

Gender Bias Crossways Borders: With Reference to Khaled Hosseini's a Thousand Splendid Suns

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Abstract: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Afghan writer Khaled Hosseini is an example of portrayal of life of women in Afghanistan. The struggle and oppression in the lives of two Afghan women are shown in this novel. Centers on the friendship between Mariam and Laila, the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* describes the cruelty and problems faced by Afghani women in their daily life. With the setting of Afghanistan, the novelist has taken the last thirty three years of that country's tumultuous history of war and oppression and told it on an intimate scale through these two characters. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is set against the background of Afghanistan's recent history. The novel, which spans Afghan history from before the Soviet war until after Taliban rule, has been said by critics to be even better than the Hosseini's critically acclaimed *The Kite Runner*. Khaled Hosseini's second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is written from a third person's point of view. In his novels, he speaks out and reveals the true face of the society. His novels are highly popular and critically appreciated.

Key words: family, history, policies, physical, spiritual

I. Introduction

"The human rights of women throughout the Middle East and North Africa are systematically denied by each of the countries in the region, despite the diversity of their political systems" (Listverse). In countries such as Iran, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia family matters are governed by religion-based personal ranking policies. Most of these legal rules regard women basically as inferiors under the never-ending custody of their male family members. Men enjoy the legal status of 'head of household' who has the right to do decision-making in families. These concepts are held up by family courts in the countries that often emphasize the dominance of male decision-making power.

Khaled Hosseini was born in Northern Kabul, Afghanistan. He is a novelist and also a practicing Physician, currently residing in California. His first novel *The Kite Runner* was very much praised by the readers and it was translated into plays. It was also released as a Hollywood film. His second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was published in June 2007. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, describes the nation's condition as a result of decades of turmoil. He crafts the story of two strong Afghan women of different ages from different areas whose lives intersect for a while. The novel, which spans Afghan history since post Soviet war until Taliban rule, has been said by critics to be even better than the Hosseini's critically acclaimed first novel, *The Kite Runner*.

Khaled Hosseini in his novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has depicted the pitiable conditions of women living in Afghanistan. The author has beautifully portrayed the characters in the novel. The author brings out the strict Islamic laws practiced by Afghan women and the torture they tolerate in daily life. Like his first novel *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* too is set against the background of Afghanistan's recent history. The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* centers on the friendship between Mariam and Laila. It is split into four parts, with a focus on Mariam as an illegitimate child in the first part, continuing with Laila in the second part who is a generation younger than Mariam, and the relationship between the two women, in the third part. In the last part they travel in their separate paths. The book's title is taken from a poem written about Kabul by the seventeenth century poet Saib-e-Tabrizi. The title symbolizes that Mariam is in Laila's own heart and she shines with a bursting radiance of a thousand suns.

The novel follows the lives of two women characters Mariam and Laila who struggle due to the violent nature of their husband. Both the women characters are treated badly and are abused physically, sexually and emotionally. Continuous sufferings make them lose all hope in life. Stress, fear and anxiety make Mariam to take an extreme step like murdering her own husband and Laila to flee the country.

Mariam studies at home tutored by Mullah Faizullah because in Afghan society, women are not allowed to learn. She learns Koran and also to read and write. She tries to convince her mother to admit her to go to school but her mother advises that as a girl she should need to learn how to endure. As she was an illegitimate daughter she was called 'Harami'. After her mother's death 16yr old Mariam was married to Rasheed who was half the age elder to her. He tells her to act like his wife and stop crying all the time. The law of Afghanistan orders

women to wear the burqa. As Mariam had never worn a burqa before Rasheed says that "a woman's face is her husband's business only" (69). Mariam wears the burqa out in town for the first time and finds it frustrating to move and see in the garment.

"Sex," he says, "is such a taboo subject in Afghanistan, but it's a need or a means to something, and I wanted to write about these women in the full scope of their lives, spiritual and physical. In a society where invisibility is modesty, this is scandalous." Also, Hosseini refuses to treat the burqa as a cliché for the repression of women. "For the urban women, the burqa was a disaster," he says, "but in the villages, many women wear it by choice, and this is the least of their problems, even though it's so visible to the West." (Louisa 34)

Rasheed marries his neighbour Laila as Mariam couldn't bear a child. In Afghan society if a woman commit adultery they slay her and the child has to suffer this shame throughout his or her life. As Laila was expecting her beloved Tariq's child she agrees to marry Rasheed as she wanted society to acknowledge the child as Rasheed's instead of calling it 'Harami'. After the fall of the government people had hope for liberty when Taliban came to rule. But when they announced the strict rules and the hope of the people once again dies. The Taliban beat the women who laughed in public and who neglected to wear burqa. All schools for girls were closed and women were not allowed to go for works. Laila couldn't believe the forced house arrest of women. Women suffered physically and mentally during Taliban rule. Without any hope they surrender them to their husband. After the arrival of Taliban the condition became worst. The Afghan women were treated like insignificant creatures. Universities and museums are ravaged, and artifacts and books were also destroyed. Cinema theaters were also closed and they feel there was no entertainment in their society. The Taliban force destroyed everything.

