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Islamic Fundamentalism in Afghan Literature: A Study of Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract:

Religious fundamentalism and its radicalization is a global phenomenon. It has been evident in the various parts of the world from the history of metaphysics. The countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Jerusalem, Palestine, New York etc. have witnessed such radicalization in frequent intervals of time. It has also been an eminent part of the literature of the respected places. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* written by an Afghan-American writer which is set in Afghanistan deconstructs the plight of Afghan women in his novel.

The paper tries to investigate the role of Islamic fundamentalism in defining the sufferings and miseries of Afghan women in the novel.

Keywords: Fundamentalism, Radicalization, Literature, Afghan-American.

“Islamic fundamentalism preys upon the vulnerable and the disillusioned, offering a false promise of meaning and purpose.” - Reza Aslan

Religious fundamentalism and its radicalization is a global phenomenon. It has been evident in the various parts of the world from the history of metaphysics. The countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Jerusalem, Palestine, New York etc. have witnessed such radicalization in frequent intervals of time. Islamic fundamentalism is a very old phenomenon.

Islamic fundamentalism is a socio-religious phenomenon characterized by a conservative and literalist understanding of Islam. It encompasses a set of beliefs and practices that emphasize strict adherence to religious doctrines, seeking to establish the implementation of Shariah, or Islamic law, as the foundation for governance and societal norms. It is crucial to recognize that

Islamic fundamentalism constitutes just one interpretation within the diverse spectrum of Islamic thought and does not encompass the entirety of Muslim perspectives. Islamic fundamentalists believe in the importance of returning to what they perceive as the original teachings of Islam, as outlined in the Quran and the Hadith (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad). They seek to apply these teachings to all aspects of life, including politics, society, and personal behavior. Some key beliefs and features associated with Islamic fundamentalism include Shariah Law, Opposition to Western Influence, Jihad, Gender Roles and Moral and Social Conservatism. Islamic fundamentalism has played a significant role in the history and current affairs of Afghanistan. The country has experienced several waves of Islamic fundamentalist movements that have had a profound impact on its society, politics, and governance. It is essential to note that Afghanistan is a diverse country with various religious and ethnic groups, and not all Afghans adhere to Islamic fundamentalist beliefs.

In recent years, the Taliban has resurged and regained control over significant parts of Afghanistan, culminating in their takeover of Kabul in August 2021. The Taliban's ideology remains rooted in a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, although they have indicated a willingness to moderate their approach compared to their previous rule. The situation in Afghanistan is complex and evolving, and it is crucial to consider the diverse perspectives and experiences of Afghans when discussing Islamic fundamentalism in the country. One of the notable periods associated with Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan is the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. The Taliban emerged as a militant group that aimed to establish a strict interpretation of Islamic law and enforce their version of Shariah in the country. They captured Kabul, the capital city, in 1996 and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which lasted until 2001. During their rule, the Taliban imposed severe restrictions on women, banned forms of entertainment, and enforced a harsh interpretation of Islamic law. The invasion was driven by the Soviet Union's desire to support a communist government in Afghanistan and secure its interests in the region. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 had a profound impact on the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the country.

The issue of women's rights and the impact of Islamic fundamentalism on women is a significant and complex topic. Islamic fundamentalist interpretations often lead to restrictive and patriarchal practices that limit women's freedoms, opportunities, and agency. However, it is

important to note that not all Muslims or followers of Islam adhere to or support such interpretations, and there is a wide range of beliefs and practices among Muslim communities.

In societies influenced by Islamic fundamentalism, women may face various challenges and restrictions, including gender roles, dress codes, social and legal restrictions, violence and oppression. It is important to emphasize that these challenges do not represent the experiences of all Muslim women, as practices and beliefs vary across different cultures, communities, and interpretations of Islam. Many Muslim women are actively challenging and seeking to reform patriarchal norms and interpretations to advance gender equality and women's rights within an Islamic framework.

Engaging in a nuanced and sensitive dialogue that recognizes the diversity of Muslim experiences is crucial when discussing Islamic fundamentalism and its impact on women. It is essential to support efforts that promote gender equality, human rights, and empower women within the context of cultural and religious diversity.

