

Oppression and marginalization of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

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Abstract

The rights of women in Afghanistan were safeguarded under law. The constitution of Afghanistan ensured and advocated equality for women. The country was heading towards a democratic setup. The sense of tolerance was widely embraced. Women had an active role in Afghanistan's overall development. They were holding some of the key positions in the administration. A good number of women were school teachers, doctors and university students. But the onset of Taliban regime in 1996 took total control of the Kabul city of Afghanistan and soon after they imposed some seriously strict restrictions and the country started ultimately moving into a hostile regime. All this came as a result of misinterpretations of Islamic Sharia by the Taliban. Women were the most horribly victimized section of the society by the Taliban's high handed and hard line approach. They were forced to quit their jobs, now they could only afford to work in limited circumstances. This paper will explore the same plight of Afghan women narrated in Khalid Hussaini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through a feministic approach. The novel gives a good account of this theme of women oppression through the character of Mariam and Laila who are subjected to various hardships during their survival in Kabul in the novel. My study is based on Iris Young's (a political theorist and a feminist) most famous idea about "Five Faces of Oppression."

Introduction

A Thousand Splendid Suns is one of Hussaini's bestselling novel published in sixty countries and translations of the book also being made in various languages. The novel explores the plight and oppression of women in Afghanistan through the character of Mariam and Laila. Iris Young's article titled "Fives Faces of Oppression", defines oppression as "an enclosing of structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or a category of people" (Young 41). Mariam and Laila in the novel are oppressed by their

husband Rasheed, an antagonist of the novel with a wicked character. He marries both Mariam and Laila and subjects them to his abuse. The novel narrates the struggle of both the ladies to find their identity against this oppression perpetrated on them by both Rasheed and the society they live in. Hence, this study will be done through a feministic approach.

Feminism is an advocacy for the rights of women. Feminists look for equal opportunities for both men and women in the society. In 1851, Sojourner Truth gave voice to the rights of women in her publication "Aint I a woman." Feminist theories have emerged from 1974. The other noteworthy publications are *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Marry Wolstencraft, *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert etc. Feminism is divided into three waves. The first wave (1830's - early 1900's) seeks women's fight for equal contract and property rights. The second wave (1960's - 1980's) focuses on the workplace, sexuality and reproductive rights of women. The third wave (1990's - present) promotes gender equality.

The outline story of the novel highlights Afghanistan's thirty years of Soviet occupation and Taliban's brutal regime in which women were the common victims. The struggles of women have been brought into limelight through the character of Mariam and Laila. Mariam is the illegitimate daughter of a rich businessman named Jaleel. She is forced to marry Rasheed at the age of fifteen. Rasheed is very unkind to his wife. He constantly abuses Mariam. For not being able to conceive a child. He also forces her to wear a burqa against her wish. Heaving grown impatient with his wife, he marries another girl, a fourteen year old Laila who has lost her parents by a rocket fire. She is pregnant with a child so she had to surrender before Rasheed for her own as well as her upcoming child's security. She too suffers from the wickedness of Rasheed. Therefore both Mariam and Laila now join hands to fight against the atrocious Rasheed for a common cause. The novel beautifully depicts the sufferings of woman she tolerates at the hands of their fathers choice regarding her marriage, her husband's monopoly and her attempt of looking for the welfare of her children.

According to Iris Young in her article, oppression can be of five kinds; exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. These five types of oppression can be perpetrated on any kind, man or woman. Young said, "As a group, women are subjected to gender based exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence" (Young 64). These are discussed as under:

1. Exploitation – This type of oppression is utilizing another person's labour or sources without a proper care for any kind of compensation. Iris Young remarked, "Some people exercise their capacities under the control, according to the purposes and for the benefit of other people" (Young 49). In the novel, Mariam is married to an unkind and a hypocrite Rasheed who is hell-bent to inflict Mariam with pain and suffering all the time. He scolds Mariam for having not been able to produce a child. In fact, he alleges her responsible for the earlier miscarriage of his child during Mariam's pregnancy. But Mariam despite all this does all the work in a very selfless manner without expecting any rewards. In general, we see all the women in the novel being treated so pathetically. Be it Mariam, Nana or Laila, all are pushed to the wall by the male dominated society, the Soviet and Afghan regime. Mariam is told by her mother at the start of the novel that, "A man's accusing finger always finds a woman" (Hosseini 26). These words become absolutely true when we look at what happens with Mariam's life. She being as we know the illegitimate child of Jaleel is left at the mercy of her mother. Jaleel does not accept her, in fact, he marries her with Rasheed against her wish and she has to make a compromise. Her mother also faces almost the same kind of misery. She too is one among few of the illegitimate victimized wives of Jaleel who exploited her. Laila too is exploited, she is told a well documented lie that her boyfriend Tariq died in a bomb blast. This lie makes the way smoother for Rasheed to exploit her body. Therefore, it is quite clear that all the women despite the fact that they are as good as we see them in the novel, they make a lot of sacrifices but even their greatest of sacrifices don't count. Mariam couldn't deliver a child due to her constant miscarriages. So, Laila never becomes an object of rivalry for her but in fact Mariam treats her as her own daughter. Rasheed does not like either of his wives; he behaves rudely and does not like the stuff Mariam cooks. He only attempts to see faults in her so that he always makes up a reason for exploiting and beating her. We can see the same in the following lines from the novel, "He was more apt to these days, to fault her cooking, to complain about clutter around the yard or point out even minor uncleanliness in the house" (Hosseini 100). Rashid's contempt for Mariam is further illuminated when we go through the book, as,

What is the matter?" He mewled, mimicking at her. "What is the matter is that you've done it again." "But I boiled it five minutes more than usual." That's a bold lie "I swear_" He shook the rice angrily from his fingers and pushed the plate away, spilling sauce and rice on the sofra. Mariam watched as he stormed out of the living room, then out of the house, slamming the door in his way out. (Hosseini 109,110)

This is how bad a person Rasheed is, has no respect for Mariam's diligence in her work. She deserves high applauds and acknowledgement as a compensation from her husband for all her work but is unfortunately deprived of this. Therefore, it is not less than a mere exploitation.

2. Marginalization – Iris Young remarks that people are marginalized from the society in order to be exploited. (Young 50). This kind of oppression is again faced by both Mariam and Laila. Mariam as discussed is the illegitimate child of her father. She is being described by a very offensive term 'harami' by the society even her mother will address her by the same derogatory word. This is indeed very pathetic. She is also exiled by her father after being forcibly married to Rasheed. Her misery is reported in the following lines, “Mariam is born as harami, 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” (Hosseini 04). This harami tag on her has most certainly marginalized her completely. She can't enjoy the same freedom as others in the novel do. She constantly suffers from the clutches of her husband's patriarchy and aggression. For him, Mariam is a repulsive creature. He despises her for everything, blames her for all the miscarriages she has suffered and leaves no stone unturned in order to marginalize her. In order to put her down all the time, Rasheed remarks that "all that she has given him in the marriage is only bad food" (Hosseini 119). It is never fair to marginalize a woman if she can't beget a son or be an illegitimate like the poor Mariam is. In Afghanistan, we see when the Taliban came into power, women were completely alienated. Their right to seek education was denied under such a tyrant and conservative rule. Woman education was considered as entirely an unIslamic practice. They were not allowed to come out of their houses for any academic pursuit. The same attempt of preventing girls from going to schools for seeking education by Taliban is mentioned in the novel as, "girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately" (Hosseini 45). Once this thing is ensured by Taliban, it will automatically subjugate and marginalize women in all affairs whether at home or outside. Some girls like Aziza are still in pursuit of education but they however have to make sure that Taliban does not see them during their homework. This is witnessed by Aziza saying, "but we have to pull the curtains, so the Taliban does not see us" (Hosseini 312). This is quite embarrassing because children like Aziza should not grow under such kind of fear. Mariam and Laila really believe in the importance of knowledge as seen from the novel. Laila's father Hakim was

a firm believer in the fact that education to woman will empower her always. Mariam too once desired to place a ruler on a page and draw some important - looking lines.

3. Powerlessness – According to Iris Young, the "powerlessness means the lack of authority or power" (Young 52). This type of oppression can be said when a person has no power to raise his/her voice against any unjust treatment. Again we find it from the novel that it is both Mariam and Laila who become the victims of the same sort of oppression. Mariam as seen is a hostage to Rasheed's indifferent attitude towards her. Laila in order to emancipate Mariam, her own self and her little daughter Aziza makes an audacious attempt to flee to Pakistan but unfortunately they are caught at the Bus station. This thing provokes Rasheed and he puts them to starvation and keeps them as hostages in a closed room literally helpless and powerless. This is recorded in the following lines as, Azan rang out a second time and still Rasheed had not given them any food, and worse, no water. That day, a thick, suffocating heat fell on them. The room turned into a pressure cooker. (Hosseini 288) Taliban did not allow women to earn their livelihood by working in any government or a private department outside their homes. They kept them confined to closed four walls of their houses. Women's earnings were regarded as unfair in the sight of Islamic Sharia by Taliban. This made women a little bit vulnerable as far as meeting their financial expenses are concerned. In the novel, Laila comes from an educated background. She too was qualified. She could easily have made her as well as the expenses of her little daughter Aziza quite affordable but her husband Rasheed being conservative much like Taliban curtails her and she is left in poverty and helplessness. The same powerlessness is highlighted in the following lines as, "We get mothers like you all the time - all the time - mothers who come here, who cannot feed their children because the Taliban won't let them go out and make a living. So you don't blame yourself. No one here blames you. I understand" (Hosseini 249). Rasheed has a strangle-hold over his wives. He does not tolerate them. He keeps them under his authority by using brute force. This might not have been possible if the government in power did not support the same kind of behaviour with women. Rasheed does not fear the law even because he knows all his deplorable acts against Mariam and Laila would be easily justified. He uses a frightening power always to silence and oppress them. This is reported from the novel as, "You try this again and I will find you [...] And, when I do, there is not a court in this Godforsaken country that will hold me accountable" (Hosseini 147).

