

---

## Study of Marginalized Afghan Women in Khaled Hosseini's

### *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Siddhant  
M. Phil. Scholar  
Dept. of English  
K.U. Kurukshetra

#### Abstract

The aim of this research is to illustrate the marginalized and the downtrodden conditions of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. An attempt has been made to briefly overview the marginalized condition and sufferings of women in Afghanistan. Women are marginalized and subjugated thoroughly in the world history. The male supremacy is deep-seated phenomenon in a patriarchal society and the consequent relegation of women to a marginal position encouraged Khaled Hosseini to write such novel. The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* explores the frustration and disappointment of two women who experience the repression in the male dominated society. Laila and Mariam, two main characters of the novel raise their protest against the male dominated Afghan society, where women are denied their freedom to act. The male ego of her husband Rasheed subjugated Laila and Mariam psychologically and physically.

**Key words:** Gender inequality, Patriarchy, Violence, Marginalized.

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-born American novelist and doctor by profession. He wrote three novels entitled *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*. Hosseini deals with the history of Afghanistan and his native land in all the three novels. He shows the struggles of the people of Afghan in various perspectives in each of his novels such as the childhood perspective in *The Kite Runner*, womanhood or feministic perspective in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and a perspective of family reunion in *And the Mountains Echoed*.

Hosseini's second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is taken for the present study to delineate the factors that marginalize Afghan women through the social, political and religious

---

---

restrictions unwillingly forced upon them in male dominated society. Hosseini explores the present state of social exclusion of the Afghan women through the characters of Mariam and Laila in the novel.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the second novel which talks about an unforgiving time, an unlikely friendship, and an indestructible love. The story is a narrative told from the perspectives of the two women characters, Mariam and Laila. They shows how they were raised, what they lost as the result of war, and how in the end, their strength and enduring hope helped them face their fate.

When the novel starts, readers come to know about the word ‘Harami’ used for Meriam which means Illegitimate. How one can be a ‘Harami’ and who has the right to decide and who have given them the right to decide that, one is ‘Harami’ or not. It’s only a hypocritical opinion of the people who believes that they have the possession to use such kind of words especially for women and girl children. It’s very painful to see that such discrimination still exists in twentieth century.

In the novel we observe that Meriam craves for her own Identity. Meriam on her fifteenth birthday asks her father Jalil to take her with him, at his home with the other family members. So that she can play with them, watch movie, attend school with her cousins: “And I want you to invite my brothers and sisters too. I want to meet them. I want us all go together. It’s what I want.”(Hosseini 26).

The period of the rise of the Mujahideen underscores changing conditions especially for the women of Afghanistan. Brian Forst asserts: “The mujahideen of Afghanistan developed a distinctive aura of heroism for standing up bravely against a vastly larger and more technologically sophisticated Soviet military power in the 1980” (112). While the Mujahideen are looked up as heroic, but their rule was not good for women. During their control, the soviet decrees about equality no longer hold true and this has harsh consequences for the female population. Murders and rapes of women took place under this regime of violence. Laila is not able to go out alone and is always accompanied by Tariq. It is also during this regime that

---

Rasheed decides to marry Laila. The particulars of the matter are self-explanatory. Rasheed wants to marry Laila even though he is around sixty now and Laila hardly fourteen; it has been eighteen years since Rasheed married Mariam, and now he desires the beautiful and educated Laila as his bride. Mariam, of course, is unhappy but being a woman, she knows too well that she cannot convince Rasheed. Paradoxically, it is Mariam who is forced to convey Rasheed's decision to the young girl. Fourteen year old Laila is Rasheed's third wife; she is still expected to be a virgin, to have an intact hymen. The young Laila being familiar with this knowledge adds more commenting on the standing of women in a patriarchal set up. The life and death emphasis on virginity is applicable only to women but employment of the rule is so rigorous that the consequences for a woman who is not a virgin at the time of her marriage are unforgiving. This necessitate Laila's hiding of a knife beneath the mattress with which she cuts her finger causing it to leave blood on the matrimonial sheets in order that Rasheed will think that she is a virgin, her hymen has just ruptured-and that the child she is bearing is his own. This act also symbolizes the false nature of the marriage between Rasheed and Laila. It adumbrates the lies that she will continue to tell Rasheed. This draws a stark contrast between the true love shared by Laila and Tariq and the social construction of marriage that Laila enters into out of desperation for her unborn child, which further exemplifies that their marriage has no element of respect or partnership.

