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Beyond The Veil: Examining The Complex Identities Of Afghan Women In Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract: The condition of women in Afghanistan is complex and varies across different regimes, yet it is predominantly marked by subservience to patriarchal structures. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* offers a vivid depiction of women's experiences as power dynamics shift. This paper analyzes the stereotypical images of Afghan women and examines how the author addresses these representations. A close scrutiny of the novel reveals instances where the author conforms to prevailing prejudices. The portrayal of Afghan women as passive and powerless often elicits sympathy and a sense of responsibility from readers. However, studies indicate Afghan women have actively participated in Afghanistan's reconstruction and are not as helpless as the novel implies. Still, Hosseini's narrative includes redeeming moments, such as Laila securing employment and contributing to Afghanistan's rebuilding.

Index Terms **- Women, Afghanistan, New Historicism**

The history of Afghanistan is marked by political instability, particularly during the last 30 years of prolonged war, infrastructure collapse, and restrictive political regimes. The situation of women in Afghanistan has been dismal during this period. Their status was undermined during the Soviet occupation and under subsequent regimes. Women's rights were further eroded when the Taliban came into power in 1996. Yet the plight of Afghan women was barely covered by the Western mainstream media until the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 drew strategic interest toward Afghanistan (Kumar). In the weeks following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, burqa-clad women were immediately featured on the cover of the New York Times, Business Week, Newsweek, Time, and other general interest magazines (Kumar). Subsequently, the anonymous veiled women gained high visibility. It is quite interesting to see how these images of Afghanistan and its women, propagated by the Western world, are handled in Khalid Hosseini's works.

The status of women in Afghanistan fluctuates under different regimes but is largely defined by subservience to patriarchal norms. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* begins during the reign of King Zahir Shah, when Mariam, the protagonist, is a young child. She endures the consequences of polygamy and is labeled a harami, rejected by both Jalil and society due to her birth out of wedlock and her social class. Although Jalil occasionally displays kindness and concern, he remains hypocritical and ultimately refuses to accept her into his family.

One notable aspect is the absence of compulsion for women to wear burqas in rural areas of Afghanistan. The depiction of Mariam and Nana walking in Gul Daman without burqas challenges prevailing stereotypes about Afghan women. Historical records indicate that the burqa was not widely enforced during the pre-Taliban era, particularly in rural regions. Women rarely wore burqas, as such attire interfered with agricultural work. Nomadic societies in Afghanistan differed from those in the southern provinces, where the burqa was more commonly worn. Nomadic women were highly mobile and did not face strict taboos

regarding contact with strangers (Marsden). However, external perceptions often reduce Afghan women to the image of burqa-clad, repressed individuals.

National Geographic's famous 1985 image, as well as Schwartz-DuPre's (2010) work, sheds light on this aspect. The veil of the Afghan Girl can be read as a signifier of Afghan repression. Image of childhood reveals the themes of vulnerability, dependence, and insecurity. The Afghan Girl's green eyes encourage identification between herself and her Western readers. The girl's anonymity serves as a representation of every Afghan girl. Burqa and the veil of Afghan woman tend to define their existence in Western media after the post 9/11 complications. In exploring the Time.com photo essays, Cloud (2004) bases her discussion on the same argument and uncovers how images in the essay encourage Western viewers to lament the status of Afghan women and support U.S. intervention. She argues that these sequences of images try to project Afghan women as helpless victims waiting for emancipation by the West. Their burqas suggest their invisibility and subservience. This view of Western media clearly ignores the fact that Afghan women can have a different say in this matter. This possibility is mildly suggested in the novel when Mariam looks upon Purdah as something that shields her from the uninvited scrutiny of men. It offers her a respite in the otherwise irritating patriarchal society, which tries to overpower her at every turn of life.

