



(Re)Defining Women as Modern Archetypes from Oppression to Freedom in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Literature, art and culture are interrelated. They form the basis of independent, original thought and both reflect and manifest the problems and aspirations of a society. Women's rights and liberties have suffered an unstable evolution in Middle East countries for centuries. Through the eyes of two women, Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* explores almost forty years of the history of Afghanistan and delves into the loss of women's privileges.

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.

Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is taken for the present study to delineate the factors that marginalize the Afghan women through the social, political and religious restrictions unwillingly forced upon

them in reality. We need to understand two main qualities that mark this shift: 'the quest for identity' and 'Expressionism'. Making personal psychological experience visible to the reader is another major element of contemporary literature, a trend known in literary circles as Expressionism. The idea here is to bring internal feelings and experiences to the surface, and a character's inner life is just as important, if not more important, than the external events taking place. Expressionism is the attempt to show the character's inner struggles, and writers in the contemporary period will illustrate the character's state of mind as often as possible.

Keywords: Expressionism, Harami, Nikka, Patriarchy, abandon

Hosseini explores the present state of social exclusion of the Afghan women through the characters of Mariam and Laila in the novel. Mariam and Laila, the two main protagonists, suffer under the custody of a patriarchal superiority using radical rules and legitimizing the abuse of women. Hosseini somehow adopts a naturalist air in plotting the stories of both Mariam and Leila. Mariam who is born as an illegitimate child as a result of an affair between a maid and her master is doomed till the very end whereas Laila, who is born to a moderate family and a feminist father, overcomes all the intricacies she faces in her life.

Mariam for the first time she heard the word harami. Since she was a child she has a complicated, miserable life. She's an illegitimate child or as her mother put it, a "harami"– bastard. "Mariam did surmise, by the way Nana said the word, that it was an ugly, loathsome thing to be a harami, like an insect, like the scurrying cockroaches..." (4)

According to Elaine Showalter's *Towards a Feminist Poetics*, Mariam can categorize under the Feminist Phase. In the Feminist phase women asserted themselves in determined efforts for political and social equality. In this phase social events strengthened woman's position to disown the accommodating postures of femininity that is the easy gesture of sliding into manmade grooves though experience injustice. However, it counter-balanced male materialism and it failed to explore the actual physical experience of woman. Mariam, in *A Splendid Thousand Suns* reacts according to the feminist phase. She protested silently against male counter parts. At the same time she has adapted herself to the male materialism.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, 1949 explained subjectivity- our sense of self- through existence philosophy. Existentialism proposes that one exists first, and through one's acts, one becomes something. 'One is not born a female; one becomes this' (*The Second Sex*, 1997: 301). She reasoned that an individual has absolute control over their fate, and neither society nor organized religion should limit our freedom to live authentically. But since men have claimed the category of self, of subject, for themselves, women are relegated to the status of other. Consequently, the category of women has no substance as an extension of male fantasy and fears. Thus a woman is required to accept her status of other, 'make herself object' and 'renounce her autonomy' (*The Second Sex*, 1997: 280).

The women represented in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are primarily modern archetypes because they use traditional and untraditional methods to overcome oppression and fight for freedom. In addition to that, they are used to instruct others about life and culture in a patriarchal society. Just as these women characters are used to instruct, show truths, and provides hope for all the people on a journey from bondage to freedom, traditional storytelling also uses similar techniques.

Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* depicts the plight of women in Afghanistan. The issues of feminism and identity have been portrayed through the innocent character of Mariam and Laila. Mariam had to marry Rasheed who is many years elder to her, because her father and his wives force her to marry. Laila, the other protagonist also marries Rasheed because she was orphaned and pregnant.

Hosseini in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrayed the history of Afghanistan and the inner conflict of two women Mariam and Laila in a country where the Islamic law imposed on their right and virtues.

In a traditional and patriarchal society, male counterparts are given more authority overall, both the novels reveal the struggle and the inner conflict that a woman faces because of their gender. Perhaps the greatest theme in both works is that all oppressed people must have hope in themselves even in the midst of hardship.

In this novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the women provide hope for the future. Since they remain hopeful in themselves or in external elements, they are able to overcome oppression and continue on their voyage to

freedom. The novels portray the women's unending fight for their freedom, rights and individual identity in this male dominated world.

Analysing novels and fictions to detect the portrayals of women seems a significant area of study. To justify extending the research and to examine the other novels and fictions that focused on oppression of women determines the image of women dominant in literature.

Finally, the research suggests to analyse the reality of women in the context of Afghanistan and Indian vision that corresponds with the image of Afghan women and traditional mythology in literature.

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