



FROM MARGINS TO THE CENTRE: A STUDY OF THE SUBALTERN IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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ABSTRACT

Aptly dedicated to the women of Afghanistan, Khaled Hosseini's second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* delivers a heartbreaking portrayal of the plight of the civilians specially women. A country perpetually reeling under foreign invasions such as the Soviets, internal conflict by the warring factions of the Mujahideen, victimized under the dictates of the ancient sharia laws of the Taliban- the novel questions the power of endurance in order to come to the centre. As Mariam's mother Nana says women need to learn only one skill-tahamul, endure, the central characters Mariam and Laila's test of endurance proves massive amidst domestic violence, Laila undergoing caesarian operation without anaesthesia, beatings by the Talibs while going alone to meet Aziza apart from witnessing mass murders, rocket bombings; everything points to the fact how much women can endure and still move on with dignity. This paper will attempt to question the double colonization of women in Afghanistan as presented in the novel. In this novel, the communists favoured women's education as Babi tells Laila that it is a good time for being a woman in Afghanistan. Towards the end, when American President George Bush declared war in Afghanistan after 9/11 in order to search Osama bin Laden, Laila's hope in homecoming co-incides with the reconstruction of new Afghanistan under President Hamid Karzai. Although, the Mujahideen and the patriarchal Taliban are local forces, it needs to be seen that the novel takes a dig into its hypocritical, male dominated ideologies.

Keywords: Taliban, subaltern, endurance, marginalization, feminism.

It is well known that Afghanistan is a war-ravaged country, where the civilians have been perpetually suffering under the threat of violence and death. The author Sushmita Banerjee, has written in the preface to her memoir *Kabuliwalar Bangali Bou (Kabuliwallah's Bengali Wife)* that "Afghanistan is a country of terror." Whether it is foreign invasions like that of the Great Britain, the Soviet Russians, or the ethnic factions of the Mujahideen or the menace of the Taliban, or the war waged by the Americans after 9/11, all of their brutal gaze and surveillance had enveloped the

Afghans in what Michel Foucault calls panopticism. It feels as if the common Afghans are constantly being observed and monitored and even a slight diversion from the absurd dictates of the dictatorial regimes will result in their harshest punishment. Rosemarie Skaine in the book, *The Women of Afghanistan Under the Taliban* said that, "While much of the Afghan population suffers under the Taliban, women bear specific, unrelenting and often violent adversity, including the denial of basic human rights, veiling, seclusion and segregation." (7) This paper, which deals with Khaled Hosseini's

second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* published in 2007 will mainly focus on the following aspects, the double colonization of women as subaltern, whether the subaltern is really dumb or it can speak, the veil as an item of injustice and the subversive spirit and resilience of the subaltern to become a thousand splendid suns.

Whether it is the ban on the all girl band Pragaash in Kashmir, or the shooting of Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan or the murder of rebel author Sushmita Banerjee in Afghanistan, patriarchy does not need any definite place or time to reveal its omnipresence. Aptly dedicated to the women of Afghanistan, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* delivers a heartbreaking portrayal of the women characters, Nana and her daughter Mariam as well as Laila and her daughter Aziza, with the central characters being Mariam and Laila, between whom circumstances form a mother-daughter relationship, a bonding which ultimately becomes a weapon to combat patriarchy.

Nana, being a poor servant epileptic girl, is ostracized by the society for bringing disgrace, whereas Jalil Khan, the rich businessman defends himself by putting the entire blame on her. He could have easily taken her as his fourth wife but he did not, since she was his housekeeper with a disease. Nana advises her daughter Mariam quite early in the novel, "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) Mariam was born a "harami" which means an illegitimate child. The tag remained attached with her name throughout her life, for no fault of hers. As it is mentioned "She understood then what Nana meant, that a harami was an unwanted thing; that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance." (4) In a review, Linda Null and Suellen Alfred has said that "this story looks a bit like an Afghan *Scarlett Letter*, though unlike *Dimmesdale*, this father acknowledges his daughter's birth but he does not have the courage to embrace his daughter into the fullness of his prosperous household; instead he consigns her and her mother to the outskirts of the town in what could be described a little more than a shack." (123)

When Mariam aspires to go to school, Nana speaks the truth of their condition, "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 despite Nana's repeated warnings, Mariam aspires to rise above her position by claiming her rights, she meets with the most disastrous consequences, Nana's suicide and her forced marriage to Rasheed.

After marriage, even though Mariam shifts to Kabul, the most liberal place in Afghanistan, life fails to liberate her. Rasheed turns out to be a staunch patriarch. Quoting from Sushmita Banerjee again "Here women only tolerate oppression, cook and are children producing machines. Means three-in-one." (26) When Mariam suffers repeated miscarriages, Rasheed transforms into a tyrant of domestic violence leaving Mariam a passive, silent and reclusive woman. In a most disturbing scene, Rasheed forcefully makes Mariam eat stones which reflects the kind of atrocities a woman faces when she fails to produce any child, and in this case, Rasheed was obsessed with the male child. Moreover, it is Rasheed who compels his wife to wear the burqa much before the Taliban makes it compulsory for all women to wear. Rasheed proclaims his masculinity by differing himself from "soft men" like the teacher Hakim and the other rich, educated Afghan men by claiming, "But I'm a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand?" (69) So, it can be said that Rasheed's ideology is no different from that of the Taliban.

