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Reading Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a Novel of Women Resilience

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Abstract:

Afghan-born American novelist and physician Khaled Hosseini's second bestselling novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, written in 2007, is set in "war-ravaged landscape of Afghanistan", and it focuses on the tumultuous lives and relationship of Mariam and Laila. In contrast to *Hosseini's The Kite Runner*, which is a story of "father-son relationship", this novel is regarded as "mother-daughter story" by the author himself. The novel relates the story of Mariam and Laila in four parts. The first part focuses on Mariam, while the second and fourth part on Laila, and the relationship between the two women in the third part. At the background the novel also recounts Afghanistan's troubled history of last several decades, through the eyes of a segment of the Afghan population that probably suffered and lost the most during that period, that are its women. Through this pitiable story of two women married to a man Rasheed, who oppress them physically as well as psychologically, the author tries to represent the situation of Afghan women, who are not only affected by the war but are also being oppressed by their domestic rulers, that are their husbands. The present paper attempts to examine the Afghan women, oppressed under the rule of patriarchy, whether at the domestic level by their husbands or at social order under Taliban rule, and their resilience and tenacity to survive, which is clearly identified throughout this novel with a glimpse of hope at the end, as the rains return, the cinemas open, the children play and the orphanages are rebuilt.

Keywords: Afghan war, Women Resilience, Oppression, Domestic violence, Patriarchy etc.

Khaled Hosseini brings in this novel the subject of women suppression in Afghanistan along with the various other restrictions of education and familial subjugation. He has created the man-dominated patriarchal Muslim world of Afghanistan where women are deprived of equality and freedom, and where "women are still very much women," to use Simone de Beauvoir's words (de Beauvoir [Introduction] 3). They are treated as they are slaves of their men who rule them, order them and own them, and they are warned, "be women, stay women, become women," with a religious ideological tool that "a woman's face is her husband's business only," (Hosseini 48). This acts as a cynical bludgeon in the cruel hands of husbands. The issue of Afghan women's rights is the deep-seated concern of the novel that relates it to feminist aspect, and just after the September 11, 2001 attack, it became a major concern of Afghan literature as a whole. The novel traces more than three decades of chaotic history of Afghanistan. Within this larger historical context, Khaled Hosseini has analysed the egregious situation of women in Afghanistan, both before and after the Taliban rule. The various forms of suppression in the patriarchal authoritarianism of Afghanistan show how women excruciatingly dependent on their fathers, husbands and, especially, on their sons, because bearing male children are considered the one and only path to social status.

In an interview, Khaled Hosseini has expressed the unfathomable impression of the smoldering reality of two Afghan women which forced him to write this novel. In his own words:

What intrigue me about this new book were the hopes and dreams and disillusion of these two women, their inner lives, the specific circumstances that bring them together, their resolve to survive, and the fact that their relationship evolves into something meaningful and powerful, even as the world around them unravels and slips into chaos... The intimate and personal was intertwined inextricably with the broad and historical. And so the turmoil in Afghanistan and the country's tortured recent past slowly became more than mere backdrop. Gradually, Afghanistan itself – and more specifically, Kabul – became a character in this novel.¹

Hosseini Further illustrates:

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 of survival were always with me, and a good part of my inspiration for this novel came from their collective spirit.²

Therefore, on the basis of Hosseini's own admissions the novel essentially stresses the inner strength of woman. We see that both Mariam and Laila endure so much despondency merely because they are women, however, each did not give up hope. Mariam faces her father who repudiates to acknowledge her, a husband who knocks about her for twenty-seven years, and at the last, she has to murder the man when he is determined to kill Laila. So the novel traces the story of two victimized but courageous Afghan women.

