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Silencing the Song in Her: A Feminist Reading of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract:

On Khaled Hosseini's own admission, *The Kite Runner* is a story of father and son relationship. There is no denying the fact that the story mainly revolves round male characters and the female characters remain in the background, still the seemingly inconspicuous presence of female characters says a lot about their condition in the society both in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and the tightly-knit Afghan community in the US in 1980s. The role and importance of women in the novel – the stories of Amir's mother though no longer present; Jamila Taheri, the migrant general's wife, Hassan's mother Sanaubar, Amir's wife Soraya and even Hassan's wife Farzana remain untold but their brief appearances and silence have very important presence and role in the lives of male characters and development of the plot in the novel. This paper attempts a feminist reading of the novel to seek what message the silence, absence or death of female characters conveys in the novel. This paper critically examines Helene Cixous' proposition that women are written out of the text and it is their absence that makes them desirable. This paper argues that women cannot be written out of a story that involves social and family relationships. Hisham Sharabi's views on changes in Arabic society are taken into account to understand the family relationships in post-modern Arabic world.

Keywords: Gender roles, gender discrimination, feminism, patriarchy, family relationship, Bildungsroman.

The Kite Runner is the story of Amir, a young boy from Kabul, whose closest friend is Hassan, a Hazara (an underprivileged, exploited ethnic minority in Afghanistan). The story is set

against a backdrop of tumultuous events, from the fall of monarchy in Afghanistan through the Soviet military intervention, the exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the rise of the Taliban regime. The novel primarily focuses on three significant stages in Amir's life: his childhood in Kabul his and his father's first years as immigrants in 1980s California, and Amir's return to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Amir's mother died during his birth and he has been brought by his aristocratic, flamboyant father whom he calls Baba. Readers see him as a person who is torn between Amir and Hassan. Hassan is Baba's illegitimate son from Sanaubar, his childhood friend servant Ali's wife. The novel has enjoyed a phenomenal success ever since it came out in 2003 with 4 million copies sold in America alone. Currently, it is published in 40 countries and has been translated into other languages like Persian and Chinese. In 2007, it was adapted into a movie directed by Marc Froster.

Cixous' text *The Newly Born Woman* was published first in 1975 in France, but the first English translation was published in 1986. This text is described as a breakthrough within the modern feminist movement. Cixous explores women's position in literature to understand what is hidden and suppressed in culture and history (Sellers 37). Cixous claims that literature writes out and excludes women as either dead, absent or missing. The fact that the woman is absent is vital for the construction of a good mother or a good woman. In this sense, hierarchy is key to understanding the underlying forces of male dominance and privilege. The underlying intention of the woman being absent is a precondition for the survival and smooth working of patriarchy. Women tend to be associated with passivity in the philosophical paradigms of family and kinship structures.

This paper argues that the silence, death or absence of women in a text do not amount to their being written out, rather, as the novel in question *The Kite Runner* shows, their silent, absent submissive representations strongly assert their presence; their presence is felt more strongly than men through their sketchy, understated descriptions by the narrator; their stories do not remain untold, rather, apart from giving voice to Soraya and to some extent her mother Jamila, the author, by providing information about Sanaubar and Assef's mother, them leaves a lot for the imagination of the reader to work out. Amir's dead mother or the disappearance of Sanaubar makes the reader wonder about them, especially Amir's mother whom Amir tries to discover through her diaries and books. Although the novel, apparently, doesn't assign any

woman character a significant role, the women even when they are missing, dead or absent, or lurking on the margins make a profound statement. Amir's mother Sofia, who is dead, Hassan's mother Sanaubar who is missing and Hassan's wife Farzana who dies defending her husband and even Assef's mother Tanya, make their presence felt despite their death, absence or silence. Women cannot be a part of the story and must disappear.

Since the story has the Afghan society as its background, a discussion of the Afghan social set up would be in order. The Afghan society is a male-dominated, patriarchal society. Patriarchy is the most important determinant in the construction of gender roles. Afghan people apply a traditional division of labor in which men should be responsible for fulfilling any family needs from the money they earn by working outside home, whereas women only manage the necessities using the money from their husbands. The division of labor in the family context clearly separates the roles of a husband and wife. However, both have responsibility to function their roles to maintain the continuity of the family dealing with economic necessities. Afghan men are expected to be the breadwinners to produce money outside home. As the breadwinners, they work outside to earn money for the family. In contrast, women living under patriarchy should not work outside home because it is not appropriate for women to go outside home without their husbands. In consequence, men receive more benefits from that role.

