Plight of Women in A Thousand Splendid Suns

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Abstract

Afghan women suddenly attracted the attention of many diasporic writers and American media after the attack on the World Trade Center. A deep study of the post colonial literature highlights the fact of Afghani women to be suppressed and dominant and needs the involvement of western military to come out of the jaws of the orthodox views of their own men. Here, a very pertinent question is the way how Afghani women and their plight is represented to the readers throughout the world. For the accurate representation, The Thousand Splendid Suns by Khalid Hosseini has been selected and considered to be authentic to gain more information about the pessimism of Afghan women. A deep study of this novel underlines the grief of women in Afghanistan especially in the times of war. Not only about their grief, this book is a good source to get information about their outlook for their own life and their future, their urge to study and to set themselves free. The purpose of this paper is to examine the way Afghan women have been represented in The Thousand Splendid Suns.

Key Words: Freedom, Plight of women, Hopes, Ambitions, Possessions

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghani postcolonial writer, has been designated to be the representative of the nation. His writings provide a deep insight into the lifestyles of his countrymen. The characters in his stories become victims of unfairness and brutality of the other group of society. Themes of mistreatment, regrets, confusion, low self esteem are well presented in his writings. However, they always hope for a better tomorrow. Thus by portraying the grief of these characters, he manages to reveal their desires and hopes for their future. Though the women in his stories are mistreated by the men of their own houses, they have distinct ways to tackle that and to set themselves free. This novel is a spectacular example in presenting the inner strength of women. At the time of Khalid’s birth, women in Afghanistan were free to study and pursue their hobbies. This book highlights the causes of deteriorating the condition of women in Afghan and snatching their living rights from them. Schooling is not common in Afghanistan; people use the method of folktales to enlighten others. Women have been represented to stay away from all the learning and to be engrossed in the household chores. Mere depicting the condition of women will not serve the purpose, thus historical background needs to be studied to understand the claimed change by women. History is the evidence that Afghanistan has been the center of social violence for years. Middle East and Asia route has been combat zone for Soviet Union, UK and US. Lands have been polluted and made barren with the explosion of landmines and the mobility of women has
been restricted and they have been confined in the four wall of the house. Because there are quite less
democratic opportunities to women to work outside, their condition is getting worst by sitting at home, being involved in
the domestic chores and not doing something productive for the society, leaving the economy to be poor with
each passing day. There has been a drastic change in the economy of the country because of the removal of
educated women from their jobs and making them restricted to the family issues only. This act of removing
women from their jobs has resulted in the shutdown of many schools because half of the teachers in the country
were women. This mere action affected the hospitals and other civil services likewise.

Not only the geographical adversities, this country women experience hell on earth due to the orthodox
thoughts and the traditional domination. No woman is allowed to be the head of the family. It can be any
elderly man. Marriages in the bloodlines are also one reason for the natives to remain behind in the race of
growth. People especially women are not allowed to mingle with someone not familiar with the family. Culturally only male child is preferred in the family. Moreover, this tradition is accepted in their religion, stamping their attitude and behaviour to be correct. Although many steps have been taken by Afghan rulers to
improve women’s condition, Taliban and Mujahedeen did not give their approval to the freedom of women. In
the very beginning of the novel, Marriam – a young girl- is shown to be always waiting for her father Jalil to
visit her. She lives with her mother Nana in Heart. She does not accept her mother’s detachment and hatred
towards her father for abandoning them and not letting them stay with him. Thus, she decides to visit her father
on her fifteenth birthday with the hope of being accepted by him with open arms. Contrary to her hopes, she is
not even welcomed at Jalil’s house and has to spend the whole night waiting for her father. On her visit back to
her home, she finds her mother, Nana to be dead. She gets to know that this death is a suicide and remembers
that her mother used to consider Marriam her only possession and dies the moment when she goes to see Jalil.
Marriam, who is an illegitimate child of Jalil, is neither accepted by her father nor by her father’s other wives.
They plan to get her married to Rasheed, an old man from Kabul. Rasheed is widower and wants to remarry
only with the hope of a baby boy. The initial period of Mariam’s marriage has been beautiful, as Rasheed has
his expectations from her. However when she starts having miscarriages, Rasheed starts showing his original
hidden face. Mariam faces the domestic violence and is treated as animals in her own house. Now Rasheed
wants to have a second wife in order to have a baby. Laila who is quite young and is pregnant with the child of
her friend Tariq is forced to marry Rasheed. Laila accepts the offer to hide her affair with Tariq. This marriage
increases the sufferings of Mariam, who has to perform all the household chores and has to serve Laila as well.
Mariam’s all hopes for a better future dash into dust when Laila is considered to be the head lady in the house.
She is treated quite fair. But this treatment is not for long time. The birth of a baby girl, Aziza, snatches all the
freedom from Laila, and Rasheed starts hating her for giving birth to a baby girl. Now Rasheed treats both the
women equally. And this treatment becomes the reason of them coming close to each other and develops a
good bond of sisterhood. Because of being bbrutally treated, they try to escape from Kabul, but they both are
cheated by a man they trusted and are brought back to their home. This trial makes their life more pathetic.
Rasheed denies to give them any food and brings them to the point of death. At that time, Zalmai, Rasheed’s son, takes birth. At that time, Taliban’ power increases in the country and they ban every kind of mobility of women. Here, Tariq comes back to the story and his arrival at the home is revealed to Rasheed by Zalmai. Getting angry on his arrival, Rasheed starts beating Laila. Marriam, unable to see Lila being died by Rasheed, hits him with a shovel and kills him. She is later imprisoned for the crime to kill her own husband and then hung up. Laila with tariq and children stays in Pakistan for sometime, but returns to Afghanistan to serve her nation. There She lives her dream of being a teacher.

