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From Subjugation to Selfhood: The Transformation of Women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract:
Women have always remained the marginalised "other" in a gendered society. From time immemorial, patriarchy as an institution has relegated women to a subordinate status. To ensure and exert its hegemonic control over the powerless inferior sex, the powerful patriarchy has established stereotypical roles for both men and women. Men should be the monarchs of the public sphere, whereas women should be the "angel in the house" and maintain the private realm. Patriarchy as an ideology is so deeply embedded in society and culture that even women have internalised this ideology. The desperate struggle of the deprived and discriminated womenfolk in this phallocentric society is beyond the borders of spatio-territorial particularities. However, the frail and fragile "second sex" has the power to reverberate and reincarnate herself as the magnificent, brave "New Woman". Significantly, the role of a woman has remained very tough and challenging in a discriminatory society. However, most noticeably, it becomes extremely excruciating in a conservative Talibanic society. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is one such touching testament that graphically narrates the suffering and strength, plight and power of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, who are the victims of the oppressive Talibanic rule. When the Taliban takes over Afghan society, life becomes miserable for them. They become doubly colonised and are compelled to fight a desperate struggle, but ultimately they successfully overcome the daunting obstacles. This article explores how these two female protagonists, belonging to different age groups, act as foils to each other and serve as mouthpieces for captivity and emancipation. Moreover, it aims to explore how Mariam and Laila, rather than succumbing to the tormenting terror inflicted on them, forge their selfhood.

Keywords: Patriarchy, oppression, subjugation, Emancipation, selfhood, "New Woman".

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Khaled Hosseini, the famous Afghan-American novelist, contends that gender apartheid is so appalling in Afghanistan that a discussion of "every other topic paled in comparison" (409). Consequently, Hosseini, who dealt with an exclusively male's world in his debut novel, *The Kite Runner*, decided "to explore the inner lives of two struggling Afghan women" in his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (409). Appearing in 2007, Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* stands out as an enthralling tale of personal devastation and survival of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila. The author describes the work as "a modest tribute to the great courage, endurance and resilience" of Afghanistan's women (412). Through the characters of Mariam and Laila, Hosseini poignantly chronicles the trials and tribulations, the torture and turmoil in the life of Afghan women. The sufferings of Afghan women deeply disturbed him, and he wanted to fathom the inner thoughts of these women, whom society compelled to live lives of "obedience and service" (410). Hosseini believed that "Afghanistan needs its women" and without the proper participation of women the "whole project of rebuilding Afghanistan is doomed" (411). Mariam and Laila, the two victims of the oppressive patriarchal Afghan society, epitomise the endurance and resilience of Afghan womenfolk. The novel is a touching testament to the struggle and strength, plight and power of these two women. It stands out as a gripping tale of physical and psychological violence. Using the novel as a vehicle, the novelist makes a caustic criticism of the brutal, inhumane treatment of women in the patriarchal Afghan society, especially under the Taliban. However, the novel not only captures the struggles and sufferings of women but also their endurance and perseverance. Hosseini's heroines, despite all odds, successfully transcend subjugation and experience an awakening of the self. In this context, it is worth noting that several critics have addressed the issues of resilience and endurance in Hosseini's heroines.

Meenakshi Sharma has analysed the various forms of "resilience" and its development as a "survival mechanism" in adverse situations (46). Critics, such as Bindu Ann Philip, have focused on the "endless endurance" of the female figures.

In contrast to the aforementioned articles, this manuscript focuses on the transformation of the female protagonists from subjugation to selfhood, underscoring their voyage toward self-awakening. This article makes a text-based analysis of Hosseini's representation of the two female characters and attempts to analyse their journey from subservience to selfhood. Moreover, using Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of "patriarchal bargains", the article analyses the strategies the characters employ to secure their survival. The paper, however, is not an elaborate study of the abuse and torture of Mariam and Laila; rather, it seeks to explore their reactions and responses to this torturous treatment. Finally, the article humbly attempts to illustrate how the protagonists, defying all chains of captivity and control, discover themselves and emerge as mouthpieces of emancipation.

