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Islam, Taliban and Women in Afghan Society: A Critical Study of Khalid Hussein's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract:

A Thousand Splendid Suns, a novel by Khalid Hussein, points out various restrictions and orthodox traditions, formed by fundamentalists groups, which have been imposed on society in the name of religion to subjugate and marginalize the people. Despite the writer depicted the war, conflict and their consequences over the country social, economical and cultural conditions. It is true that the war and confrontation in Afghanistan history is very interminable and plays a significant role in country obliteration. After the intrusion of Russia in Afghanistan since 1979 various conflicts and violence upsurge to a great extent has particularly affected the common civilians in each form. Besides such war subjects there are other important characteristics that have been extensively discussed in Afghan literature such as the rise of extremist insurgent groups and their influence over society, especially on matriarchal community.

Key Points: War, Conflicts, Extremism, Islam, Subjugation, Suppression, Society and Women.

Khalid Hussein is one of the most renowned Afghan born American writers. He is accredited particularly for his fictional writings as well as poetry translation. In his marvelous works the best are his novels such as *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Mountains Echoed*. All three are counted as the contemporary masterpiece. Hussein is acknowledged for introducing historical and cultural heritage of country and insofar contemporary situation and autonomy of radicalism and extremism in Afghanistan. His writings mainly include the theme of family and redemption, women pining, struggle and endurance in their married life and position in society. Besides he draws on the subjects of civil war, conflicts and awful consequences. His novels represent Afghanistan and its society specifically as he admitted it, in an interview, the responsibility to write about one's own nation:

It is quite burden for a writer to feel responsibility to represent his or her own culture and to educate others about it. For me it always starts from a very personal, intimate place, human connections and then it expands from there.

Nevertheless for many decades the endless war and conflicts in Afghanistan has caused devastation and unrest which profoundly influence the society on a large scale. In the novel Hussein speaks about long history of War in Afghanistan:

And that, my young friends, is the story of our country, one invader after another Macedonians. Sassanians. Arabs. Mongols. Now the Soviets.(Hussein144).

It is a fact that in the period of uncertainty and war a peaceful life is reverie for common men. Such devilish acts of war deteriorate the lives of civilians and prompt them to live in the ambiance of fear, desperation and hopelessness. The calamity of war and conflicts in Afghanistan arises because of various Purposes and aspirations with much malevolent intention. It is an observation that if Taliban and such radical fringe are responsible to generate the gloomy atmosphere in Afghanistan, similarly both the Soviet Union and western world are also liable to some extent for engendering such harrowing conditions. Afghanistan's literature plays a striking role to bring out the prevailing traumatic situation and perpetual war history. Amidst important Afghanistan writers are Mahmud Tarzi, Ahmed Rashid, Ayesha Jalal, Khalid Hussein and others. In their writings they acknowledge the world from the hardship of life and practical realities that exist today in Afghanistan society. They sketch painstakingly the loss of cultural heritage and the effects of war on the civilians particularly children and women with full of integrity.

Moreover the dominance of extremism in Afghanistan has degraded the position of women there. It is reckoned that not only in Afghanistan but also in many countries, women have been subjugated by various means and identified as the symbol of weakness. They are deprived from their basic needs and rights too. They have been used as a commodity and object of lust. Furthermore, they condone drastic and unbearable social practices that have been brought into practices by patriarchal world as the sacred stigma. In the same way Afghan women were also marginalized and exploited in society by men-made restrictions and social dogmas. Taliban, as critics observe, used religion to establish them in Afghanistan. They introduced their culture and conservative mind set for both men and women by claiming the part of the Sharia law (Islamic principle). But in their laws women were more repressed than male as Hussein has depicted in his writings.

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is classified as one of the prominent writings in contemporary English literature. In this work Hussein closely observes the Afghanistan society and eulogizes cultural beauty, historical monuments of the country. Nevertheless the depiction of conflict arises out of the war and the exploitation of women in a male world is very magnificent in the novel. The novel particularly focuses on female world, their sufferings and daily confrontation with domestic issues in both spheres inside or outside the house.

However through the outline of the novel we come to know that radicalism has been targeted in the whole narrative and writer tries to convince the readers that how Taliban regime

uses religion to put on their illegitimate and ethnic rules over society. While in another side of the novel the Husseini mentions various verses of *Holy Koran* that signifies the fact that Islam in real sense never endorses such devilish things. Although there is a depiction of such radical insurgents, we also see some important characters that represent the trueness, integrity and show their benevolent attitude towards women. In many ways the novel is a response to those who cite that the religion Islam is the cause of women degradation, subjugation, victimization and its teachings and scriptures confines a women's position in society.

