

## In the Face of Enemy within the Four Walls: Women in Khaled Hosseini's a *Thousand Splendid Suns*

Jamsheed Ahmad

Ph.D Scholar Dept of English  
AMU, Aligarh 202002, India.

Patriarchy has different incarnations in different cultures and it has its various hues and colours and manifests itself in different societies in their specific customs, value systems, worldviews and various social discourses. Novel and specially the realistic novel is one particular form of discourse that puts a mirror directly into the face of society and reveals its features and characteristics with a considerable amount of verisimilitude. The novelist with an unflinching realism, unveil the ugly face of a society that seems to be least egalitarian and sets oppressive and dichotomized hierarchy based on various on various human myopias, namely gender and class.

Afghanistan, the country with maximum media coverage in recent times, has a very troubled history with the invasions by Macedonians, Sassanians, Arabs, Mongals and then Soviets. Monarchy ended there in 1973 with Daoud Khan overthrowing King Zahir Shah. Communism showed its strong presence in 1978 when after the murder of a prominent communist leader Mir Akbar, Afghanistan slowly passed into the tyrant hands of Soviet Union. America entered with the claim to help local Mujahidin to overthrow the Soviet, which ultimately happened in 1989, and thus Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was renamed as Islamic State of Afghanistan. The turmoil and violence continued with the local 'Mujahidin' turned warlords belonging to different ethnic groups fighting among themselves for the supremacy.

In the mid-nineties there emerged a force- that brought Afghanistan to the headlines-called Taliban who ruled over the smoke-filled and dusty Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan till America again interfered and ended their rule with the help of The Northern Alliance. The war is still going on though America claims that it has brought freedom to the Afghans in general and Afghan women in particular.

Very little, rather no attention was paid towards the literature produced in countries like Afghanistan till 9/11 episode. Aftermath of 9/11 certain interest in Afghanistan, its history, its culture and more importantly its literature was aroused the world over. A lot about this country is being written by the native writers and the writers of other countries as well. The name of Afghanistan-born Khalid Hosseini stands among the first ones in the list. With just two novels namely *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* his name, he is very much concerned about the wretched condition of the people in general and women in particular who are subjugated within and without the four walls of their so called homes in the war-torn country. Weeda Mansoor writes, "Afghanistan is the world's most forgotten tragedy, the Afghan nation the world's most forgotten population, and her women the most strangulated, ill-fated, and deprived segment of Afghan society (68). In Afghan society, some view women as "half of men" (Brodsky 37) and for others they are the "receptacle of honor" (Ahmed-Ghosh 3).

The present paper shall deal with the lesser discussed *A Thousand Splendid Suns* which is a pathetic story of two women married to a man Rasheed who oppress them physically as well as psychologically. It shall focus on some of the instances in the novel to stress upon the point that other than war Afghan women have to face a more monstrous enemy, an enemy against whom the chances of winning are less.

Both the women, Mariam and Laila in the novel are in encounter with many enemies. The women are the victims of the Russian rule, the Mujahidin terror, the maimed and deteriorated Afghan culture, the Taliban antipathy and worst of all the gender apartheid. Above all these faces the women face their husbands in their four walls where they are confined due to the despotic attitude of their men. As for as the relationship with husband is concerned the chief female character Mariam is a passive and mute lady because she finds a solace in her marriage with Rasheed after being callously treated by her father Jaleel. As a child Mariam, the illegitimate child of Jaleel and his maid Nana dreams of living with her father's family in Herat but once she comes to know the real face of her father her dreams get shattered. She somewhere finds a protector and a bread earner in Rasheed and thus does not question his demands and duress. Although she realizes later that her so called protector makes a hell out of her life but she does not revolt. She endures because she has nothing to fall on. She has no place where she can go and besides her feminine instinct does not allow her to break off. She thus finds both her protector and oppressor in a single person. Unlike Laila who does not remain passive once she gets the opportunity, Mariam endures as endurance is in her legacy.

Khaled Hosseini has in very clear terms brought the fact home that the foremost enemy of the women in the novel is man. He may be in the form of a father like Jaleel or in the guise of a husband as Rasheed. Rasheed wants a son and even before the actual birth names him. His feeling that a son shall carry forward his name integrates the gender apartheid prevalent throughout the world with the patriarchal mind set of the Afghan men. However one does not wonder at their preference for a son as this has been there for the last hundreds of years not only in Afghanistan but throughout almost all the countries of the world.

After marriage Rasheed forces her to wear the burqa and literally makes her a prisoner at his home. He declares with an air of impunity, "Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand?" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 69). Burqa represents the suppression of the women identity if she is to wear it by force. A burqa is a pleated sack like cloth wore from head to foot and the woman see through a mesh screen. Burqa has no religious sanction in Islam and it has been left to woman to cover her face or not. Arline Lederman writes in her essay titled 'The Zan of Afghanistan' in *Women for Afghan Women*:

According to some scholars, the heavy tent like veil worn by women in the Near East and eventually by Muslims started with upper-class Christian women of the Ottoman Empire. For status, safety and comfort, they were frequently carried about in curtained sedan chairs, which were similar to the sedan chairs of the Hindu aristocracy or European royalty. The chairs enabled riders to avoid the mud of rough roads that would sully their finery. The coverings offered privacy and protections from thieves and from dust. Some Near Eastern historians believe that the complete covering was an imitation of upper class Christian female style rather than a Muslim religious requirement. (50)