Although Mariam's marriage to Rasheed is a saga of constant violence of all kinds physical, sexual and emotional and psychological, two incidents of physical violence stand out noticeably in this context. The first occurs when Laila and Mariam decide to run away to Peshawar in Pakistan to escape the violence of their common husband, Rasheed. The attempt to flee ends in fiasco as the two women cannot travel alone and the man that they trust betrays them and absconds with their money. They are arrested and sent back to their husband. Therefore, the Mujahideen members seize them and send them back to the same man that they were trying to run away from. Khaled Hosseini describes in details the physical violence that follows when Laila and Mariam reach home in a police car guarded by a Mujahideen soldier. Laila tries to protect Mariam from Rasheed and the latter kicks and punches Laila and her little daughter, Aziza without any thought to her protests. Khaled Hosseini describes the scene as Laila sees it:

---

Then she was being dragged by the hair, she saw Aziza lifted, saw her sandals slip off, her tiny feet kicking. Hair was ripped off from Laila's scalp, and her eyes watered with pain. She saw his foot kick open the door to Mariam's room, saw Aziza flung onto the bed. He let go of Laila's hair, and she felt the toe of his shoe connect with her left buttock. She howled with pain as he slammed the door shut. A key rattled in the lock Aziza was still screaming. (240)

The unfortunate child is also not spared of Rasheed's heedless torture. Both mother and child bear the brunt of his anger for the criminal act of trying to escape from him. Mariam's beating begins downstairs and this is observed by readers through Laila's vision:

To Laila, the sounds she heard were those of a methodical, familiar proceeding, there was no cursing, no screaming, no pleading, no surprised yelps, only the systematic business of beating and being beaten, the thump, thump, of something solid repeatedly striking flesh. (240)

This indicates that beatings and their sounds are a common happening in this house and having suffered at the hands of Rasheed very often Mariam is hardened to these in such a way that she does not beg for mercy or even scream in pain. However, this is not enough to satisfy Rasheed's fury. Later:

She saw Rasheed leading Mariam across the yard, by the nape of her neck. Mariam was barefoot and doubled over. There was blood on his hands, blood on Mariam's face, her hair, down her neck and back. Her shirt had been ripped down the front. (240)

The articulation of these details, Hosseini helps the reader realize the degree of violence that the two women, particularly Mariam, are subjected to. Rasheed imprisons both separately for three days without food and water. Also, he has no mercy for the little girl, Aziza, his daughter. Aziza and her mother are left in the heat of Afghanistan without a drop of water. All Laila's pleas for mercy, for at least a glass of water for the dying baby are ignored by Rasheed. Finally, on the third day, they are released from the trauma after warnings and threats against

---

repeating the crime of running away, and not before a final act of violence. Khaled Hosseini recounts: But not before delivering a kick to the flank that would have Laila passing blood for days (243). In this way one can see that all the three females suffer brutal consequences at the hands of a merciless man, Rasheed.

Another horrible instance is depicted through the condition of hospitals of women when the Talibs insist that men and women would be treated in separate hospitals, the hospital in Rabia Balkhi is a horrendous place for medication as most of the funds and facilities were being diverted to the men's hospitals. A horde of women pushing and shoving each other for their turn makes Mariam fight her way to the front of the melee for Laila's turn of delivery. The scene is a heart rending one as there is groaning, somebody bleeding, women shrieking, so that some doctor could attend them. There are only two doctors and when finally Mariam could make it to a doctor; she tells her that Laila has to be operated for the baby to come out a caesarian the only possibility. The doctor also discloses her helpless state when she tells that there was no X-ray, suction, oxygen or simple antibiotics, and moreover the doctors would have to perform the operation in their burqa. This incident gives a picture of the Talib's inhuman and biased attitude towards women.