All the women characters in this novel struggle in their life. Rasheed abuses Laila when he finds that she has delivered a girl baby. In Afghanistan, a woman's value has been measured by her ability to bear children especially boys. Laila obeys her husband as he often warns both herself and child of sending out to the streets. Mariam would have never gained strength to fight against Rasheed if she had not gained confidence and affection from Laila. Mariam proves that she is equal to a thousand splendid suns. It is a powerful novel that touches deep into reader's heart. Throughout the novel women are treated very poorly with little or no respect and have no rights to decision making either in society or at home. Men are far superior to women in Afghan society. Despite all these hardships for women, Mariam and Laila are able to overcome these struggles and live their lives in a satisfactory, successful way in the end.

After the attacks on the United States on 11 September, 2001, Afghan women suddenly gained high visibility all over the world. A number of novels and fiction were written about Afghan women and it is the center of the story. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* owing to its vast popularity and high readership among the Western readers. The social participation of Afghan women in the same periods reveals the capability of Afghan women to fight, to survive the war, to restore their basic rights, and to motivate other women to contribute for shaping their own lives.

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. They always work on land and they don't have proper education. Their roles are of women are restricted to wives and mothers, and they maintain agricultural routine for their economic purpose, particularly planting and weeding, animal husbandry, and craft production. These play an important role in their day-to-day activities. In terms of wearing burqa in rural areas, the burqa was seldom worn because it interfered with women's work in fields and with the care of livestock. Instead, wearing burqas has been more common in the southern provinces.

In this novel, Hosseini beautifully portrays the culture that exists in Afghanistan. By reading this novel one can understand the complexities of the Taliban rule. In Afghanistan women has no right to walk alone and she always had to cover her face. These rules are mentioned in *the Koran* for the well being of human beings. But religion distorted all these rules and made human life more complex especially in the case of women in Afghanistan.

The women characters in this novel suppress all their feelings. Mariam endures a lot while Laila tries to raise her voice. But from this novel one can understand that the human beings are able to suffer only to a certain extent. But at last surely they will react and this is evident in the case of Mariam. She suffers a lot and at last she murders Rasheed.

The work of Khalid Hosseini is translated into different languages, and is receiving favorable pre-publication reviews. As a popular work, this novel continues to affect the world's notion about Afghan society and particularly about Afghan women. It turns out to be influential across the world and worthwhile to be closely examined. His second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is described from a third person's view. In his novels, he speaks out and reveals the true face of the society. His novels are highly popular and critically appreciated. An article in *Washington Post Book World* tells that:

Hosseini's native land, where "every Afghan story is marked by death and loss and unimaginable grief," yet where "people find a way to survive, to go on." Many of us learned much from *The Kite Runner*. There is much more to be learned from *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It is, for all its shortcomings, a brave, honorable, big-hearted book. (Yardley)

In the novel, both the women face lot of difficulties and struggles in their life that every woman faces in Afghan society. In some months since its release, the novel has garnered a plethora of positive reviews: *The Kite Runner* he uses a melodramatic plot to convey vividly the many aspects of love and the ways people sacrifice themselves for those they hold dear. With *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini has shown that he doesn't intend to be a one-hit wonder. It will be interesting to see where he goes from here. (Lisa See)

Through this novel, Hosseini pictures the real problems of Afghan society. Struggle is a major unifying concept in Hosseini's works. In this novel, characters are caught in crossfire and overwhelmed by external forces. The lives of characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, was influenced by the outside brutal unforgiving world and they made decision about their own lives which are affected through revolution, wars, extremism and oppression. The characters are forced into a situation they did not build, prefer or initiate. 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." A German inventor has built a mini-oven that requires only 20 percent of the current amount of wood, Hosseini notes, and "it only costs around \$70." But there aren't funds to buy enough of them, he adds, and women and girls end up brutally beaten and dead as a result. It's a fate that can be changed, the novelist points out. (C1)

II. Conclusion

In many areas of Afghanistan, girls are often taken out of school when they hit puberty. Cultural factors related to the 'correctness' of sending girls to school, reluctance to send girls and boys to the same school after third grade, as well as the perceived and real security threats related to girls walking to school and attending classes all contribute to slowing down the enrollment of girls in schools. Likewise, the enormous lack of female teachers, who are fundamental in a country where girls cannot be taught by a man after a certain age, is having a negative impact on girls' education. While progress has been made since the fall of the Taliban, women are still struggling to see their rights fulfilled. Literacy rates among young Afghan women are disturbingly low. Only 18 per cent of women between 15 and 24 can read. While the total number of children enrolled in primary schools is increasing tremendously, the percentage of female students is not. (Listverse)

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