In the novel "Mariam had never before worn a burqa. Rasheed had to help her put it on. The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen. She practiced walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 65)

Mariam could not give Rasheed a son and it is all which brings Rasheed's fury over her. Although she tries her level best to submit to his demands but it is not enough. "The *qurmas* was always too salty or too bland for his taste. The rice judged either too greasy or too

dry, the bread declared too doughy or too crispy. Rasheed's faultfinding left her stricken in the kitchen with self-doubt" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 91). The height of Rasheed's vehemence comes when "he shoved two fingers in her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in her upper lip curled in a sneer" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 94). Rasheed made her chew the pebbles and leaves her spit blood and the fragments of two broken molars. Mariam is treated by Rasheed in a way as if he tries to avenge upon her for not giving her a son. Even destiny plays its part as many years pass but she could not become a mother.

Laila, a city bred woman unlike Mariam, is trapped by Rasheed who sends a man- who later turns out to be a gate keeper at a city hotel- by the name of Abdul Sharief who weaves a false story about Tariq's death and thus drags Laila into the ploy. Rasheed is a lustful man and his greed for Laila's body makes him to stoop so low that it compels Laila to say yes to his proposal. Rasheed's trap gets corroborated with Laila's pregnancy which he is already aware of. Laila is thus left in a tight corner with no other option. Rasheed knows that Tariq would have been only obstacle in his path and he manages to get rid of him although for the time being. It is no charity on his part, as he claims to Mariam, to marry Laila; in fact it is his lust for a young body as young as fourteen. Rasheed's marriage with Laila not only brings cataclysm for her but for Mariam also as she gets deprived of the value and position, which she had almost none in fact, in Rasheed,s house. Mariam tries to dissuade Rasheed but fails. Rasheed gets stingy with words and Mariam as well as Laila become the subject of his butt. Once he says to Laila, "We are city people, you and I, but she is a *dehati*. A village girl. Not even a village girl. No. she grew up in a *kolba* made of mud by his father *outside* the village. Her father put her there. Have you told her, Mariam, have you told her that you are a *harami*? Well she is . . . I'll say bit this way: if she were a car, she would be a Volga" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 199).

After Aziza's birth and their running away from his house Laila too slides down in Rasheed's eyes like Mariam and the beatings and abuses are again started, this time the more vulnerable victim being Laila.

Laila didn't see the punch coming. One moment she was talking and the next she was on all fours, wide-eyed and red-faced, trying to draw a breath. It was as if a car had hit her at full speed, in the tender place between the lower lip of the breastbone and the belly button. She realized she had dropped Aziza, that Aziza was screaming. She tried to breathe again and could only make a husky, choking sound. Dribble hung from her mouth. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 240)

A kind of emotional bond develops between Mariam and Laila and both come together on one side. The physical torture is vividly described in more than one place in the novel. For instance "Mariam slid out of her bed and began backpedalling. Her arms instinctively crossed over her chest, where he often struck her first" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 215). At another place:

Downstairs, the beating began. To Laila, the sounds she heard were those of a methodical, familiar proceeding. There was no cursing, no screaming, no pleading, no surprised yelps, only the systematic business of beating and being beaten, the thump and thump of something solid repeatedly striking flesh, something, someone, hitting the wall with a thud, cloth ripping. Now and then Laila heard running footsteps, a wordless chase, furniture turning over, glass shattering, then the thumping once more. (240)

Beating is like taking meals for Rasheed, an indispensable part of his existence. These beatings however bring Laila and Mariam closer to one another and it results in a strong bond of female friendship which results in Rasheed's death towards the end. The physical harassment reaches its height when they are kept locked for days together without any food and water. Rasheed closes all the doors and windows on them and they lost the count of the days.

Rasheed's partial attitude towards Aziza gives a clear picture that a girl child is unwelcome event in his life. On one hand he buys different kinds of toys for Zalmai even when his shop gets burned and he has to borrow money from his friends and on the other hand he decides to leave Aziza to beg in the streets. Later he sends her and not Zalmai away to the orphanage. This difference of attitudes runs throughout the novel.

**Conclusion:** It can be said that Khaled Hosseini is at pains to give a message that Afghan women are not only affected by the war as media portrays but are also being oppressed within the four walls of their homes. Though *A Thousand Splendid Suns* did not get as fame as *The Kite Runner* yet for a sensible reader it leaves a strong message. Through the story of two women characters, Hosseini brings the reader face to face with a harsh facet of Afghan society, which has got eclipsed due to more media and literary coverage to the political and war scene.

## Works Cited

- Ahmed-Ghosh, Huma. "A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 4.3 (May 2003): 1-14. Web.
- Brodsky, Anne. *With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan*. New York: Taylor and Francis Books, 2004. Print.
- Hosseini, Khaled, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007. Print.
- Mansoor, Weeda. "The Mission of RAWA: Freedom, Democracy, Human Rights." *Women for Afghan Women*. Ed. Sunita Mehta. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 68-83. Print.
- Lederman, Arline. "The Zan of Afghanistan: A 35-year Perspective." *Women for Afghan Women*. Ed. Sunita Mehta. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 46-58. Print.
- Purdue OWL. "MLA Formatting and Style Guide." The Purdue OWL. Purdue U Writing Lab, 10 May 2008. Web. 15 Nov. 2009