The system of patriarchy brings its influences to the construction of gender roles for both sexes so as to continue male dominance. Patriarchy positions men at the center of social organizations. Lindsey defines patriarchy as "male-centered norms operating throughout all social institutions that become the standard to which all persons adhere". (3) Patriarchy manipulates people to create norms based on male perspectives as the guidelines for both men and women in society. In the eyes of patriarchy, men possess the highest status in nearly all cultural domains and women are assigned subordinate status, "Patriarchy is thus, by definition, sexist" (Tyson 85).

The hierarchal binary oppositions of superior/ inferior can be seen operating as much in the case of father-daughter relationship as it does in father-son relationships. General Taheri and Soraya exemplify the same power dynamics. The father-daughter relationship is based on fear. The father comes across as representative of patriarchal norms and in Soraya's case as a watchdog in view of her elopement which he rendered unsuccessful. The romance between

Soraya and Amir starts with them wanting to spend time with each other, despite the nasty rumor the society builds up about her. Every time Amir meets up with Soraya, her father is there to oversee their encounter:

... because suddenly her smile vanished. The color dropped from her face, and her eyes fixed on something behind me. I turned around. Came face-to-face with General Taheri. ... He moved past me, toward the booth. ... the other hand extended toward Soraya. She gave him the pages. ... He dropped the rolled pages in the garbage can (Hosseini 140).

Amir marries Soraya and after a couple of years, they realize that it is very difficult for Soraya to become pregnant. After fifteen years of marriage, they are still not able to conceive. After several visits at the doctor to undergo tests and trying to find an answer, the results of the tests find no fault with Amir, who “passed with flying colors” (Hosseini 170), leaving Soraya to be examined and create the idea that it is her “fault” for her infertility. Soraya, for the reason that she is a woman, has to undergo much more extensive examinations, but that there is no explanation for her infertility. The reader never gets to know how Soraya’s feels as she is never allowed the space to voice her feelings; this prerogative is reserved for Amir, “And I could almost feel the emptiness in Soraya’s womb, like it was a living, breathing thing. It had seeped into our marriage, that emptiness, into our laughs, and our lovemaking. And late at night, in the darkness of our room, I’d feel it rising from Soraya and settling between us. Sleeping between us. Like a newborn child” (Hosseini 174). Soraya has failed at the ultimate test of her womanhood:

If you are a woman, you will resemble ideal woman; and you will obey the imperatives that mark your line. You will channel your desires, you will address them where, how and to whom it is proper. You will honor the laws (Cixous 113). The man loves the women because she lets him, she accommodates in a way that she knows will make him love her. To be loved back by the man, the woman must live up to the expectations that only she can: to carry and give a child to the man. Her fate is already set in advance because she is a woman (Cixous 114).

Although Soraya's voice and emotions have been written out and her ability to conceive has been stripped away, the narrator presents her as a character who is not only an exception to the patriarchal model of ideal woman, but is also acceptable to a man as his wife – she runs away with a man she has fallen in love with; she discloses her past to Amir before they get married; Amir accepts her despite the rigid societal strictures against women with 'loose' characters (Had this happened in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, she would have been stoned to death), Amir does not go for second marriage despite the fact that she cannot give him a child. In every way she has all the attributes that would make her unacceptable to any man, as far as Cixous' theory is concerned but Amir himself admits, when Soraya shares her past with him, "I envied her. Her secret was out. Spoken. Dealt with. - - - I suspected there were many ways in which Soraya Taheri was a better person than me. Courage was just one of them." (Hosseini, 152)

Patriarchy works not only through the agency of man, "Afghan men, especially those from reputable families, were fickle creatures. A whisper here, an insinuation there, and they fled like startled birds." (Hosseini 137) but also women who tend to behave like men against their own sex. This is evident from the incident when Amir and Soraya are attending a wedding of Soraya's uncle's son. During the ceremony, they overhear a conversation between two middle-aged women. In response to the first woman's comment that the bride was not only beautiful but virtuous too, the second woman's observation obviously refers to Soraya: "I know. I tell you the boy did well not to marry his cousin." (Hosseini 164). Soraya points out the discrimination, "Their sons go out to nightclubs looking for meat and get their girlfriends pregnant, they have kids out of wedlock and no one says a goddamn thing. Oh! They're just men having fun! I make one mistake and suddenly everyone is talking *nang* (pride) and *namoos* (honour and dignity), and I have to have my face rubbed in it for the rest of my life". (Hosseini 164)