Afghan literature, which encompasses works written prominently in Pashto, Dari, and English languages, serves as a vivid portrayal of the societal challenges faced within the country. The roots of Afghan literature can be traced back to its oral tradition, which later transitioned into written form with the advent of the Arabic script. In contemporary times, Afghan literature flourishes through a rich combination of oral and written traditions in both poetry and prose. This body of work has been profoundly influenced by the social, political, and religious turmoil that has plagued Afghanistan. Furthermore, the significant mass immigration resulting from social and political instability has also left an indelible mark on Afghan literature.

Among the notable authors representing this literary landscape is Khaled Hosseini. Born to an Afghan diplomat and raised in Iran and France, Hosseini eventually settled in America. His debut novel, *The Kite Runner* (2003), not only garnered critical acclaim but also achieved considerable commercial success. Since then, all of Hosseini's subsequent novels have revolved around protagonists of Afghan origin and prominently featured Afghanistan as a significant setting. These works have garnered widespread positive attention from both readers and critics alike. One such novel is *The Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), also authored by Khaled Hosseini. This narrative intricately weaves together the lives of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila,

whose paths converge against the backdrop of tumultuous events spanning several decades in Afghanistan. These events include the Soviet invasion, the civil war, and the rise of the Taliban regime. Through their stories, Hosseini skillfully captures the profound impact of historical and political upheavals on the lives of individuals, illuminating the multifaceted realities faced by Afghan women within a society marked by conflict and adversity.

The novel reflects the socio-political realities of Afghanistan over a 40-year period. The story takes place against the backdrop of significant political changes, which deeply impact the two main female characters. The suffering they endure is rooted in both patriarchal dominance and the religious oppression prevalent in Afghan society. Hosseini vividly portrays the contrast between the earlier Western influences and the subsequent religious order imposed by the Taliban, emphasizing the injustice faced by Afghan women.

The narrative spans different political eras, including the rule of King Zahir Shah, the Republic of Mohammed Daoud Khan, the Taliban regime, and the interim presidency of Hamid Karzai. The arrival of the Taliban, in particular, brings drastic changes, replacing secular law with Islamic Shari'ah law. By comparing the lives of women before and after the Taliban's rule, Hosseini effectively illustrates the extent of injustice inflicted upon Afghan women. The suffering of the protagonists, Mariam and Laila, is deeply intertwined with politics and religious oppression. The domestic hierarchy in households like Rasheed's and the Commanders' households is heavily influenced by religious beliefs. Additionally, the novels depict a matriarchal hierarchy that emerges as a result of patriarchal authority and a totalitarian society. Mariam, being of humble and illegitimate origins, faces societal rejection and isolation due to negative perceptions. Religion also shapes the motives and dynamics of character relationships and interactions. Hosseini's exploration of the stark differences between Mariam's struggles and Laila's privileged upbringing highlights the themes of socio-political activism and the absence of gender and class equality, as viewed through Marxist literary criticism. By incorporating the constant change of political regimes and leaders in Afghanistan, the author demonstrates how violence and conflict exacerbate oppression. This allows him to delve more deeply into the suffering endured by women under religious oppression, surpassing the scope of his previous work, such as *The Kite Runner*.

In Afghanistan, patriarchy remains a defining characteristic strongly influenced by religious fundamentalism. This societal structure deeply impacts people's spirits and souls, leaving lasting imprints. Rasheed, a representative of the patriarchal society, derives his sense of superiority from the unyielding status of the family. However, Mariam suffers greatly within their marriage due to violence and indifference. The repeated instances of abortion, devoid of care and love, result in the loss of their ability to conceive. Despite this backdrop, Rasheed desires to marry Mariam solely to fulfill his own needs and desires whenever he pleases.

Tragically, Laila also falls victim to the ongoing disaster. Her mother disregards the importance of education and looks down upon her husband's refined nature. When Laila's mother picks her up from school, she fails to protect her from the insults of a misbehaving boy. Laila perceives her mother's attention being primarily directed towards her two brothers. The absence of her brothers, who did not return victorious from the wars, plunges her mother into deep grief. Laila feels deprived of the only enduring and selfless love she could have received from her mother due to her mother's flawed perspectives and values.

