

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

FEMINISTIC STUDIES IN THE NOVEL *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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ABSTRACT

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* describes the plight of the Afghan women both under the patriarchal social systems of the Afghan society and the brutal forces of political parties. Hosseini actually gives a message through this novel by showing the power of unity through the main characters, Mariam and Laila. With these two characters he has raised the issue of feminism and gender equity. The novel stresses over the rights of women who are not given access to education and freedom of choice. Male dominance is the major concern that relates this novel to feministic aspect.

**Key words:** Feminism, Male dominance, Strong bond, Love, Patriarchal resistance

Feminism became an organized movement in 19th century as people came to believe that women were treated unfairly. The feminist movement was rooted in the progressive movement and especially in the reform movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the major roots of feminist criticism began to grow. During this time, women gained the right to vote and became prominent activists in the social issues of the day, such as healthcare, education, politics, and literature. Cambridge dictionary defines 'Feminism' as the belief women should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or set of activities intended to achieve this state.

Feminists demand rights for women and try to improve their way of life. Those who have fought for gender equality and women's rights are considered as Feminists. They want to see women in all fields of life without any subjugation from male side. Writers from ages tried to highlight the elements of oppression being done upon women. Not only women writers, but some of the greatest male writers advocate and support women's rights and write in the form of women's experience. They

write from a female point of view. One of the authors writing the novel from a women's experience is one of the popular author of the contemporary age is khaled Hosseini. He has written a remarkable piece of fiction "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" from women's point of view and seeks justice for women. Through this novel Hosseini tries to depict the real picture of Afghanistan and wants to educate the people about his Homeland which is a forgotten land in the eyes of outsiders. Americans know about Afghanistan only from the eyes of media in which Taliban news is blaring since 1990. Hosseini wants his readers to know about Afghanistan that was productive and flourishing.

Woman in Afghanistan has gone through severe forms of male aggression. There is a long history over the subjugation of Afghan woman. Several writers have tried to highlight the violence against women in their writings. Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is one of them. This novel was written after Hosseini travelled back to his native country Afghanistan to examine for himself the nation's situation in the aftermath of the decades of turmoil. Hosseini has analyzed the

situation of women in Afghanistan within the historical context. He has written the plight of the Afghan women along with socio political scenario of Afghanistan. Hosseini in this novel has turned as a feminist, in which he shows men's wicked behavior towards women including such reprehensible activities like domestic violence, rape, forced marriages, male dominance, mental torture, abusive language and sexual harassment. Patriarchal culture considers women as an object only. Violence against women is a key factor in the subordination of women by men. It not only occurs physically but also mentally and sexually. Such system provides woman a place only for a sex purpose. Like a man who is always charmed by woman's femininity.

'The Second Sex' One of the important obstacles to a woman's freedom is not her biology or the political or legal constraints placed upon her, or even her economic situation; rather it is the whole process by which femininity is manufactured in the society. In her celebrated phrase "One is not born but rather becomes it woman. (Beauvoir, p-125)

Besides male oppression, the political conditions in Afghanistan are also unfavorable towards women. Samitra says about the types of oppression that the Afghan victims face, "Victims of not simply double colonization but triple oppression that is of patriarchy, militarization and Islamic fundamentalism." (Choudhury P-214)

Writers have done much work in raising the issues concerning about women's inferiority. Through their works they have tried to develop a perception in improving the conditions of women throughout the ages. Hosseini also penned this novel for the same purpose. He advocates women's rights. He has showed through his characters that without equal participation of women there are least chances of progress. Women can be seen as an integral part in the rebuilding of the Afghan nation through this novel. Through his characters he showed how they struggle against all odds in order to lead their nation to the path of success. As the novel opens we become acquainted about the miserable conditions of women in Afghanistan. Nana, the first woman character becomes the object

of male dominance. Nana was working in the house of Jalil as a housekeeper. During the passage of time she got pregnant of Jalil's child. Jalil's wives were outraged and ordered him to through her out of the house. Jalil becomes henpecked husband casts Nana out of his home on the insistence of his wives. Nana's only solace was her father now but her own father disowned her. Jalil didn't have the courage either to stand up to his family and nor accepting the responsibility of making her pregnant. Instead, he blamed Nana that she had forced herself on him and that it was her fault. Nana says,

This is what it means to be a woman in this world... Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam." (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, P-7)

The patriarchal system of Afghanistan is such as male are important than woman. It seems as Afghan government has given them licence to do whatever satisfy their desires. We see only the woman characters suffer as such there is no punishment in the law of Afghan government for the evil doers 'males.' Jalil satisfies his animal desire only to get bed with Nana when it comes into the notice of Jalil that Nana has got pregnant of his child. In maintaining his honor, he feels shame to keep Nana inside his home without knowing that it's his own creation.

