rasheed takes Mariam to Kabul after marriage, Mariam begins adjusting to her new life as the wife of a man she barely knows. Mariam soon becomes pregnant, and Rasheed, having lost his own son in a drowning accident years earlier, hopes for a boy. When Mariam suffers a miscarriage, her marriage takes a turn for the worse; Rasheed is no longer cordial to her, but verbally and physically abuses her. Even though it is because of Rasheed, she loses her unborn child, even then, she is the one whom Rasheed blames for not having a child, Down the street lives Laila, the beautiful young daughter of ethnic Tajik parents- a progressive-minded high school teacher and a mother who mourns the loss of her two sons, who were Mujahedeen fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Laila has a subtle romance with Tariq, a boy from the neighbourhood who lost a leg at a land of mine explosion. Soon Afghanistan is threatened by war and Kabul is bombarded by rocket attacks. Tariq's family decides to leave the city. The emotional farewell between Laila and Tariq culminates in a clandestine tryst on the living room sofa and it becomes the reason for Aziza's birth. Laila's family also decides to leave Kabul, but as they are packing, a rocket destroys the house and kills her parents. Laila is taken in by Rasheed and Mariam. Soon after recovering from her injuries, including a slight deafness in one ear, Laila discovers that she is pregnant with Tariq's child. In order to avoid the stigma of being an unwanted mother, Laila agrees to marry Rasheed, who is eager to have a young and attractive second wife, and immediately consummates the marriage with a hope that she can pass the child off as his.

A few months later, a man stops by the house to tell Laila that he met Tariq at a hospital, and that Tariq is dead. Laila gives birth to Aziza, a baby girl. Rasheed is unhappy and suspicious, and he becomes abusive and with this feeling of suspicion Rasheed tries to threaten Laila. On seeing such behaviour of Rasheed towards Laila, Mariam comes closer to Laila and gradually a strong bond

develops between them. After an initial rancorous relationship, Mariam and Laila eventually become confidantes. They plan to run away from Rasheed and leave Kabul for Peshawar, Pakistan, but they are betrayed at the bus station by a man they thought they could trust, arrested and returned to Rasheed. Rasheed beats the two women and deprives them of water for several days, almost killing Aziza. A few years later, Laila gives birth to Zalmai, Rasheed's son. By this time, the Taliban have risen to power in Afghanistan. They have banned television, movies and books other than the Koran, and women are not allowed to work. A drought comes, which eventually leads to widespread hunger and food shortages. When Rasheed's shop burns down, the family is thrust into destitution. There is little food and Rasheed finds himself reduced to working as a porter at a hotel. As their monetary situation worsens, Aziza is sent to an orphanage a few kilometres away. Then one day, Tariq appears outside the house, revealing the fact that the man who stopped by the house to tell the news about Tariq's death was a plan made by Rasheed. He and Laila are reunited, and their passions flare anew. When Rasheed returns home from work, young Zalmai tells his father about the visitor. Rasheed starts beating Laila savagely with his belt, but Mariam comes to Laila's defence by killing Rasheed with a shovel. He becomes so brutal that he tries hard to hit Laila almost killing her. On seeing the anger in the eyes of Rasheed Mariam tries to save Laila but fails. Later she attempts to kill Rasheed by hitting him a shovel in order to save Laila and this scene has been very vividly described in the novel, "If she let him walk now, how before he fetched the key from his pocket and went upstairs looking for the gun in the room where he'd locked Zalmai? Had Mariam been certain that he would be satisfied with shooting only her, that there was a chance he would spare Laila, she might have dropped a shovel. But in Rasheed's eyes she saw murder for them both."(Hosseini 340). After the murder of Rasheed, Mariam tells Laila to run away with Aziza and Zalmai .

Then, Mariam makes Laila to understand that it is so difficult to run away together after killing Rasheed. But Laila goes on pleading with Mariam. Mariam forces Laila to leave Kabul and move to a safe place with Tariq and her children. Laila and Tariq leave for Pakistan with the children. Mariam confesses to killing her husband and is executed. After the fall of the Taliban in 2003, Laila and Tariq decide to return to Afghanistan. They stop in the village near Herat where Mariam was raised, and discover a package that Mariam's father had left behind for her, a videotape of Pinocchio and cheque for her share of the family inheritance. They return to Kabul and fix up the orphanage.

Rasheed tries to suppress and dominate Laila and Mariam. When he marries Mariam, he tortures her like an animal and later on when he marries Laila; he behaves in the same violent manner. He always wanted to have a male child, but when Laila gives birth to Aziza, he becomes too much abusive and violent towards both Laila and her daughter Aziza. It is through the Talibanisation of Afghanistan, that people face, such terrible circumstances, where they are not able to find food for them. Rasheed's shop is burned down and he has no job to survive. But for the survival he takes up the job to which he is ill suited.

Taliban has risen to power and there is a drought and living conditions become worse in Kabul. This is not only the story of Mariam and Laila; but this is the story of several Afghan women who suffered similar denigrating dehumanising treatment. This novel reflects the domestic violence to which Laila and Mariam are subjected. Things which happen outside have a drastic impact inside the house. The husband-wife, father-daughter relationship are distorted due to the violent acts of Rasheed. Though the man woman relationship takes a sour turn a sister like bond develops between Laila and Mariam. Mariam sacrifices her own life and happiness in order to save Laila's happiness. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a breathtaking story set against the volatile events of Afghanistan's last thirty years, from the soviet invasion to post-Taliban rebuilding, a story that puts the violence, fear, hope and faith of this country in intimate, human terms. Two generations of character are brought jarringly together by the tragic sweep of war, where personal lives are inextricable from the history playing out around them. It is a striking, heart-wrenching novel of an unforgiving time, an unlikely friendship, and an indestructible love. Hosseini has portrayed the suffering undergone by the people of Afghanistan through his novel. The novel shows terror and fear that was generated among the Afghan people during the conflicts between different factions and later during the Talibanisation of Afghanistan. The harsh rule of Taliban ruined the lives of women southern Afghan province. The attitude towards men continues to be the same as was pointed out by Mariam in "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*". She says "like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always." Mariam's words are very true and in Afghanistan such cases are common. When the Taliban started their rule in 1996, they introduced new laws for Afghan people and they were strictly imposed on women. The novel shows the impact of violence on human relationships and the power of men over women this effect is not only portrayed in a negative but it has a positive side too. The lovers Tariq and Laila get

separated due to increased violence. Mariam sacrifices her own life and happiness in order to save Laila's happiness.

“*A Thousand Splendid Suns*” by Khaled Hosseini has clearly depicted that the power of men over women made them suffer a lot, they lost all their identity in front of the violent authority of the Taliban and among men. Women are portrayed as a bearers of double burden in being oppressed by authoritative powers and subordinated by men.

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