Since gender apartheid is the major concern of this novel, it is necessary to make a detailed analysis of the position of women in the contemporary world scenario. "Male dominance", as Lerner points out, is "universal and natural" (16). Women have always remained the marginalised other in a gendered society. From time immemorial, patriarchy as an institution has relegated women to a subordinate status. Moreover, "they had been excluded from equal access to education and from participation and power in public life" (Lerner 27). The all-powerful patriarchy has ensured and exerted its hegemonic control over the weaker sex by assigning stereotypical roles for them. Women are expected to be "the angel in the house" and to maintain the sanctity of the private realm. Thus, their actions are dictated, their fates decided,

and destiny sealed by the patriarchal society. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak pertinently analyses the conditions of females in a male-dominated society:

> …a figure of "woman" is at issue, one whose minimal predication as indeterminate is already available to the phallocentric tradition. (287)

The mode of operation and the implications of a patriarchal system have been aptly summed up by Deniz Kandiyoti:

> The implications of the patrilineal-patrilocal complex for women not only are remarkably uniform but also entail forms of control and subordination that cut across cultural and religious boundaries, such as those of Hinduism, Confucianism, and Islam. (278)

The women, irrespective of class, culture and religion, are compelled to lead a life of blind obedience and unthinking compliance. The moment women try to break free from the norms established by their self-proclaimed superior male counterparts, they are subordinated and suppressed. The desperate struggle of the deprived and discriminated women in this phallocentric world moves beyond the borders of territorial boundaries. Despite all kinds of torture and violence inflicted on them, women have the resilience to endure and fight. Life has always been a tough battle for women. However, significantly, it became extremely excruciating for the Afghan women in a conservative Talibanic society. Khaled Hosseini is well aware of the injustices inflicted upon women in his country, and through Mariam and Laila, he succeeds in giving voice to Afghan women in general.

Hosseini deliberately chooses two female characters as the novel's protagonists. The appalling condition of Afghan women moved him, and he intended to "look for the very ordinary humanity beneath their veils" (Hosseini 412). The novel centres on the lives of Mariam and Laila, "two women separated by a generation but united by an unbreakable bond of friendship"

(415). Mariam is an illegitimate child, "who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home and acceptance" (4). However, innocent and illiterate Mariam unquestioningly "admires" her father, who pays her weekly visits (5). In an ardent desire to be united with her father, fifteen-year-old Mariam leaves her "kolba" and abandons her mother (27). However, she becomes disillusioned after this visit and realises that she has no place in her father's house.

Nevertheless, this knowledge had a profound impact on Mariam's life, and she lost her mother, Nana, her sole belonging. Consequently, Mariam was compelled by her stepmothers to marry Rasheed and to leave Herat permanently. To erase Mariam's presence from their household, her stepmothers marry her off to Rashid, a man twice her age, and send her to Kabul. There, she makes a new beginning. As Mariam remained childless and failed to fulfil Rasheed's expectations, their marriage gradually descended into brutality and torture. The situation worsened after Rasheed's marriage to young, orphaned Laila. However, Laila's refusal to remain under Rasheed's control further annoyed him. She also became a target of Rasheed's cruelty. Their predicament further aggravates after the advent of the Taliban. Amidst all suffering and pain, a friendship and a unique relationship flourished, defying the rules of time and age and enduring beyond death.

A deeper probe into Hosseini's novel reveals that the author is well aware of the stringent rules of patriarchal control and dominance that were in effect in contemporary Afghan society. The selection of three women, representing different classes, cultures and generations, as the novel's protagonists, is both intentional and obvious. He wanted to emphasise that the plight of women is eternal, transcending time and circumstances. Notably, Hosseini portrays his female characters differently and distinctly. Despite being victims of an authoritarian, male-dominated

society, the female characters differ from the conventional women who readily internalise patriarchal ideals and function as agents of patriarchy. Rather, they question the hollowness lying within this gendered society and are well aware of the ploy employed by patriarchy to hegemonise the weaker sex.

The characterisation of "Nana" as a representative of the slave class is deliberate and significant. Hosseini underscored the use and abuse of slave women by their masters, and poignantly portrayed the exploitation and violation of lower-class women by their upper-class masters: "Nana had been one of the housekeepers. Until her belly began to swell" (Hosseini 7). Lerner's observation pertinently sums up Nana's situation:

> The practice of using slave women as servants and sex objects became the standard for the class dominance over women in all historical periods. Women of the subordinate classes (serfs, peasants, workers) were expected to serve men of the upper classes sexually, whether they consented or not. (88)

Nana silently bears the toil and tribulation of patriarchal oppression and teaches her daughter Mariam about the reality of patriarchy: that "like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman" (Hosseini 7). Despite her deplorable situation, Nana dares to blatantly declare that: "It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure" (18). Although initially doubtful of her mother's claims, innocent Mariam eventually recognised her father's deception following her shocking disillusionment with him:

> For the first time, Mariam could hear him through Nana's ears. She could hear so clearly now the insincerity that had always lurked beneath, the hollow, false assurances. (Hosseini 38)

Later, after marriage, Mariam discovered a huge discrepancy between Rasheed's preaching and practice. The man who was accustomed to delivering grandiloquent lectures on female honour and propriety and was overprotective of the "nang and namoos", the "honour and pride" of his wife, did not refrain from viewing pornographic magazines (82). Mariam felt drugged and thought, "...why did Rasheed insist that she cover when he thought nothing of looking at the private areas of other men's wives and sisters"(82)? She knew that she could never mention/refer this to Rasheed. Mariam is a silent sufferer who silently swallowed all the physical and mental violence inflicted upon her. The repeated collapse of hope made Rasheed more distant and resentful toward Mariam. Aggrieved Mariam, who silently bore the appalling abuses of Rasheed, remembered that:

> ....each snowflake was a sigh heaved by an aggrieved woman somewhere in the world....As a reminder of how women like us suffer....how quietly we endure all that falls upon us. (91)

She becomes a passive receptacle for Rasheed's anger and frustration. Thus, Mariam adopts silence and endurance as her strategies of survival in Rasheed's household, and these "patriarchal bargains" of subservience, submissiveness, and servility play a vital role in securing her shelter (Kandiyoti 275). Her silent suffering projects her as a mouthpiece of captivity.

Contrary to Mariam's childhood of deprivation and denial, Laila enjoyed a free, happy childhood. Laila, the "revolutionary girl" (Hosseini 112), is the daughter of the "educated intellectual" Hakim (Hosseini 79). Laila's doting dad, her "Babi", made it clear to her that "marriage can wait, education cannot...because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated" (114). The convergence of the two disparate worlds of Mariam and Laila marks the novel's crucial climax. Laila's castle of happiness was blown up by the factional wars of

Afghanistan. After the death of Laila's parents in the factional war in Afghanistan, Rashid cunningly grabbed the opportunity to marry Laila and bring her into his household. Orphaned Laila was compelled to marry scheming Rashid to give a name to her unborn child. However, Laila is not a docile woman to silently accept any imposition. The decision to marry Rasheed was her strategy, her "patriarchal bargain", to secure the future of her unborn child (Kandiyoti 275). She decided to marry Rashid to legitimise the fruit of her love with Tariq. Kandiyoti opines that:

> These patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts. (275)

Kandiyoti's observation pertinently sums up Laila's situation.

The relationship between Mariam and Laila started with a note of hatred. However, it gradually evolved into one of the strongest bonds of camaraderie. One became the confidant of the other, and they together shared the purity of a mother-daughter relationship. Amidst Rasheed's authoritarian domain of torture, Mariam and Laila constructed their own cosy corner, where they eagerly waited for the "nightly ritual" of sharing "three cups of *chai*" and performed all their domestic chores together (245). Ultimately, Laila the "revolutionary girl" emerged as a perfect foil to Mariam, Rasheed's reclusive wife (112). The former, a true mouthpiece of emancipation, shows the courage to restrain Rasheed from violently attacking Mariam:

> Rasheed raised the belt again and this time came at Mariam
>
> Then an astonishing thing happened: the girl lunged at him. She grabbed his arm with both hands and tried to drag him down... (235)

