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Masculinity, War and the Alternative Space: A Study of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to understand the relationship between masculinity and war through a study of Afghan-American novelist, Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). Masculinity and war create a space which is completely hostile to marginalised sections of the society, especially women and children. However, Hosseini's novel appears to indicate the possibility of an alternative space even in a masculinity-obsessed, war-ravaged society which can provide a glimmer of hope to the subaltern. In Hosseini's novel, the alternative space is created through female bonding. This paper intends to examine whether this alternative space actually succeeds in opposing the repressive, dominant patriarchal and racist power structure.

Keywords: Masculinity, war, marginalised, alternative space, dominant

There is a dialectical relationship between masculinity and war. War creates a fertile ground for the flourishing of the masculine traits. Similarly, an over glorified masculinity prepares the ground for war. In his doctoral thesis, titled "Masculinity, War and Refusal: Vicissitudes of German Manhood before and after the Cold War" (2004), Steven Lester Gardiner argues, "Soldierly masculinity is found precisely in that majority of cultures that participate in the war system" (86). This paper intends to explore the relationship between masculinity and war through a study of Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). The novel is set in the war-ravaged Afghanistan, and it portrays with graphic details the victimisation of women and children in a war-torn, masculinity-obsessed society. Despite the tragic sufferings of almost all the characters, especially the women and children, the novel attempts to spread a ray of hope through the strong bonding between the two central female characters. It appears that Hosseini posits the possibility of an alternative space in an otherwise god-forsaken place through female bonding. This paper would explore whether the novel actually succeeds in challenging the repressive power structure or it reinforces the same ideological presuppositions which help the patriarchal society to maintain its hegemony over women.

A Thousand Splendid Suns encapsulates a very turbulent period of modern Afghan history, starting with the invasion of the Soviets, followed by the Mujahideen-led war, the rise of the Taliban and ending with an America-sponsored new Afghanistan after September 11, 2001. The novel revolves around the struggles of a woman, named Mariam and her relationship with another woman, called Laila. Mariam is the illegitimate child of Jalil, a rich businessman and his maid servant, Nana. After her birth, Mariam along with her mother is

forced to live in a small shack outside the city of Herat in Afghanistan. Though Jalil comes to meet Mariam once in a week, and is affectionate towards her, he never publicly acknowledges her for the sake of protecting his "honour". That is why, even though Mariam urges Jalil to come on her birthday and take her to his cinema hall, Jalil does not turn up, causing heartbreak to Mariam. Since Mariam deeply loves her father, she quietly leaves her home without the knowledge of her mother and heads towards Herat where her father lives along with his legitimate wives and children. However, Jalil does not let her come inside his house, and Mariam spends the entire night in the open in front of her father's house. Next day, when Jalil's driver takes Mariam back home, she finds her mother hanging from a tree.

After Nana's death, Jalil allows Mariam to stay in his house. However, after a few days, Mariam is forced to marry Rasheed, a shoe shop owner in Kabul who is almost of her father's age. In Kabul, Mariam's life with Rasheed initially is one of relative calm and stability. However, calmness and happiness completely disappear from Mariam's life when she fails to deliver a child even after getting pregnant for the seventh time. Since Rashid's desire to be the father of a son remains unfulfilled, he starts abusing Mariam both verbally and physically. The violence inflicted on Mariam by Rasheed intensifies with each passing day. However, Mariam finds some solace through her relationship with a neighbourhood girl, called Laila. Laila's life, like that of Mariam, is full of anguish and suffering. Laila fell in love with a boy, named Tariq who had lost one of his legs from a land mine. However, the lovers fail to get united since Tariq along with his parents leaves for Pakistan due to the war in Afghanistan. Laila also loses her parents in a bomb blast. The bomb blast which causes the death of Laila's parents seriously injures Laila as well. Mariam and Laila meet for the first time when the latter is taken by Rasheed to his home for medical treatment. The initial attitude of Mariam towards Laila is one of strong dislike and resentment since Rasheed proposes marriage to Laila once she recovers from her injuries. Laila accepts the proposal of Rasheed with readiness since she discovers that she is pregnant with the child of Tariq. When she delivers a girl child after a few months, she loses the attention of Rasheed. Instead, Rasheed grows suspicious and doubts that Aziza is his daughter. So, along with Mariam, Laila also becomes the target of Rasheed's cruelty and violence. Even after giving birth to a male child, Laila does not find any respite from Rasheed's brutality. It is at this juncture, the tension between the two women eases, and they develop a strong bonding with the passage of time.

Since Rasheed was aware of the relationship between Laila and Tariq, he paid someone to convey the false news of Tariq's death to Laila. Rasheed's cunning manipulativeness gets exposed when Tariq comes back and meets Laila after a few years. Since Rasheed cannot tolerate Laila meeting Tariq, he mercilessly tortures both the women and Laila's little daughter, Aziza. When Rasheed tries to kill Laila out of sheer rage, Mariam kills him by hitting on his head with a shovel. After Rasheed's death, Mariam persuades Laila and Tariq to leave Kabul and settle down in Pakistan, while she herself surrenders before the Taliban. Mariam is kept in the prison for a few days before being punished with death. Laila along with her family comes back to Kabul after 2001, and becomes a teacher in the orphanage where Aziza was earlier admitted for a few months. At the end of the novel, Laila is pregnant

with her third child, and decides that if it is a girl, she would name her Mariam.