It can be argued that all Afghan women suffer unanimously at the hands of patriarchy but Kabul has its history of financially independent modern women due to the help of progressive monarchs such as King Amanullah, and his wife Queen Soraya. In the novel, Laila, the free-spirited daughter of the teacher Hakim lived a vivacious life, like a girl in any independent country during the reign of the communists. According to Hakim, "Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they are probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've

ever had before,...it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that, Laila."(133) The ideology of Hakim is portrayed as different from most of the menfolk in his country, particularly from his neighbour Rasheed. His wife Fariba and daughter Laila never wear the burqa. Laila is educated in a girls school where there are progressive teachers like Khala Rangmaal who teaches the girls not to wear the veil. Even she favours Soviet militarization saying it will defeat the anti-progressives and the backward bandits. Laila is even blessed with the company of Tariq, a differently-abled subaltern. Even though he walks with an artificial leg, he never considers himself a cripple. He even uses his handicap as his weapon as it is seen in his fight against Khadim for assaulting the dignity of Laila. Tariq is actually one of the many victimized children of the Soviet land mine campaign which used to cripple Afghan children, so that neither they nor their fathers (who then had to care for their children) could join the jihad against the Soviets. Moreover, Tariq is also the representative of the refugees whose family is one of the many displaced subaltern who suffers from poverty, disease, homelessness and most important, hopelessness and despair. Tariq becomes a false victim of smuggling and ends up seven years in pathetic jail conditions but it can be seen that all bitter circumstances fail to subdue the spirit of the subaltern.

The novel dramatically reveals what can be the fate of spirited women like Laila in Afghanistan. Tragically left an orphan at fourteen due to the violence wrought by the Soviets and the Mujahideen, she meets the same fate as Mariam. Apart from the pebble-eating scene of Mariam, which reveals the utmost atrocity on women, in the case of Laila, it is the hospital scene where after immense struggle she gives birth to Zalmai through a caesarean operation without anaesthesia. As it is said "Mariam would always admire Laila for how much time passed before she screamed."(285) but on the other hand, Rasheed's only concern is the gender of the male baby.

Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak mentions that the subaltern cannot speak or can the subaltern speak? In any country when the oppressors become extremists, the subaltern do rise and speak. Mariam

was a passive victim of Rasheed's domestic violence because she had internalized what her mother Nana had taught her, to endure without protest. When Mariam becomes the second mother of Laila, she is amazed to see Laila's courage and resistance. It is after becoming Laila's mother that Mariam regains her lost voice. It is usually believed that the communication between women are always non-serious, trivial and gossip-bound but the communication between Mariam and Laila when they have halwa and chai under the starlit sky dismantles this anti-woman belief. Victims of not simply double colonization but triple oppression that is of patriarchy, militarization and Islamic fundamentalism, these two women realize their common enemies and their need to fight for each other. It is Laila who actively fights against Rasheed but the final and fatal strike comes from Mariam and "this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life."(341) On analysis, it is seen that Mariam also took revenge against her father Jalil Khan by replicating the exact scene when her father did not welcome her into his house. Her second revenge of killing Rasheed gives her the status of a celebrity inside the Walayat women's prison. As it is said, "None of the women in Mariam's cell were serving time for violent crime-they were all there for the common offense of "running away from home." As a result, Mariam gained some notoriety among them, became a kind of celebrity. The women eyed her with a reverent, almost awestruck expression. They offered her their blankets. They competed to share their food with her."(354) It can be said that all the women respected her because she is a winner against patriarchy.

Since time immemorial, the veiling of women is one of the most controversial themes among patriarchal ideologies of all time. Robert J.C. Young has written "For many westerners, the veil is a symbol of patriarchal Islamic societies in which women are assumed to be oppressed, subordinated, and made invisible. On the other hand, in Islamic societies, and among many Muslim women in non-Islamic societies, the veil (hijab) has come to symbolize a cultural and religious identity, and women have increasingly chosen to cover themselves as a matter of choice." (*Postcolonialism*

80) The veil has different political, social and cultural meanings depending on the context and situation of that particular time and space. In this novel, the veil or the black burqa occupies a central place. Rasheed, the domestic Taliban imposes on both his wives to wear the burqa. The first time Mariam wore it, the novel mentions, "The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through the mesh screen. She practiced walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth."(71) This particular description reflects the capacity of a piece of cloth to hinder the vision, movement and speech of a woman. On the other hand, Mariam also found the burqa comforting, as it is said, "It was like a one-way window. Inside it, she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of the past."(72) When Laila, the educated girl first wears the burqa, the situation is similar, "For Laila, being out in the streets had become an exercise in avoiding injury. Her eyes were still adjusting to the limited, grid like visibility of the burqa, her feet still stumbling over the hem. She walked in perpetual fear of tripping and falling, of breaking an ankle stepping into a pothole. Still, she found some comfort in the anonymity that the burqa provided. She wouldn't be recognized this way if she ran into an old acquaintance of hers. She wouldn't have to watch the surprise in their eyes, or the pity or the glee, at how far she had fallen, at how her lofty aspirations had been dashed."(226) In both the above descriptions, the burqa is portrayed as a prison-like garment, which instills fear in the mind of the woman. Regarding the comfort factor, it is comfortable only to hide the shattered hopes, the unfulfilled dreams of the woman. It is a garment to practically hide the entity called a woman, to make her invisible, to obscure her speech.