There are various comments by different Islamic scholars on such questions and similarly Yusuf Estes, a renowned Islamic American scholar, states that: "If you want to know the real teachings of Islam and its real values then don't see the Muslims but go through their scriptures like the Quran and Hadith." Besides there are multiple instances that explicitly exhibit that Islam is a religion of peace and talks about equality of men and women in every sphere of life. Moreover Khalid Husseini introduces many characters that represent the true image of Islam in the novel.

The novel closely concerns with the plight of three women under the circumstances of domestic violence, social imprison and ongoing conflicts. Through the depiction of these characters the writer attempts to highlight those thousands of Afghan women's sufferings and their traumatic condition in male dominated society. The story sets amidst 1970 to 2002 and encompass invasion, civil war and unstoppable violence in Afghanistan. Nana is one of the female characters in the novel who has been characterized as the victim and oppressed creature in the male dominated world. She is the illegitimate wife of Jalil, a man of three wives and nine children. Jalil is described as a coward but a man of status in his patriarchal or capitalist world. Nana loves Jalil and she becomes the mother of his child named Mariam before marriage, which leads to sufferings in Nana's life. After knowing the truth of pregnancy she was banished from the society on the account of her adultery. While on the other side Jalil doesn't face any insulting remarks. He is suggested by his relatives to leave Nana. Although she doesn't receive any moral support from Jalil but is blamed for maligning his image in the society. Nana tells Mariam:

You know what he told his wives by way of defense? That I forced myself on him. That it was my fault. Didi? You see? This is what it means to be a women I this world. (Husseini7).

The above passage reflects Nana's heart throbs and woes that she faces in her whole life. This signifies the conservativeness of patriarchal society and their attitude towards women. The life-lesson given by Nana to her daughter Mariam about orthodox society in the beginning of novel represents the experiences, struggle and endurance of numerous Afghan women. Nana loves a lot to Mariam and she is the only hope to her in the desolate world. Nana doesn't want to leave Mariam in the guardianship of Jalil after her death because she was much aware of Jalil and his family's deceptiveness.

Mariam is one of the protagonists in the novel who is an epitome of women's struggle, endurance, sensitivity and servility. After her mother's death she gets married without her consent with a person name Rashid, a man thirty years older than her. The marriage of Mariam against her inclination was one of the biggest examples of women's exploitation in society. Likewise Mariam there are many women in Afghan society who have been tied in such knot of marriages and fake relationships and later left alone to confront the hardship throughout the life. Initially Mariam found her married life full of love and delight but later recurring miscarriage crushes her relationship. For this natural fault she bears violence in her whole life. Such incidents signifies the fact that Rashid does not have any emotional attachment towards Mariam and the relationship for him was mere a physical lust. She was scolded and beaten up every day by him for various reasons. After getting the title of bareness she becomes the object of abuse, insult, scornful comments for her husband. She has lost her previous status and becomes a burden to Rasheed. In her ongoing brutal life she learns to compromise and endurance that has been taught by her mother: "Only one skill. And it's: tahamul. Endure."(Husseini18). Because of her inability to produce a child she compromises herself with suffering, abusiveness and also the thrash of belt on her body has become the regular part in her life. In my opinion how a person can blame a women for natural causes of infertility. Every woman dreams to become a mother and wants to experience in her life a joyful period of pregnancy. It is not women's fault behind such problems but the nature which does not give them chance to become a mother. It is a perennial fact that most of the time in many domestic cases women were accused by men as well as by the society. As Nana speaks to Mariam:

Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam. (Husseini7).

Laila is another major female persona in the novel. She is insofar the victim of gender violence alike Mariam but her upbringing and lesson of her infancy taught by her father makes her strong, defiant, independent and responsible women. After the death of her brother in a war she fulfills her duty by taking all the responsibility of house and meanwhile learns a lot of things from her father i.e. education, duty towards nation and its rebuilding after war. All the characteristics reflect her maturity at an early age and ingrains modern thoughts that is the inheritance of her father. She represents her intelligence and courage when she is left alone in an attack where her parents die, and reluctantly accepts the proposal of marriage with Rasheed. It is stated that her decision of marriage in such traumatic circumstances was an act of stabilizing herself at that time. She knows that Rasheed is not a perfect guy for her but at that moment she was without an alternate to go anywhere. Many a times she tries to escape from such birdcage situation by making attempts but remains unsuccessful. At last she releases herself with the sacrificing act of Mariam, her victim companion in the domestic violence. Laila's returns again in Kabul and opening of refuge for women and children represent her sense of duty and responsibility that she promises with her father and Mariam too.