In a speech delivered at Book Expo America on 2nd June, 2007, Hosseini says, "Life was a struggle for some women in Afghanistan well before the Taliban. But it became all but unbearable with the outbreak of factional war, anarchy and extremism. In many ways, that is when disaster really struck" (Hosseini 2007: 407). A *Thousand Splendid Suns* is set in the conflict-ridden Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, and depicts how women are completely marginalised and denied all kinds of freedom. The *kolba*, located in the outskirts of the town where Mariam and her mother are forced to live, is symptomatic of the marginalisation of Afghan women in general. Nana is completely disillusioned with the society where a virtual gender apartheid exists. That is why, even though Mariam loves her father very much and reposes complete faith in him, Nana tells her, "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). She further tells Mariam, "There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life...And it's this: *tahamul*. Endure" (18). Mariam learns a lesson on endurance very early in her life when she is forced to marry Rasheed. In the Postscript of the novel, Hosseini writes, "The sad truth is that the Taliban-style oppression of women in certain regions of Afghanistan existed long before the Taliban was even a twinkle in the loving eye of the Pakistani secret intelligence" (409).

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam has been subject to enormous cruelty and violence by her masculinity-obsessed husband, Rasheed. Rasheed expresses his annoyance with those liberal-minded, "modern" (69) men who allow their wives a little bit of freedom. He terms these men as "soft" (69), and says, "It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife" (69). There is hardly any difference between the repressive laws enforced by the Taliban on women and the dictates of Rasheed. Rasheed forces Mariam to wear a *burqua* arguing that "a woman's face is her husband's business only" (69). However, Rasheed's argument is not based on any belief in the sanctity of marriage, but merely reflects the double-standard behaviour of the male-dominated society. Mariam becomes aware of this hypocritical behaviour when she discovers several pornographic magazines containing naked pictures of women in the drawer of Rasheed's dresser. The novelist questions the double-standard behaviour of the society through the thoughts of Mariam, "What about all his talk of honor and propriety ... A woman's face, he said, is her husband's business only. Surely the women on these pages had husbands, some of them must ... If so, why did Rasheed insist that she cover when he thought nothing of looking at the private areas of other men's wives and sisters" (81 – 82). Rasheed starts inflicting intolerable cruelty on Mariam when she fails to deliver a male child. In the novel, the lives of the two female protagonists, Mariam and Laila run almost parallel. Just as Mariam is constantly humiliated and abused by Rasheed, Laila also feels neglected at her own home. Laila felt that her two martyred brothers who joined the *jihad* to fight against the Soviets had "overshadowed her in life" (140). Laila always felt that she "would never leave her mark on Mammy's heart the way her brothers had" (142).

Like Hosseini's first novel, *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* shows how the marginalised sections such as women and children are the worst sufferers in a war-

torn society. Ahmed Rashid in his book, *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords* (2001) mentions how a UNICEF survey finds that most of Kabul's children have witnessed extreme violence and they do not expect to survive for long (109). As the war intensifies in Afghanistan, women lose even the slightest of freedom. Public places become so unsafe that women are forced to drop out of school. The narrator in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* says, "Mariam heard of women who were killing themselves out of fear of being raped, and of men who, in the name of honor, would kill their wives or daughters if they'd been raped by the militia" (247). The oppression of women reaches its height during the Taliban regime. The regulations issued by the Taliban's religious police "forced Afghan women to disappear entirely from public view" (Rashid 2001: 105). Ahmed Rashid further writes that the Taliban recruits were "brought up in a totally male society. In the madrassa milieu, control over women, and their virtual exclusion was a powerful symbol of manhood and a reaffirmation of the students' commitment to jihad" (Rashid 2001: 106). Joshua Goldstein in his book, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice-Versa* (2001) explores how war can be interpreted as a signifier of manhood or masculinity. It can be argued that by engaging in war and reducing women to complete non-entities, the Taliban cadres try to assert an aggressive masculinity which does no good to anyone except causing intolerable anguish and suffering to millions of people.