Gender inequality appears persistently in the society in which patriarchy powerfully touches social relationships. "Patriarchal relations tend to be strongest where men have very fixed views and ideas about what women should do and how they should behave in relation to them and within sexual relationships" (Maddock 113). A patriarchal family always provides power for a man as the family leader to control other members and dominate the family possession. Patriarchy never lets women to have power and authority in the family, except for household activities dealing with housekeeping, caring and nurturing children. Living under patriarchal system, women's life is full of restrictions and limitations that possibly make the

relationship between men and women problematic. Dominance by males is established in most Arab countries and fathers assume the role of the head of the household. Arab Muslim family structure is hierarchal and patriarchal and the eldest son will often take over the dominant role in absence of his father (Haboush 183-198). This family structure appears to be different than what is culturally normal for Anglo-American households. Typical Western families have an egalitarian structure between the husband and wife, both of whom often work outside of the house and contribute to the family income (McGill & Pearce 520-533).

Soraya is shown to be in awe of her father but later on it turns out that it is more fear than respect or love for her father. When he his hand reaches out to her and she hands him Amir's story obediently as if he had a right to know what it contained. Furthermore, the relationship between the father and the daughter is also based on power, the father's power over the girl child: "The general did not approve of women drinking alcohol, and Soraya didn't drink in his presence" (Hosseini 168). But she did in his absence.

Marriage is seen as a salvation for the woman and as a must within neo-patriarchal systems of family structures. However, at the same time, marriage also amounts to the ending of the woman's individuality, as an individual free to make her choices and decisions - it can "silence the song in her." This can somewhat be seen as a sacrifice of the woman because if she is not married, her life and destiny cannot be fulfilled: she must belong to someone and hence, conceive. Thus, the man "saves" her by exercising his male privilege, which is a way to uphold patriarchy and strengthen the woman's inferior role in contrast to the man. But the novel does not seem to subscribe to this rule of patriarchy – Soraya cannot conceive but she can still be a mother to Sohrab, Hassan's son and Amir's nephew, thus joining her husband in his act of repentance, which again places her on the same footing as a male- in this case her husband.

Cixous describes literature as being intertwined with the philosophical and the phallogocentric, which stands for male dominance. The masculine structure is now seen as something natural or eternal and the female is desirable because she is passive. The man loves her because she is not there, she is not present. Her absence is what he loves about her, otherwise, the woman is a threat to the man. What if she starts to do better than him, or what if she is present and forces him to acknowledge her? The man must always be more than the woman, he must always be at the beginning and it must always end with him. Thus, writing her out of the story is the required way to make her desirable. She becomes a part of the story by not

being there physically, maybe not even mentally. Hence, the removal of her voice is essential to the story (Cixous 67). *The Kite Runner* shows that Cixous' proposition cannot be applied categorically.

The women in *The Kite Runner* fall into two categories— the docile, submissive kind and the bold and liberated ones - Jamila and Assef's mother belong to the first category while Soraya and Sanaubar to the second. Jamila and Assef's mother conform to the role assigned to them by their religion. Islamic law typically follows highly traditional gender roles, thus relationships between husband and wife are based on respect as opposed to equality (Aroian 255-261). The Qur'an states: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded" (4:34). Jamila, Soraya's mother had been a talented singer but gave it up when she married as it was one of the conditions laid down by the general she would never sing in public. So much so that she wasn't even allowed to sing at her daughter's wedding, 'Soraya told me that her mother had wanted to sing at our wedding, only one song, but the general gave her one of his looks and the matter was buried'. (Hosseini 163) Amir believes that Jamila adored him because he had, "rid her heart of its gravest malady ---. That her daughter would age alone, husbandless, childless. Every woman needed a husband. Even if he did silence the song in her." (Hosseini 164)

Assef's mother is another example of how women live a suppressed, stifled existence. To Amir, both husband and wife seem to be scared of their son, but it is the mother that the narrator chooses to describe this fear: "His mother, Tanya, was a small, nervous woman who smiled and blinked a lot. ... she smiled, unconvincingly, and blinked. I wondered if Baba had noticed. ... their son frightened them" (Hosseini 89). Assef's mother, a nervous and scared woman, is very much like Soraya's mother: a strong woman who lives in the shadow of her husband. This delineation of female characters as mute, frightened creatures says more about them than a more participatory role would have.

