

Endurance of Women in Afghan Society in Khaled Hosseini's

A Thousand Splendid Suns

(Book review)

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Women's condition in Afghan society as depicted by Khaled Hosseini in his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is miserable. This novel focuses on how the women are victims of the patriarchal despotism, and also explores on the endurance as a typical characteristics of women in Afghan society.

Khaled Hosseini (2007) depicts the plight of Afghan women realistically in his novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It is about "the tragedy of Mariam's life. Rather it is better to say that this is the unavoidable destiny of many women. A woman is exploited everywhere" (Jana, 2013 P.7). Afghan women are living a pitiable life not only because of patriarchal social structure but also because of the war and crisis even in the 21st century. The women have been treated indifferently and have become major sufferers during the time of Russian invasion in Afghanistan. It is a story of women's sufferings and endurance on the one hand, and hopes and struggle for living on the other. Hosseini (2007) depicts a pathetic life situation of women, as he writes about the condition of a major female character of the novel; "Nana has been one of the housekeepers. Until her belly to swell"(P. 6). Nana's daughter, Mariam and her husband Rasheed's second wife Laila suffer a lot; but both of them have an unbelievable endurance to tolerate even in the difficult situation.

Women have a typical quality of endurance even in the most difficult situation, as Nana says, "It's our lot in life, Mariam, women like us. We endure. It's all we have" (Hosseini, 2007, P. 18). Both Mariam and Laila, who were forced to marry Rasheed, had to face the same problem being physically and mentally oppressed from him. They make a mutual bond to support each other and try to resist over the extreme form of domination. They were the victims of patriarchy at the domestic level manifested as the domestic violence on the one hand, and the socio-cultural Taliban rule on the other.

During Taliban's tenure, women were treated inhumanely. Sharia Law⁺⁺⁺⁺⁺ was enforced which restricted women from enjoying their fundamental natural rights.

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Women were discriminated, marginalized, and they had no rights to enjoy their fundamental rights which resulted a deteriorating socio-economic situation of women in the areas controlled by Taliban. Women were forced to put on Burqa all the times. During those days, there was severe gender discrimination. They were allowed to study. Women could only read Quran and that too, until the age of 8. After 8, they were strictly prohibited to get education. Some of the restrictions according to Sharia Law against the women as quoted by Hosseini (2007) in the novel are:

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. (P.271)

Women have been forced to tolerate exploitation and tyranny by the males. Males' heart is cruel against women as Nana told Mariam;

A man's heart is a wretched thing. Mariam, it is not like a mother's womb. It won't bleed. It won't stretch to make room for you. I'm the only 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're nothing. (P. 27)

As Hosseini (2007) writes the socio-cultural system itself has discriminated the women. The birth of a son is supposed to be taken as the doorway to heaven as he writes: "Boy is better, Mariam jan, they carry the family name-- " (P. 66) Hosseini illustrates how political aggression and the influence of power in Afghanistan that keep changing right from the invasion of Russian troops to the post Taliban tenure affects in the socio-cultural system that created the oppression upon the women. Due to warfare, women have always been compelled to face the oppression either by government or society and above all males themselves as Mariam told Nana "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always." (Hosseini, 2007, P. 7)

The sexual exploitation with physical torture has also been shown in the novel Rasheed terrorizes his wife as Hosseini (2007) writes;
All these years and still she shivered with fright when he was like this, sneering, tightening the belt around his fist, the creaking of the leather, the glint in his bloodshot

*****The code of law derived from the Koran and from the teachings and example of Mohammed

eyes. It was the fear of the goat, released in the tiger's cage, when the tiger first looks up from its paws, begins to growl. (P. 145)

During the reign of Taliban from 1996 to 2001, women had to tolerate worse situation than in any other time or by any other society. The Taliban started implementing the traditional fundamentalist Islamic ideology that caused an institutionalized system of gender discrimination that limited the women only inside the house. Under the rules of Taliban all the natural rights of the women were completely denied as mentioned in the novel;

