

Women's Predicament in the Selected Works of Khaled Hosseini and Kunzang Choden

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Abstract:

This paper offers a comparative study of women's predicaments in the selected works of Khaled Hosseini and Kunzang Choden, with primary focus on *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Circle of Karma*, and with reference to Choden's *Tales in Colour and Other Stories*. It argues that although both writers expose the persistence of patriarchy and gender discrimination, the nature of women's oppression and resistance in their works is shaped by distinct socio-political and cultural contexts. Hosseini depicts Afghan women subjected to violent, state-enforced misogyny intensified by war and religious extremism, where female solidarity becomes a powerful form of resistance. In contrast, Choden presents a subtler, tradition-bound form of oppression in Bhutan, where women's struggles unfold through everyday silencing and an inward, spiritual search for selfhood. Drawing upon postcolonial feminist theory and cultural studies, this paper highlights how both writers present non-Western perspectives on women's suffering, agency, and resilience. The study attempts to show that women's resistance in postcolonial societies need not always take overtly political forms; it may also appear through emotional endurance, spiritual negotiation, and small acts of self-assertion shaped by specific socio-cultural terrains.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism, women as subalterns, socio-cultural terrains, Khaled Hosseini, Kunzang Choden, Afghanistan, Bhutan, female agency.

Introduction

Postcolonial literature plays a crucial role in articulating the lived experiences of societies that have often been misrepresented or silenced by dominant Western discourses. Such literature offers insider perspectives on social hierarchies, cultural practices, and political realities that shape everyday life. Within this framework, the writings of Khaled Hosseini and Kunzang Choden foreground women's voices, exposing gender-based oppression embedded within patriarchal systems of Afghanistan and Bhutan. Although these societies differ significantly in political history and cultural organization, women in both contexts remain subjected to restrictive gender roles that limit their mobility, autonomy, and access to education.

This paper argues that women in postcolonial societies experience what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes as "double marginalization," where colonial histories intersect with patriarchy to render women as subaltern figures whose voices are rarely heard within dominant narratives. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam and Laila inhabit a war-torn Afghanistan where women's lives are regulated by both family authority and state-imposed misogyny. In *The Circle of Karma*, Tsomo grows up in a Bhutanese society that appears outwardly harmonious but quietly restricts women through tradition and cultural expectations. While both writers depict women's suffering, their narratives differ in the form oppression takes and in the possibilities of resistance available to women.

The present study places Hosseini and Choden in dialogue in order to examine how socio-cultural terrains shape women's predicaments in different postcolonial contexts. Rather than presenting women as passive victims, both writers depict female characters who negotiate survival, dignity, and selfhood within restrictive environments. By reading these texts through

postcolonial feminist and cultural studies perspectives, this paper attempts to highlight culturally specific forms of women's resistance and resilience.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism and Socio-Cultural Terrains

This study is grounded in postcolonial feminist theory, which emphasizes that women's oppression in non-Western societies cannot be understood solely through Western feminist categories. Postcolonial feminists argue that gender relations are shaped by history, religion, culture, class, and political conditions. In societies such as Afghanistan and Bhutan, women's lives are structured not only by patriarchy but also by socio-cultural terrains that regulate behaviour within family and community spaces. These terrains include customs related to marriage, education, honour, religious belief, and women's labour, all of which shape women's everyday experiences.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" is useful for reading the female characters in Hosseini's and Choden's works. Spivak argues that subaltern women are often denied a voice because their experiences are filtered through dominant ideological and cultural structures. Mariam's life as an illegitimate child in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* positions her as socially invisible even before her forced marriage. Her suffering is normalized within her community, leaving her with little space to articulate her pain. Similarly, Tsomo in *The Circle of Karma* belongs to a rural Bhutanese society where women's silence is culturally reinforced. This paper argues that both Mariam and Tsomo represent subaltern female figures whose lives are controlled by family authority and tradition.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism is also relevant to this study. Mohanty warns against representing "Third World women" as a single, homogenous group of oppressed

subjects. Instead, women's experiences must be understood within their specific cultural and historical contexts. Afghan women under Taliban rule face violent, institutionalized misogyny, while Bhutanese women experience a quieter but persistent form of exclusion through tradition and domestic norms. The researcher observes that these different contexts produce different forms of resistance: collective and overt in Hosseini's narrative, and inward, spiritual, and individualized in Choden's.

Ania Loomba's concept of "double colonization" further helps to explain how women are oppressed by both patriarchy and socio-political structures. In Afghanistan, war and religious extremism intensify women's suffering by legally restricting their mobility and education. In Bhutan, cultural conservatism and economic dependence limit women's agency without the presence of overt state violence. By combining postcolonial feminism with a cultural studies approach, this paper examines how socio-cultural terrains shape women's predicaments and define the possibilities of resistance available to them.

Women's Predicament in Khaled Hosseini's Works

Khaled Hosseini's fiction is deeply shaped by Afghanistan's turbulent political history. His narratives depict the impact of war, displacement, and religious extremism on ordinary lives, particularly those of women. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the lives of Mariam and Laila unfold against decades of conflict, including Soviet invasion, civil war, and Taliban rule. These historical conditions intensify patriarchal control over women, turning domestic spaces into sites of confinement and violence.

