

TRAUMATIC STATE OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S NOVEL A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS

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Abstract

In this paper, I would like to explain about the struggle of women in Afghanistan, especially the characters of Mariam and Laila. I have selected the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini. Hosseini is the very prominent Afghan born American writer. In this novel, he beautifully portrays the characters and the incidents belong to the Afghan society especially the women characters of his native land. It explores the lives of two unfortunate Afghan women, Both Mariam and Laila are from different family backgrounds, culture and decades even though they forced to become as a member of a same household. They shared their lives together. They struggled a lot as being born as women. The lives of Afghan women have seen three critical eras in Afghanistan history which have affected the status of Afghan women. This novel is a tale about the illness character of strong men and natural strength of weak women. They suffer from domestic violence and yet find love, companionship and consolation from each other. Afghan women were still voiceless and faceless until Khaled Hosseini broke up the silence with the story of Mariam and Laila through their troublesome lives in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Keywords: Afghan Women, Struggle, Sufferings, Trauma and Violence.

Under the Taliban regime, Afghan women were denied education, right to work, right to move freely, access to adequate healthcare, etc. From the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century, the rulers of Afghanistan consistently attempted to lessen women's restrictions in the country. Throughout the 20th century, Afghanistan continued to be a country dominated by tribes and also men continued to have ultimate control over women. The lives of Afghan women have seen three critical eras in Afghan history that have affected the status of women in Afghanistan.

In Afghan society, a woman's role is dictated by societal rules which portray women as lesser individuals compared to their male counterpart. Women are considered untrustworthy without reasonable cause. Women symbolize honour of family, community and nation and must be controlled as well as protected. So they

can maintain their moral purity. Not allowed to raise eyes towards men or make eye contact with them. They may never come in direct contact with men. A woman must dress properly without showing skin. Not allowed to laugh loudly.

Attention women:

You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by amahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home.

You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.

Cosmetics are forbidden.

Jewelry is forbidden.

You will not wear charming clothes.

You will not speak unless spoken to.

You will not make eye contact with men.

You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.

You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger.

Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately.

Women are forbidden from working.

If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death

Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar. (270-271)

Though the religion of Islam demands that men and women be equal before law, Afghan women have always been denied many of their lawful rights and their lives have been circumscribed behind the veil. Women were forced to wear a burqa in public places to cover their entire body. They are extremely hot to wear and hard to breathe in. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* not only chronicles the violent of Afghanistan during three decades but also records the plight of women before and during the Taliban era.

In Afghanistan, achieving equal rights for women has always been a complicated one. Their conditions depend on where they live. In rural areas, the question of female employment and education has not been an issue. Khaled Hosseini in his novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has depicted the pitiable conditions of women living in Afghanistan. In this novel, Hosseini beautifully portrayed the culture that exists in Afghanistan. He brings out the strict Islamic laws practiced by Afghan women and the torture they tolerate in daily life. *Thousand Splendid Suns* follows two Afghan women, born two decades apart, whose lives are brought together through a series of largely tragic events

Mariam and Nana lived in the four walls without knowing anything that was happening outside the world. After Nana's death, Mariam started to live in the

house of his father Jalil. She was stranger there and felt lonely in the midst of crowd. She felt as if she did not belong there, and remembered her mother's words, "I'm the only one who loves you. I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing!" (TSS, 27). She was a burden on Jalil and his other three wives. So, they find a suitor, Rasheed, for her who was thrice aged than she was. She did not want to marry such a man, who was already once married. She cried for help but no one listened her. She was forced to accept and hug this tragedy of forced marriage.

A Thousand Splendid Suns follows the lives of Mariam and Laila, the two wives of the brutal and misogynistic Rasheed. Mariam, the illegitimate daughter of an outcast mother, weds the middle-aged Rasheed at the age of fifteen after her mother's suicide. Her father arranges her marriage when his high-ranking family demands that his embarrassment be sent away. Eighteen years and multiple miscarriages later, Mariam becomes a constant target of abuse from Rasheed. The women characters in this novel suppress all their feelings. Mariam endures a lot while Laila tries to raise her voice.

The novel is a tale about the frailty character of strong men and innate strength of frail women. It explores the lives of two unfortunate Afghan women who belong to totally different backgrounds, and are forced to share the same unhappy household. Their tragedies, unwavering endurance, sacrifices, cruelty, rejection by their families and their brutal husband is narrated. They suffer from domestic violence and yet find love, companionship and consolation from each other.

In the Afghan society, women have very different educational experiences. They are not allowed to learn and Mariam's case is no different. She is tutored by Mullah Faizullah only in the Koran and she learns how to read and write. When she asks her mother about going to school, her mother insists that the only lesson that she needs to learn is how to endure. Ultimately, throughout the rest of the novel, Mariam's capacity for endurance is what allows her to survive the horrible conditions and depressing personal losses.