Nana, after giving birth to Mariam an illegitimate child, a Harami. The tag remained attached with her name throughout her life, for no fault of her and her mother is the one, who emphasized this idea the most because she herself has paid the full price for having a child out of wedlock. This is what means to be a woman in this society. Only woman suffers and the ugly tag sticks to them only. It appears as male's sins are washed off after committing. They have no need to hide, they can roam everywhere wherever they like.

After Nana's death Mariam too suffered the same way. She was forced to marry without her willingness. Mariam's first year of life with Rashid passed with difficulties and rewards. Mariam missed the days with Nana and Mullah Faizullah and the winter afternoons reading with him. When Mariam began to cry and Rasheed passed his handkerchief

to her and began to talk to her at length. He made it clear that he does not like crying women. Mariam's behavior irritated Rashid. His day today behavior turns crueler than Jalil. Rashid's first demand is that he wants to impose on Mariam that she ought to wear a Burqa.

Mariam began to do the chores and on the third day of Eid, when Rasheed went to visit some friends, Mariam began to clean up the house including Rasheed's room. She opened the top drawer of his dresser and saw a gun lying there that shocked her, but she believed that it must be there for protection purpose only. Beneath the gun were several magazines with pornographic pictures of many beautiful women wearing nothing all naked. She quickly put them back but was surprised about his talks of honour and propriety, his disapproval of the female customers. She was shocked that a man like Rasheed, who insisted that 'A woman's face, is her husband's business only and that all women should cover, had kept such demeaning pictures.

"Surely the women on these pages had husbands, some of them must. At the least, they had brothers. If so, why did Rasheed insist that she cover when he thought nothing of looking at the private areas of other men's wives and sisters?" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* p-82)

Mariam still continues to believe on Rashid because there was no one to look after her. During the first year she experiences her first sex with Rashid. Mariam feels so much happiness when she realises that she is pregnant, Rashid also becomes happy. He expects and also determines to have a boy. He thinks that the baby would be a boy and he even had a name for him, Zalmai. Rasheed was sure it's a boy, but if it happened to be a girl, Mariam has to choose the name. It displays Rashid's thinking of male superiority over female. It shows that women in Afghanistan are respected only if they give birth to males.

Since the day at the bathhouse, there had been six more cycles of hopes raised then dashed. Each trip to the doctor was more crushing to Mariam than the last. Rasheed then became even more remote and resentful. Once she even put 'make up' for him, but he winced with distaste with

this she rushed to the bathroom and washed it off, tears of shame started mixing with soapy water, rouge and mascara. She dreaded the sound of him coming home in the evening. Her heart pounds and she wondered what excuse he will use that night to pounce on her. However, nothing she does was enough - she cannot give him his son back, she has failed him seven times, and now she is nothing but a burden to him. Rashid started to find a way how to mistreat her. One evening Rashid took the rice Mariam has made, chewed once and angrily spits it out. He said that she was lying that she cooked food, he shook the rice angrily from his fingers and pushed the plate away and stormed out of the house. She was shaking and it's all she can do when Rasheed leaves the house, she begins to pick up the grains of rice that he spat. Soon, he returned with a handful of pebbles and forced her mouth open and stuffs them in. He forced her to chew the pebbles and through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes. In her fear, she did so, breaking the molars in the back of her mouth. He tells her, "Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food and nothing else." (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* p-103). Mariam's pebble-eating scene reveals the paramount atrocity inflicted upon women.

