

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 2 [April 2016]

7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite



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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Surviving the Odds: Women Characters in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract:

The concepts of feminism and resistance are closely interrelated. In fact, resistance against odds is a definite characteristic of the feminist struggles. The women adopt a number of strategies to survive and endure the atrocities bestowed on them despite their constant struggles, sacrifices and silence. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a novel that takes into account a number of female characters in a politically disturbed Afghanistan and narrates the frightful experiences and survival tactics of the women characters in a scene of heightened domestic oppression. The novel intertwines the life of Mariam and Laila, two diametrically opposite characters and highlights the various strategies they adopt to fight the oppressive scene. In this paper we have tried to throw light on the endurance as well as the rebellion of the female characters in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Keywords: feminism, endurance, struggle, survival, rebellion.

Resistance to injustice and discrimination has been expressed in subtle ways in various writings. These writings reflect a willingness to reckon with gender disparities. The most important aspect of this resistance is to break the silence and to rediscover the female self. In the words of Srimati Basu, the idea of resistance has inherent in it the "bind between the inability to leave the situation one is in and yet a strong reluctance to accept the norms of that position" (187). Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a novel that takes into account a number of female characters in a politically disturbed Afghanistan and narrates the frightful experiences and survival tactics of the women characters in a scene of heightened domestic oppression. The novel intertwines the life of Mariam and Laila, two diametrically opposite characters and highlights the various strategies they adopt to fight the oppressive scene. The novel displays the reality of gender roles in Afghanistan through the various women characters Nana, Mariam, Fariba, Laila and other minor female characters. It throws light on the continuous distress and oppression that are a part of women's daily lives and how women find multiple ways of surviving these odds.

The first women character we come across is Nana. With Nana the tone of the novel is set- feminine anguish and an inherent desire to revolt against the same. Nana was a housemaid at Jalil's house. She was used by him and also impregnated. But Jalil does not aid her in conceiving. The only aid he provides her is the small *kolba*. He discards her because his three wives protest against Nana. Nana is left powerless as the only truth is that women are powerless and she finds ways to vent out her frustration. Aninidita Ghosh can be quoted here:

Scott sees how the weak have always expressed discontent using multiple strategies and avenues. From small 'inoffensive' acts in the presence of the dominant to louder pronouncements of disquiet in congenial surroundings, the dominated have consistently critiqued the conditions of their subordination. The apparent harmony between oppressors and the oppressed is merely a masquerade as it conceals deeper and ever- present roots of disquiet and change (5).

Nana has a small daughter- an illegitimate child – a *harami*, Mariam. Nana loves Mariam and gets irritated with her: “you are clumsy little *harami*. This is my reward for everything I've endured. An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little *harami*”(4). It was all Nana's frustration of being cast aside to lead a solitary life as she carried Mariam an illegitimate baby, the father of whom was Jalil. Moreover, what led more to Nana's frustration was the fact that Jalil had left her all alone with a mere '*kolba* as a possession and yet Mariam shows her loyalty towards Jalil. Nana expresses her anger as “a man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed; it won't stretch to make room for you”(27). Mariam's loyalty towards Jalil is too much for Nana. She commits suicide in despair. Before her death, Nana advises Mariam by stating, “ It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us endure. It's all we have”(4). Thus, for Nana the best way to survive is “endurance” or *tahamul*. She survives the odd years of her life through enduring the hardships and pains as she knew the only solution left to her was bearing the pain.

Jalil emerges as the first representative of a patriarch in the novel. He represents that class of men who are more concerned with their status and name in the society. Jalil mistreats Nana and does not even spare Mariam at one point of time. The only thing he does for Mariam is that he makes occasional visits to her. On the day, when Mariam reaches Jalil's place, Jalil does not allow her in. Mariam, however, has always admired Jalil as a father. She relishes the time spent with her father as she knows nothing of the reality. She did not understand that she was a *harami*: “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 and acceptance”(4).

Mariam is taken up by Jalil after Nana's death. She stays with his family who did not accept her as a legitimate member. The three wives of Jalil want her to get married much against her wishes. When Mariam refuses to marry the forty year old Rashid by saying “I don't want this. Don't make me this” (47), Jalil's wives in ironical terms tell her to act rationally by

accepting the marriage: “now be reasonable, Mariam. You can’t spend the rest of your life here. Don’t you want a family of your own? You have to move on” (47). Thus, Mariam gets married to Rasheed and thus, begins the life of torture and endurance for Mariam. The first few months of her marriage were peaceful. But slowly the beauty fades away when Mariam fails to have a successful pregnancy. Rasheed begins torturing Mariam “with each disappointment, (six other miscarriages) Rasheed had grown out more remote and resentful. Now nothing, she did please him” (98). He is irritable and always in a bitter mood. He is so enraged that Mariam dreads his homecoming and has a feeling that she is no better than a burden to him. Rasheed finds ways of torturing her. He forces her to chew a “handful of pebbles” in order to make her understand how her cooking tastes. He clasped her jaw, forced her mouth open and then forced the pebbles into it. “through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes”(103). With utter brutality he leaves Mariam suffer, thus showing his disgust at her inability to bear a son. Thus, Mariam is reduced to a cringing and crippled object of oppression. There is no refuge in her life with Rasheed- “his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat... Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid...she lived in a fear of his...volatile temperament, his ...punches, slaps,[and] kicks”(89).

