

**STANCE OF WOMEN IN THE CULTURAL SCENARIO OF AFGHANISTAN AS
PORTRAYED IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS***

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Abstract

Literature is a mirror of society which is characterized by human imagination using different forms and techniques which suits the real world the writer occupies. Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns is such a mirror that reflects the life of two Afghan Women realistically. More than the political history, the writer tries to depict the familial scenario and the ruthlessness of the male patriarchy on the backdrops of major political events. The present study aims to find traces the influence of all the basic factors of the society like culture and religion for failure of the individualistic dreams and freedom of women in the history of Afghanistan. It also focusses on different roles played by tradition, child marriage and polygamy in subduing women in the position of victims in the Afghan society.

Key words: Afghanistan, Child marriage, Culture, Patriarchy, Polygamy etc.

1.1 Culture- An Index of Life

... In its widest sense, culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or a social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of human being, value system, tradition and belief (UNESCO, World Conference on Cultural Policies, 1982). The basic aspects of life find expression in this definition.

Society, culture and politics are the indices which shape the history of a country. Cultural and political settings of the whole social scenario determine the country's historical as well as economic growth. Creative expressions rely on the edifying cultural backdrop of a nation. Aesthetic works are shaped by the troubled chronicles in history. Violations of social norms, harassments of marginalized, constraints imposed on artists pave way for agitated minds thirsting for realizations.

Afghanistan, with its rich history and rugged geography has often been a fairy tale to both the spectators and the readers. Hosseini has effectively banked on this to weave a tale which allure and enlighten the readers about the social set-up of this geographically insulated country named Afghanistan.

1.2 Khaled Hosseini and *The Thousand Splendid Suns*

Khaled Hosseini, who was an expatriate from Afghanistan tries to explore the daily struggles of Afghan citizens in the midst of the violence and the carnage of war through his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The title *A Thousand Splendid Suns* comes from a poem composed by Saeb-e-Tabrizi, a seventeenth century Persian poet who wrote “ One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs, / Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls”.

In the approximately forty years which the novel covers, from the late 1960s to post-September 2001, the daily lives of Afghans swing unpredictably with joy and despair and between hope and disillusionment amid fighting first with Soviets, followed by the Mujahideen, the Taliban and finally with Americans.

Hosseini wants to give a western public assailed with media images of war- torn Afghanistan, firstly during the soviet occupation and then under the Taliban, a glimpse of the country which he remembered now when he was in his childhood and tries to eliminate the misconceptions about women who had not suffered repression before the Taliban seized power, contrary to the belief of westerners. It is the role of women that Hosseini has chosen to explore in this novel and he portrays it vividly through the stories of Mariam and Laila, two women separated by a generation but united by an unbreakable bond of friendship. These two not only endure the brutality of their husband Rasheed, but also the appalling atrocities of the Taliban, yet remain resilient and true to themselves.

1.3 Afghan History and Society in *The Thousand Splendid Suns*

The social scenario of Afghanistan is hostile towards individualistic as well as societal growth. Hosseini says

Fiction is often like a mirror. It reflects what is beautiful and noble in us, but also at times what is less than flattering, things that make us wince and not want to look anymore. Issues like discrimination and persecution, racism, etc. are such things. The rifts between our different people in Afghanistan have existed for a long time and continue to exist today, no matter the politically correct official party line. Because these issues of ethnic differences and problems between the different groups continue to hound our society and threaten to undermine our progress toward a better tomorrow, I think --possibly naively-- these issues are best dealt with face on. I don't see how we can move forward from our past; how we can overcome our differences, if we refuse to even acknowledge the past and the differences.” (Dialogue with Khaled Hosseini by Farhad Azad, 2004)

The writer strongly believes that the past history of Afghanistan has a great impact on the lives of the present generation including himself. So he tries to chronicle the past social scenario in the way of historical facts and its influence on the different character's destiny including Mariam as well as Laila in this novel. Through this labour of creativity, he tries to find the problems and the issues which have to be addressed in order to redeem Afghanistan

from its history of cruelty towards mankind which are manifested by curbing human's basic rights and freedom during the rule of different powers.

The psychological trauma caused by the society on individuals after the long term wars and invasions are portrayed by Hosseini throughout the novel. Even the children like Aziza (Laila's daughter) are victims of the war who are mentally disturbed by its agony. We can witness it through incidents like Aziza's initial refusal to go back to her native. i.e. Kabul after the war is over. Thus social and political instability of a country leads to the victimization of women and children as in the case of every other war.

For Hosseini, family is an integral part of a society. He tries to reveal the aggression and the resulting frustration in the domestic setup of the family. The aggression made by the patriarchal society on women in the form of both physical and verbal aggression, sexual and emotional abuse, intimidation which led to economic deprivation, and threats of violence which disturbs the social setup of the country.

2.1 Portrayal of Conditions of Women in Afghan Society

2.1.1 Traditional Family roles of Women

Afghan families have a high regard for age, as well as a reverence for motherhood. The extended family serves as a support system, economically and socially. Child socialization takes place within the family because of deficiencies in the education system. Even though they are getting education, Tariq and Laila gets socialized through the family visits in neighbourhood as seen in the play. Extended family households may contain three to four generations including the male head of family and his wife, his brothers, several sons and their families, cousins with their families, as well as all unmarried and widowed female, and elderly grandparents. These multigenerational units practice close economic cooperation and come together on all life-crisis occasions. This permits cohesive in-group solidarity to be maintained. This is the situation in the rural areas, but in urban areas like Kabul people lead a nuclear family thus there is no cooperation and support between man and woman and latter is abused because no one in the family is there for the support of its members. Thus Mariam and Laila in the novel are always under torture in the hands of Rasheed.