Laila is the other female protagonist in the novel who stays in the same neighborhood as Mariam. She is much younger to Mariam. She is the daughter of Hakim and Fariba. In the same novel, how circumstances put Laila into a perplexed situation. She was aware of her pregnancy out of wedlock by Tariq, she decides to take an extreme step to give name to her child and get married with Mariam's husband, Rasheed, who had dug her out from the rubble. Rashid turns towards Mariam to satisfy his animal desires. He does not feel pity on her but pretends to make her feel that he is her well wisher. Rashid tries to make a bundle of lies like to talk about politics and books in order to impress her and excite her for marriage. It is demeaning to treat a woman like that. Rashid a men folk wanted to treat her wounds only because he was attracted towards her youth. It is an inhuman trait in Rashid.

Women like Laila is used by Rashid, otherwise there is no sign of human love in Rashid. Mariam pleaded Rashid to let the girl leave the house. Rashid told her men are allowed to marry to whom they are attracted to or what make them pleased.

Rashid the evil doer who was expecting a boy from Laila now wishes the same from Mariam. When Laila gave birth to a girl baby whom Rashid was not expecting from her, he was dejected and said, "Sometimes, I swear, sometimes I want to put that thing in a box and let her float down Kabul River. Like baby Moses." (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* p-231)

Laila names her daughter Aziza, which means 'the Cherished One'. Rasheed never called his daughter by the name but always *the baby*, or, when angry called her, that thing. Laila begged Rasheed to buy Aziza a girl clothes but Rasheed refused and saying that the boy's clothes he purchased during Mariam's pregnancy are good enough. Laila was obsessed with motherhood and find everything the baby does to be astounding and wonderful. Mariam reluctantly admired Laila's devotion to her daughter. The tiniest changes in the baby enchanted her and everything the baby did was declared spectacular. Laila was worried about the baby's illness, every minor coughing was suspected as pneumonia and every rash was either chicken pox or measles. Rasheed asked Laila not to get too attached because in Afghanistan one out of every four children die before the age of five. Hosseini used this comment to allude to the high mortality rate of young Afghan children which implies the tragic health conditions in Afghanistan. That night Rasheed tried to have sex with Laila before the six weeks after-birth during which the doctor had ordered Laila to abstain sex. Rasheed was furious when Laila refused to have sex with him and he rushed into Mariam's room and blamed her for Laila's withholding sex. When Rashid proceeded to beat Mariam, Laila comes to her help. It shows Laila's courageous step in slowing down Rashid's progress towards Mariam. Rashid starts to yell and beating her, Laila tries to rescue her against the sinister Rashid. Laila's courageous way to stop beating Mariam by Rashid like,

Stop it, bas!" the girl said. "Rasheed, you can't do this."

"Go back to the room."

Mariam backpedaled again.

"No! Don't do this!" "Now!"

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, but she could do no more than dangle from it. She did succeed in slowing Rashid's progress toward Mariam. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* p-216)

After this incident, Mariam realized that Laila tried to save her from Rashid's beating. Mariam's hate towards Laila thus changed into friendship. They became friends to each other.

Laila's character refuses the oppression, violence and also discrimination against woman and struggles against the oppression. Whenever they tried to run away they were caught. Laila was told by the police officer, Rehman that the running is a crime for a woman and that the escape she attempts was common among Afghan women. Laila criticizes the right to inequality between man and woman and what the police officer said in discouraging them,

As a matter of policy, we don't interfere the private family matter, hamshira." Officer said. "Off course you don't, when it is a benefit of man, isn't this a private family matter, as you say? Isn't it? (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* p-238)

After many years of war, when the Taliban came into power in 1996, people in Afghanistan felt a sigh of relief. People were greeting the Taliban on their success. But the next day the bearded Taliban moved through the streets of Kabul in red trucks mounted with loud speakers making blazed announcement of the new laws. Some message was played from mosques on the radio now called 'voice of sharia' and fliers were distributed as well. Mariam finds one of the fliers which listed strict rules regarding clothing and behavior with particularly strict laws for women that include all citizens to pray five times 'namaz'. For the men this included growing beards and wearing turbans. Singing, dancing, kite fighting, reading books, movies and painting were all forbidden. Women were forbidden

from leaving their house unaccompanied, showing their faces and speaking unless spoken to first. The punishment for women, who laugh in public or neglect a burqa, was beaten by the Taliban. Cosmetics, jewelry, wearing charming clothes were all forbidden. All schools for girls were immediately shut down and women were forbidden from working. Adulterers are to be stoned to death. With the emergence of Taliban, restrict laws were made for men and particularly for women. Women mostly became the target of Taliban. They imposed stern laws against women and were asked to wear burqa and not to go alone outside without the company of husband or any other relative. Every untoward incident that happened in Afghanistan mostly women suffered. Women were forbidden from leaving their houses unaccompanied, showing their faces and speaking first unless spoken first. Laila believes and realizes that these stern rules imposed by Taliban can only escalate the oppression and violence mostly for women. Laila was burning inside and denounced Taliban's policy against women and described the Kabul to Mariam and Rashid before Taliban's reign.

