

The role of women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini

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ABSTRACT: The paper is the outcome of my reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by Khaled Hosseini. I read the novel after a gap of 10 years after its publication. I am able not to put in words the impact it had on me. The paper focuses the role of women in the novel. The backdrop of the novel is war zone area of Kabul, Afghanistan. The acute exploitation and torture the women in the novel had endeavored is worth studying. The novel depicts the life of Mariam and Laila which by fate had brought them together as the wives of same man, Rasheed, who torture them, abuse them physically and mentally. I would like to express my views how sisterhood can be a solution to lot of women problems in the world. With the advancing and ever changing modern world we had witnessed the atrocities against women is on ever increasing mode. Women all over the world need to come together and raise our voice together.

Keywords: Sisterhood, Patriarchal, Exploitation, Solidarity

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I. THE STUDY

Khaled Hosseini's second *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is indeed mesmerizing and quite scary. I have just completed the novel recently. I wish I had read the novel earlier. The struggle and the fight for existence by the women across the globe are not new. For centuries women have been struggling for existence. But the flavor Hosseini adds is quite remarkable and breathtaking. Every page is suspense and he is able to create it till the last page of the novel. The story focuses around the main protagonist Mariam and her ultimate liberation, in killing Rasheed saving four lives, Laila, Aziza, Zalmai and Tariq. The study is purely on the basis of women representation provided in the novel.

II. MARIAM

"Mariam was five years old the first time she heard the word "*harami*" (3), this is how the main protagonist of the novel was introduced. One could anticipate the life she is going to live in the coming pages of the novel. "*Harami*" is a strong swearing word an outcast, an unwanted by the family and by the society. Mariam in the beginning is not even aware why she was addressed with that name, until one knows the meaning of the word it has a lesser impact but with maturity the word started burdening Mariam's life. She was single handedly brought up by her mother Nana with occasional visit by her biological father, Jalil. Though her father did shower lot of love whenever he comes to visit her, Mariam did want more from her father. Jalil never had the guts to accept her legally. Nana had tried to reason out Mariam many times that life is not as rosy as it seems but young Mariam never pay heed to it. Once her mother told her that, "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). She later realized what her mother told. How true the statement was, the writer in spite of being a man is able to bring out the sensitivity of women's issue. No matter what the cause of the problem, it's the women who pay the price, and later when Mariam was married to Rasheed, she was going to encounter abuses every moment of her married life till her execution.

The relationship Rasheed and Mariam is worth studying to understand the inner engineering of Mariam why she ultimately killed him later in the story. There is an age gap of thirty years of difference between them. Rasheed is almost like a father figure to Mariam. She is naïve by the time of her marriage. She has known only Jalil and Mullah Faizullah who were nice and protective of her. During her initial marriage with Rasheed, he took care of her and the only reason behind was he wanted a son and to satisfy his sexual needs. Later with miscarriages after miscarriages, he started treating her like dirt, Mariam's happiness was short lived. He has insisted wearing a burqa and talk about "honor and namoos, their honor and pride" (69). He talked about pride and honor but hid dirty magazines in his drawer. But Mariam justified saying that he is a man after all, and after

having lived alone for years, his needs are different from hers. She is always there satisfying his lust as well as his needs. Mariam being 'harami' is one big reason that makes her powerless to stand up for herself and controls her for much of her life.

III. LAILA

Laila is a young intelligent, spirited girl from a loving family, growing up down the street from Rasheed's and Mariam's house. Laila's mother is disturbed since her older brother's left family to join the holy war. She never bothers about Laila and her husband and is obsessed with her sons' sacrifice. Laila seeks comfort from her best friend Tariq, a boy a few years older than her. People in the country seek refuge in Pakistan but Mammy is unwilling to leave. Tariq tells Laila that he and his family are fleeing to Pakistan but Laila was reluctant to leave his father and go ahead with them. Days later, Laila's parents also decide to leave Afghanistan, but as they are packing, a bomb hits their house, killing Laila's parents and wounding her badly.

When Laila enters in the life of Mariam, she was already hardened and was just living a physical abuses life without any meaning. Laila is different from Mariam. She is educated and quite confident with her thinking as well as her body. When she agreed to marry Rasheed, she was only fourteen and completely aware what she is asking for in the marriage. She wanted to protect the child that was conceived out of the wedlock with her beloved Tariq. She knew very well that without her parents and her beloved she will have hard time living alone in Kabul. Laila became a companion in bearing the physical, psychological and sexual torture of Rasheed. Though the marriage between her and Rasheed has worsened the condition of Mariam, but later it did turn out to be a good for Mariam. Whenever there was problem between Laila and Rasheed, Mariam used to pay for it. One fateful night when Rasheed was beating Mariam with belt, Laila came up in rescue of Mariam:

"No! Don't do this!"

