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A Study of Women Oppression and Terrorism in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini

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Abstract:

Issues like violence, assaults and rapes are not unheard of in any society. But when a nation is under war, such violence becomes intense. The reason is that during war, soldiers are violent and frustrated because of obvious reasons and want the opponent country to lose in the worst manner. Taking away their pride is a simple and easily available option. Many civilians are forced to migrate to newer lands and an unknown future. During migration, young girls and children are stolen for the purpose of trafficking. Women become both internally and externally displaced refugees in a very vulnerable state. Such circumstances have profound psycho-social consequences on women. This article is called “Subjects of War: Women Oppression and Terrorism in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini” and it studies the effects of war on the women characters of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It proves how women are the worst hit segment of society during wars because they are not simply killed by the enemy country, but preyed on honour. There are descriptions of women losing their mind over their sons who died fighting terrorism. This study explores how the Afghanistan terror attacks of the Soviets and Mujahideen impacted the innocent and vulnerable women of Afghanistan.

Keywords: War, women, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini, Afghanistan war.

Khaled Hosseini dedicates *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to the women of Afghanistan in the very epigraph of the novel. The primary theme of the narrative is the oppressive conditions of women in countries under war. It demonstrates how the Taliban uses fear and violence to keep the Afghanistan women under their feet like a doormat. Even though the novel highlights the resilience of its women protagonists Laila and Mariam, it focuses mainly on how the

women in a terror prone country like Afghanistan struggle to get basic rights. Men, like Laila's brother fight the war but women stay at home and bear the brunt. The research paper discusses women's plight as depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* on both social and domestic levels. On the social level they battle the Taliban and on the personal level, they battle their husband Rasheed.

In the book *Women, War and Peace* (2002) writers Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf discuss various issues related to women, especially war, trauma and oppression involving violence. The book is an independent assessment done under United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). The Foreword of the book says "Women have become the worst victims of war – and the biggest stakeholders of peace" (i).

While more men are killed in war, women often experience violence, forced pregnancy, abduction and sexual abuse and slavery. Their bodies, deliberately infected with HIV/AIDS or carrying a child conceived in rape, have been used as envelopes to send messages to the perceived 'enemy'. The harm, silence and shame women experience in war is pervasive; their redress, almost non-existent.

The situation of women in armed conflict has been systematically neglected. (2)

A Thousand Splendid Suns shows the women's treatment as slaves and objects only to discharge certain fixed functions that are decided by Taliban, and men in general also. The main oppressors in the story are Rasheed and Taliban. Afghanistan is shown in a state of internal war – its original culture and prosperity against the barbaric and tyrannical Taliban. As a result of Taliban, the women are maltreated at a social level; and on a particular and domestic level, Laila and Mariam are tortured by Rasheed. They find their way to emancipation only after Mariam sacrifices her life in order to free Laila from the clutches of Rasheed, and to some extent, patriarchy.

Rosemarie Skaine, an American author, in her book *The Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban* (2008) says that the Taliban have tormented the lives of both men and women, but the latter have suffered to a greater degree. They have endured terrible hardships under the rule of the Taliban. They have been forced to lead a secluded- lives and observe unimaginably strict rules under the guise of Islam. This work addresses the issues involving the fact that how women have been subjects of oppression under the guise of rehabilitation. They have been raped, murdered, physically punished in the name of religion and social decorum. The book includes moving interviews and first- hand accounts of Afghan women who share their oppressed plight and how the Taliban reduced and denied their rights as human beings so much so that one doubts whether Taliban are "really Afghan or Islamic" (35).

In the Chapter 37 of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam finds a flyer in the yard. It is about the message being circulated across Afghanistan by the Taliban who would send their “armed bearded men in black turbans” and announced the flowing message to the men and women of Afghanistan (269). The same message is also printed in the flyer that Mariam reads:

Our *watan* is now known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. These are the laws that we will enforce and you will obey: [...]

Attention Women:

You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must always be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you're caught on the street, you'll be beaten and sent home.

You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.

Cosmetics are forbidden.

Jewellery is forbidden.

You will not wear charming clothes.

You will not speak unless spoken to.

You will not make eye contact with men.

You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.

You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger.

Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately.

Women are forbidden from working.

If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death.

Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-Akbar (271)

Similarly, Chapter 39 recounts events that happened in January 1997. Taliban announced that the men and women will not be treated together in the same hospital. There will be different hospitals for women. It is the part of the story where Laila is in labour-pain and needs to be attended immediately. When they reach the Malalai Hospital, they learn that “this hospital no longer treats women ... not anymore” (278). The guard asks them to go to some other hospital, Rabia Balkhi for example but that conditions of the women-only hospitable was despicable. A woman patient waiting to be treated says “there is nothing there ... they had no clean water, no oxygen, no medications, no electricity” (279). It is only after the Taliban goons shoot up a few rounds of bullets into the air, the crowd of women patients

disperse – “The Talib lifted his Kalashnikov and fired rounds into the air. Another Talib behind brandished a whip. The crowd dispersed quickly” (279). An article by the National Library of Medicine, Canada, written by Jessica Mendes, called “Taliban Rulers Curtail Women's Freedom, Health care” (Nov 13, 2001) believes that such plight of women is normal in Afghanistan:

RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan), however, says things are more clear cut; in its view, health care is segregated to an extreme degree. “If there are no female physicians, women and children are denied help, even if they are dying,” says Fatima. Reports vary widely across the country, but one theme persists: men should not be looking at women. Even in places where this is tolerated, doctors are barred from examining body parts not directly affected by the ailment. Policies confining care for men and women to separate hospitals were first announced by Taliban officials in January 1997. Later that year, the Ministry of Public Health forced all but one hospital to cut off medical services for Kabul's half million women. A widespread ban on the use of female medical workers also took effect. The bans were lifted in November 1997 after the International Committee of the Red Cross intervened. “Since that time, international assistance has improved health care access and quality in many areas of Afghanistan,” says Amowitz. (Mendes)

In another incident involving infidelity, Taliban trusted the man and not the woman involved. They blindly forgave the man who sought forgiveness and falsely charged the woman of seduction and was denied every act of clarification: “When they were caught and sent back, the mullah's son was flogged before he repented and said that Naghma had seduced him with her feminine charms. She'd cast a spell on him, he said. He promised he would rededicate himself to the study of the Koran. The mullah's son was freed. Naghma was sentenced to five years” (388). Many such regular incidents are reported in the news also. For example, Jethro Mullen and Masoud Popalzai in their *CNN* report recount a barbaric incident of a 19-year old girl Rokhshana in a Taliban-controlled village in central Afghanistan – “The couple were caught after two days, and the Taliban leader of the village ordered that Rokhshana be stoned to death for adultery” (Mullen). The provincial government is “powerless to respond” he says. Various reports like the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Amnesty International etc. have shown concerns because “The prevalence of violence against women and harmful practices continues to be of serious concern” (Mullen). The

oppression of the Afghani women can also be seen in the case of women living alone. Or the women who are divorced, separated or widowed.

A report by Lida Ahmadi of Rukhshana Media, published in *The Guardian* called “Nowhere to go...” (2001) concerns the horror stories that float the media every other day about the plight of women in Afghanistan. They report the stories of Roqia and Tahira who “weathered many storms” to be able to survive in Afghanistan under the terrorism of Taliban reign (Ahmadi). They share their traumatic experiences: “They did not eat on the same table with me, or touch the food I made. They would tell me, ‘you are a divorced woman, and what you cook is unclean’ ... Eventually, tired of the emotional and mental stress, Tahira decided to leave. “It was at dawn, one day, the sun hadn’t fully risen, and I left my family with only the clothes I was wearing. I got into a taxi to Kabul and never looked back,” she says” (Ahmadi). Women live under the constant fear that the Taliban might enter their houses for investigation and assault and rape the women of the house for fun or as punishment.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam and Rasheed are a childless couple. The resentment of childlessness is vented out in every possible manner on Mariam every day – she is humiliated physically and tortured mentally. Even though Mariam charges Rasheed with her miscarriages, she has to suffer with no fault of hers. His bitterness grows with each passing day and his brutal atrocity towards Mariam can be seen in an episode when Mariam's rice is a little undercooked. As a punishment of making an un-perfect food, Rasheed makes her eat rocks. Mariam says, “His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in” (104). Mariam is hopeless that she will ever find solace and happiness in her life. For her, burqa is a way to hide from the judgemental and scary society of Afghanistan. In the novel, burqa is a symbol of women subjection and control. Rasheed forces Mariam to wear it, reflecting on woman as an object of possession and object.

Rasheed marries Laila who is very young and in a vulnerable position. She belongs to ethnic Tajik parents. His purpose is to enjoy the happiness of an heir and to be a father to a son. Laila is already pregnant in an early stage from her beloved Tariq when she marries Rasheed. Much to Rasheed’s dismay, she gives birth to Aziza, a beautiful girl. Rasheed’s bitterness increases and he becomes abusive to both her wives. For the atrocious treatment both the women receive, they develop a bond of sympathy and friendship eventually. They plan to run away to Pakistan but are arrested and returned to Rasheed who gets more violent towards them, to the point of killing the innocent Aziza. Parallely in the narrative, Hosseini shows the rise of Taliban simultaneously. The story proceeds with Tariq, Laila’s beloved coming back in her life

after years. Rasheed learns about Tariq's meeting Laila and this infuriates him. He locks up Aziza in a room and beastly hits Laila. Upon Mariam's interference and protection, he beats Mariam also and tries to lock her in the tool shed. Mariam picks up a shovel and hits Rasheed very hard on his head, killing him in an instant. In an act of saving Laila and gifting her freedom, she becomes her surrogate mother. A. Jana in her article "Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: A Tale of Endurance and Emancipation" (2013) says the story is "the tragedy of Mariam's life. Rather it is better to say that this is the unavoidable destiny of many women. A woman is exploited everywhere" (7).

A Thousand Splendid Suns portrays the lives of women in a war-torn country and they live in a constant fear. Hosseini depicts lives ripped apart from dignity, devoid of happiness, extremely objectified and tortured for petty reasons. Mariam's death is presented to promote hope against hope and victory of goodness over evil. She has the healing power of love and sacrifice and adopts the form of a omnipotent deity who shall go to any extent to avenge the victim. Although the ways of their emancipation may be debatable, but given the situation of standing between devil and the deep sea, they choose the better – killing Rasheed.

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