



**LIVING ON THE EDGE: WOMEN IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S  
*A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS***

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Article Info:

Article Received:24/10/2014

Revised on: 02/11/2014

Accepted on: 06/11/2014

**ABSTRACT**

The persistent conditions of conflict and violence in Afghanistan, continuing for almost fifty years now, has caused huge destruction in terms of human and material losses. It has also led to a radical transformation in its socio-cultural fabric almost irreversibly. Because of their vulnerable position in its society, the Afghan women have endured a tough existence as they came to grips with a double subjugation in the form of patriarchal authority and the oppression emanating from the persistent conditions of the conflict. However, there is often a tendency to cast Afghanistan and its people in essentialist terms both in academic and non-academic endeavours. This paper studies the vital subject of Afghan women's experience as narrated in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. In the light of this novel, this paper argues how during a critical phase in Afghanistan's history, the conditions of violence and conflict magnified the oppression on its women. By contextualising the Afghan women's experience in a specific set of historical, political and social factors, this would hopefully offer an alternative view of the condition of Afghan women rather than the usual stereotyped descriptions.

Keywords: *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Afghanistan, Khaled Hosseini, Patriarchy, Oppression, Women.

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The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini is a significant narrative which brings to fore the predicament of Afghan women who have lived under the debilitating shadows of patriarchal oppression and war. This paper attempts to argue, in the light of Hosseini's novel, how the patriarchy and persistent conditions of conflict have multiplied the oppression on women in Afghanistan. However, in the beginning of this paper, one needs to make it clear that the aim of this paper is not to homogenize Afghanistan or its women by any means. It is a fallacy which has become a recurrence when it comes to any academic or non-academic discussion about Afghanistan. Afghan women are not a homogenous category in any way. There are various intersections like the class, ethnicity, regional belonging, or historical situation which the Afghan men and women tread like their counterparts in any other part of the world. This paper focuses on how the unique historical circumstances, in the form of conflicts and wars that Afghanistan has now been coping with for almost a half of century, have brought agonizing experiences for its women.

The women in the novel genuinely appear as suffering beings. The prolonged conditions of the conflict in Afghanistan have taken heavy toll on human life and brought enormous suffering and devastation for the country. In any conflict children and women, in any case, are always the worst sufferers because of their vulnerable positions in the society. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, "Women have never been secure within (or without) the nation state—they are always disproportionately affected by war, forced migration, famine, and other forms of social, political, and economic turmoil" (514). In a society like Afghanistan where, in some instances, patriarchal customs come into view as hard and as rigid as its landscape, one is only left to wonder about the conditions of women when these customs are further entrenched by a prolonged conflict. It appears from the narrative of Hosseini's novel that women in Afghanistan have been victims both of patriarchy and the brutal situation of conflict that has now ravaged Afghanistan for the duration of almost a half of century. In the novel, this is reflected in the words of Babi who despondently observes, "Women have always had it hard in this country" (133).

Patriarchy has been defined as a term that "refers to those systems—Political, material and imaginative—which invest power in men and marginalize women. It manifests itself in both concrete ways (such as disqualifying women a vote) and at the level of imagination" (McLeod 173). The patriarchal society enforces 'the ideal womanhood' concept on women which has to be attained in any condition or circumstance. As reflected in the novel, in the Afghan society, it is the women who have to cultivate these ideals laid down by the patriarchy. The patriarchal society sees to it that women become the perfect accomplishments of these ideals. This concept becomes a major instrument of oppression on women. About the centrality of female sexuality and its moral regulation as an essential trait of South Asian societies, Jayawerdena and de-Alwis point out:

Ironically, the common denominator that cuts across all communities, and often classes as well in South Asia, remains notions of female modesty. The sexual and moral codes imposed on women, codified and disseminated through hegemonic patriarchal institutions and instruments such as the state, law, religious tenets and their interpreters, the schools, the family, etc. share many similarities, despite their being categorized as Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and so on. (Jayawerdena and de-Alwis 17)