Rasheed has been portrayed as an emblem of the repulsive masculinity-obsessed society. He not only inflicts intolerable cruelty on Mariam and Laila, but also holds views which completely denigrate women to the status of non-entities. Rasheed considers his marriage with Laila a "charitable" (209) act since he believes that he has provided Laila a home and "a sanctuary" (209) through marriage. Instead of treating Mariam and Laila as human beings, he describes them literally in commodified terms. Rasheed tells Laila immediately after their marriage that if Mariam "were a car, she would be a Volga", and Laila would be "a brand-new, first-class, shiny Benz" (216). When Laila protests against the repressive laws of the Taliban like making "half the population stay home and do nothing" (271), Mariam rightly thinks that there is hardly any difference between Rasheed and the Taliban since Rasheed has "done the same to her and Laila, in effect" (271). Moreover, Rasheed vicariously enjoys the spectacle of violence enacted by the Taliban at the Ghazi stadium on every Friday, and describes at home "with a queer sort of exhilaration the hands he'd seen severed, the lashings, the hangings, the beheadings" (274 – 275). Thus, Rasheed's sadistic nature is symptomatic of the deformed psyche of a masculinity-obsessed society. Moreover, it becomes clear that the so-called "sanctuary" which women receive through marriage can in no way be an alternative.

Though Hosseini succeeds in depicting the plight of the marginalised sections, he cannot be celebrated as a champion of the down-trodden. In any traditional male-dominated society, women are assigned only support roles such as nurse, mother or wife. In *A Thousand Splendid Sun*, motherhood has been used as an important trope. It is considered as "the cherished province" (87) for women. In a male-dominated society, a woman's worthiness is measured in terms of her ability to live up to the ideals of motherhood. Laila's mother is apparently portrayed as an assertive and intelligent woman who has the ability to participate

in the political debates. She takes pride in the fact that her sons have joined the Mujahideen in their fight against the Soviets. However, Laila's mother is presented in a negative light since she fails to qualify as a "good" mother. She has been criticised by the novelist not only because of her indifference towards Laila but also because of her misguided support for the *jihad*. On the other hand, Mariam is portrayed as the ideal mother despite the fact that she does not have any natural child. Mariam finds a completely new identity through her relationship with Laila. At the end of the novel, Mariam is almost assigned the status of a martyr since she sacrifices her own life for the sake of Laila. By presenting motherhood in stereotypical terms, and by portraying Laila's mother in a negative light, the novelist appears to share the same prejudice of the male-dominated society against "intelligent" women.

However, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is remarkable in the sense that the novel attempts to construct an alternative space out of female bonding. The hole which Mariam and Laila dig to hide the television set during the raids of the Taliban can be considered as a physical embodiment of the female space which the two women try to establish. The space created through female bonding not only provides the protagonists an emotional refuge but also empowers them to fight against the tyranny, unleashed by aggressive masculinity. In fact, the murder of Rasheed by the two women can be considered as a challenge to the tyrannical patriarchal power structure. After Rasheed's death, Mariam happily takes the entire blame on herself and sacrifices her own life for the sake of Laila's happiness.

A Thousand Splendid Suns also projects America as an alternative to a vilified Afghanistan. The novel portrays America as the saviour and "the land of opportunities". Laila's father, Babi plans to leave the war-ravaged Afghanistan and take refuge in America since he views that "Americans were a generous people. They would help them with money and food for a while, until they could get on their feet" (148). Laila believes that due to America's "war on terror" after 2001, the situation in Afghanistan has improved for the better, and even as a woman, she can contribute towards the Afghan nation-building process. Laila comes back to Kabul after September, 2001. She takes up the job of a school teacher in Kabul, and even provides financial help to rebuild the orphanage where her daughter, Aziza was forced to stay for some time. Thus, Laila becomes successful in asserting an active agency which is otherwise denied to a woman in a male-dominated society. Hosseini's uncritical projection of America as the "savior" is in complete opposition to Anand Gopal's strong indictment of the interventionist politics of America in the name of fighting terror and rebuilding a new Afghan nation. In his book, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban and the War through Afghan Eyes* (2014), Gopal through his investigative journalistic accounts has exposed the complete failure of the West, especially America in the Afghan nation-building project. Moreover, Hosseini has simply glossed over the widespread racial and class-based exploitation present in the American society. Instead of giving any kind of insight into the troubles faced by the Afghan refugees in America, Hosseini uncritically portrays America as "the land of opportunities". Thus, instead of intervening in the existing neo-colonial relationship between Afghanistan and America, Hosseini takes recourse to a West-centric discourse and posits America as the perfect alternative to a "vilified" Afghanistan.

Though the novel ends on a happy note, one question remains unanswered, that is, whether a woman can lead a happy life outside the institution of marriage. Tariq turns out to be a good, understanding husband, and Laila succeeds in asserting her active agency even within the institution of marriage. The novel shows that the relationship between Tariq and Laila is based on reciprocal love and respect. However, it appears that Tariq's physical deformity and the consequent lack of masculinity are the major factors behind the success of this relationship. Moreover, the possibility of an exclusively female space gets completely negated with the death of Mariam. Though the novel ends with the picture of a new, "liberating" Afghanistan, it looks more idealistic. It appears that the novelist's blind admiration for America makes him completely oblivious to the tragic fate of thousands of women and children who have suffered humiliation and America-sponsored violence everyday in post-2001 Afghanistan. Hosseini's novel cannot be considered in any sense as a radical critique of the dominant, exploitative order. In fact, the novelist reinforces the same ideological presuppositions which help the racist, patriarchal society to maintain its hegemony over the marginalized.

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