A Thousand Splendid Suns both asserts and thwarts this image of Afghan women as helpless and naïve. His female characters are victims of a system that tries to circumscribe their lives, but they are not guileless when it comes to resistance. Khaled Hosseini presents a contrasting picture of what the West conceives of Afghanistan when Mariam describes her visit to the sophisticated streets of Kabul with her husband, Rasheed. She can see women wandering around the streets freely, not wearing burqas. Rasheed's comments on his lady customers who are daring enough to wear short skirts and make up also suggest a change in the perceptions of Afghan women, even before the intervention of America or the West. Reforms implemented by King Amanullah from 1919 to 1929 significantly improved the position of women and girls in urban areas. To illustrate, Marsden (1998) cites his steps of reformation, such as banning child marriage, outlawing polygamy among civil servants, and permitting women to discard their veils. A growing number of girls in this period benefited from secondary and higher education. In 1953, when Daoud became Prime Minister, women were encouraged to participate in the government and the workforce. They took on traditional service roles, such as secretaries, nurses, receptionists, and air hostesses. A minority became doctors, lawyers, engineers, and journalists. By the end of the 1950s, policies were enacted to allow women to hold greater roles in education and the workforce, to voluntarily remove the veil, and to have a future beyond the walls of their homes. (Ellis)

This development of a sophisticated class of people with a broader outlook on women and their rights can be gauged in the views of characters like Hakim. Even Jalil, with all his hypocrisy and selfishness, does not turn his face to the relevance of education for women. He and Mullah want Mariam to study, but it is Nana who rejects this idea by saying that women like Mariam require only one skill: "Only one skill. And it's this: tahamul. Endure" (Hosseini 17). All of Jalil's girl children were studying when Mariam reached the house. The same outlook towards education can be seen in the much sophisticated parts of Kabul. But Khaled Hosseini also points out the influence of Western ideologies, especially communism in bringing about this change in Afghanistan. Many historical records project soviet controlled Afghanistan as a haven for women with its liberal views. After April 1978, when the Soviet Union came to power in Afghanistan, women's situation was all the more enhanced. Seizing power, the Soviet Union introduced rapid reforms to change the political and social structure of the Afghan society. Women's rights to education, employment, mobility, and choice of spouse were considered among their major objectives (Moghadam). People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) intended to impose female education throughout the country in an effort to combat the very high level of illiteracy. This resulted in bringing about vast changes to the predicament of Afghan women, thus pointing to the kind of enlightenment that women characters like Faridha and Laila have.

Laila's father, Babi (or Hakim), as she calls him, is a teacher, but he was fired by the Soviets and now works in the local bakery. He is quite loving towards Laila and concerned about her education and future. He points out how much better it has been for women under Soviet rule. In fact, he points out, two-thirds of the students at Kabul University are women and advises her to tap this freedom to her benefit: "It's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that, Laila" (Hosseini 121). But the new laws providing equal opportunity to women have also angered those in the rural areas who are bound by their traditions and resent having the Soviets tell them how to treat their women. Some of them flee to Pakistan, and they cite their main reason as the use of force to have women attend literacy classes (Skaine). Rasheed shares this view of the orthodox Afghan Muslim when he speaks about Hakim in contemptuous terms. The way orthodox and patriarchal figures like Jalil and Rasheed dominate the narrative with their oppressive strategies sometimes shadows the otherwise sophisticated and developed side of Afghanistan. In certain

sections of the novel, one can see that characters like Mariam are denied education and a good living by the ruthless system of society. Loyal hands of patriarchal Afghan society, like Rasheed and Jalil, either insist that they wear burqas or abandon them after exploiting them physically and mentally. They look down upon anyone supporting causes such as women's education or freedom. In that sense, one may wonder whether the author also approves of the notion of Afghan women as innocent victims waiting for the West to redeem them.

