



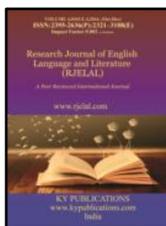
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PANGS OF OPPRESSION: A STUDY OF WOMEN IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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ABSTRACT

The popular saying of Afghanistan "A woman is best either in the house or in the grave" conveys the plight of Afghan women. As a subservient being she should stay at home, and bear children for the continuation of their husband's lineage. If the woman breaks the norms of the game, her life is worth little – her husband is entitled to kill her. The paper presents the status of Afghan women as hapless victims of patriarchy, political changes, war, terrorism and natural calamities with reference to Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007).

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a powerful novel which brings to the fore the most harrowing experiences of women in Afghanistan. In order to focus upon the precarious existence of Afghan women, the author has introduced two female protagonists. The novelist depicts how women are ill-treated, abused and tortured in the Afghan society. The paper seeks to analyse Hosseini's presentation of the subjugation of women in Afghanistan.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Nana is suffering from her husband Jalil's rejection of her as his wife. She loses her freedom in society and family, and is pinched psychologically at every moment. Though Jalil is not doing any physical and verbal assault on her, whatever he does, has deeper scares on her soul. Nana tells Mariam that Jalil has no *dil* to stand before his folks for the sake of Nana's respect. Instead of saving her honour, Jalil expels her out of his house and forces her to live alone in the *kolba*. Her psychological pain can also be viewed through her words when she abuses Mariam by saying 'harami' again and again. After this bitter experience, Nana teaches 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" (TSS 7).

Physical violence against women is a common one which includes slapping pinching, biting, kicking, fisting, burning pouring hot water over the body, detainment, beating with a stone or a stick. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* the violent Rasheed with a brown leather belt in his hand, while "Mariam slides out of her bed and begins backpedaling. Her arms instinctively crossed over her chest, where he often strikes her first (TSS 255). This fear, emerging out of the disposition of Rasheed, has been the cause of permanent psychological torture for Mariam for many years. The brutality of Rasheed with Laila, Hosseini depicts the scene as: "And then he is on Laila, pummeling her chest, her head, her belly with fists, tearing at her hair, throwing her to the wall... Rasheed pushes Laila to the ground, and begins kicking her" (326). Except it, both women have to face double brutality – at the hands of Rasheed and the Taliban. Secondly, the young girls have to face sexual violence in which the dominant men are seen trying to establish sexual relationship by force, damaging sexual organs, and boycotting and cutting sexual relations.

Verbal violence consists of humiliation, isolation and insult of victimized person before his/her family and relatives. Isolation is also a sort of violence against women. Hosseini writes that after the incident in the bathhouse, Rasheed has got changed. It is shown that most nights when he comes home, he hardly talks anymore. He eats, smokes, goes to bed, sometimes comes back in the middle of the night for a brief and, of late, quite rough session of coupling (TSS100). He still goes with Mariam for outing but he walks quickly without speaking to her, and "he isn't so ready with a laugh on these outings anymore" (TSS 100). In the response of Mariam's question, "Are you angry with me?" (TSS100), he often sighs and does unbearable actions that disturb Mariam psychologically. Moreover, another sort of verbal violence is seen when he finds fault with her cooking and "complains about clutter around the yard or points out even minor uncleanliness in the house" (TSS100). In this respect the scene of stone chewing is the combination of both verbal and physical violence.

The main objective of man-woman relationship is to bring forth children. It is on one side the symbol of pride and on the other side it highlights the male potency. Child birth here is not merely child birth but birth of a male child is more appreciable. This can be seen in the case of Rasheed who prefers Zalmai to Aziza. Even Aziza's birth becomes a constant torture for Rasheed. He always condemns the activities of Aziza. Once Mariam says, "Look! She's reaching for the rattle. How clever she is" (TSS 253). In response of this, he says, "I'll call the newspaper" (TSS 253).

Rasheed's high hopes about a male child betrays him and he becomes more violent against Mariam and Laila. He discusses the name of the expected birth of a baby boy and suggests him to be called Zalmai. Ironically, this name goes to the illegitimate son of Tariq and Laila. Same expectations, Rasheed keeps with Laila when she gets pregnant. When Laila goes with Rasheed to his shoe maker's shop, "He feels her belly, not through the shirt but under it ... swelling so quickly, Rasheed says, 'It's going to be a big boy. My son will be a *Pahlwan!*'" (TSS 247). Birth of a male child is no less

than a blessing for the Afghan families, as they make the ancestors immortal.