Shame, honor and dignity play a very large role in the traditional Arab family. Aroian states: "Family honor includes segregation of the sexes, particularly modesty in women and not being alone with men who are not immediate family, as well as refraining from behaviors that are prohibited by Islam, such as pre- or extramarital sex or drinking alcohol." (p.256). There is

a cultural code regarding keeping emotions hidden and family life is guarded with fierce privacy and seeking help outside the family realm is seen as unacceptable and shameful.

The two other women characters in the novel - Soraya and Sanaubar - stand in striking contrast to Jamila and Assef's mother. They do not conform to the patriarchal diktats although they may seem to – Soraya rebels but she is brought back by her father similarly, Sanaubar is also made to marry Ali as she is seen as a threat to the family and societal morality in general. Both challenge the patriarchal system though unsuccessfully at first but they manage to have their way in the end. Sanaubar's end may appear tragic and more of her fault than the society's but she dies a peaceful death and has nothing to complain about. Soraya succeeds in finding a loving husband despite all the disadvantages that society attaches to her – stigma of running away with a man not of her family's choice; her inability to bear a child.

The main duty of women as set forth by Islamic law is to marry, take care of her children, maintain her home and protect the honor of her family. Sexuality discussions are regarded as taboo for many people of the Middle East and culturally, there is a high value placed on virginity and women are expected to bear children right after marriage.

Soraya never minces words when it comes to castigating what she thinks to be the double standards of society, particularly, moral standards. She is quick to point out how women are always expected to be paragon of virtues, spotlessly clean and innocent while for men, it is perfectly normal to have relationships with as many women as they like and have children out of wedlock. She marries Amir but on her own conditions. She has the courage to tell Amir about her inglorious past. Even in the matter of career she makes it absolutely clear what she wants to be, "My father wants me to go to law school, my mother's always throwing hints about medical school, but I'm going to be a teacher. Doesn't pay much here, but it's what I want." (Hosseini 140). Interestingly, it is not only the father who is trying to impose his choice but the mother too, a woman. Soraya reiterates her choice of career is final when her father brings up the issue again and this time she hints at her father's lack of self-respect as he lives on charity, after he leaves the room, "Teaching may not pay much, but it's what I want to do! It's what I love, and it's a whole lot better than collecting welfare, by the way." (Hosseini 167)

Sanaubar is described as a woman of easy morals who intentionally loses her dignity to sleep with different men. Men use her body for pleasure is the manifestation of the female

inferiority as property. To save the family's dignity, her uncle forces her to marry Ali in an arranged marriage in which she loses her rights and opportunities to make decisions for her life because they must be submissive to men. Once a man makes a decision, she has no choice to reject it. In other words, she loses her freedom and must submit herself to the power and authority of men. When women believe that they belong to men, they become powerless in everything. But again, Sanaubar turns out to be another exception to the patriarchal commandment – she leaves her lawfully wedded husband and her newly born baby to have her own way; to live the life as she deems fit. That Ali is sterile is cause enough for her to do so. She comes across as an unscrupulous person with very unconventional views in the eyes of the rigidly orthodox society she comes from. But to look at it in another way- she is a rebel.

First, Sanaubar as a person is presented as a woman who was once desirable and beautiful and next, she is shown as a very ugly person. What becomes of a woman if she does not have an attractive physical appearance? Cixous states that a woman must be beautiful, but that it is her absence that makes her desirable within patriarchy. Sanaubar returns to the story exactly at the right moment, which is when Hassan's wife gives birth to Sohrab, and: "it was Sanaubar who delivered Hassan's son that winter" (Hosseini 195). It is as if her only purpose of coming back is to fulfill the woman's destiny of conceiving children and then disappear. Sanaubar nurses and takes care of Sohrab as if he was her son. And then "one morning, she did not wake up. She looked calm, at peace, like she did not mind dying" (Hosseini 196).