Women are regarded as the worst victims of war, facing unimaginable repercussions: They are "beaten and tortured and humiliated and imprisoned" (Hosseini 411). War grossly violates women's fundamental rights, leaving them to suffer immensely and forcing them to surrender to its devastating consequences. Mariam and Laila's lives worsened under the oppressive, over-conservative Talibanic rule. They became doubly colonised and were forced into a desperate struggle. However, neither the atrocities of the Taliban nor the brutality of Rasheed could curb the indomitable spirit of Laila and Mariam. Laila, who "wasn't raised in a household where people did things like that", decided to protest and escape (243). The life full of suffering and endurance suddenly became intolerable for Mariam, and she, too, decided to accompany Laila. Defying the "fatwas" of the Taliban and the dictatorship of Rasheed, they decided to forge an identity of their own. Mariam and Laila's attempt to escape failed, and they were brutally tortured because "it is a crime for a woman to run away" (259). Rasheed subjected Mariam and Laila to inhuman torture after being sent back home. After the failed attempt to escape, Mariam and Laila became synonymous with Rasheed, both experiencing the same "distrust, (...) disdain and disregard" from him (Hosseini 267). Together, they endured Rasheed's malice and incessant assaults. Their shared sorrow, struggle and suffering under Rasheed's torment and torture brought them closer to each other, and they discovered refuge in each other's arms. Their relationship evolved through their ongoing struggles, gradually becoming a mother-daughter bond. Each was eager to protect and rescue the other. That is why, after the revelation of Tariq's return to their lives, when Laila and Mariam were subjected to barbarous and brutal treatment by Rasheed, both became desperate to save each other. Finally, when Rasheed attempted to kill Laila by suffocating her, Mariam's maternal instinct compelled her to make the first decisive choice of her life: to save her daughter's life (341). Silent and submissive, Mariam recalled, "all

the self-denial, all the sacrifice" she had endured as well as the meanness and violence of Rasheed (Hosseini 341). Finally, driven to protect Laila from his brutality, she overcame her submissiveness. Using a shovel, Mariam killed Rasheed:

> She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life. (Hosseini 341)

The killing of Rasheed brought a drastic change in Mariam's attitude to life. For the first time in her life, she took the initiative to decide and "devise a plan" to make things easier for Laila (Hosseini 345). After Rasheed's death, a role reversal occurred between Laila and Mariam. Confident, pragmatic Laila became muddled and messy in her thoughts, while under-confident, timid Mariam became "unclouded", severe and sober (346). Having taken charge of charting the future course of their life, Mariam decided to stay back and face the consequences of Rasheed's murder. Despite Laila's repeated pleadings, Mariam remained firm and obstinate in her decision. The author has poignantly portrayed the final moments of Mariam's life. Gracefully, in a steadfast manner, she walked towards the goalpost, and in this final moment Mariam looked back, calculated the fluctuations in her life and realised that the ebbs were greater in her sea of life. Finally, she embraced death not with "regret" but with "abundant peace" (341), derived from the realisation that her illegitimate beginning ultimately culminated in a legitimate manner (361). This life, though fractured and fragmented, had gleeful snippets that Mariam shared with Laila and her children. Moreover, it is in this life that she finally has the chance to decide the course of her future. Thus, Mariam, overcoming the label of a silent sufferer, becomes the architect of her own destiny and that of others. Notably, Mariam's sacrifice brings Laila's salvation. She forged her selfhood through her sacrifice.

Laila, on the other hand, decided to return to her country and help to develop it. All through her life, she carried the echo of her Babi's words that "when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you (Laila)" and realised that (378):

Kabul is waiting. Needing. This journey home is the right thing to do. (381)

After returning, Laila started a new beginning in war-wrecked Kabul. She decided to use the money that Mariam's father had left for her for a noble cause. Laila and her husband, Tariq, started working with the orphanage and renovated it. Dedicatedly, they worked to improve the living conditions of needy children. The media acknowledged the efforts of Laila and Tariq, and covered their activities. In her new venture, Laila performed her responsibilities with dedication and sincerity. Significantly, in Laila's new journey, Mariam became an indispensable part of the former's memory and mind. Thus, Laila may aptly be described as Hosseini's "New Woman", who epitomises emancipation and empowerment by asserting herself and resisting the patriarchal hegemony. She actively participates in Afghanistan's social change.

A detailed analysis of the novel reveals that Hosseini's heroines exhibited remarkable grit and perseverance in enduring and resisting the brutalities of patriarchy. Rather than surrendering to the exploitative structures that seek to oppress and subjugate them, Mariam and Laila emerge as archetypes of resistance and resilience, which challenge the hegemony of a traditional patriarchal society and resist its domination through inner strength and tenacity. Although they failed to subvert and dismantle the structure of patriarchy, they were successful in defying the patriarchal norms that controlled them. Mariam and Laila were compelled to negotiate and strategically adapt to the oppressive structures of society by devising their own patriarchal bargains to secure their existence, dignity and survival. Despite all odds and obstacles, they are the agents of their own emancipation and define their selfhood on their own terms. Thus,

Hosseini's heroines determine their own courses and chart their journeys. Mariam and Laila consequently become the harbingers of hope and survival for the women, illustrating how women can challenge patriarchal authority and create an alternative narrative of survival amidst suffering.

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