In the name of honour and ideal womanhood, it appears that the sexual predation and the brutalization of women are widespread in the Afghan society. As Cynthia Cockburn examines, "The power imbalance of gender relations in most (if not all) societies generates cultures of masculinity prone to violence. These gender relations are like a linking thread, a kind of fuse, along which violence runs" (44). In the novel, Mariam cannot withstand her defiance. She has to bow down before the rigid customs of her society as she is reluctantly dragged into marrying with Rasheed. At the *nikka* (Islamic occasion of wedding) ceremony, the Mullah, without acknowledging Mariam's consent, remarks, "All that remains now is the signing of the contract" (53). Rasheed is apprehensive about the undercurrent sexual predation in the society which ironically prescribes moral codes for its women. Notwithstanding the seemingly 'sophisticated' culture of Kabul, of which he often brags about, he tells Mariam in strict terms to wear burqa and avoid strangers, even their family friends and guests. Mariam is not used to wearing burqa and finds it very suffocating. But she has to yield in before Rasheed's authority who tells her, "You 'll get used to it" (71). Later on, he gives similar dictates to his second wife Laila. In giving strict dictates to his wives, Rasheed falsely pretends of protecting their "honour" and "integrity" while indulging in limitless cruelty of abusing and beating them regularly. After Mariam rightfully protests against his second marriage, Rasheed openly boasts of the practice of polygamy prevalent in the society when he tells her, "Don't be so dramatic. It's a common thing and you know it. I have friends who have two, three, four wives." (208). While he is averse to the idea of his wife meeting strangers, Rasheed's hypocrisy is revealed when Mariam finds nude magazines lying hidden in his closet. At this, Mariam wonders about the existing double standards prevalent in the society. It is only the women who commit wrong; men simply

cannot be wrong in this society. She learns it from her own experience as well as from her mother's life. After Jalil's illicit relationship with Nana which results in the birth of Mariam, Jalil blames Nana and disowns her because his honour in the society would be harmed. On this, 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 woman in this world....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. (7)

There is also the case of Nagma whom Mariam meets in the Taliban prison. She was lured into eloping by a Mullah's son, but after the Taliban arrest them and put them to trial, the man testifies against Nagma blaming her for seduction. Leaving aside all the norms of justice, the Taliban take his account to be true and set him free while sending Nagma to prison for five years. All this serves to reinforce the dubious and hollow nature of codes of honour formulated by the male society in Afghanistan for its women.

In the dominant patriarchies, women also seem to be internalizing the essentialist patriarchal customs which traps them further in the web of marginalisation. Reflecting on this, Kavita Punjabi argues, "The social demands of the women, the social construction of what a feminine identity should be, make women vulnerable to internalizing guilt, whereas the former, the feminist identity that addresses the needs of women, makes it possible for them to deal with both the superimposed and the internalized guilt" (Aman 2001). In the novel, women appear to share their part in the male hegemony. They internalise and essentialise views of the differences in human beings as embedded in the patriarchy dominated culture. Nana's various utterances seem to underlie this essentialist view. She tells Mariam, "It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have. Do you understand?" (18). Mariam herself reflects grimly, "As a reminder of how women like us suffer, how quietly we endure all that falls upon us" (90). In the beginning of the novel, Mariam expresses great urge for going to school. She informs his friend and mentor, the elderly Mullah Faizullah, who gives his consent. But her mother Nana sees no purpose of education. She rebukes Mariam for even thinking about education:

What is there to learn?... What's the sense schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon. And you'll learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school. Look at me... only one skill. And it's this: *tahamul*. Endure. (18)

When Mariam refuses to marry the forty years old Rasheed by saying "I don't want this. Don't make me this", Jalil's wives, in ironical terms, tell her to act rationally by accepting the marriage: "Now, be reasonable, Mariam. You can't spend the rest of your life here. Don't you want a family of your own? You have to move on"(47). This seems reflective of the set space and roles assigned to women in the patriarchal order.

