

The Silenced Voices of Afghan Women in Khaled

Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

Khaled Hosseini, the first American writer of Afghan descent has made a name for himself by showing the human side of Afghanistan and re-establishing a personal connection with the country. The research examines the silenced voices of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. This research examines the experiences of Mariam and Laila, the novel's protagonists, whose stories serve as a microcosm for the broader struggles of Afghan women. It argues that Hosseini's work gives voice to the voiceless, highlighting Afghan women's resilience, agency, and resistance in the face of unimaginable adversity. The research explores the intersectionality's of gender, culture, and power in Afghan society, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexities of women's lives in Afghanistan. It aims to shed light on the struggles and triumphs of Afghan women, promoting empathy, understanding, and social change.

Keywords: gender, trauma, resistance, identity, power.

Afghan literature refers to the literature produced in the Islami Emirate of Afghanistan influenced by central and South Asian literature. It is predominantly written in two native and official languages of Afghanistan, Dari and Pashto. Some regional languages such as Uzbek, Turkmen, Balochi, and Pashayi also appear in Afghan literature. While Afghanistan is a multilingual country, these languages are generally used as oral compositions and written texts by the Afghan writers and in Afghan curriculum. This literature is highly influenced by Persian and Arabic literature in addition to Central and South Asia. Khaled Hosseini, the first American writer of Afghan descent has made a name for himself by showing the human side of Afghanistan and reestablishing a personal connection with the country.

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 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 research paper attempts to argue, in the

light of Hosseini's novel, how the patriarchy and persistent conditions of conflict have multiplied the oppression of women in Afghanistan. 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 study focuses on how the unique historical circumstances, in the form of conflicts and wars that Afghanistan has now been coping with for almost half a century, have brought agonizing experiences for its women.

The women in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* genuinely appear as suffering beings. The prolonged conditions of the conflict in Afghanistan have taken a heavy toll on human life and brought enormous sufferings and devastation for the country. In any conflict children and women, 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).

Afghanistan society, where patriarchal customs come into view as hard and 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 half a century. In the novel, this is reflected in the words of Babi who despondently observes:

Babi said, women who were studying law, medicine, engineering. *Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they're probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before,* Babi said, always lowering his voice, aware of how intolerant Mummy was of even remotely positive talk of the communists. (133)

The term "Patriarchy" has been defined as a word which refers to those systems

political, material and imaginative which invest power in men and marginalize women. 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.

Jayawerdena and de-Alwis underscore how the regulation of female sexuality, particularly through the lens of female modesty is a central, unifying feature across South Asian societies. Despite the diversity of religious, cultural, and social identities in the region ranging from Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist communities, the fundamental principle of regulating women’s sexual behaviour and maintaining their modesty transcends these differences. It argues that the sexual and moral codes imposed on women are deeply embedded in a range of patriarchal institutions such as the state, law, religious frameworks, schools, and families that shape and enforce these norms. These institutions, whether secular or religious, act as instruments of social control, using prescribed codes of conduct to maintain women’s modesty as a key marker of social order and morality. By pointing out the similarities across these diverse systems, Jayawerdena and de-Alwis suggest that, regardless of a particular religious or cultural tradition, the overarching mechanism of controlling female sexuality remains largely the same. It reflects a broader, hegemonic patriarchal structure that consistently reinforces traditional gender roles, where women's sexual behaviour and modesty are tightly regulated to ensure conformity to societal norms.

The irony highlight is that despite the profound differences between various communities in South Asia, this shared emphasis on female modesty as a moral and social expectation becomes a unifying factor across these different groups. This speaks to the deeply entrenched patriarchy in South Asian societies, where the regulation of female sexuality is not only a private or familial matter but also a social, legal, and religious concern, actively maintained by institutions at all levels of society.

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. In the novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam, the protagonist cannot withstand her defiance. She has to bow down before the rigid customs of her society as she is

reluctantly dragged into marrying Rasheed. At the Nikka ceremony, the Mullah, without acknowledging Mariam's consent, remarks,

All that remains now is the signing of the contract," the mullah said. Mariam signed her name- the *meem*, the *reh*, the *ya*, and the *meem* again- conscious of all the eyes on her hand. The next time Mariam signed her name to a document, twenty-seven years later, a mullah would again be present.

"You are now husband and wife," the mullah said. Tabreek. Congratulation. (53-4)

Rasheed, husband of Mariam 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. To quote:

Mariam had never before worn a burqa. Rasheed had to help her put it on. The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen . . . "You'll get used to it," Rasheed said. "With time, I bet you'll even like it". (71)

Rasheed gives similar dictates to his second wife Laila. In giving strict dictates to his wives, he falsely pretends to protect 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. Your own father had three. Besides, what I'm doing now most men I know would have done long ago. You know it's true.
"I won't allow it."

At this, Rasheed smiled sadly. (208-9)

Rasheed is averse to the idea of his wife meeting strangers. His 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 and 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 defence? 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)

The case of Naghma, whom Mariam meets in the Taliban prison. She was lured into elopement by a Mullah's son, but after the Talibans arrest them and put them to trial, the man testifies against Naghma blaming her for seduction. Leaving aside all the norms of justice, the Talibans take his account to be true and set him free while sending Naghma 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 patriarchal setting, women also seem to be internalizing the essentialist patriarchal customs which traps them further in the web of marginalisation.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 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 a great urge to go 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 and argues:

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)

Mariam refuses to marry the forty-year-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.

Gender is central to the construction of national, ethnic and religious identities, women's behaviour is perceived as a "cultural marker" of "their" communities. 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. The Talibans, 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 Talibans 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 Talibans, 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).

Manchanda points out, that 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. 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.

Women in Afghanistan suffered a lot during the Taliban rule. As described in the novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* the Talibans frequently carry out executions, flogging and stoning of women who are accused of defying their strict orders. Mariam become a victim to the Taliban's torture. 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," the young Talib said. "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)

The Talibans claim sarcastically, 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. 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 arrival of Talibans. But it became all but unbearable with the outbreak of factional war, anarchy and extremism. In conflict zones, it has been often found that violence on the bodies of women serves as a tool of political repression. Such acts of physical coercion are motivated by an idea of keeping a woman in complete confinement and submission.

Rasheed callously treats Mariam and Laila at home while the Talibans do the same to them outside it. Rasheed welcomes Talibans 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.

The research highlights the fact that 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 relentless pain and suffering which, in Hosseini's own words, has been matched by a very few groups in recent world history. This pain and suffering were cast in their voicelessness. Through his narrative, Hosseini endeavours to provide a voice to the Afghan women by bringing their sufferings to the fore.

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