They cannot make half of population stay home and do nothing, "Laila said. "Why not?" Rasheed said. For once. Mariam agreed with him. "This is not some villages. This is Kabul. Women here used to practice law and medicine; they held office in the government. (A *Thousand Splendid Suns* p-249)

Laila's character depicts a rebellious nature and doesn't want to acknowledge the oppression and violence. Her character infuses hope and strength in Afghan women who can live better lives and work like a men.

Khaled Hosseini shows through the bond of characters how they fight bravely against oppression. He tries to give power to women to fight against their rights. All the characters in the novel try to retain hope despite dealing with the political and personal oppression. Every character yearns for peace. Like Mariam, who wanted to go to school like Jalil's other daughters. Hakim too wanted her daughter Laila to be educated. He wanted to see Laila educated. He had himself remained high school

teacher before the communists fired him. Her education was the most important thing in his life. He believed that progress of society is possible only if its women are educated. He said, "Society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance." (A *Thousand Splendid Suns* p-114) Hosseini through the character of Hakim lays emphasis on the education of women. He wants to eradicate the concept of inequality between men and women on the basis of sex. He gives equal importance to both sexes on the basis of education. Laila by the passage of time develops a good relationship with Mariam. They developed a strong bond to fight against the evil designs of Rashid. Mariam shared every account of her life with Laila. She told her about the husband, her forced marriage with Rashid, the trip to Kabul, her pregnancies and endless cycles of hope and disappointment with sudden change of Rashid's nature. They both became helpmates to each other and they tried to run away second time to get rid from day to day lashings of Rashid but alas! they didn't get success in their mission. Unfortunately they were caught again by the police and sent back to Rashid. He brutally punished them in taking such extreme step. But Laila with her strong reaction protested against this decision and Rashid slapped her across the face that made a smashing sound. Laila on the other hand punched him back and this made him stumble two steps backward. This reaction made Rashid to leave the room. This step evoked in Laila a great strength to struggle against man's oppression.

Suddenly, it seemed to Laila that the collective hardships of their lives-hers, Aziza's, Mariam's-simply dropped away, vaporized like Zalmai's palms from the TV screen. It seemed worthwhile, if absurdly so; to have endured all they'd endured for this one crowning moment, for this act of defiance that would end the suffering of all indignities. (A *Thousand Splendid Suns* p-292)

It educates us that women are the most tolerated being; they are always suppressed without even a fault. But when they are extra used and suppressed they too have the ability and voice to speak up and defend themselves. Laila too does the same to

Rashid. His dog's days begin to start after the fire incident. Rashid sold everything to make their ends meet. Due to his unemployment he was getting worse and bad tempered. He expressed his anger on them and in order to get relief from frustration he beats Laila. But due to their strong bond Mariam comes to defend and saves her from the cruel hands of Rashid. Keeping in view Rashid's worst conditions, they decided to send Aziza to orphanage, as it hurted them both, but there was no any other alternative than it.

One day he refused to go at all, so Laila attempted to walk alone without taking care of the restrictions imposed by Taliban. Rashid warned her about the consequences of leaving alone because she cannot go beyond the Taliban. But due to her motherly side she didn't pay heed to Rashid's words. She was willing to face any worst consequence but didn't give up her visit. Laila strives hard against the patriarchal culture in Afghanistan and is ready to meet any eventuality. Laila's character shows that Afghan women are brave,

Yet despite the dominant patriarchal culture in Afghanistan and therefore more restricted, oppressed conditions for women, some academic studies contend that Afghan women are not necessarily voiceless and powerless. These scholars argue that Afghan women have been capable to fight to survive and to take part in social participation to reclaim their rights and further their enhancement. (Kazemiyan, p-19)

In the changing scene of the novel, Tariq's appearance played both havoc and joy into Laila's life. When Tariq met Laila, Zalmai narrated the encounter between Tariq and Laila. Rashid understood and looked at Laila and Mariam feeling trouble inside. It was the time of beating. Rashid whipped Laila with belt, Mariam who had formed a secret bond with Laila; she came forward to stop him from hurting against their husband.