Whether women make their appearance for a specific gendered assigned role or not, the fact remains that the society and for that matter the text cannot do away with a woman; her story, though tragic, needs to come full circle even if it is her death. Sanaubar returns as the missing part of the family, her coming back cannot be regarded as the return of the prodigal son (mother), but rather her repentance and desire to make amends for her injustice to her son. Leaving her new-born illegitimate son can in fact be seen as an act amounting to her cocking a snook at the male-dominated society that uses women as its property; her abandonment of a man not capable to perform the obligations of husband can be seen in the same light. Furthermore, she returns as a woman whose face has been mutilated with a knife, which may be comeuppance for the pride she took in her beauty but it can be surmised that she seems to have been brutally punished for something that men are free to indulge in- promiscuity.

Cixous argues that if one is in need of saving, one must be a woman. She states that a man cannot save another man but to reproduce the system of excluding women in literature, it has to be a woman that needs rescuing. The novel, on the contrary shows that it is men who need saving – men, who, being underprivileged and belonging to minority ethnic community, hold the same low status as women in a patriarchal society. The rape of Hassan and Sohrab are examples of men who need saving from other men who claim superior position in the patriarchal system. While in the case of Hassan it is his inferior position in the society that makes him vulnerable just as a woman is in a male-dominated society, in the case of Sohrab, it is his innocent youth and state of being orphan, in addition to belonging to the minority, underprivileged Hazara community, that exposes him to societal exploitation just as a woman would be in a patriarchal set up. In Sohrab's case it is not left to conjecture as he is presented as a female, looking like a woman outwardly because he is made to wear a dress, make-up and dance like a woman.

Baba's wife, Sofia, was called "my princess" (Hosseini 15), but she dies right after giving birth to Amir, creating a sense of guilt for "killing" the father's beloved princess (Hosseini 18). Not once does the novel refer to Sofia as an individual or as Amir's mother but always as "his father's wife" or "Baba's princess." The idea that is being conveyed is that the wife belongs to the husband and nothing more. But the absence of motherly care and affection make the character of Sofia important, leaving an emotional blank in the life of Amir which is one of the reasons he has a traumatic childhood with a father who does not understand the emotional needs of his son. Thus Amir's mother, though dead, remains alive through her absence adversely affecting Amir's growth as a child.

Amir and Soraya belong to a generation that witnesses and participates in the changing power-dynamics, where man and woman are seen as equals. Cixous' theory stands suspect in the light of these changing social mores in the 1990s. The Afghan migrants in the United States are still a very tightly-knit one and traditional, more so for the fact that they are living in a foreign land and keeping their traditions alive for them is the most important challenge; this is their only way keeping their identity distinct. But transnationalism and multiculturalism seems to have brought about a change in the way the young generation thinks- broadening their outlook and making them more cosmopolitan in their approach to life.

A basic assumption of Hisham Sharabi's work *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* is, "that over the last one hundred years the patriarchal structures of Arab society, far from being displaced or truly modernized, have only been strengthened and maintained in deformed, "modernized" forms."⁽⁴⁾ He adds, "Material modernization, the first (surface) manifestation of social change, only served to remodel and reorganize patriarchal structures and relations and to reinforce them by giving them "modern" forms and appearances".

(4)

Sharabi observes:

"In the transition from the patriarchal to the modern family, women are certainly the primary beneficiaries. Familial patriarchy provides the ground for a dual domination—of the father over the family household, and of the male over the female. In itself, the structure of the modern family provides the necessary (but not *sufficient*) ground for the liberation of women. The precondition is access to education and to work and thus to economic independence." (32)

Soraya belongs to a family that is still very much patriarchal, but she belongs to the generation of educated young woman who knows her mind and will assert her rights and this is possible mainly through her education. One of the major reasons why Sanaubar pays the price for being a rebel is that she is without the advantage that Soraya has - education. Nevertheless, she did not let her song silence her - after abandoning her family, she ran away with a band of singers and dancers.

While Sharabi's views appear very much relevant to the social and familial dynamics in the context of *The Kite Runner*, Cixous' theory seems only partially to do so. The condition of women in patriarchal, Taliban-ruled Afghanistan of 1980s can be convincingly viewed in the light of Cixous' theory but it seems to be a little behind the times in the case of the United States of 1990s, the period to which the story belongs. This was a time when the second generation of migrants was finding breathing space in a liberated, multicultural world where values of their homeland seemed to be no longer strong enough to control and guide their lives – Amir and Soraya are representative of that generation.

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