"Now!"

Rasheed raised the belt again and this time came at Mariam.

Then an astonishing thing happened: The girl lunged at him. She grabbed his arm with both hands and tried to drag him down, but she could no more than dangle from it. She did succeed in slowing Rasheed's progress towards Mariam.

...

"You win. You win. Don't do this. Please, Rasheed, no beating! Please don't do this."(235)

The whole episode had a great impact upon Laila as well as Mariam. Mariam for the first time in her life found someone who stood for her. Laila on the other hand stood up for someone since she cannot bear injustice. With this a new bond was formed between Mariam and Laila, thus bringing them together, a sisterhood in struggle. Laila tries to run away from Rasheed's house only to be brought back by the police. Laila became hell for both after that incident. But Laila is not a type of woman to give up that easily. And with the coming of Taliban things became worse in Rasheed's family. Years later, Laila gives birth to a son, Zalmai and Rasheed was absorbed with his son and doesn't care about others in the family. Suddenly when Tariq turn up in her doorstep, she realized that Rasheed had sent Abdul Shariff to trap her. However, Rasheed finds out from Zalmai that Tariq came home and brutally begins to beat Laila. The two women see death in his eyes, and with a shovel Mariam kills Rasheed. Mariam takes the blame on herself, turns herself over to the Taliban to bear the consequences. She clears the way for Laila to find refuge for herself and her children in Pakistan with Tariq. Mariam gives in, as she finally finds love in Laila and her children. Laila lived the new life that Mariam gave her. When things are better in Kabul, she insists that her family move back home so they can help rebuild their city. Laila visits Mariam's old home and is able to relate to Mariam's talk about her Kolba, she comes to terms with her grief over Mariam's execution. Laila and Tariq build a new life in Kabul. Laila becomes a schoolteacher, and works in the orphanage where Aziza once lived. And when Laila becomes pregnant, she decides that if she has a girl, she'll name her Mariam.

IV. NANA

Nana, mother of Mariam role in the novel is less, but she is present throughout the novel. Mariam later in her life was able to connect more with her mother and the guilty feeling that she left her mother for Jalil only to be betrayed and ultimate suicide had left a deep impact in Mariam's life. She has always tried to protect Mariam in the best of her capability. But one mistake she did was not sending Mariam to school. That became the biggest drawback and hurdles for Mariam's growth and development. When Mullah Faizullah insisted that Mariam should go to school Nana out rightly rejected the idea of sending her daughter to school.

"Learn? Learn what, Mullah sahib?" Nana said sharply. "What's there to learn?" She snapped her eyes towards Mariam..."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 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)

“Endure” the words echoes in the ears of Mariam later in her life. Though, hearing the words sounded harsh for those who are reading the inner line meaning that Nana wanted to convey is quite true. Nana knew that women like her have no value in the Afghan society and ultimately they have the power to endure the harsh treatment of the men. Later Mariam remember her mother word “Endure” which works like an ointment healing the wound that Rasheed inflicted everyday of her married life.

The life of Nana surrounds around Mariam and went she ran away from home to be with Jalil, she found her life valueless to live and chose death over being alive in grief over the lost of her daughter. The relationship between mother and daughter is little strange. Though they love each other. There is a vacuumed that is created due to misunderstanding or communication gap. Nana could have been a strong pillar for Mariam and would act like a shield from the unwanted marriage. As a mother she should have given education which could empower her daughter life. A mother plays an important role in the life of a daughter and a daughter look up to their mother for moral support; unfortunately it did not happen with Mariam. She has only given the way to endure only bear it no matter what, she has not given voice to her daughter.

Jalil’s Three Wives

The three wives of Jalil are actually responsible for Mariam’s fate. They knew very well that their husband was responsible for Mariam entry to their life. But they never accepted her or Nana. They condemn and look down upon her and treated her like dirt. They hurried married her off to Rasheed knowing the fact Mariam was only fifteen years old like their own daughter. They could have given her education and little space in their big home. Rasheed was forty –five years old a widower. “You can’t spend the rest of your life here” (47) was the verdict they gave when she said that she is not ready for marriage. They did not make the brief stay comfortable for Mariam. Thus, the three wives sealed the fate of Mariam. Women sometimes are responsible for the sufferings of other women. Rather than becoming a source of support and solidarity, they turn out to be the oppressor.