Mariam's life is marked by social stigma from childhood. As an illegitimate child, she grows up internalizing shame and exclusion, which later makes her more vulnerable to accepting abuse

within marriage. Her forced marriage to Rasheed illustrates how women are transferred from paternal authority to marital control with little agency. The researcher observes that Mariam's early social conditioning prepares her to tolerate violence, revealing how patriarchy operates not only through physical force but also through psychological conditioning.

Laila, in contrast, grows up with access to education and hope for a different future. However, the Taliban's rise to power strips her of these possibilities. The prohibition of women's education, employment, and public presence reflects state-enforced misogyny that renders women socially invisible. The burqa, which Laila is compelled to wear, becomes a symbol of enforced anonymity and control over women's bodies. This study argues that in Hosseini's narrative, women's bodies become sites of political regulation, where state power and patriarchal authority intersect.

Despite this oppressive environment, Hosseini foregrounds female solidarity as a meaningful form of resistance. The relationship between Mariam and Laila develops through shared suffering and emotional dependence. Their bond creates a small space of care and mutual recognition within an otherwise hostile domestic environment. The researcher observes that this emotional connection becomes the foundation of Mariam's final decision to protect Laila from Rasheed's violence. Mariam's act of killing Rasheed is not presented as mere personal revenge but as a moment of ethical choice shaped by maternal care and solidarity. Through this act, Hosseini transforms Mariam from a passive victim into an agent who asserts moral authority within a system designed to silence her.

Hosseini also critiques patriarchal double standards through secondary female characters. In *The Kite Runner*, Soraya's past elopement becomes a source of lasting stigma, whereas similar

behaviour in men is often culturally forgiven. This contrast reveals how patriarchal norms continue to regulate women's sexuality and honour even within diasporic contexts. The persistence of these values suggests that patriarchy travels with communities, reshaping itself within new cultural settings.

Furthermore, Hosseini highlights the psychological consequences of prolonged oppression. Mariam's internalized sense of worthlessness and Laila's fear-ridden compromises demonstrate how patriarchy affects women's inner lives. Their trauma does not disappear with changing political regimes; instead, it leaves lasting emotional scars. In this sense, Hosseini presents women's suffering as both a personal and political condition, shaped by historical violence and everyday domestic control.

Women's Predicament in Kunzang Choden's The Circle of Karma

Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma* presents a deeply personal narrative of a Bhutanese woman whose life is shaped by poverty, gender discrimination, and cultural expectation. Unlike the overt political violence depicted in Hosseini's Afghan context, Choden portrays a society that appears peaceful but is structured by silent forms of patriarchy. The protagonist Tsomo is denied formal education despite her father's scholarly background, reflecting a cultural belief that literacy and intellectual development are unnecessary for women. This early denial limits her possibilities for self-realization and economic independence.

Tsomo's life unfolds as a journey marked by displacement, labour, and exploitation. Her decision to leave home reflects a quiet rebellion against familial control. However, her mobility does not translate into freedom. Instead, she encounters new forms of vulnerability in unfamiliar social environments, where her gender and economic dependence expose her to exploitation. The

researcher observes that Tsomo's suffering is normalized within the narrative; her endurance is expected rather than questioned. This normalization reflects how patriarchal values are embedded in everyday life rather than enforced through visible political structures.

Choden frames Tsomo's suffering within Buddhist philosophy, particularly the concept of karma. Tsomo interprets her hardships as the result of past actions, which encourages introspection and acceptance rather than direct confrontation with social injustice. However, this acceptance does not signify passivity. Tsomo's gradual turn toward spiritual life represents a conscious rejection of the limited roles available to her as a woman within domestic and sexual relationships. Her decision to become a nun can be read as an act of self-assertion within culturally available forms of resistance. The researcher argues that Choden presents spiritual renunciation as a gendered strategy of survival that allows Tsomo to escape the cycle of exploitation without openly challenging social norms.

Choden also draws attention to the invisibility of women's labour. Tsomo's continuous physical and emotional work remains unacknowledged, reinforcing her economic dependence and social marginalization. Women's contributions are treated as natural duties rather than recognized as labour, which further entrenches their subordinate status. Through this portrayal, Choden critiques a cultural system that sustains gender inequality by rendering women's suffering ordinary and unremarkable.

In addition to *The Circle of Karma*, Kunzang Choden's *Tales in Colour and Other Stories* offers brief yet powerful glimpses into the everyday lives of Bhutanese women. The stories focus on ordinary domestic settings where women's struggles unfold quietly. Unlike Tsomo's life narrative, which traces a long journey of suffering and spiritual transformation, the women in

these stories are depicted in momentary situations that reveal the emotional and psychological costs of patriarchy.

Female characters in these stories often experience emotional neglect, restricted choices in marriage, and social pressure to conform to gendered expectations. Their suffering is rarely voiced openly, reflecting a cultural context in which women are expected to endure rather than protest. The researcher observes that silence functions as both a survival strategy and a mechanism of control. Women remain silent not because they lack awareness of injustice, but because social structures offer them few safe spaces for articulation.