Despite Mariam’s anger and humiliation, Rasheed gives a final blow to her marrying Laila. Initially Mariam finds it difficult to accept Laila as her co-wife. She rejects all the attempts of Laila trying to befriend her. She is for the first time, a woman with negativity towards a person. However, this marriage turns out to be Mariam’s salvation. Soon she finds herself a friend to Laila. In the words of Usha Bande,

Women- women dyad that has come under too strong a feminist glare due to its homosexual connotation is in fact one of the sources of female resistance in patriarchy in its healthy form, it plays a significant role in identity formation as well as in sustaining women in the patriarchal setup. In a society where the male and the female world are strictly compartmentalized, women find their space in the “inner courtyard” where the feminine atmosphere reigns supreme. Away from the male domain and secure from the male gaze women try to forge strong ties “not necessarily lesbian and get a feeling of belonging. (115)

This woman-woman dyad is a great source of resistance by women. The women find each others’ company, a kind of solace. They empathize with each other, thus providing each other the means to survive the oppression they suffer at the hands of the society.

When Aziza, Laila’s first child is born, she becomes a miracle in Mariam’s life. Her life changes. For the first time in her life, she feels wanted. Aziza becomes attached to Mariam, responding to her as though she is a second mother. “Mariam had never before been wanted like this. Love had never been declared to her so guilelessly, so unreservedly... she marveled at how, after all these years...she had found in this little creature the first true connection in her life of

false, failed connections”(226). The bond between Laila and Mariam grows stronger with time. Mariam finds refuge in Laila and Laila’s solace in Mariam’s company. Thus, when Rasheed turns violent and was about to kill Laila, Mariam finally reacts. She makes a calculated decision to kill Rasheed. Her fear vanishes and she decides to save Laila. “He’s going to kill her...he really means to. And Mariam could not allow that to happen. He’d taken so much from her...she would not watch him take Laila too”(310). She knows she has to kill Rasheed. “Mariam raised the shovel high...she “turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life”(311). She saves Laila and comforts her by sharing her vision of future, “ a remote village where the road was narrow and unpaved but lined with all manner of plants and shrubs”(315)...they would make new lives for themselves- peaceful, solitary lives and there the weight of all that they’d endured would lift them...”(315).

At the time of her death, Mariam is aware that she will miss Laila and Aziza but yet she is at complete with herself. She knows that she came into the world unwanted but she is leaving it “as a woman who had loved and had been loved back... this was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings”(329). Mariam has a heroic death.

Laila, Mariam’s solace makes a lot of choices and strategies for survival. She was a neglected child by her mother as she mourns the absence and then the death of her two sons who fought against the Soviet Union. Laila’s refuge is her father. Her father teaches her about poetry and Afghan history. Babi and Laila are a supportive team. She protects him from the anger of her mother almost as much as he protects her from her mother’s indifference. Her father’s expectations for her to be educated and to pursue a profession set aside Laila from her friends who plan to marry and raise children. “Babi had made it clear to Laila from a young age that the most important thing in his life after her safety, was her schooling”(103). Laila accepts her father’s expectations for her and is proud of them. Laila loses her mother and father during the *mujahideen* shelling of Kabul following the fall of Najibullah and the failed attempt at a shared government. She survives and is left on her own wits and resources to survive. Rasheed offers help to Laila not out of sympathy but to satisfy his own desire. He has plans of marriage with Laila and Laila also has no option but to accept Rasheed’s proposal. Her acceptance of the proposal is her way of surviving the world which would have offered her nothing except abduction, rape or finally murder. The moment she realizes that she is pregnant with Tariq’s child, she accepts Rasheed’s proposal. Laila tries to hide the identity of Aziza’s real father, but she fails. She however, remains undeterred and once again plans to deceive Rasheed. She gradually steals money from Rasheed and also includes Mariam in her escape plans. However, their plan fails and Laila, Aziza and Mariam are left to be tortured at the hands of Rasheed. The happy moments do not last long as the political turmoil in the state leads to exhaustion in the family resources. Aziza is sent to an orphanage. After one of Mariam and Laila’s visit to Aziza , they return to find Tariq waiting outside their house. It is this fateful and nearly fatal event that

brings about the pivotal moment in the novel leading to Mariam's decisive action against Rasheed and Laila's ultimate escape from him.

Because of Mariam's sacrifice Laila is back with her childhood sweetheart and both of her children are alive and thriving. Laila evolves into a mature woman. Once she starts hearing about positive changes in Kabul, she wants to be a part of it. She recalls her father's words: "you can be anything you want, Laila, he says. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you" (343). Laila wonders if living her life as a maid in a "foreign land" would be what Mariam wanted for her. "May be it wouldn't matter to Mariam what Laila did as long as she and the children were safe and happy. But it matters to Laila. Suddenly it matters very much" (343). And so Laila chooses to abandon what peace her family had found and returns to Kabul to realize her full potential. As Tariq and Laila set to work at Aziza's old orphanage, Laila feels Mariam's spirit everywhere and senses it as a force behind Kabul's reconstruction. Laila's new pregnancy also offers hope at the end of the novel and the determination to name a female child after Mariam is a fitting tribute to her.

Thus, the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, describes the travails and ordeals of the Afghan woman and their continuous fights for existence. They devise multiple strategies to define their existence. For a woman in real life, existence itself is a tight rope walk, be it Nana, Mariam or Laila. All of them struggle for realizing self-hood in the face of taboos and tortures, repressive codes and oppressive males. While Mariam initially submits herself to the innumerable tortures, Laila plays tactfully and Nana survives through the principle of endurance. At the end all the women characters survive the odd and frame their identity.

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