In Afghanistan, polygamy is practiced, while the Afghan people strongly adhere to Islam. The marriage law initially upholds the principle of monogamy, but under certain exceptional circumstances, polygamy is allowed. If the institution of marriage did not exist in this manner in Afghanistan, Jalil would not have been influenced by immoral thoughts, and Laila would not have married him. Consequently, Mariam and Laila would not have become trapped in the confines of such marriages. Unfortunately, Afghan women lack the power to change their circumstances or escape from these unhappy unions.

Afghan women harbor a deep longing and yearning for freedom, which remains concealed behind the burqa and veil. These coverings, imposed on women, act as impenetrable barriers hindering their communication with the outside world. The burqa and veil indirectly constrain the minds of people, sowing seeds of sorrow in the hearts of Mariam and Laila.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Najibullah regime lost its external support, leading to an inevitable war. It was within this political climate that Laila tragically experienced the misfortunes of her family. The looming threat of war cast a dark shadow over

the country, resulting in death and famine. Paradoxically, those who yearned for peace often found themselves sacrificing their lives to the ongoing conflict.

The Taliban emerged from the fundamentalist movement in Kandahar, the second-largest city in Afghanistan. Many of its members were students from Afghan refugee Madrasahs (religious schools). During their rule, the country endured severe oppression under the guise of Islam. In such a challenging environment, Laila was forced to separate from her daughter, Aziza, in order to ensure her safety. If not for the Taliban's presence, she would never have allowed such a heartbreaking separation. The Taliban, as an organization, inflicted immense suffering on Afghan women, leaving them caught in the chaos and devastation of war.

The author depicts the oppression faced by women under extremist Islamic groups like the Taliban, who drastically disrupted the lives of women in cities like Kabul upon seizing control of Afghanistan. Women who previously had the choice to either not cover or wear only a headscarf were suddenly compelled to wear burqas. Schools were shut down, women were dismissed from their jobs, and those who violated the Taliban's extensive list of rules faced physical punishment. The novel, mirroring real life, highlights that the Taliban's regulations for women are even more severe than those of the already oppressive Mujahideen. By focusing on women's stories, the author aims to evoke compassion, emphasize their love, value, and resilience, and shed light on what women in Afghanistan lost due to extremism.

According to Afghan law, Mariam has no agency in deciding her own fate and is forced into marriage with Rasheed because her father has control over her future. One of Rasheed's initial actions is to enforce strict rules on Mariam's public life, including her requirement to always be accompanied by him and forbidden from conversing with inadequately covered women. Laila faces the same restrictions. Under the Mujahideen, women who attempt to escape their husbands are sent back home, as these factions view women as the property of their husbands based on their interpretation of Islamic law. The Taliban is even more oppressive, resorting to physical violence against women who venture out without a male family member as their chaperone. When Rasheed loses his shoemaking shop and the family faces starvation, there is no assistance available. Laila is compelled to place Aziza, whom Rasheed perceives as nothing more than a burden, in an orphanage, while Zalmai gets to enjoy the luxury of a television, despite its illegality.

It is crucial to note that none of these tragedies stem from mainstream Islam, which had been the way of life for many Kabul residents prior to the outbreak of conflict. When Mariam is a child, Mullah Faizullah desires education for her, but her mother refuses. The person who imparts religious teachings to Mariam envisions a better future for her. Additionally, despite Laila's father being dismissed from his job by the Soviets, Babi informs her that under Soviet rule, it was a "good time to be a woman in Afghanistan" due to the rights and education afforded to women. However, with the rise of the Mujahideen and subsequent Taliban regime, all women's freedoms were lost under the guise of extremist religious laws.

In Khaled Hosseini's powerful novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Islamic fundamentalism serves as a backdrop to the gripping stories of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila. While the narrative explores the devastating consequences of religious extremism, it also sheds light on the complexities and nuances within the Islamic faith. Ultimately, the novel's conclusion offers a poignant reflection on the destructive nature of fundamentalism and the enduring resilience of the human spirit.

Khaled Hosseini, an unanticipated presence in modern Afghan literature, is a highly skilled writer. His focus lies in capturing the lives and destinies of ordinary people. Drawing inspiration from the social backdrop of Afghanistan, he crafts stories that resonate with readers due to their authenticity and vividness. This essay aims to analyze the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through a religious lens, highlighting the religious themes and perspectives portrayed in the book.

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