The oppressive strategies of the orthodox Afghan society take a fresh turn with the retreat of the Soviet Union. The country plunged into the horror of the Mujahedin groups battling for control of the country. Eventually, an unstable government, known as the Mujahedin Government of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, emerged as a coalition of seven Mujahedin parties (Marsden). Its president, Burhannudin Rabbani, suspended the Constitution and issued religious decrees that imposed several restrictions on women's freedom and mobility. They declared that women should not use perfumes, not wear clothes similar to men's, not wear makeup, and not have Western-style hair. They should be completely covered, be educated only at home by fathers, brothers, or other relatives, and only learn the basics of Islam (Ellis). Eventually, in 1996, the Taliban, who felt outraged at the behaviour of the Mujahedin leaders fighting for power, decided to take action. They were determined to put an end to what they saw as corrupt practices, drawing on Islam as a justification for their intervention. Seizing power, the Taliban implemented four central policies regarding women. First, women were forbidden to hold jobs, and their sole responsibility was to bring up the next generation of Muslims. Second, they could not attend schools until the Taliban had come up with a curriculum in accordance with the basics of Islam. Third, women were forced to wear burqas. Although women were obliged to wear chadors during the Mujahedin period, the Taliban implemented the policy that women must wear burqas that cover their faces as well to completely observe the practice of wearing the hejab as recommended by Shariat. Finally, women were denied freedom of movement. They could only leave their homes if escorted by male relatives and had to avoid contact with male strangers (Marsden). Laila's and Mariam's inability to escape from Rasheed highlights a similar situation in Afghanistan. When they attempted to escape, they were caught and tortured for that reason. It also justifies Laila's inability to get a job.

But in reality, these restrictions on women did not go unchallenged. Educated women in Afghanistan demonstrated genuine resistance to such changes. However, due to either a lack of interest from Western media prior to the 9/11 attacks or a deliberate omission, these instances of female agency are often unrecorded. Studies examining the Western media's response to Afghan women's movements confirm this trend. Women are rarely depicted as agents actively shaping their own lives and futures. When politically active women are represented, the focus tends to be on their personal backgrounds and circumstances rather than their political perspectives. A Thousand Splendid Suns similarly reflects this pattern. The oppression of patriarchal society is only mildly delineated in the novel. Characters like Laila and Mariam, though they possess a strong sense of justice, fail to resist subjugation for most of the novel. Mariam silently bears the burden of polygamy under both Rasheed and Jalil and does not attempt to free herself at any point in time. It is only towards the end of the novel that Mariam reacts to the ruthless exploitation by killing Rasheed. Laila, although educated, is constrained in society and unable to pursue her desires. She fails miserably in her love and again in her life when she marries Rasheed. She forgets the very essence of freedom her father taught her when she submits to Rasheed's oppressive household. Mariam's words: ''Think like a mother, Laila jo. Think like a mother. I am'' (Hosseini 328) is a wakeup call to Laila. From there onwards, Laila's decisions become her own, and she leaves the country to embrace freedom. When Laila decides to return and participate in Afghanistan's reconstruction, it becomes a subtle yet poignant statement on the possibilities for women in Afghanistan.

The depiction of Afghanistan in the novel is largely bleak. The majority of the narrative unfolds against the backdrop of war-torn Kabul. Hosseini details the rise of the Taliban, describing their origins as young Pashtun men whose families fled to Pakistan during the Soviet conflict and their motivations for joining the movement. The narrative recounts the destruction of the country, including the closure of universities, the removal of paintings, the destruction of televisions, the burning of books, and the shuttering of bookstores. Various factions commit atrocities against each other and the civilian population, with frequent bombings in Kabul. One such bombing results in the loss of Laila's family and Tariq. However, the novel does not entirely neglect Afghanistan's rich culture and sophisticated urban life. Hosseini introduces balance to the prevailing narratives of low literacy, poverty, and desolation by invoking Hakim's memories. Through Hakim, Laila, and Tariq are exposed to the richness of Afghanistan's cultural heritage. When Hakim reveals the remnants of this culture and recounts its history, he simultaneously shares these insights with the reader. Descriptions of Kabul's vibrant streets, with vendors and women present, provide an alternative perspective

to the commonly discussed image of a war-torn Afghanistan. Although Hosseini presents moments of hope, such as Laila's decision to work, it is unclear whether these portrayals reflect genuine progress or merely a desire for outside help.

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