Though initially, Mariam's marriage and the start of their new lives did not seem so terrible, providing an element of hope, but as days passed, things started to worsen. Rasheed was not a kind husband. In the beginning he was happy to have another person in his house especially after the wedding he changed completely. Mariam's miscarriages add to her woes. Rasheed's behavior towards her was reasonably good till Mariam had a miscarriage. She is unable to bear a child due to several miscarriages. With each miscarriage, Rasheed's behavior becomes more brutal, inhuman and distant.

Mariam's permission is not sought when Rasheed marries Laila. In Afghan society, rules are framed in full favour of men. They are allowed to marry many

times as they please and can also divorce their wives when they fall out of favour. Like other woman, Mariam too suffers from similar situation. Her psychological trauma is further increased when she sees Laila sharing her life with Rasheed. She feels unwanted in her husband's house, a condition she had experienced in her father's house. But at the same time, Mariam is grateful to her husband for not throwing her out of the house. Hosseini paints the picture of male dominated society where girls are hated and no more considered worthwhile.

One evening, Rasheed takes the rice, chews it once and promptly spits it out. He shakes the rice angrily from his fingers and pushes the plate away and storms out of the house. He returns with a handful of pebbles and forces her mouth open and stuffs them in and then orders her to chew the pebbles. Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbles a plea. Tears leak out of the concerns of her eyes. In her fear, she does so, breaking the molars in the back of her mouth. He tells her, "Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food and nothing else"(94). Then he goes away, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars.

Mariam's initial anger with Laila is quite natural because she is robbed off her only role in life. Her identity as Rasheed's wife is threatened when a new person enters her life. When she comes to know that Laila is pregnant, she feels inferior to her. Laila lives with varieties of struggle, more bombings, beatings and arguments fill their life. They start fighting even for simple things, but this fight serves as a device to bring them together. Slowly, a friendship develops between the two women. Together, they endure degradation, starvation and brutality at the hands of their husband.

When Laila's second pregnancy makes her and Mariam visit the hospital, they are forced to travel around Kabul due to the shifting of the hospital system, separating men and women into separate hospitals. Only the female staff has been discharged from Kabul's hospitals and there is no clean water, no oxygen, no medicines, and even no electricity. The hospital waiting room is closely packed by women patients and their families. Mariam helps Laila sit down against a wall and assures her that she will be examined by a doctor.

While fighting through the crowd in the waiting room to reach the registration window, Mariam realizes the sacrifices made by a mother. The nurse there informs them that there are only two doctors working in the hospital and they are busy in operations. They have to wait most of the day, in the evening they are called inside and Laila is finally examined by a doctor, wearing a long dark burqa. After examining her closely, she tells Laila that she needs an immediate caesarian section because the baby is breeched and they are late. But there is no anesthesia available for the procedure.

When Laila knows about the lack of anesthesia and that any further delay can harm the baby, Laila just asks the doctor, “Cut me open and give me my baby” (TSS, 259). The doctor goes ahead with the procedure. Laila has to give up her little daughter, Aziza, and put her in an orphanage because Rasheed is unable to feed them all and the girl child is forced to go there. When they place her in the orphanage, Laila and Mariam promise to visit her regularly. In the beginning of Aziza’s stay at the orphanage, Rasheed walks with Mariam, Laila, and Zalmai to the orphanage to visit for 15 minutes. Sometimes, Rasheed starts walking and forces all of them to turn around because he does not want to walk. Then Rasheed begins refusing to go at all.

Women are not allowed out on the streets without a man to accompany them. If they are caught they are beaten and sent home. Since her husband refuses to go with her to visit the child, Laila sneaks out alone. She is often beaten by the Taliban for walking alone. One day a young Taliban beats Laila with a radio antenna. The burqas often protect from the beatings.

One night, Rasheed beats Laila and locks the children up in the room. He puts a gun into Laila’s mouth and Mariam tries her best to move him, but she fails. Suddenly, Mariam shows extreme courage when she runs to the back shed to grab a shovel and uses it to murder her violent husband of almost thirty years in order to save Laila.

In the novel, both the women face a lot of difficulties and struggles in their life that every woman faces in Afghan society. Through this novel, Hosseini pictures the real problems of Afghan society. Struggle is a major unifying concept of Hosseini’s works. They fight till the end but they never give up. Among other problems rape is one of the biggest problems faced by women in Afghanistan. An article published in Washington Post says, “One of the biggest problems at the camps is when the women go out to gather firewood to cook, and they get attacked and raped” (15).

Khaled Hosseini describes in the novel is really unfortunate not for women only but for humanity at large. The Afghan women are really fighting for their existence of being born women. Khaled Hosseini’s canvas is large and beautiful. Hosseini has created the male-dominated patriarchal Muslim world of Afghanistan where women are depressed of equality and freedom.

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