The Taliban men who interpreted life only in the darkness of the ancient Sharia laws had made such absurd laws which resulted in one of the harshest gender apartheid in Afghanistan. Regarding their interpretation of laws, Ziba Mir-Hosseini in the

essay, "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism" says that the opponents of women share "an essentialist and nonhistorical understanding of Islam and Islamic law. They fail to recognize that assumptions and laws about gender in Islam-as in any other religion-are socially constructed and thus historically changing and open to negotiation." Moreover, the puritanic laws to ban all sorts of entertainment, writing books, watching films and painting pictures showed that the Taliban wanted to degrade all people to something worse than the medieval ages. In the novel, there are several instances which show that nevertheless the amount of punishment, the subordinated people always find subversive ways to achieve their means of freedom. Tariq narrates to Laila of a person who had been publicly flogged for painting flamingoes. The Taliban's Victorian thinking had problem with the birds' long bare legs, so he painted trousers on the legs making them "Islamic flamingoes". Nevertheless, he used water colour, so that when the Taliban are gone, he can simply wash them off.

Even though television was forbidden, several households had smuggled one set of television. Even Rasheed who was bankrupt smuggles one for his son Zalmai which Mariam and Laila buries underground during the Taliban raids. The special mention of Kabul transforming into "Titanic City" during the drought of 2000 when people smuggled pirated copies from Pakistan again reiterates the subversion of Puritanism. The novel mentions, "After curfew, everyone locked their doors, turned out the lights, turned down the volume, and reaped tears for Jack and Rose and the passengers of the doomed ship."(296) Barbara Klinger mentions in the essay, "Contraband Cinema: Piracy, "Titanic", and Central Asia" that, "Titanic's particular appeal for Afghans-press articles cite the special effects, Di Caprio, the sex scenes, My Heart will go on- love story based on class conflict, experiential link in audience's mind between ship's doomed history and their struggling, war-torn country." Aziza's mimicry of the kissing scene with Mariam also tells that the future of Kabul is not going to be bound in puritanic ideals.

The orphanage is another instance of rebellion against the Taliban. Even though the

Taliban had banned education of girls, Aziza and the other children are educated in a clandestine manner by Kaka Zaman. According to Aziza, "But we have to pull the curtains, so the Taliban don't see us." Kaka Zaman had knitting needles and balls of yarn ready, in case of a Taliban inspection. "We put the books away and pretend to knit."(314) Moreover, the Taliban rule that women must always be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative is not followed by Laila when after being repeatedly beaten by the Taliban, still her mother's urge inspires her to go out alone to meet Aziza. The most lowest form of humiliation is meted out to Laila when a Talib after whipping says, "I see you again, I'll beat you until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones."(313) As Khaled Hosseini said this was in reality said to a woman by a Talib. In the novel, however, Laila is not deterred, she wears extra layers of sweaters in the blistering heat as padding to get relief from the public beatings and goes out alone several times to meet Aziza.

Critics have said that considering the amount of torture and punishment meted out to the Afghan women, the title of the novel is tragically ironic, it should have been a thousand splintered suns. It can be said that the novel is hopeful amidst darkness. The profound source of hope comes from Hakim who takes his family to the most peaceful place in Afghanistan, on top of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Even though ironically he has lost his teaching job because of the Soviets, he praises the measures taken by the Soviets for the upliftment of the Afghan women. His optimism and courage is also present in Laila who finally takes the most important decision in the novel, apart from Mariam's decision to kill Rasheed. It is to leave her peaceful family life in Pakistan and return back home. Fulfilling Hakim's dream that Laila will be needed in Afghanistan's reconstruction process and also her friend Hasina's foreboding that one day Laila's photo will be on the front page of the newspaper, the home-coming is ultimately the most important to show as how these marginalized people have come to the centre. Laila's becoming a teacher at the orphanage speaks volumes about the future of Afghanistan since quoting from Rosemarie Skaine again, "One of the most destructive effects of the Taliban's restrictions on women working is that

a generation of children are growing up uneducated because most of Afghanistan's teachers were women."(9)

Moreover, Mariam's public execution can be compared to a religious crucifixion. Mariam was religiously inspired from childhood by Mullah Faizullah. Laila's going to her birthplace, her kolba leads to her salvation and finally there is a hint of the resurrection of Mariam in Laila's unborn child. Unlike Khaled Hosseini's other two novels *The Kite Runner* and *And The Mountains Echoed* which end not in Afghanistan but America and France, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* lets the marginalized come to the centre in their own homeland, Afghanistan.

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