For Mariam Laila proves the drop of the Christ blood to save her existence inside the house. In my concern the representation of relationship of love and mutual concern between Mariam and Laila shows writer intentions to convey the message that only a woman can understand the pain of another woman and insofar can receive the tranquility and love mutually. Both characters in this novel confront domestic violence, abuses and beatings by their husband. They don't see the emotion and love in Rasheed's eyes. But their mutual love and compassion towards each other gives them tranquility and pleasantness in such traumatic sufferings. When Laila becomes the mother of Aziza, Rasheed doesn't feel happy because of not getting a boy. But Aziza was loved and cared by Mariam and Laila extensively. She becomes the fond of Aziza. Her affection towards Aziza was not less than like a real mother. Aziza's reaction towards Mariam was also warming and pleasant. Her craving to hold hand and sleep in Mariam's arms sometimes makes her calm-full. This kind of genuine love of Aziza propels Mariam into delightful tears and gave a longing of solace inside her heart that is filled with pain and agony. She asserts:

Her heart took flight. And she marveled at how, after all these years of rattling loose, she had found in this little creature the first true connection in her life of false, failed connections. (Husseini246).

In the atmosphere of gloominess Mariam and Laila receive a world of emotional attachment, adoration and quietness in each other company. Once they make attempt to flee from the house but unfortunately were arrested by the police. This act proves to them as deaths like crime. The description of this scene in the novel by the writer creates a very emotional situation and moves the reader completely. At first Rasheed brutally beats Laila and later Mariam without mercy and sentiments. Both were left alone and Laila with Aziza were locked in a room and didn't get even a single piece of bread and water. Meanwhile Rasheed doesn't show any compassion towards the little beautiful baby Aziza. Laila begs him water for Aziza, She states: "Just one glass, Rasheed. Not for me. Do it for her. You don't want her blood on your hands."(Husseini264). Further there are many passages in the narrative that speaks about male vulgarity and their fiend treatment towards women. Mariam becomes habitual of meeting such drastic violence but she endures all the bearings silently without any protest and resistance:-

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 goat, released in tiger's cage, when the tiger first looks up from ties paws, begins to growl. (Husseini234).

Similarly like Mariam many women in society daily meet such despicable situation and bears wordlessly by thinking it the consequence of their destiny. But woman like Laila shows resistance and defies the restrictions and violence of society fearlessly.

As far as the position of women discoursed in the context of Islam it is believed that the role of women in Islam is very peculiar and prime. In current period the western world and media is trying to defame image of Islam by making various accusation regarding women's treatment, terrorism and conservativeness. But in a real way when we go through the Islamic scriptures we don't get any such references that degrades women in a society or eulogize the terrorism. The writer of this novel tries to represent the genuineness of the religion Islam through the depiction of various characters. Hakim, Laila's father, is a very important character in the novel. He believes that women are not only an object of marriage and made for producing children but also entitled for everything in society like men i.e. education, job, freedom, right to take decision in difficulties and others. He treats Laila like a son and always reminds her duty towards the nation. Maulana Faziullah is a character in the novel who imparts good lessons of life to Mariam. He was the one who teaches Mariam five times prayers and recitation of Quran and also guides her how to read and write books. Mariam learns from him various lessons of life. Maulana tells Mariam in her period of anguish and loneliness that the recitation of Koranic verses is worth reading in this situation and it gives us comfort and calmness. He asserts:

They will comfort you too, Mariam Jo, you can summon them in your time of need, and they won't fail you. God's words will never betray you, my girl. (Husseini 17).

Jalil never thought about Mariam's education but it was Maulana who made request Nana to send Mariam to school. Whatever education Mariam preserves, it was bestowed by Maulana Faziullah. In spite of all such characters here we bring out some references from Islamic scriptures that speak about the position of women in Islam and what rights Islam gives to them in a society. I point out here some references from religious scriptures or Islamic history that explicitly exhibits the status of women e.g. Aisha, the wife of prophet, is one of the ultimate examples of Muslim woman whose life characterizes the position and rights of women in a society. Once she fought a war against the enemy (called battle of camel) and also commanded the army as a leader. Even though it is believed that during the prophet's time she represented herself as a strong advisor of the prophet in war negotiation and military expeditions. Jawed Anwar an Islamic scholar in his article states that: Hazrat Aisha is known for "her expertise in the Koran, shares of inheritance, lawful and unlawful matters, poetry, Arabic literature, Arab history, genealogy and general women".

Nevertheless female education is concerned in Islam there is a great history regarding women's education. There are multiple instances of early Muslim Women who have strongly advocated and took interest in women education. Among them Hazrat Aisha is known as the first woman who opened a madrasa for the education of girls and endorsed the education of law and the teachings of Islam for women. Zammurd, the sister of Slahuddin Ayyubi (1193) and Uzra, his niece established madrasa for women and spread the women education in their time. The first university named 'The University of Qarawiyyan' in Morocco was founded by the

great Muslim woman scholar Fatima Bint Muhammad al-Fihri. It is regarded much older than Oxford University. In the context of Indian society Razia Begum Sultan, the first Muslim women ruler in India, established two madrasas in New Delhi.