In this novel, Khaled highlights sufferings of women, their pain in getting rejected and brutally beaten. He regards the efforts of those who want to shine out, to be significant for the nation’s economy and the generations to come. He wants them to be respected in all the ways and relations they have. This novel is highlighting the corruptness of the government and abusiveness of husbands. The very first women character in this novel is Nana, who gets involved with her master. She is physically used by her. This relation can not be considered to be a forced one on Nana, as she is with Jalil out of love. Jalil has been married to three women. This mere incident reveals the value of being women in that society, where a man is in relation with another woman even after being the husband of three women and father to many kids. Nana is about to get married to someone of her own caste and community, and she realizes that she is pregnant with Jalil’s child. This becomes the reason of turning her life into hell. She is abandoned by her own father and has none to help her. Jalil in his effort to save his name and reputation helps her to stay on the outskirts of Heart. However, she is never given the rights of being his wife. She is hated by Jalil and his family. Nana’s character shows the helplessness of women in the nation. The man who is reason of destroying her life is not accepting her and her child whom he usually calls harami (an illegitimate child). Nana wants to keep her daughter away from society and jalil in order to save her from being rejected and abused by them. She considers her daughter to be her only possession and keeps on reminding her that she will die if anything happens to her daughter. She wants to make her aware about what jalil did to both of them. She is highly depressed woman who has seen the ugly face of society and has experienced the true nature of people. Her character does not only reveals the women domination, but the plight of downtrodden people. Getting to know about Jalil’s affair with a servant, his wives are not worried about the life of an abandoned girl who is pregnant also, but want to save their family name. They continue to live their life with jalil with no difference. This incident does not only depicts Nana’s sufferings but the lifestyle of the upper class women also. Jalil is allowed to marry as many women as he wants to. But his wives are not allowed to roam in the city without wearing burqa. It shows male dominance over women. Nana is living her life only for her daughter. The moment her daughter leaves her, she commits suicide.

Another very important character to portray the grief of Afghan women is Mariam. Mariam from the very beginning of her life is deprived of family love and many other facilities that an ordinary child possesses.

“Her naivety causes her to dream of a different life outside the one she knows. She daydreams her life at school: Since then, thoughts of classrooms and teachers had rattled around Mariam’s head, images of notebooks
with lined pages, columns of numbers, and pens that made dark, heavy marks. She pictured herself in a classroom with other girls her age. Mariam longed to place a ruler on a page and draw important looking lines.” (ATSS, 17)

When she is married to Rasheed, she is not even asked about her will to get married and to whom. In the marriage, she is forced to lead a crushing life from the beginning when they choose a husband for her: “Now he is a little older than you,” Afsoon chimed in. “But he can’t be more than … forty. Forty-five at the most. Wouldn’t’ you say, Nargis?” “Yes. But I’ve seen nine-year-old girls given to men twenty years older than you suitor, Mariam. We all have. What are you, fifteen? That’s good, solid marrying age for a girl.” There was enthusiastic nodding at his. It did not escape Mariam that no mention was made of her half sisters Saideh or Naheed, both her own age, both students in the Mehri School in Heart, both with plans to enroll in Kabul University Fifteen, evidently, was not a good, solid marrying age for them.” (ATSS, 44)

Their hopes and desires are unvoiced. They feel attached to each other as they both are dealing with the same problems and torture by their husband. They both see comfort in each other’s lives because of themselves only. “it is usual for the co-wives to learn to get along because they unite for responsibilities and against the common abuses: Mariam grew accustomed to this companionship. She was eager for three cups of tea she and Laila would share in the yard. In the morning Mariam fund herself looking forward to the sound of Laila’ slippers slapping the steps as she came down for breakfast.” (ATSS, 251)

In this novel, it is shown that women are usually mistreated by society and their husbands. Babi who is Laila’s father wants her to set example for other Afghan girls to come out of their houses, to go to school and to prove their worth to the whole nation. He sends her to school and is very particular about her studies. He has made one library at home, so his children may not find any difficulty in studies. Babi ensures Laila that she will make an impact in the world she lives in, which contrasts with Mammy’s impression of Laila’s heroic brothers. “You’re a very, very bright girl. Truly you are. You can be anything you want, Laila. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more” (114).

In this novel, author tries to pen down the war times and its impact on the lives of human being, country’s trade and education. Life is valuable. When life is at risk, people prefer to fulfill their basic necessities than the material accumulations. This novel does not only talk about women but the condition of country in all spheres. Keeping the condition of Afghan women in mind, Hosseini has tried to bring this menace in others’ notice and has taken a step for the improvement. These women spend their whole life in pain and grief and choose to end their life when they get deprived of any hope. They are ambitious; they dream of better life, but they can not because of being suppressed in the male dominant society. This novel presents human capacity to live fife with hope even after getting scattered many a times. Humans’ get-going spirit is well presented in many incidents.
This novel presents the tragedy of women’s lives. However, the author ends the novel on a happy note by giving hope of harmony.

References:

