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Displacement and Cultural Alienation: The Psychological Trajectories of the Protagonists in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract:

The research paper focuses on the cultural clashes and their impact on the life of characters. The novel projects the intersection of several aspects of cultural corrosion, Afghanistan itself was war torn and demolished by conflicts. The bullets of doubt and despair rip holes in homes and result into homelessness and cultural dislocation of people. Like their battered country, the lives of Laila and Mariam are also disrupted and disintegrated. Research Paper describes the quest for survival of Laila and Mariam to escape male domination supported and sanctioned by the society and culture of Afghanistan. In spite of being co-wives, they begin to lean on each other and fight the cruel Rasheed. The research paper depict the impact of cross cultural wars on the life of the characters. Many young men like Tariq were forced to leave their homes because of uncertainty and political unrest and mass butchering carried out by the Taliban and suffered displacement. Women became the targets of violence, rapes and sexual oppression.

Keywords: Cultural collision, displacement, cultural alienation, male domination,

A Thousand Splendid Suns, Khaled Hussein's second novel was a popular work and continues to impact the world's opinion about Afghan society and Afghan women. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a heartrending tale of Afghan women, set against the volatile events of Afghanistan's last thirty years of Taliban rule.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is a tale of two generations of characters who suffer multiple displacements and fractured identities as they live in the shadows of violence, fear and war. The history of Afghanistan is marked by political instability, infrastructure collapse, and restrictive political regimes. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* uses the political backdrop of Afghan society to narrate a domestic tale about the plight of women in an oppressive culture. The impact of the Taliban culture is so disastrous that women lost their identity. Women are reduced to sex dolls

and children producing machines. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* traces the socio-political and cultural history of Afghanistan. As Brannigan rightly points out;

Literature is a vehicle for the representation of history, and it does contain insights into the formation of historical moments. It reveals the processes and tensions by which historical change comes about. But it does not ... reflect history as a mirror. It sees literature as a constitutive and inseparable part of history in the making, and therefore rife with the creative forces, disruptions and contradictions, of history. (418)

A Thousand Splendid Suns focus on the cultural clashes and their impact on the life of characters. The novel projects the intersection of several aspects of cultural corrosion, Afghanistan itself was war torn and demolished by conflicts. The bullets of doubt and despair rip holes in homes and result into homelessness and cultural dislocation of people. Like their battered country, the lives of Laila and Mariam are also disrupted and disintegrated. (*The Thousand Splendid Suns* 132) The novel describes the quest for survival of Laila and Mariam to escape male domination supported and sanctioned by the society and culture of Afghanistan. In spite of being co-wives, they begin to lean on each other and fight the cruel Rasheed. Their bond is so strong that they are even ready to die for each other. In fact Mariam shines in the heart of Laila “with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns.” (*Thousand Splendid Suns* 366)

The plot of the novel describes the struggles of women who are caught in the in the net of political factions and cultural standards. Hosseini explores the impact of cultural corrosion on the people in the midst of violence and carnage of war. Hosseini uses the friendship of Mariam and Laila to depict the resilience of human spirit where hope sustains life like oasis in the desert. Rebecca Stuhr has rightly said that:

Hosseini is a cultural theorist of the post-colonial era. His novels depict the traumatic experiences of the people caught in the web of cultural collision. His stories are quite compelling and the language is quite bewitching. He questions assumptions and breaks apart stereotypes through the strengths and weaknesses of his characters. He gives details of history, culture, and daily life in Afghanistan.. (77-78)

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Nana is enslaved by Jalil who is a rich businessman of Heart. Nana is psychologically tortured by Jalil. He doesn't bother, there is no scene of physical assault but she always feels deeper wounds in her soul. Nana tells Mariam that Jalil is a heartless person, has no *dil* to protect her in the family. Nana is forced to live in a poor and improvised kolba far away from the main town. Nana lives alone with her daughter Mariam. Mullah Faizullah, a religious tutor comes once a week to teach Mariam to read and to tutor her in Koran recitations. In

desperation Nana abuses Mariam again and again calling her '*harami*'. Nana teaches her the cruelty of patriarchal ideology pointing out that just as a compass needle points north similarly "a man's accusing finger always finds a woman" (*SUNS* 7). Jalil forces her daughter and mother to live like Hazaras. He lived with his three legal wives and ten children. Every Thursday Jalil visits the Kolba and gives Nana a pittance for child support to redeem his sin toward Mariam and Nana. Mariam is delineated as an outsider condemned suffering persecution and shame. The neurotic Nana warned Mariam of the malignant deeds of her father Jalil.

Mariam's mother is marginalized. Nana is bitter and depressed and is emotionally unstable woman. She has to endure rejection, abandonment and frustration of life with morbidity. Mariam always keeps her thoughts and words to herself. Her mother never sent her school, she was in emptiness because she never got any affection, she felt lonely as she was friendless, and she often played in the river in the edge of the river. Thursday was her lucky day because her father visited her; he would bring some gifts for her and often would take her to the edge of the river to play with her. Mariam loved her father, had full faith in him more than her mother but Nana always ridiculed Jalil saying the his love was false only a way to atone for the sin he committed in the past. Nana warns Mariam of the false illusions of Jalil who is very cruel from the core of his heart.

You're afraid that I might find the happiness you never had. And you don't want me to be happy. You don't want a good life for me. You are the one with the wretched heart" (*SUNS* 27).

Mariam and Laila discover that "they were not enemies any longer" (*SUNS* 224). The turning point in Mariam's life came on her fifteenth birthday when she took liberty to visit Heart to meet her father alone against the warning of Nana. Mariam thought that she was free like other children and had the right to meet and enjoy the company of her father who she loved her from the core of her heart. Jalil had promised her to take her to the cinema on her birthday. Nana had prohibited her and even threatened her that she would commit suicide if Mariam went to Heart. All her dreams were shattered when Mariam reached Heart, her father didn't come to receive her, he was unwilling to meet her. His indifferent attitude was shocking to Mariam. She was let sleep outside her house like discarded furniture. She realized that her mother was right about Jalil and her perception about his father was wrong. Her sensitive heart broke, the bolt came from the blue when she found her mother hung up and died. Now she had no option but to live with her father against the wishes of Jalil's wives who married her to Rasheed. . Her father Jalil could marry her with a rich man of status but she was married to a poor shoe maker. It is quite interesting to note that her parents are absent on the eve of her marriage. Her mother Nana is no more in this world and father is a cruel monster who wrecks the happiness of Mariam. She is virtually sold to an aged cobbler Rasheed. Her father Jalil is a silent spectator of the scene of her ruin. Mariam is thrown into a cage of Rasheed where she will suffer eternal damnation. Jalil has no courage to look at Mariam. She hopes that Jalil will look after her but he is quite unconcerned

staring at the pitcher” (*SUNS* 51). Jalil is ashamed of his crime but he has no courage to speak to his wives. His plan of marriage of Mariam is just to get rid of Mariam.

Mariam recollects the words of Nana mother who had warned her of the malignant intentions of her father. Nana had told her how her father had betrayed them. In derogative language her mother had condemned Jalil; her “beloved father” who “cast us out”. (*SUNS* 5). Being lonely, poor and marginalized she grows possessive about her daughter who is the only hope of her life and the only link of communication. “You’re all I have. I won’t lose you to them...” (*SUNS* 18) Nana suffered alone, she survived all the oppression of her husband Jalil. She doesn’t want her daughter to suffer marginalization.

You must know what it means to be a woman. Do learn it well my child! Now and learn it well...a man is always right and a woman is always wrong. He is always found accusing a woman. Women like us. We endure. It’s all we have” (*SUNS* 18).

Nina suffers the oppression of the patriarchal society silently; she bears the false indictments without any protest and at last dies in seclusion under emotional breakdown. Her life and death exposes the cruelties of the society which is always indifferent to the abandoned women. When her mother commits suicide, Mariam feels alienated and feels stigmatized. She is confined to a lonely cottage like her mother and is denied free social interaction as Nana told her: “there is only one skill a woman shall have. She must learn to Endure.” (*SUNS* 17). Her only joy is the weekly visit of her father but feels disappointed to know that her father lacks courage to recognize her. The dejected Mariam leaves Herat to be married. She goes to Kabul where she encounters more hardships of life and cultural dislocation. After marriage Rasheed is quite kind and hospitable, he takes Mariam around the city and gives certain precious gifts just to win her confidence. He buys for her “a pure gift a dark maroon silk shawl.” But Mariam is not pleased with the gifts because she recollects the warnings of her mother. Her father, had purchased gifts for her mother only to absolve him of the guilt. The real self of Rasheed comes on the surface when he expresses his rage and mercilessly beats Mariam because of her miscarriages. The real cruel self of Rasheed comes on the surface when Mariam cannot give birth to her babies. Rasheed sinks into hatred and contempt; he beats her mercilessly. She sees the lower middle class living in crowded areas and in Rashid’s house, Mariam sees “pots and pans and a pressure cooker” (*SUNS* 53) Her husband Rasheed is bitter, cruel, insensitive and orthodox. Rasheed is rigid patriarch who uses all tools to subjugate and dehumanize Mariam. Sushmita Banerjee observes thus: “Here women only tolerate oppression, cook and are children producing machines. Means three-in-one.” (26) When Mariam suffers repeated miscarriages, Rasheed transforms into a tyrant of domestic violence suppressing innocent Mariam. Rasheed says: “The women come uncovered; they talk to me directly, look me in the eye without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their knees”(SUNS 63). Mariam wears the burqa for the first time.

“She has difficulty getting adjusted to it. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth” (*SUNS* 65) She is forced to wear a burqa which “symbolizes the loss of her vision of life”. (*SUNS* 63). Rasheed believes in patriarchal oppression:

Remember Mariam I am of a different breed and you cannot understand me from where I come from? Nobody knows from where I come from and why have I come from ? You must remember that the face of a woman only belongs to her husband only. Do you understand? (*SUNS* 69)

Mariam is very submissive and when she accepts a *burqa* for her husband’s satisfaction. She wears the burqa for the first time symbolizes the loss of vision. Rasheed being orthodox Muslim uses physical violence to use and abuse Mariam. He has no love for her; she is subjected to all kinds of tortures. Mariam found the burqa comforting, as “It was like a one-way window. (*SUNS* 72) All women in the novel are victims of double colonization; they are subjected to all forms of physical and psychological torments. The clash of culture, religion is so serious that they are oppressed by patriarchy, terrorism and religious fanaticism of the Taliban. Rasheed had the second wife Laila who was the victim of Taliban terrorism. Laila loves Tariq who is compelled to flee away from Kabul to save his life. Laila’s family decides to leave also. They are packing up their things when Laila takes a box out to their car and a rocket hits her house, killing her mother and father. Laila’s parents have been blown up by the shells of the Mujahideen. She has no parental side to find a good spouse for her.

The Taliban enforced the strict puritanical laws, banned all sorts of entertainment. Nobody could conduct music concert, writing of books and watching films was banned. The Taliban degraded all people, victimized and tortured people. Tariq narrates to Laila of a person who had been publicly flogged for his love for paintings. Mariam was abandoned by her mother, ignored by her father; Mariam does not know any happiness in life until she meets Laila. Laila was the youngest of Fariba and Hakim. She was given good education but war shattered her life. . Rasheed took Laila into his house when Laila was almost killed in the war. Circumstances forced Laila to be Rasheed’s second wife. At the time of her marriage Laila was pregnant with her beloved man Tariq who moved to Pakistan to escape from violence of Taliban. After getting married to Laila, Rasheed has not been shown doing sex with Mariam. He boycotts sexual relationship with Mariam on two bases, first she passes through a series of miscarriages, and secondly, Laila conceives a child. Mariam was not jealous of Laila and treated her well.” She looked after her children and played with them. Rasheed wanted to kill Laila because she loved Tariq and always desired to desert Rasheed. The Taliban strictly imposed laws which inhibited the growth of women. The cultural collision begins when the old traditions of Kabul were scrapped by the Taliban. One of the rules is that women will stay inside their homes all the time and are forbidden from attending schools and working (*SUNS* 271). Laila who was brought up in a liberal way but in Rasheed’s house” she is in a cage locked to suffer eternally. “(*SUNS* 271).

Rasheed is a callous husband believing in traditional oppressive patriarchy. He is greedy, selfish and mean and when he finds that Mariam is unable to give birth to a child he behaves in a monstrous manner. Mariam is treated as a servant; she is almost locked in a cage to be persecuted physically and emotionally. Rashid intimidates her thus: I know you are trembling! Did I terrify you? “Do I scare you? Don’t you feel scared of me?” (*SUNS* 60). Mariam leads a hellish life being terrified by Rasheed every day. She passed four years of her harrowing life and then she realized that how difficult it was to lead a life in terror and horror. She also realized that “how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid” (*SUNS* 99). Rasheed was a man of explosive temperament and it was very hard to spend life with him. Rashid would enjoy sadistic pleasures in beating and humiliating Mariam. It was a routine matter for her to experience wounds on her delicate body but now she had become hard and tough. She was a fear-ridden woman always sick of Rashid’s shifting moods and his aggressive behavior. When she entered his house after marriage she found the house a ghastly place inhabited by cruel monsters. Rasheed would give severe beating to his wives and he was a terror in the house. Laila tried to run away from his house. Rasheed caught her from her hair; dragged her violently and some of her hair ripped from her delicate scalp. Laila cried and screamed in pain but Rasheed witnessed her sufferings silently. Rashid didn’t stop, he pushed her violently, and there was blood in his hands, blood on Mariam’s face who tried to save Laila.” (*SUNS* 269) “Mariam is always haunted by guilt as she finds herself responsible for the suicide of her mother. She feels this guilt hanging around her neck like an albatross. She strongly feels that all her sufferings even after her marriage are because of her guilt. She is forced into marriage with a widower for too old for her. The Taliban destroyed Afghanistan and people continued to suffer but Laila is hopeful of a better future and rehabilitation of people. Laila hopes and has firm faith in the resurrection of her country but she feels intense anger at the sight of the war lords walking away scot-free.

She was surprised to find the killers and murderers living in posh homes. They have been appointed minister of this and deputy minister but all are the enemies of the peace of Kabul. (*SUNS* 363)

Mariam is caught in the whirlpool of cultural collision; she had to confront Rasheed who represented orthodox Muslim culture. She struggled to survive in war torn society of Kabul. Mariam is always haunted by guilt-consciousness. She thinks that she is responsible for the tragic suicide of her mother. Nana’s death was not a minor incident, it shattered all her life. Jalil married her to Rasheed because her mother was not alive. She realized that fate and societies are colliding to ruin her. The first step of her domestication and victimization of Rasheed’s culture is her acceptance of the *Burqa*. She symbolically lost her vision of life as all the shutters to the outside world were closed for her, “all the shameful secrets of her past” (*SUNS* 66). The main cause of her despondency is her multiple miscarriages. She becomes pregnant again and again but she suffers miscarriage to the chagrin of Rasheed. She curses herself and Nature that doesn’t allow her to enjoy the pleasures of motherhood. She becomes sick and sad losing interest in life

and its activities. She is haunted by her guilt and feels torn in body and spirit. She is forced to ponder over her anguish thus:

Could I be a deceitful wife? Could I be a dishonorable woman? I had never been a vulgar woman. What have I done to this mean husband who is so cruel and violent? How could I tolerate his continual assaults,? *SUNS* 309)

Mariam had been subjugated and marginalized in all ways. She was persecuted emotionally, physically and psychologically. Nana, Mariam, Laila, Aziza suffer because of cultural antagonism. Khaled Hosseini gives the animal imagery of a grizzly bear to suggest his monstrous cruelty. His physical structure with huge body and rough hair give the impression of an ugly bear. He boasts thus: "Half the women in this city would kill to have a husband like me" (*SUNS* 276). Rasheed keeps four wives and he enjoys sadistic pleasures in torturing all his wives like a tribal war lord of primitive society. Laila loves Tariq passionately, she is impregnated by Tariq but the political unrest and anarchy of Afghanistan compelled Tariq to leave his country. Rasheed spreads the false report that he is killed to entrap Laila. Tariq is the real victim of collision of culture. He is crippled by the blast of Soviet land mine; he is treated as a subaltern by all. Laila loved Tariq; she was pregnant and was lonely because Tariq was forced to leave Kabul. Laila had heard interesting stories from his parents who had enjoyed courtship and marriage. Her father had told her that enjoyed the married life. Laila lived in the world of dreams as she had romantic view of love and marriage. Rasheed married Laila because Mariam couldn't give birth to a baby and she was a barren woman. In the first year Rasheed is very kind to Laila; looks after her very well and even gives her gifts. But after she becomes a mother, he resumes his habit of physically torturing Laila. His language is vulgar and abusive; his attitude towards women is violent and dehumanizing. He uses his kicks and sticks to torture Laila. Women like Mariam and Laila are bound together by destiny in an abusive marriage. Laila lost everything during the Afghan war but she never lost faith in God...

In the last section of the novel Hosseini depicts the heroic action of Mariam who is fed up with the tormenting behavior of Rasheed, Seasons had come and gone. People were mercilessly butchered, many of them fled away to other countries. But Mariam had hardly noticed any change because of her own troubles. Mariam's existence becomes wooden. Over time, she becomes Rasheed's puppet. He pulls the strings. She stays home, cooks and cleans. She becomes Rasheed's scapegoat, and he beats her to express his frustration. She had passed these years in a distant corner in her mind, a dry, beyond wish and lament, beyond dream and disillusionment. There the future did not matter to him. Her only mission was to save Laila and her children from the cruel Rasheed. In order to rescue Laila Mariam intervenes. She kills Rasheed in the scuffle. She is stressed not to own the responsibility of Rasheed's death but she declines and prefers sentence of execution than the life of subjugation. When Mariam is about to be executed for killing Rasheed, she recounts her life with Laila. Mariam was at peace with herself; there was no

feeling of remorse. She had taken the decision to kill Rasheed independently in pursuance of the calling of her soul. Rasheed had been a brutal animal and it was a good job to kill the animal. She was leaving the world because she had brought order out of chaos. Her killing was meaningful and she was leaving a very good friend, a very loving mother and a very good guardian.” (SUNS 329) Mariam is not repentant at all and she thinks she has done a noble deed in killing a dangerous bear. Mariam kills Rasheed for her love to Laila and her children. She dares to end their subservience and exploitation.

Conclusion

A Thousand Splendid Suns depict the impact of cross cultural wars on the life of the characters. Many young men like Tariq were forced to leave their homes because of uncertainty and political unrest and mass butchering carried out by the Taliban and suffered displacement. Women became the targets of violence, rapes and sexual oppression. Hosseini depicts the existential challenges and dilemmas of the people of Kabul engulfed in cross cultural wars. The novel is set in a turbulent period of the history of Afghanistan when there was exodus and the Taliban had destroyed all institutions. It was a period of emergency as the life had paralyzed and evil doers like Rasheed enjoyed absolute patriarchal powers to crush the happiness of others. All the protagonists, Amir, Hassan, Baba, Nana, Mariam, Laila are the victims of cultural corrosion. The external forces represented by Rasheed, Jalil and Assef destroyed the peace of their life. People were influenced by the ruthless world of war and oppression. Khaled Hosseini presents psychological case histories of women who are sexually oppressed and tortured by the male protagonists. Laila enjoyed peaceful life in Pakistan but when she returned back to Kabul she had to suffer the physical and psychological traumas.

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