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Human Behind Every Burkha: Sisterhood, Oppression and Patriarchal Subjugation in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini

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Abstract:

The present research examines the elements of sisterhood, oppression, and patriarchy in Hosseini's novel, '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*'. The idea here is that there is a 'Human' behind every 'Burkha'. Human in this research can be traced as the qualities that define human beings, love, compassion, affection, support, and sacrifice, whereas burkha symbolizes patriarchy, the oppressed, and abused Afghan woman of Taliban. Idea of sisterhood is used, to liberate the chained female characters. The story portrays the malpractices of men on the women and treating them as animals or slaves than normal human beings. This disgusting treatment of Taliban men towards women makes them forget their rights and status. This novel focuses on gender discrimination, political subjugation and social treatment of women under a patriarchal society, where women characters are more humane, while those of men as beasts.

Keywords: Sisterhood, Oppression, Sexism, Patriarchy, Epiphany.

INTRODUCTION

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist, and a UNHCR goodwill ambassador. He is born in 1965, Kabul, Afghanistan and moved to United States in 1980. He is the author of New York Times bestsellers, viz. *The Kite Runner*, *A Mountain Echoed* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is Hosseini's third novel, which is amongst certain books that reside at the bottom of the heart. The premise is set in Afghanistan during the communists and thereafter the Taliban rules (Shameem 2014). The novel revolves around the lives of two protagonists, Mariam and Laila including their ups and downs (Jong, 2013). Mariam is an illegitimate child of a rich father and after her mother's ultimate death at the age of fifteen

got unwillingly married to much older man named Rasheed (Hosseini, 2007). Mariam enters into an entirely new world where grieves and sorrows have become her daily companions. Her husband mistreated her after several miscarriages. She met a younger educated girl Laila, who became her sister-wife after the death of her parents in a rocket attack. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* depicts the plight of women behind the walls of Afghanistan during several invasions in the country (Dharmani and Singh, 2018). It thoroughly depicts women's helplessness, sufferings and endurance in the patriarchal society of Afghanistan. After numerous emotional turmoil's, Mariam and Laila successfully bonded themselves which seems highly unconditional to this tangible world. The issues of feminism and gender equality have been raised through these characters. The novel stresses upon the rights that were not given along with the restrictions to education, choices and liberation that restrict their great potentials in the patriarchal society (Singh, 2013). They were forced to undergo terrible religious, political and social subjugations and oppression under Taliban's Afghanistan (Ram Kumar & Suba, 2019). This novel is not about "the tragedy of Mariam's life. Rather, it is an unavoidable destiny of many women. A woman is exploited everywhere" (Jana, 2013). Hosseini (2007) depicts pathetic life situation of women, as he writes about the condition of a major female character of the novel; "Nana has been one of the housekeepers. Until her belly to swell (Hosseini, 2007). Nana's daughter, Mariam and her husband's second wife Laila, suffers immensely, but they showed unbelievable endurance. Women have a typical quality of endurance even in the most difficult situation, as Nana says, "It's our lot in life, Mariam, women like us. We endure, It's all we have" (Hosseini; 2007) Mariam sacrificed throughout her life with a smile. The novel also focuses the suffering of Laila. She is saved by Rasheed and Mariam, after a rocket attack that killed her parents. When she realized that she is carrying Tariq's illegitimate child, she decided to marry Rasheed to save her honor. At that time Mariam was twenty-five of age and Rasheed was sixty. Both the women get bonded and stood by each other against the brutality of Rasheed but it ends with a feeling of epiphany for Mariam. She realizes at the end that she was much stronger than what she actually believed throughout her life. The climax of the novel occurs with an unexpected and pitiful feeling of missing out something. The story is probably a roller-coaster ride of emotions to its readers, leaving them content with a mixed bittersweet ending. Khalid Hussein is the magnificent storyteller and skillfully pours emotions in his writings.