4. Cultural imperialism – Young says about this kind of oppression that is the "universalization of dominant group, experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" (Young 59). In the novel, Mariam and Laila suffer from the patriarchy of their husband Rasheed who is regarded as the more accepted and the more dominant one in the family by the set norms of the society. He always uses his wrath on them and reduces them to mere objects of interiority under this kind of oppression in the novel. Both Mariam and Laila after getting fed-up with the atrocities of their husband try to run away from him to Pakistan but police takes hold of them and takes them to the police station where they face the outrage of police also. The police does not lend an ear to their miseries, they are rather more favourable towards Rasheed. It shows that he being a male is a more acceptable notion or norm in the society. Police is normally supposed to maintain law and order and service and security to the public irrespective of their sex must be the identity of police. But the novel does not give any such account of them. During Taliban's regime also, women were the more common victims to their hostility. Their life was curbed and curtailed by the imposition of some of the ferocious laws. The Taliban would use the religious scriptures to justify their intolerance towards women. Such tactics is always the more powerful weapon to dehumanize and break the morale of a particular part of community. We see in the novel when the judge who is in charge of handling Mariam's case of murdering her husband, uses the same religious scriptures in order to set the norm that women are always inferior to men. The same is illustrated in the novel as, God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different [...] This is why we require only one male witness and two female ones. (Hosseini 355)

5. Violence – Iris Young said, a systematic violence occurs when members of a group learn to live with the fear of attacks with no intention but damaging, humiliating or destroying the person. (Young 61). We see poor Mariam suffers from the excruciating distress caused to her by the violence of her agonizing husband Rasheed. In the following lines, we see Rashid's violent treatment towards her wife Mariam as,

"Get up", he said. "Come here. Get up." He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it. "Put these in your mouth." "Stop it, Rasheed, I'm_" His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it, Mariam struggled against him, numbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in, his upper lip curled in a sneer. "Now chew." He said. (Hosseini 110)

This is how hostile Rasheed is towards her wives. This severe treatment of Rasheed provokes a response and resistance from both Mariam and Laila. They therefore decide to face Rasheed with some bravery now. One day both Mariam and Rasheed had a scuffle which ultimately ended with the death of latter, though this was an accidental death but Mariam had to face a number of legal trials in the court of the Taliban governed administration. However, she had no regret for what she did because she did it for the betterment of Laila and Aziza. The security of both of them was her top priority and they were her love. The hostility and violence of Rasheed towards Mariam goes on to show that for men their wives can be the soft targets of their husband's unabated wrath. The following lines from the novel are very pathetic, they arouse a sympathetic feeling in the minds of the readers for poor Mariam. "Had she ever been a deceitful wife?" She asked herself. A complacent wife. A dishonourable woman? Discreditable? Vulgar? What harmful thing had she wilfully done to this man to warrant his malice, his continual assaults, the relish with which he tormented her?" (Hosseini 331). This treatment towards women is quite similar to Taliban. They are also very unkind and indifferent in attitude towards a female. Woman who even desire to give their children a good quality education are subjected to face a stern action from them.

Conclusion.

The oppression and marginalization of women is a recurring theme in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, as discussed, it is being narrated through the adversities faced by two main characters of the novel, that is Mariam and Laila. Mariam faces all the drastic consequences caused as a result of her husband's constant animosity towards her without any complaint. Laila however is comparatively brave. She resists strongly against the abuses and offences of Rasheed. It is Laila who actually prepares Mariam for escaping from the hostility of Rasheed. This shows that women are brave enough inside to defy any oppression, whether it be from their husband or society in general. This is very evident from the novel when we see Laila looking at the eyes of her little daughter. According to her there is something behind her eyes which neither Rasheed nor Taliban can break. She compares the hardness of her daughter to a block of limestone. This is very testament to the fact that women in the novel have been portrayed as strong characters who cannot wilt easily under a patriarchal system in the society. Thus making the novel a fit subject to be studied from a feministic point of view.

Works cited

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