Furthermore there are numerous instances in Koran and Hadith that talks about women's status in different parts of life. In a verse of Quran Almighty God reprimanded those male who treated badly and subjugated the women:

Believers, it is not lawful for you to inherit women against their will, nor should you detain them wrongfully, so that you may take away part of what you have given them, unless they are guilty of something clearly outrageous. Live with them in accordance with what is fair and kind; If you dislike them, it may be that you dislike something which God might make a source of abundant good."(Koran 4:19, 58).

Notwithstanding when we bring into notice the Prophet Mohammed's teaching there are multiple example that hails women's position in a society. He tells that the best people in society are those who are good towards their women in house and also states that the man must always praise the good deeds of his wife and love her while the bad one should ignore. In the context of education he speaks that it is the duty of every women and men to seek knowledge. All above these references signify the fact that Islam never forbids women for education, leadership or in any sphere of life. Islam is one of the best religions in the world that gives men and women equal rights in every sphere with certain conditions. These are the western countries, extremists and also media that represent the negative image of Islam and try to defame it.

The novel also speaks about the scenario of Afghanistan under the rule of Mujahidin and Taliban. Among them Taliban is recognized as one of the staunch radical groups. It is a self-proclaimed Islamic assembly that has strong influence over Afghanistan. The history of Taliban is not new in historical context. They have emerged profoundly after Soviet Union (USSR) defeat in Afghanistan and still they are active in major tribal parts of the country and fighting against American army. Their ultimate objective is to make Afghanistan an Islamist country under Islamic Sharia law. Their ways of executing the society have vividly sketched by writer and he also criticizes their hardcore laws and treatment of women and children. Hussein admits in an interview that Taliban regime extensively destroys the cultural heritage of country and also its domination broadly deteriorates the society. He says:

The Taliban's acts of cultural vandalism—the most infamous being the destruction of the giant Bamiyan Buddhas—had a devastating effect on Afghan culture and the artistic scene. The Taliban burned countless films, VCRs, music tapes, books, and paintings. They jailed filmmakers, musicians, painters, and sculptors.

Meanwhile the women's positions under the rule of radical group were very pathetic and unbearable. They were deprived of everything and prohibited from getting education, walking freely outside the house. Without male company they can't move in an open-air, otherwise they would be punished. These instances appeared in the novel when Laila goes to meet Aziza in the orphan house without her husband. She was savagely beaten by Antenna and sticks by the groups.

Sometimes she was given a tongue lashing or a single kick to the rear, a shove in the back. Other times, she met with assortments of wooden clubs, free tree branches, short whips, slaps, and often fists. (Hussein313).

In such a pathetic regime of Taliban women were stopped from wearing jewelry and charming clothes. Meanwhile they could not paint the nails if they do their finger would be cut down. Women can't laugh in public places. They have been stopped from working and also if a woman is found accused of adultery she is beaten brutally until the last breath. The Taliban imposes hardcore restrictions on men as well. They were asked to follow five times prayers and men without beard were punished. Their sources of entertainment were banned such as singing, dancing, playing cards and others. Paintings, cinema and audio and video cassette were burned by that radical groups. Both men and women were deprived of writings books and going to schools and colleges. All books except Koran were burned and destroyed. The writer says: "The poem of Khalili, Pajwak, Ansari, Haji Dehqan, Ashraqi, Beytaab, Hafez, Jami, Nizami, Rumi, Khayyam, Beydel, and more went up in smoke." (Hussein273). Such extremist group proves havoc for the Afghan people.

The consequence of the Taliban rule was more drastic. Poverty, unemployment, hunger emerged at a broad scale and people started dying. An orphan child, divorcee women were mostly suffered in these unbearable situations. These orphan or divorcee women had lost their parents and male relatives in either war or in attacks. They don't have any option to earn bread for their living and the consequence is that thousands of children and women have died during the radical regime. In spite of that those who were caught in the act of murder, adultery, stealing they were punished very strongly. Either they were hanged or punished by stone death. Such evil deeds and punishment by these extremists were unprecedented and horrified. As far as religion is concerned, I believe, there is no religion in the world that will permit committing such heinous actions. In my opinion Taliban only uses Islam as a shroud for their existence of power that cause destruction of society and thousands of lives are lost.

Khalid Hussein is one of the few writers who described the Afghanistan society meticulously. In this novel he has depicted the sufferings and traumatic conditions of Afghan women and also examines extremism, ongoing conflicts, cultural vandalism and suppression and subjugation in such a way that easily convince the readers and forces to think them. By using character of Hakim and Maulana Faziullah he endeavors to signify the fact that it is not religion but the certain cruel hearted people or hypocrites who use religion to shroud themselves for their own benefits.

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