In the opening pages of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* itself the mistreatment of women in conservative Islamic societies is hinted at when one of the two protagonists talk vociferously of what it means "to be a women in this world" (6) where "like a compass needle, a man's accusing finger always finds a women" (7). The Taliban, an extremist militia, seized control first Herat (1994) and then Kabul the capital of Afghanistan, on September 27, 1996 and violently plunged Afghanistan into a brutal state of totalitarian dictatorship and gender apartheid in which women and girls were stripped of their basic human rights. Upon seizing power, the Taliban regime instituted a system of gender apartheid effectively thrusting the women of Afghanistan into a state of virtual house arrest. Under the Taliban rule women were stripped of basic rights, their work and visibility, opportunity for education, voice, healthcare, and mobility. When they took control in 1996, the Taliban initially imposed strict edicts. They banished women from the work force and closed schools for girls and women and expelled women from universities. Taliban prohibited women from leaving their homes unless accompanied by a close male relative. The following quote bring to light the ill treatment of women by Taliban.

Crossing the street, she was spotted by the Taliban and ridden with questions- What is your name? Where are you going? Why are you alone? Where is your mahram? – Before she was sent home One day, a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna. When he was done, he gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said I see you again I'll beat you until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones. (TSS313)

Taliban's ordered that the windows of women's house should be painted black and forced them to wear the burqa (or chadari) – which completely shrouds the body, leaving only a small mesh – covered opening through which to see. Taliban prohibited women and girls from being examined by male physicians while at the same time barred female doctors and nurses from working. To

cape it all, women were denied even treatments for their ailments. The Afghan women cannot either go to a male doctor or get treatment from a female physician.

'This hospital no longer treats women,' the guard barked. He was standing at the top of the stairs, looking down icily on the crowd gathered in front of Malalai Hospital. A loud groan rose from the crowd. 'But this is a women's hospital!' a woman shouted ... 'My wife is having a baby!' a heavyset man yelled. 'Would have her give birth here on the street, brother?' (TSS278)

The Taliban's claimed to follow a pure fundamentalist Islamist ideology. Within Islam, women are allowed to earn and control their own money, and to participate in public life. The women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* have very different educational experiences. Mariam is tutored by Mullah Faizullah in the Koran, and she learns how to read and write. Yet when she asks her mother about going to school, Nana insists on that the only lesson that Mariam needs to learn is to 'endure'. It's our lot in life. Mariam, Women like us. we endure [Nana said] Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter; like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always find a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam" (7). Nana's tormenting birds bring to light the anguish of Afghan women who are destined to suffer.

The first generation women Mariam learned lessons of life through sufferings. She understood that the importance of education was to know oneself and the world around her. So she willingly tried to educate the third generation girl Aziza with what she knew.

Mariam had started teaching Aziza verses from the Koran. Aziza could already recite by heart the surah of ikhlas, the surah of fatiha, an already knew how to perform the four ruqats of morning prayer. 'It's all I have to give her,' Mariam had said to Lila, 'this knowledge, these prayers. They are the only true possession I've ever had.' (TSS 290)

Even a few fathers are also insincere and callous towards daughters. Jalil is a type of callous

father who abandons Mariam. Unknowing the fact she adores her father and loves her sweet words from him like "my princess." Though her mother insisted on the fate of being women and also be a woman without recognition for being an illegitimate child she lives in a utopian world without coming to terms with reality.

What a stupid girl you are? You think you matter to him, that you're wanted in his house? You think you are a daughter to him? That he's going to talk in? Let me tell you something. A man's heart is a wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed. It won't stretch to make room for you ...' (TSS 27)

Laila, in contrast, has a father who emphasizes the importance for her education. He emphasizes Laila's education is as important as that of any boy. As the situation of women in Kabul is not suitable he insists on tutoring Laila himself. He comments on the importance of women attending universities.

I know you are still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now, he said. Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very, 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, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its own women are uneducated, Laila. No chance. (TSS114)

A Thousand Splendid Suns offers a faithful picture of marriages which are forceful and not based on love. Mariam has a forced marriage with a man of forty- five when she is only fifteen. The family members didn't ask her permission. They just informed her. Her step mother says to her.