At the outset of the novel, we are introduced to Mariam, the protagonist of the novel—how she is called '*harami*' (bastard). She is too young to understand what the word meant, but she "*did* surmise, by the way Nana said the word, that it was an ugly, loathsome thing to be a *harami*" (Hosseini 5). Later, when she became older, she understood that *harami* was not merely an utterance or simply a word but, rather, Nana was "spitting at her" and this "made Mariam feel the full sting of it. She understood then what Nana meant, that a *harami* was an unwanted thing; that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance" (Hosseini 5). Thus, after reading only few pages from the novel one could construe that novel is concerned with the female issues and female body. Mariam's mother Nana was seduced by a rich man, Jalil, at whose house she was working as a housekeeper. After knowing that she became pregnant with him, he left her out of the city Heart, where Mariam was born, in 1959. The personal account narrated by Nana is paralleled with the Afghan history at large narrated by Jalil to his illegitimate daughter, Mariam. One the one hand, Nana said to Mariam that his father "cast us out of his big

¹ <http://lgdata.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/docs/1988/359002/thousandsplendidsuns.pdf>

² . *Ibid*

fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily” (Hosseini 6). During Nana’s delivery, Jalil did not bother to summon a doctor, or even call a midwife. She was left alone on cold and hard *Kolba*’s floor, a knife by her side. It took her two days, without sleeping and eating, or someone who would give her water to drink, in delivering Mariam. On the other hand, it is Jalil who brought clipping from Heart’s newspaper, *Liifaq-i-Islam*, and read from them to Mariam. By means of this Mariam came to know that “there existed a world at large, beyond the *Kolba*, beyond Gul Daman and Heart too, a world of presidents with unpronounceable names, and trains and museums and soccer, and rockets that orbited the earth and landed on the moon” (Hosseini 16). Every Thursday, Jalil brought a piece of that world with him to the *Kolba*. Through this technique of narrating the stories to Mariam by Jalil, Hosseini is unfolding the political history of Afghanistan—how it became a republic from a monarchy. The life of Mariam and her mother Nana, out-casted far away from the main town, reminded us of a classical American novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, nevertheless, unlike Pearl’s father Dimmesdale, Jalil acknowledges his daughter’s birth but he does not have the courage to embrace his daughter.

Mariam has been taught earlier by her mother that “like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman” (Hosseini 7). To Jalil Nana was like a ‘*mugwort*’, a weed, something you rip out and toss aside. This weed was confined to a house which Nana called “*rat-hole*”. Mariam and Nana lived in the four walls without knowing anything that was happening outside the world. After Nana’s death, Mariam started to live in the house of his father. She was stranger there and felt lonely in the midst of crowd. She felt as if she did not belong there, and remembered her mother’s words, “I’m all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I’m gone you’ll have nothing. You’ll have nothing. You are nothing!” (Hosseini 28)

She was a burden on Jalil and his other three wives. So, they find a suitor, Rasheed, for her who was trice aged than she was. She did not want to marry such a man, who was already once married, and she cried for help but no one listened her. She was forced to accept and hug this tragedy of forced marriage. Woman as a part of man’s patrimony “is losing herself, woman is lost” (de Beauvoir 3), because “she owns nothing, woman is not raised to the dignity of a person; she herself is part of man’s patrimony, first her father’s and then her husband’s”. (de Beauvoir 93). The observance of forced marriage of little girls with much older men, simply as an ‘exchange’, is also another point that author wants to stress upon.

Mariam and Rasheed reached Kabul in their house which was totally strange, and freighting to live in and that too with a man whom she did not know at all. She began to cry and Rasheed would say to her angrily, “That’s one thing I can’t stand, the sound of a woman crying. I’m sorry. I have no patience for it” (Hosseini 40). She was forced to wear *burqa* which she never had worn before. It was like a cage to her and “the padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen” (Hosseini 65)

After few weeks she began to like Rasheed. He took her to a visit to the city. She even became pregnant. One day when she was watching the snow falling, she remembered Nana saying that “each snowflake was a sigh heaved by an aggravated woman somewhere in the world.... As a reminder of how women like us suffer. How quietly we endure all that falls upon us.” (Hosseini 59). Hosseini has used pregnancy as a symbol for hope throughout the novel. First, it was Nana who lived only in hope of her child outside the whole world, then every time

Mariam's pregnancy brings hope for her but each time this hope was shattered by destiny itself. Now, Rasheed began to find faults in everything she was doing for him, although she tried her level best to execute his demands. The climax of his cruelty towards her can be seen 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" (Hosseini 94). Her mouth was full of blood when Rasheed forced her to chew the pebbles.