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 a maharam, a male relative. If you are caught alone in the street, you will be beaten and sent home. (Hosseini, 2007. P. 271)

The story of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* records thirty years of Afghan history along with miserable condition of women, indifference of the authorities towards the suffering and deteriorated life they are bound to live in. Many women were abducted and given to others as slaves or forced into marriage, dragged into prostitution and raped. Sexual violence has been easily accepted in society. The males were legitimized oppressor in the name of social control. The women became major sufferers due to violence, cruelty, brutality, and oppression that were perpetrated by the ruling authorities. Ketu H Katrak (2006) writes, "women bear the worse violence in these horrific events in terms of violence on their bodies-rape and dislocation of home, family and community" (P.113).

Mariam and Laila, in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, represent typically Afghan women who are marginalized and are often treated as the possession, the objects or pets. They are restricted to take part in socio-cultural and political activities. They are blamed and even punished for the offence they have not committed. The law of the country turned against them and exercised male domination as a legitimized system of the country.

Mariam and Laila had different upbringings, yet, they have same fate, sharing same abusive husband and marital oppression. Mariam connects Aziza as her own reflection; Aziza has also become *Harami* like Mariahm and Laila who became companion to endure the torture that Rasheed imposed. They both share sadness of losing their most loved ones.

Mariam is shown a matured Afghan woman who knows well how to tolerate in any unfavourable situation that she has to face in her life. She is full of patience; she has endured her mother's suicide, her father's deception, mismatching husband, unimaginable marital life, constant poverty and lifelong physical and mental burden. Still she seems peaceful and hopeful for the days that she thinks will come with all joy,

freedom and happiness. She tries to fulfil the dream of Laila as her own dream. While, on the other hand, Laila represents later generation in Afghanistan who understands the value of education, women rights, who dreams of freedom in the land where Taliban restricts even for a very fundamental needs of women. But she also becomes helpless due to the widespread war and scattered family. She does not have any rights of resisting the system directly but she tries to do so by avoiding such culture and new law and escape to Pakistan to struggle for existence. Mariam and Laila two different characters in Hosseini's novel portraits two distinct quality and personality which may not be powerful when counted individual, but becomes really strong when they are put together. Laila tried to give Mariam new life. Mariam, who had become aimless, finds her life is worthy when she becomes the mother of Laila and Aziza. The repressed emotion was turning as her strengths each day she saw Laila troubled by her husband. Finally, she surpassed her fear of being beaten severely or murdered and resisted directly when it was on the life and death of Laila. Laila's education had made her alert about the present situation of women in Afghanistan. She become logical putting forward her views. She symbolizes modern Afghan women who dreams of equality, talks about women rights and dares to cross the patriarchal boundary. She presents different worldview to look at which gradually turned Mariam into a different woman than what was she defined or acted differently than she was expected. Laila learnt a lot of things from Mariam, knew how to raise children and have control over her own emotion with the help of Mariam. She finds herself safe near Mariam despite all torture and violence upon her. The closeness and unity of Mariam and Laila becomes strength for Afghan women who seem to be tolerating, hopeful and ultimately powerful to fight against the males.

As described above, Hosseini presented the difficult life situation of women who have been suffering a lot in Afghan society in this novel. Women are the victims of both domestic violence and cultural domination.

There are many factors responsible for having such gender biasness in Afgan societies. Afghan society has been affected by its long time war and internal conflict. It has more impacts upon the lives of women. Women have the capacity to endure all difficult situations they face in the family and in their society as Hosseini has depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. They struggle hard with the hope for better tomorrow. The main characters of Hosseini's novel, both Mariam and Laila show their quality of endurance. Afghan society practises domestic violence against women and that is taken normally. If the husband cannot control women, he is taken as a coward in front of other males. If the woman attempts to revolt against it, the society takes it negatively and attacks her; that attack becomes legitimized and women have to tolerate. That is how the women have been living there.

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