Condition of women's in prison are also not good, Mariam refers to one of the prisoners Naghma during her trial period. Mariam learns from Naghma that her father had promised her to a tailor, thirty years older than her. She tried eloping with Gardez, son of a mullah whom she loved. When they were caught, Gardez repented and said that Naghma had cast a spell on him. Naghma was sentenced for five years while Gardez was freed on condition that he would spend the rest of his life reading the Holy Scriptures. At this juncture, Mariam remembers Nana's words: "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman."(7)

The author gives a forceful portrait of despotism where women are dependent on fathers, husbands and especially sons, the bearing of male children being their only path to an accepted social status. Each woman in the end is forced to accept a path that will never be completely happy for them: Mariam will have to sacrifice her life to save Laila after she murders their

---

husband while Laila, even though marrying her childhood love, must find a way to keep the sacrifice Mariam has made from not becoming an act done in vain.

The theme of Marginalization is one of the important aspects of the novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The term marginalization is referred as the social process by which a person or a group of people are made marginal or become relegated to the fringe or at the edge of society. It occurs when people are sub lined from a society, usually as an effect of discrimination making the person stand out and look at everyone from a distance. They consequently feel alone and left out from the rest of society.

While analyzing the cause for the rise of the problem of marginalization imposed over the Afghan women by the patriarchal society we are able to trace the reasons by studying the three different aspects of social, political and religious background of the Afghan history with reference to the continuous struggle faced by the two female protagonists Mariam and Laila throughout the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

There are certain instances of religious violation in the novel. In the novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Mariam is forced to marry Rasheed, a shoemaker from Kabul who is thirty years elder than her by the wives of her father while they allowed her half-sisters Saideh and Naheed both of her own age were students in the Mehri school in Herat. This compulsion of making a girl of fifteen forcibly enter into a marriage contract is an aspect regarding to the violation of the personal law of an individual. (47)

Instances of strict dress codes in the novel are Rasheed inspite of his imperfect rude ways as a husband insists his wives Mariam and Laila to wear a *burqa* when they go out from their home; and the Taliban's insistence of making the women, as a rule to wear a *burqa* even during the time of delivery, in which they were severely beaten at the violation of it.

Secondly, the influence of social norms next to religion in marginalizing the Afghan women is being analyzed. It is the society along with religion is an inter-connected, inseparable

---

aspect which plays a vital role in shaping the morality of an individual to lead a peaceful life. Accordingly importance of society in the contribution of defining the terms of the rights and equality of women is inevitable.

There are certain instances of social violations in the novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, in relation to the domination of the patriarchal society over the innocent and helpless women.

Men like Jalil Khan, Mariam's father and Rasheed her husband are allowed to get married many times as they wish, while in both the cases they remain unaffected and it is the poor women folk being affected physically and mentally in their silent acceptance of the violations of their own family, which ruins not only the affected individual members but the peace and happiness of the entire family is one of the example of the male dominated society and Rasheed's compulsion of Mariam and Laila, to agree to his decision of marrying Laila, when he is at the age of her grandfather, while she is being sheltered in his home soon after her mental and physical recovery from her severe injuries and the loss of her parents caused to her during the civil war is yet another instance of the violation of personal law of polygamy for their own comfort.

Rasheed's decision of sending Aziza, the girl child to the orphanage while Zalmai was allowed to remain at home provided with all comforts, at the time of draught during the rule of the Taliban's, is yet another instance of giving preference only to the male child in the patriarchal society.

### **Conclusion**

Through the study of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* one can see the conditions of women. Country like Afghan, a male dominated nation, takes no pain to see the awful condition of women. Women of Afghanistan are marginalized and sidelined from the main stream of society. Khaled Hosseini through Merriam and Laila shows the horrible and ghastly pictures of Afghan women. Khaled Hosseini finds a dig at the patriarchal and orthodox stereotypes who do not allow women to stand equal to their male counterpart. Simon de Beauvoir also lashes at the manmade societal set up which scuttles the intrinsic growth of women. She in this context opines "A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong." (15)

---

**Works Cited:**

1. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage Classics, 1997. Print.
2. Forst, Brian. *Terrorism, Crime and Public Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Print.
3. Hosseini Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. London: Bloomsbury Publishers, 2007. Print.
4. Sthur, Rebecca. *Reading Khaled Hosseini*. California: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2009. Print.