Now, the narrative turns towards another major character, Lila, who was a city bred, beautiful and young. She became another victim of Rasheed, both physically and psychologically, and also sexually. Her parents got killed when a rocket hit their house; she came into the malicious hands of Rasheed who trapped her by sending a man to her who weaves a false story about her beloved Tariq's death. She came to know about her pregnancy by Tariq that left no other option for her but to accept the Rashid's marriage proposal. She was just fourteen and Rasheed's lust for her worsened Mariam's position and value in the house. He avoids Mariam and abuses her as a *harami* and *dehati*. Mariam was a "sad, miserable woman," (142) as Laila would say whom Rasheed used to beat with his belt. In the novel the terror of the husband is shown in these words:

Over the years, Mariam had learned to harden herself against his scorn and reproach, his ridiculing and reprimanding. But this fear she had no control over. All these years and still she shivered with fright when he was like this, sneering, tightening the belt around his fist, the creaking of the leather, the glint in his bloodshot eyes. It was the fear of the goat, released in the tiger's cage, when the tiger first looks up from its paws, begins to growl. (Hosseini 145)

On the other side, Laila was bold to challenge Rasheed's authority. "Rasheed raised the belt and came at Mariam. Then an astonishing thing happened: The girl (Laila) lunged at him. She grabbed his arm and tried to drag him down, but she could do no more than dangle from it. She did succeed in slowing Rasheed's progress toward Mariam" (Hosseini 146)

This continuous beating and violence of Rasheed made Laila sympathize with Mariam and brought both of them close together. They began to love each other, and their unsuccessful running away from his house made Laila the victim of Rasheed's hands as well:

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. (Hosseini 160)

The most important turning point in the novel is when Rasheed seized Laila's throat and tried to kill her but, instead, Mariam killed him with her full power blow by a shovel on Rasheed's head. By giving herself to the police, Mariam made a sacrifice of her life to the family of Laila. She embraced the death bravely. The life had given her nothing but endless suffering

from the hands of father to the cruel husband, and then, the society. She was always beaten and made to obey. Even the last words that Mariam listened were, “kneel here, *hamshira* and look down”. She has been given orders in her whole life and “one last time, Mariam did as she was told” (Hosseini 225).

Education, particularly the education of Afghan women, is another aspect that Hosseini is dealing with in his novel. The words of Babi addressing to Laila affirm this:

Marriage can wait, education cannot. You are 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. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila no chance.” (Hosseini 72)

Laila’s father dreamt of the free Afghanistan where women can breathe as freely as men. For some time the coming of communism made the life of women free. Again, in the words of Bibi:

Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they’re probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they’re than they’ve ever had before... It is good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that, Laila. Of course, women’s freedom here is also one of the reasons people out there took up arms in the first place. (Hosseini 86)

But all of the Bibi’s beliefs and notions about the women education in Afghanistan were proven wrong, because now under the Taliban rule this country, known as the ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’, Afghanistan suffered more than any other government before. They have made the laws and rules that have to be accepted in anyway, and among them one is, “*Girls are forbidden from attending schools. All schools for girls will be closed immediately. Women are forbidden from working*” (Hosseini 166). The situation in Afghanistan worsened. Women were completely banned from education and other activities, which made them caged in their houses. By the Rasheed’s partial attitude towards Azizia, we can understand that the girl child was not welcomed in Afghanistan. He wanted her to beg on streets and sent her to orphanage.

However, the novel ends on a happy note. Afghanistan is changed now. People can read and write, and women too can work now. This novel can be described as a window to a society where the system “devalues equality, liberty, and human rights in favor of hierarchy, control, and repression” (Null and Alfred 125). But, at the end it make us realize that when oppression goes too far, whether through an individual or the state; once oppressed, subjugated or downtrodden can rise up against the tyranny. Hosseini, through the love and affection of Mariam and Laila for each other, portrayed “amazing resilience of human spirit where hope unfolds like a tiny, frail plant in the most unlikely places” (Null and Alfred 123).

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