

Societal Oppression in the novels *A Thousand Splendid Novels* and *Saffron Dreams*

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to bring about a change in the perspective of looking down on women in society. Gender equality is still out of reach for many women worldwide. Women in different countries struggle to gain identity in a male dominated community. The novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini and *Saffron Dreams* by Shaila Abdullah deals with how Muslim women create an identity of their own as both women come from a place where girls are married off, not supposed to work or make any decisions even for themselves and are treated unimportant. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is set in Afghanistan and *Saffron Dreams* is about a girl who moves from Pakistan to America after marriage. Both are very different women and how they go on to create their own identity is mainly focused. This research would effectuate a new way of seeing things and the societal oppression that women face in their life will evacuate by itself.

Keywords: *Societal Oppression, Identity Crisis, Psychological issues, Male Chauvinism, Equality.*

Introduction

A Thousand Splendid Suns is a novel written by an Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini in 2007. *The Kite Runner*, his debut novel in 2003 was a critical and commercial success. However, his subsequent novels have all been at least partially set in Afghanistan and have featured an Afghan as the protagonist. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has addressed the problems which are much similar to that of his first novel but from a female perspective. The story is set in Afghanistan where both Mariam and Laila's life become intertwined as Mariam's husband takes on Laila as his second wife. Afghanistan was facing a huge transition then from soviet occupation to Taliban control and post-Taliban rebuilding. Mariam was forced to marry a shoemaker from Kabul after a tragedy in her family. Later with the similar tragedy factors Laila, a girl from the next generation

had to accept the marriage proposal of Mariam's husband. The novel focuses on female characters and their roles in contemporary Afghan society.

Saffron Dreams is a novel written by Shaila Abdullah who is a Pakistani- American writer. Shaila Abdullah is noted as "Word Artist" by critics as she is an award-winning author and designer based in Austin, Texas. She is the author of five books: *Saffron Dreams*, *Beyond the Cayenne Wall*, *My Friend Suhana*, *Rani in Search of a Rainbow*, and *A Manual for Marco*. *Saffron Dreams* is about evolving identities and the events that shape them. After the 9/11 attack Arissa being a widow and a Muslim finds ways to redeem a race by discovering her husband's unfinished manuscript and her unborn child as the key to her survival. Having religious beliefs, constricted by Pakistani heritage and taking up her new role as a single mother Arissa tries hard to fit in as a modern American woman. She removes her Hijab in order to acquire a job and faces life with utmost courage though society had difficulties in acceptance of her beliefs as a Muslim.

Societal Oppression

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Khaled Hosseini had brought out the suffering of women and the destruction of Afghanistan. Both Mariam and Laila hold on to retain hope though they had to deal with the reality which is the political and personal oppression. Mariam hopes for a future when Mullah Faizullah stands up for her wish of going to school while Laila hopes for a better life as she wanted to do something great. Unfortunately, their hopes only get crushed. Well before the Taliban overrule and the imposition of Sharia law, Mariam and Laila were already under such rules forced by Rasheed, their husband. However, when the Taliban came to power women were put to house arrest unless they were accompanied by a male relative. Women were deprived of education and employment. Taliban went on to impose harsher laws which included windows of a women's house to be painted black if they were visible to the public, women could not leave house without a burqa, women were prohibited to visit male doctors though the Taliban prohibited female doctors from going to work, girls underage were put to marriage. The Taliban went on to appoint religious violent policemen to beat up women if they violated any Taliban rule such as exposing her ankles, laughing loud, wearing shoes or heels which made noise or wearing the wrong type of burqa.

Look at me, Mariam'.

Reluctantly, Mariam did.

Nana said, ‘Learn this now and learn it 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)

Even when claiming a rape, the victim must present four men in witness in order to confirm the women’s story, failing which leads to flogging or stoning for adultery. The fall of the Taliban brought hope to many in Afghanistan though some women faced violence even after that. This sort of violence is largely accepted and practiced in the community. Until now Afghanistan has not seen much of a difference when it comes to women’s rights. On August 15, 2021 the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan after twenty years and have been imposing harsh rules. In the name of religion, culture and community women have been predominantly suppressed. Impositions and inequality does not take one further and in no means is that advantageous to anyone. Thus, Khaled Hossieni takes us through the lives of these two innocent women and instills in us that a little bit of awareness and courage can bring a change and make the world a better place.

Saffron Dreams written by Shaila Abdullah brings out the story of Arissa Illahi, a Muslim Pakistani-American. Arissa Illahi grew up in a wealthy, middle-class family in Karachi, Pakistan. Though she lives a normal life who struggles to fulfill her roles as a daughter, wife and mother confronting cultural expectations and Islamophobia she had to face societal oppression later in her life. Arissa’s mother left their house and remarried while her father took good care of her and her sister and was supportive. Both Arissa and her sister get married. Arissa weds Faizan whom she had already met in New York city and also had liked him. Arissa's life is beautifully portrayed and when she gets pregnant her husband takes good care of her. It is then Arissa comes to know about the attack on the World Trade Center on the 11th of September at Manhattan where Faizan works as a cook in a restaurant there. Arissa gets completely devastated when she learns about her husband’s death. The terrorists had crashed planes into the buildings. Another traumatizing news to Arissa is that her unborn child has been diagnosed with Charge Syndrome, a disease with multiple disabilities. Arissa struggles with her faith in God at this point. When in a wreck already she has to face people who look down on her when she goes out in her hijab. Though she had nothing to do with the terrorist attack, strangers frowned upon her and she also had been attacked by some people along the subway. Arissa manages to find meaning for

her survival by taking care of her son and taking up to complete her husband's unfinished novels. To find a job Arissa gives up her hijab adapting to the country where she lived though she still maintained her culture, tradition and heritage of her religion.

I, too, had witnessed all sorts of looks in the past few days, the gazes from familiar friends who had turned unfamiliar, the silent blank stares of strangers, the angry, wounded looks wanting to hurt, the accusatory sidelong glances screaming silently, You did it, your people brought the towers down. My people? They were not my people, those few whose beliefs don't even reflect the religion they rely so heavily on to justify their cause. They wrecked people like me more than anyone, who come to this country to lead a freer, safer life, to live among a civilization unaware of the struggles of those who live in restrictive societies. (60)

Arissa was a girl who leads her life as normally as anyone would do she but was oppressed by the society because she was a Muslim woman. People looked at her with suspicion whenever she went out with her hijab on. Events that happened shaped her identity. Society that discriminated against her never knew her story. Shaila Abdullah renders clearly how a Muslim woman has been outcasted by the society and stereotyping on the Muslim American community after the 2001 terrorist attack. She makes us realize how little we know of the Muslims and how they struggle under the societal pressures to balance old traditions and modern culture. The novel changes our perceptions and it is a fresh and novel perspective.

Conclusion

There is no choice but to conclude that society expects women to behave in a certain way in most parts of the world and also the society we live in have certain presumption which are none other than the factors of societal oppression which ultimately is no moral. Both the novels are dated back when they spoke about women oppression in the society and misconception by the society but even nothing enough has changed. The Taliban never have had any second thought before laying the law in Afghanistan today. It's high time that we, the society, change to achieve harmony so that women at least from now on can live as they wish as this the world where humans can live and that too for once. Let's not take in hand the lives of others but let them live and it is a responsibility that we carry out with a change because it is we who make a society.

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