Aziza

The young Aziza is much loved by her mother Laila and her aunt Mariam. She represent the young Afghan women with full of confident, equipped with power of education and well protected upbringing. Rasheed tried his level best to destroy the life of Aziza by sending her to orphanage home. But fate has a different plan for her. When her biological father Tariq came back in her life things changed for her. Tariq and Laila provided all the opportunity for her to become a better person through education.

Sisterhood

Mariam used to struggle alone and there was no one to look upon until Lalia enters her life, “Over the years, Mariam had learned to harden herself against his scorn and reproach, his ridiculing and reprimanding. But this fear she had no control over” (234). They used to do all the household work together. Sharing becomes a part of both their lives including the beating and abuses from Rasheed. Mariam was never wanted by anybody, but in Lalia, she found a friend, a sister-in-law by marriage and a sister in women solidarity. Mariam was having a life and with Aziza a sense of belonging and motherhood. The cup of tea shared between them was the most wonderful moment of both the sister.

Then Aziza passed gas in her sleep. Laila began to laugh, and Mariam joined in. They laughed like this, at and the moment was so natural, so effortless, that suddenly Mariam started telling her about Jalil, and Nana, and the jinn. (249)

For the first time Mariam found someone who will not passed a comment or being judgmental. She found an inner strength in Laila. When Lalia was giving birth to the second baby, the situation was worse since by that time Taliban had already occupied Kabul. Things were very difficult for women. Mariam tried her level best to make it better for Laila. She was proud for Laila with the fact that she went ahead to give birth to the baby without any anesthesia, “Cut me open and give me my baby” (283).

The real test of sisterhood came into the picture later in the novel, with the arrival of Tariq. The chapter entitled “Mariam” Chapter 45 is very crucial to understand the nuances of Mariam and her action. Laila and Mariam struggled together against the advancing Rasheed and his belt. Both fought ferociously against the bullied Rasheed but he caught Laila by her neck and threw her up in the ceiling. Then he attacked Mariam but Laila hit him with a glass, “There was blood on Laila’s hands, blood flowing from the open gash on Rasheed’s check, blood down his neck, on his shirt” (339). Somehow when Rasheed managed to catch hold of Lalia and he was trying to throttle her. Mariam was scared that he was going to kill Laila. She cannot allow Rasheed to kill Laila; he had taken so many things from Mariam. Without thinking for the consequence, she raised the shovel and “hit him across the temple” (340). She managed to killed Rasheed. There is no repentance in Mariam. For

once she did something worthwhile in saving the life of another sister. She made Laila flee with the children and Tariq to Pakistan, thus saving the life of four lives, embracing the death penalty bravely. Twenty-seven years of marriage has given her only suffering, physical and sexual abuses. Life was a living hell for Mariam until Laila. Laila later did come back to Kabul once again to help the downtrodden women and to educate and give empowerment to women. Laila and Mariam become one. In every woman there is either Laila or Mariam or the mixture of both. We can rightly say that Laila is the 'Alter Ego' of Mariam.

V. CONCLUSION

The women depicted in the novel are from devastated war zone area, where people are struggling to meet their ends meet. In spite of the fact that they are not sure when the next bomb is coming, male chauvinism still prevail. Through Nana, Mariam and Laila, the pathetic inner life of the Afghan women is depicted. Mariam and Nana have accepted the subjugation and oppression and hiding their voice, But ultimately, Mariam in voicing out for Laila, she found her inner strength and for once she was her own master in killing Rasheed in order to save Laila. Women need to voice out and work together to bring about changes. One should not be a passive receiver of the crime being committed upon them. The novel ends with the hope that Laila might bring about certain changes, running away is not a solution. But fighting against the unwanted subjugation and oppression is the solution. The main discrimination the women character undergoes through the patriarchal norms in the novel are:

*Sexual violence and physical abuse in the name of marriage.

*subjugation and subordinate by force marriage, preference of boy child over girl baby, women are not allowed to walk freely without an escort or her husband.

*Stereotype that women are weak, submissive should obey husband irrespective of illogical demands.

*Marginalization from education and medical facilities when Laila was denied medical assistant during the birth of her second baby.

The stringent social norms of women especially in Afghanistan with reference to the novel are responsible for the maximum atrocities. The oppression depicted in the novel is not necessary of Kabul only. This kind of a story of crime against women is same everywhere. Subjugation and oppression upon women is and aged old story but it is still relevant today. The love and companionship they had for each other became the source of strength. "Sisterhood" among women can be a strong weapon to fight against injustice, violence and atrocities against women in general. Women have long been silence and it's time to wake up, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is one such among many works of literature that voice for women solidarity.

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