The prolonged era of conflict and violence in Afghanistan seems to have aggravated the gender inequality and women's subordination because the conflict is rooted in structures which are exclusively defined by males. As Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman argue, "gender relations and identities are first deployed in sites of militarized conflict to incite, exacerbate, and fuel violence" (4). Since gender is central to the construction of national, ethnic and religious identities, women's behaviour is perceived as a "cultural marker" of "their" communities (ibid.). After the fall of Communists in Afghanistan, the Jihadi warlords, and later, the Taliban, articulated identities which were highly masculinized in which women suffered immense oppression. Taliban, in particular, patronized patriarchal practice as a marker of national culture. They imposed harsh norms of female propriety. As a result, acts of violence were committed against women who were seen as not complying with this norm of female modesty. Since the Taliban carried out these activities at the official level, an environment was fomented in which violence on women spread across the whole society. During the

long phases of violence and lawlessness in Afghanistan, when it was grappling with the violent struggle against the Soviets, followed by a civil war among the different Jihadi and Ethnic warlords, and lastly, the surge of Taliban, there was a sharp increase in the acts of violence in which women were subjected to rapes, kidnappings, and other acts of physical assault. Elaborating on the pathetic situations of Afghan women during this violent period in Afghanistan's history, in his postscript to the novel, Khaled Hosseini himself recalls, "Women were abducted and sold as slaves, forced into marriage to militia commanders, forced into prostitution, and raped, a crime particularly heinous and unforgivable that was used to intimidate families who were opposed to one faction or another" (411). Scholars like Rita Manchanda and Anuradha Chenoy argue about conflict zones offering a facilitating environment for gender violence of all sorts. Manchanda points out, "Cultural violence against women gets magnified as conflict promotes macho values which legitimize misogyny because of the demobilization of male combatants in large numbers and also, men try to compensate for their loss of power by exercising greater control over women" (18). During the intense battles in Kabul which forces the closure of all businesses in the city, Rasheed is rendered jobless forcing him to stay passive at home. His frustration grows more and more, and it bears in his ever increasing physical assaults on Mariam and Laila. The two women are just scared by his extended presence at home.

The violent Taliban regime misinterpreted religious dictums to further strengthen the oppressive practices on women. Consequently, women in Afghanistan suffered a lot during the Taliban rule. As described in the novel, the Taliban frequently carry out executions, flogging and stoning of women who are accused of defying their strict orders. As we see in the novel, one such victim is Mariam herself. Laila is also beaten many a time for venturing out without a male companion. During Mariam's trial, a young Taliban judge tells her: "I wonder God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think we can. .. This is why we require only one male witness but two female ones" (355). In almost sarcastic terms, the Taliban claim that they are doing all this for the sake of God. They are simply unfazed about the inhuman treatment they mete out to the women of Afghanistan. However, Taliban are not the only ones to be blamed for their oppression on women. In some instances, it was a pre-existing feature of the Afghan society well before the takeover of Taliban. In the postscript to the novel, Hosseini writes, "Life was a struggle for some women in Afghanistan well before the Taliban. But it became all but unbearable with the outbreak of factional war, anarchy and extremism. In many ways, that's when disaster really struck" (410).

In conflict zones, it has been often found that violence on the bodies of women serves as a tool of political repression. In this context, Binalakshmi Neprom examines, "Rape, or other types of physical assault in conflict or under a repressive regime, is neither incidental nor private; it routinely serves a strategic function and acts as a tool for achieving specific military or political objectives" (8). Such acts of physical coercion are motivated by an idea of keeping a woman in complete confinement and submission. For instance, it is symbolised in the way Rasheed callously treats Mariam and Laila at home while the Taliban do the same to them outside it. Rasheed welcomes Taliban and is in all praise for their strict codes because his own patriarchal authority gets reinforced through their rigid dictums. To authenticate his own patriarchal hegemony, he defends Taliban's strict codes and laws for women, and sees nothing wrong in them. What one sees here is what Bunster-Burrotto terms a "cruel double disorientation" in which the conflict and the patriarchy complement each other to exacerbate the oppression on women (Punjabi 2001).

In the light of the analysis of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, one may conclude that the prolonged conditions of conflict in Afghanistan have brought adverse impacts on its women by exacerbating the patriarchal oppression on them. As a result, they had to undergo unbounded pain and suffering which, in Hosseini's own words, "has been matched by very few groups in recent world history" (412). This pain and suffering was cast in their voicelessness. Through his narrative, Hosseini endeavours to provide voice to Afghan women by bringing their suffering to fore.

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