The plot is well-set and moves around Kabul, and some other parts of Afghanistan. It is indeed the story of hope of Mariam, a character so strong and fierce who's always looking for happiness, acceptance and peace and endure everything through her journey for them. Khalid portrayed the whole situation of Afghanistan, especially the sufferings, the pain of their people, land they abandoned and then come back again because that land was their home. Indeed, the story is fictional but the pain of the people is real. This story translates the mental battles of women especially in a country like Afghanistan. This certainly is not an incentive to detest the Islamic countries where the land of the law is sharia, rather he sorts of attempts to welcome every reader to an awareness pool what women in certain part of world undergo. On the other hand, the writer drew global attention on the struggles of these women who are fighting numerous trivial wars in their daily lives. The challenges we are being imposed are immaterial compared to what certain people truly battle. He makes the world image a world where you can't simply go out without a male companion and a woman's testimony is half-worth compared to a man. Writing skills are proven to be unparalleled and the depiction of the stories rightly correspond with a man's and woman's daily routine. The novel by Hussein forces us to think about things we haven't given a thought before. It is set in a period of war, the soviet aggression in Afghanistan, the rights of people there much less for women, the living conditions, the militia and its oppressiveness but what gets the protagonists through all this is their love for each other, platonic, maternal, boundless, so strong it known no pain, no fear, no punishment not even death. Hosseini throws light into the dark reality of Taliban Afghanistan. Even through its dark story, its surely a page turner. It is not just the story of two women but also gives insight into the commotion between the Afghanistan and Soviet then among communities within the country and crucial part Taliban rule. There are four parts of the story where author has excellently have bought in some twists in the story that holds interest of readers. The story has a lot of takes like love, importance of education, respect for woman, freedom, sisterhood, feminist subjugation, religious subjugation, political subjugation, patriarchal society, sexism, gender decimation, Afghanistan under Mohajedeens and Taliban's, Afghanistan politics and most importantly oppress of woman. It presents the hardship of being woman under patriarchy. It focused on the heartbreaking reality of many women and children in war-struck countries. The title here I presented human behind burkha can be justified, as I hardly found any male character human from Jaleel to Zalmai, Laila's son and Rasheed. In the world where men think nothing of their

wives and daughters, or women in general, Hakim father of Laila, a professor by occupation, was the only man who is supportive to his daughter Laila and his wife Fareeba, although he was a topic of mockery by men like Rasheed who called him idiot. He wanted Laila to become something and do not depend on others, particularly men. Rasheed said to Laila regarding men who are open-minded like Hakim: *“I have customers, Mariam, men, who bring their wives to my shop. The women come uncovered, they talk to me directly, look me in the eyes without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their knees. Sometimes they even put their feet in front of me, the women do, for measurements, and their husbands stand and watch. They allow it. They think nothing of a strange touching their wives’ bare feet! They think they’re being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education, I supposed. They do not see that they’re spoiling their own nang and namoos, their honor and pride”* (Hosseini, 2007). The educated and liberal men are seen with the lens of patriarchy as idiots. It clearly shows gender discrimination and sexism for women.

Another event that clearly indicates the gender subjugation is when Rasheed gifted burkha to Mariam as a first gift after marriage indicating burkha as a patriarchal symbol. Even the burkha is made up of suffocative material as patriarchal rules of the society set by men. *“The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen. She practiced walking around her room in it and kept stepping on hem and stumbling. The loss of vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the peripheral vision, and the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing her mouth”* Hosseini (2007).

Hakim was the only man through which Hosseini showed the importance of education in the Taliban society, which is the only solution to the problem. He said, *“Marriage can wait, education cannot.”* Hosseini (2007) pointed out here that education brings change. He further said, *“a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated”*. On the other hand, when the novel begins, Mariam strongly urged to go to a school but her mother Nana saw no purpose of education. She rebuked Mariam for even thinking about education, *“What is there to learn? What’s the sense schooling a girl like you? It’s like shinning a spittoon. And you’ll learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don’t teach it in school. Look at me ...only one skill. So, we can clearly see the difference of thoughts in a person who is educated as Hakim and an abused oppressed woman as*

Nana. Education brings change. We can see the status of education for woman in Taliban's Afghanistan (Shameem, 2014). We also see the change in the reactions of both women towards the tyrant abusive behavior of Rasheed. Laila was an educated woman and her education had alerted her regarding the terrible situation of Afghan women (Dhakal, 2020).