You have a suitor.... His name is Rasheed. He is a friend of a business acquaintance of your father's. He's a Pashtun, from Kandahar. Originally, but he lives in Kabul... He has his own shop, and he is one of the most sought-after shoemakers in Kabul... Now he is little older than you. Forty, forty-five at the most... What are you, fifteen?

That's a good, solid marrying age for a girl.
(47)

For Nana (Mariam's mother), the prospect of marriage was ruined by a "jinn" [spasm]. She became the servant of Jalil who abused her and never treated her as his wife because he already has two legitimate wives. Nana shares her plight. "To Jalil and his wives I was a pokeroot. A mugwort. You too. And you weren't even born yet. 'What's a mugwort?' Mariam asked. 'A weed.' Nana said. 'Something you rip out and toss aside' (TSS 8).

Honour is the rock upon which social status rests and the family is the most important institution in Afghan society. In the patriarchal society women are the standards by which morality is judged. Rasheed says,

I have customers, Mariam, men, who baring their wives to my shop. The women come uncovered; they talk me directly, look me in the Eye without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their Knees. Sometimes they even put their feet in front of me, the women do for measurements, and their husbands stand there and watch. They allow it. They think nothing of a stranger touching their wives' bare Feet! They think they're being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education, I suppose. They don't see that they're spoiling their own nang and namoos, their honor and pride... (TSS 69)

Rasheed forced Mariam to wear burqa by telling that "a woman's face her husband's business only" (TSS 69). Mariam felt it as an uncomfortable thing when she said this to him he says "you'll get used to it... With time, I bet you'll even like it" (TSS 70). Men who accept liberation of women were mocked by tradition loving extremists. They found fault with modern women married modern Afghan men who did not mind that their wives walked among strangers with makeup on their faces and nothing on their heads. Rasheed explains this to Mariam "there's a teacher living down the street, Hakim is his name, and I see his wife Fariba all the time walking. Down the streets alone with nothing on her head but a scarf. It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife" (TSS 69).

Mariam understands that sincerity in wedlock is expected from women only and not from men. With illegitimate wives and children they can wander freely. But the women and children who were born out of wedlock are branded as shame for the family. "At the time, Mariam did not understand. She did not know what this word Harami- bastard- meant. Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice... Harami is not culpable whose only sin is being born" (TSS 4).

A woman's value in society has often been measured by her ability to bear children, especially boys. When Mariam gets her children aborted due to her ill health Rasheed starts beating her often and finds fault with whatever she does.

Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Maria mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes. 'CHEW!' he Bellowed. A gust of his smoky breath slammed against her face. Mariam chewed. Something in the back of her mouth cracked. 'Good', Rasheed said... 'Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know that what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food and nothing else.' Then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out Pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars. (TSS 103)

In times of war women were victims and target of attack. Military men gang raped and killed many women. "Mariam heard of women who were killing themselves out of fear of being raped, and of men who, in the name of honor, would kill their wives or daughters if they'd been raped by the militia" (TSS 247).

Child marriage was a common evil in Afghan society. Mariam says "... My mother was fourteen when she had me. Thirteen when she married" (TSS 208). Polygamy is very common in Afghanistan. Rasheed says to Mariam, "Don't be so dramatic. It's a common thing and you know it. I have friends who have two, three, four wives. Your own father had three. Besides, what I'm doing now most men I know has done long ago. You know it's true" (TSS 209).

Women are expected to be so dutiful to the service of their husbands. They are expected to

understand the tastes of their husbands and behave accordingly. Mariam says to Laila "Put them [washed and dried clothes] in the almari, not the closet. He likes the whites in the top drawer, the rest in the middle, with the socks" (TSS 220).

The author, through the character of Mariam and Laila tries to edify the Afghan women to be united and face the challenging life. For the problems of women, they should stand together and fight for it. Laila tells Mariam "Everybody wants Jack", Laila said to Mariam. That's what it is. Everybody wants jack to resume them from disaster. But there is no Jack. Jack is not coming back. Jack is dead" (TSS 296). Though Mariam and Laila are wives or Rasheed, when he tortures them they stand together for each other and that sisterhood made their survival easy in that house. When Mariam was beaten by her husband Laila came to defend her. That gratitude made Mariam to kill Rasheed when he tried to strangle Laila's neck.

Reference

Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007. Print.