The principal thing that echoes throughout this novel is the bond of love between the two women that becomes their strength to endure and retaliate against the ruthless

patriarchal tradition. (Nanada and Shokeen p-12)

Rashid swung his belt again and again on Laila and the blood started oozing out of Laila's temple. Laila tried to fight back but couldn't and this time it is Maraim who yelled at Rashid trying to block his blows. Their bond gives them strength to face their sinister husband. Mariam goes on to murder her husband in order to protect Laila. "The first time she was deciding the course of her own life." (A *Thousand Splendid Suns* p-341) Mariam makes a sublime sacrifice for the woman like Laila and her children, and her husband Tariq, "Her final act is tragic, it is also heroic and a choice that she makes." (Stuhr, p-61)

After killing Rashid, Mariam was put into a 'Walayat prison' for women in 'Shar-e Nau' near 'Chicken Street', guarded by the Taliban. In the dark, repugnant Walayat prison, Mariam shared a cell with five other women and four children. Mariam's cellmates treated her like a celebrity because they were all incarcerated for non violent crimes of "running away from home" and Mariam had committed a violent crime by killing her husband. Women offered her blankets and food and shared what little they had. As a result, Mariam gained some notoriety among them, became a kind of celebrity. The women eyed her with a reverent, almost awestruck expression. It could be said that all the women respected her because she is a winner against patriarchy. One particular woman, Naghma takes a special liking to Mariam and told her the story of her elopement with the son of a local mullah. When they were caught, mullah's son repented and was freed while she was sentenced to five years imprisonment for seducing him. The son of mullah blamed and narrated the same cock and bull story like Jalil in order to save himself. "He said that Naghma had seduced him with her feminine charms. She had cast a spell on him, he said." (A *Thousand Splendid Suns*, p-354)

In the final part of the novel the murder of Rashid not only liberates Laila from a cursed bondage of Rashid but even compels her to begin a life once again in a new country. Laila runs away on the insistence of Mariam after the killing of Rashid and is now living comfortably at Muree in Pakistan

with her children. But when she hears the rehabilitation work in Afghanistan; schools being built in Kabul, roads repaved, women returning to work, she feels that her life in Pakistan is 'wasteful. Laila knows that Afghanistan needs her. This is the individual's courage and conviction that Hosseini upholds through Laila's character. On her arrival to Afghanistan after several years, she goes to Mariam's grave, her birthplace to pay homage. She even discovers that she is once again pregnant. Laila decides to name her third child on the name of Mariam.

Khaled Hosseini shows through his characters their strength to endure harsh conditions by their bond to struggle against the man who has snatched away their rights. He tried to infuse strength into the women characters to fight against male oppression. Hosseini laid emphasis on women education in this novel through the characters of Laila, Mariam and Aziza. He believes that women education could only lead the country to the path of success and save it from further destruction lead by war, terrorism and violence. Laila being the daughter of an intellectual father who stresses on women's education and comments on the importance of women attending universities. His words to Laila foreshadow her later role in the story. He says,

I know you are still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now...marriage can wait, education cannot. You are a very bright girl, truly you are. You can be anything you want Laila. I know this about you and I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, even more. Because a society has no chance of success if it's women are uneducated. Laila. No chance. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, p-103)

Aziza on the other hand is educated by both by Mariam and Laila. Mariam taught her the Quran and 'four raqats' of morning prayers. They were determined to educate Aziza in the Koran. Zaman, the director of the orphanage also played an important role in the education of children particularly of Aziza. When Aziza was placed in the orphanage, it was Zaman who taught them secretly.

Zaman becomes the second male character after Hakim who puts emphasis on education. He taught these orphanage children despite the ban being imposed by Taliban on education.

At the end of novel Zalmai and Aziza are sent to school together. We got a universal message in this novel regarding the education of women. There must be no discrimination on the basis of gender if we really want our nation to progress, prosper and develop.

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