The last quarter of the story is powerful and impressive. The strength and relationship between the two women indicate the sisterhood where apart of being in relationship of jealousy and enmity, they still felt the same oppression and pain under patriarchy.

“She saw these things as though she too were looking at someone for the first time. And, for the first time it was not an adversary's face Laila saw but a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotested, a destiny submitted to and endured.” (Hosseini, 2007 pg 243).

Laila and Mariam became friends as the latter saved her from Rasheed. Mariam and Laila who are forced to marry Rasheed faced similar problems of physical, emotion and mental oppression. The bisexual exploitation with physical torture had been portrayed by Hosseini in the novel:

“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 paws, begins to growl.” (Hosseini, 2007).”

Katrak (2006) writes “women bear worst violence in these horrific events in terms of violence on their body-raped and dislocation of home, family and community”. Mariam and Laila are treated like slaves or pets who are marginalized by restrictions imposed on them. They were not allowed to participate in any socio-cultural activities. They have no place outside the home and are identified with the name of their husband or son. Their natural rights are also taken by Taliban (Dhakal, 2020). You will stay inside your home at all the time. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly in the streets, and if they go outside, they must be accompanied by a *maharam*, a male relative. If they are caught alone in the streets, they are beaten and sent home (Hosseini, 2007). These ideologies act as a weapon for slaughtering women under gender discrimination. They are no better than pets in the hands of men.

Second and third male marriages also portrayed a picture of female oppression by a man. When Rasheed decided to marry Laila as Mariam was unable to bear his child, Mariam objection was let down by these words of Rasheed which give a clear picture of Afghan society:

“Don’t be so dramatic. It’s a common thing and you know it. I have friends who have two, three, four wives. Your own father had three. Besides what I am doing now most men I know would have done so long ago.” Further when Mariam objected, he told her the miserable situation she was in, a place where women have no option: *There is another option, she can leave. I won’t stand in her way. But, I suspect she won’t get far. No food, no water, not a rupiah in her pockets, bullets and rockets flying everywhere. How many days do you suppose she’ll last before she’s abducted, raped, or tossed into some roadside ditch with her throat slit? Or all three?* Despite being tortured by their husband, a feeling of sisterhood prevails between Laila and Mariam. They made a mutual bond to support each other and tried to resist over the extreme form of domination. They were the victims of patriarchy at the domestic level manifested as the domestic violence at one hand, and socio-cultural Taliban rule on the other (Dhakal, 2020). Nevertheless, the novel also depicts the feminine power, and the idea of sisterhood had been used to liberate the chained female characters.

Afghanistan is one of the most difficult places in the world for a woman to live. Women faced both gender discrimination and political subjugation. According to U.N Statics Division Report, one out of ten children die before their fifth birthday. Rasheed said to Laila do not get much attached to Aziza as most of the kids do not celebrate their fifth birthday. They die before that. These lines confirm the report of U.N Statics Division of Afghanistan. Many women die in pregnancy and childbirth. Four hundred and sixty deaths per ten thousand births occurred in 2010. This cruel picture was evident when Laila was ready to give birth to her son, only one hospital in all the Kabul served women. This hospital has shortage of staff and medical facilities including medicine and anesthesia. A cesarean delivery without anesthetic is the horrifying truth Hosseini has portrayed in his novel. Laila was operated without any medication and anesthetic during the fundamentalist Taliban rule. This clearly indicates the hypocrisy and tyranny of male oppression where women are treated no better than animal under burkha. Even the sanitary medical facilities were denied to women (Singh, 2013) still the female characters show the strength which is far from the imagination. Kabul had only one hospital for women: *“Then cut me open” Laila said. She dropped back on the bed and drew up her knees... “Cut me peon and give me my baby”* (Hosseini 2007). Mariam had six miscarriages in four years due to early mismatched marriage, excess work-load and ill-treatment by Rasheed and his friends. Female third level student as nine percent of total eighteen percent (U.N Statics Devise report). Mariam

did not study due to her mother's mentality. Laila didn't due to the rule of mujahedeen, liberals like Laila's father Biba are mocked and considered as idiots who liberates woman. Though, Jalil legitimate daughters study making eighteen percent of the total population.

Total live birth rate per woman average is 6 (U.N. Statics Device report). This could be traced under sexism and gender discrimination. Women are considered second sex, or animals, for *e.g.* Laila's mother cries for her two sons who went to mujahedeen camps in war. Although Laila is also a daughter but she didn't consider her. She took good care of her mother but she remains inconsiderate towards her. Rasheed wanted a son as his heir from Mariam and Laila. He abused and mistreated both Laila and Aziza after the birth of a girl-child, Aziza. *His scorn, his ridicule, 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 the fear of his volatile temperament, his punches, slaps, and kicks* (Hosseini 2007 pg 89). Hence, numerous evidences indicate the suffering of women in the hands of patriarchy under Taliban rule.

In the climax of the novel, the idea that the woman is no better than a pet behind the burkha is changed after a severe twist in the tale. Mariam a woman with extreme patience, timid and endurance calculatedly decided to kill Rasheed, their tyrant king as he was in turn killing Laila, she ensured him to see her in this fierce manner of a lioness. At this crucial juncture, Mariam, who has done all she could to appease and accommodate Rasheed, who lived in fear throughout her marriage, is able to resist not only his brutal force but her revulsion of violent action to save Laila (Stuhr, 2011). It is a sort of epiphany, a moment of realization, a term widely used in literary context. It refers generally to a visionary moment when a character has sudden insight or realization that changes his or her understanding of themselves. The termed is first used and further experimented by James Joyce in his work *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The sudden realization of Mariam makes her do what she has never imagined of herself. *"He is 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"* (Hosseini, 2007 pg 310). In these remaining seconds, she remains clearheaded enough to assure her results. Mariam raised the shovel high. She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and she did, it occurred to her own life" (Hosseini, 2007 p311).

Conclusion

It is concluded that elements of patriarchy, sisterhood, gender discriminations and subjugations occurred in *The Thousand splendid suns*. However, I intend to bring this notion that there is a human behind every burkha with all human emotions including retaliation. This is inferred due to Mariam's altruistic and brave step taken during the climax of the novel. In tremendous hostile situations, women stood up in twined against the cultural hegemony. They express humanity towards each other and reject the notion of being an animal or slave under the burkha. the end depicts elements of epiphany by main protagonist, Mariam, who showed altruism. She sacrificed herself to save her sister-wife Laila from her husband, Rasheed thereby exemplifying the notion that there is human behind every burkha.

A woman born of illegitimate deeds dies a legitimate death after a phenomenal exposure of bravery and martyrdom. This was primary due to epiphany, self-realization and her instant decision of do an die. Before that, she lived a life of guilt, trauma and tears, as her father and his wives punished her to marry a tyrant Rasheed. Filled with loads of burdens of being an unwanted child, her husband's second marriage brought a pinch of relief to her despite her initial anger and hatred for her sister-wife. She showered her fountain of motherhood and love to Aziza, and felt connected to both Laila and Aziza who were also a similar outcome of sin.

Thought of her loved ones were in Mariam's mind when she got killed. She knew that now she will miss the company of Laila and seeing Aziza grow, marry and have children of her own. However, she was at peace with her actions and was cognizant that although she came into the world unwanted, she was leaving it as a woman who had loved and been loved back. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginning. This sacrifice of Mariam proved her as a more rational, visionary, heroic, being unlike to the notion that women is no better than a pet to man. She had a vision, reasons and rationality of a mature mind. She explained to Laila the plan for future before surrendering to death. Sacrifice and heroism are considered the most glorious trait of a human being she showed up with both, she proved that there is a real human behind every burkha. Hosseini did not end up the book at the death of Mariam rather focused on her martyrdom, she sacrificed her life to give life to Laila and her family.

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