Choden's short stories highlight how patriarchy operates through everyday practices such as gossip, moral judgement, and familial authority. These subtle forms of control shape women's self-perception and limit their imagination of alternative lives. The internalization of social norms becomes a powerful mechanism of discipline, making overt resistance difficult. When read alongside *The Circle of Karma*, these stories reveal that spiritual liberation, which becomes possible for Tsomo, is not equally accessible to all women. Many remain confined within domestic roles without any viable path toward self-determination. This contrast underscores the role of class, mobility, and circumstance in shaping women's capacity for resistance.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative reading of Hosseini and Choden reveals how socio-cultural terrains shape women's predicaments in distinct ways. In Hosseini's Afghanistan, patriarchy is reinforced by political instability, war, and religious extremism. Women's movement, education, and public presence are legally restricted, and violence becomes an accepted tool of social regulation. Domestic spaces mirror the brutality of the public sphere, turning homes into sites of fear and

confinement. The researcher argues that in such contexts, women's resistance often takes collective and confrontational forms, as seen in the solidarity between Mariam and Laila.

In contrast, Bhutan's socio-cultural terrain, as depicted by Choden, is shaped by tradition, religion, and familial authority rather than overt political violence. Gender inequality is embedded in everyday practices such as denial of education, expectations of obedience, and normalization of women's labour. Women's confinement appears voluntary because it is culturally justified as duty and virtue. As a result, resistance in this context becomes inward and individualized rather than collective. Spiritual retreat emerges as one of the few culturally sanctioned paths through which women can claim autonomy.

Education functions differently in the two contexts. In Hosseini's narrative, women's education is perceived as a threat to patriarchal control, leading to its violent suppression under Taliban rule. Laila's early education becomes a symbol of hope and resistance. In Choden's narrative, education is denied quietly and without political urgency, justified as unnecessary for women. Both contexts reveal how restricting women's access to knowledge serves as a powerful mechanism of control.

Mobility also reflects differing socio-cultural terrains. Afghan women's mobility is forcibly restricted through state laws and surveillance, whereas Bhutanese women's mobility is limited through family expectations and moral codes. In both cases, control over women's movement reinforces dependence and vulnerability, though the mechanisms of control differ in visibility and intensity.

The fundamental difference between Hosseini's and Choden's portrayal of women lies in the nature of oppression and the forms of resistance available to female characters. Hosseini depicts

a context of violent, institutionalized misogyny, where women's suffering is visible and collective. Resistance emerges through emotional solidarity and direct action, even when such action carries fatal consequences. Mariam's sacrifice alters the material conditions of Laila's life, suggesting that collective female resistance can produce tangible change within oppressive systems.

Choden, on the other hand, presents a quieter form of oppression rooted in tradition and everyday cultural practices. Tsomo's suffering is individualized and normalized, making resistance less visible and less disruptive to social order. Her liberation remains inward and spiritual rather than political. The researcher observes that this form of resistance does not challenge the structures that oppress other women, highlighting the limits of individual emancipation within deeply entrenched cultural systems.

Narrative style further reflects these differences. Hosseini's social realism creates a sense of urgency shaped by rapidly changing political regimes and visible violence. Choden's narrative unfolds slowly, aligned with cyclical notions of time rooted in Buddhist philosophy, where suffering appears repetitive and endurance becomes a way of life. These stylistic choices shape the reader's perception of women's suffering: urgent and collective in Hosseini, quiet and individualized in Choden.

Male figures in both texts also function differently. Hosseini's male antagonists embody violent patriarchy, while even sympathetic male characters remain constrained by gender norms. In Choden's work, male figures often appear passive, reinforcing tradition through compliance rather than overt cruelty. This contrast suggests that patriarchy operates not only through violent individuals but also through collective cultural participation.

Together, these narratives expand postcolonial feminist discourse by acknowledging multiple forms of resistance. Hosseini's fiction highlights the political potential of female solidarity, while Choden's work reveals the significance of inward, culturally situated strategies of survival. Both forms of resistance challenge Western feminist expectations that equate empowerment solely with public confrontation.

Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates that Khaled Hosseini and Kunzang Choden offer powerful yet distinct representations of women's predicaments within patriarchal societies shaped by specific socio-cultural terrains. Hosseini portrays Afghan women whose lives are governed by war, state-sanctioned misogyny, and domestic violence, yet who reclaim agency through emotional solidarity and sacrificial resistance. Choden presents a quieter but equally persistent form of oppression in Bhutan, where women's suffering is normalized through tradition and cultural silence, and where liberation often takes inward and spiritual forms.

Together, these narratives challenge Western stereotypes that portray Asian women as uniformly passive victims. Instead, they reveal women as active agents who negotiate survival and dignity within culturally specific constraints. By foregrounding non-Western feminist perspectives, this study contributes to postcolonial literary criticism by recognizing diverse modes of resistance, including collective political action and individualized spiritual emancipation. The paper ultimately argues that understanding women's oppression requires attention to the socio-cultural terrains that shape both the conditions of suffering and the possibilities of resistance.

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