The senior women are responsible for delegating domestic responsibilities. When families include plural wives, each wife has her own room, with her own belongings and furnishings; sometimes her own cooking space is provided. The courtyard provides space for joint household activities and entertainment. The women of the households work together to care for and discipline the children. This can also be noticed in the novel when Rasheed insists his first wife, Mariam to take care of Laila and to help in her daily routines. Moreover Laila and Mariam have separate rooms and their own belongings are supplied by their husband.

Women are responsible for most of the domestic work of the house, cooking, cleaning, entertaining and socializing children. An Afghan's family is sacrosanct and a matter of great privacy. It is considered a breach of manners among liberal Afghans, and an act requiring

revenge among conservatives, for a man to express interest of any sort in another man's female relatives. It is this cultural sense of privacy that probably was reinterpreted by the Taliban into an insistence that women be covered from head to foot when in public. "A woman belongs to her family and should not be available, in any sense, to outsiders" (Hosseini 129). This is the typical attitude of Rasheed. Even though he lives in urban area, he had a rural mind where he cannot accept the exposition of women outside the society and insists this rule over his wives.

In the rural areas, interrelated responsibilities between men and women establish a bond of partnership that builds mutual respect. Carpet making is an example. The men herd and shear the sheep, the women spin the wool, the men dye the wool, the women weave the carpet, and the men market the product (Skaine 39). A woman, often an elderly member of the household, receives the household's supply of grain following the harvest. She must make sure that this supply of the family's basic food staple is apportioned correctly over the year until the next harvest comes in. Otherwise, the family must go into debt, or starve. The male has the right to make decisions that control female behaviour and it is done to preserve male prestige and family honour. Women's independence is not encouraged and the families' social standing may suffer if the women do not remain dependant and submissive to her husband's rules. Women derive a certain amount of advantage within family relationships from their ability to damage family prestige through subtle nonconformist behaviours, such as simply ailing to provide adequate hospitality, or a lack of honour within the home. This kind of mutual respect in the lives of man and women is absent in the Urban area. Rasheed is a shoe-maker and sole bread winner of the family. So it is he who decides the destiny of other members in the family i.e. Laila and Mariam. The male patriarchal domination can be seen well when the women in the household are discouraged to speak and act. They are silenced by the cultural mores.

The selection of mates (both for male and female) is important to building a stronger family and it requires multiplicity of considerations, including strengthening group solidarity, sustaining social order, confirming social status, enhancing wealth and power or economic and political standing, increasing control over resources, resolving disputes, and compensating for injury and death. This choice for selection is only available for males who can choose their life partner as Mariam was denied this right by her father's wives in the novel.

There is difference within the culture of the country. Rural people have traditional beliefs to the core, but shows a kind of modern attitude in some aspects as they respect the role of women in the family. But in the urban areas it is mostly male dominated, but there are many types of modernist visions which is represented by the youth. Thus the culture of the country which is traditionally Islamic portrays the conditions of Afghans which is moreover patriarchal and based on orthodox beliefs of traditions and customs. These cultures are

deeply engrossed in their minds that a change in the social norms will be a distant dream which cannot be achieved easily.

2.1.2 Portrayal of women in *The Thousand Splendid Suns*

The protagonist of the novel, Mariam underwent a tough time her life. During her childhood, she was addressed as harami even by her own mother, where they lived in a Kolba deserted by Mariam's father. Nana has paid the full price for having a child out of wedlock while Jalil (Mariam's father) has seemingly paid nothing more than money to support her and Mariam in little more than a hovel outside of Herat. She had been ostracized even by her own father and then doomed to a life of loneliness. In the meantime, Mariam also paid for having even been born, because she was a reminder of all Nana had lost.

Mariam's fate became doubly disastrous as she got married to a widower named Rasheed at the age of 14. She had to suffer many atrocities after her cruel fate of marriage. One can see the average daily routine of a wife like cleaning windows, sweeping floors, and opening the windows to air out the house. She also began to prepare a meal, including kneading the dough to be baked in the communal tandoor. As Mariam stood in line with all the other wives, she listened to their conversations about their husbands and wondered how so many could have the same miserable luck: married to such dreadful men. However, it also occurred to her that this might be all some wifely game they played. The traditional stereotyped role of woman was affirmed through the character Mariam as she had no voice of her own and played a puppet in the hands of her husband.

Rasheed pulled out a paper bag that she saw holding a blue burqa. He told that customers came into his store with their wives and mentioned that one of the worst of the lot was Hakim, the teacher. He narrates that their wives were dressed too provocatively and that they placed their bare feet forward for him to measure. Their husbands think nothing of it. Rasheed emphasizes that "they don't see that they're spoiling their own nang and namoos, their honor and pride" (Hosseini 68). He then describes that he was a different breed of man who came from a place where a woman's face was her husband's business only. The burqa served as a tool to remind her about his views. She would no longer be allowed to go outside of the house without it.

In Quran, it is said " And say to the faithful women to lower their gazes, and to guard their private parts, and not to display their beauty except what is apparent of it, and to extend their head coverings (khimars) to cover their bosoms (jaybs), and not to display their beauty except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husband's fathers, or their sons, or their husband's sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their womenfolk, or what their right hands rule (slaves), or the followers from the men who do not feel sexual desire, or the small children to whom the nakedness of women is not apparent, and not to strike their feet (on the ground) so as to make known what they hide of their adornments. And turn in repentance to Allah together, O you the faithful, in order that you

are successful” (Qur'an. Suranur Chapter: The Light. 31). This rule is strictly obeyed by the Muslim world especially in Afghanistan which was essentially patriarchal in nature and Rasheed echoes this Muslim voice when he tries to insist Mariam to wear burqa.

During the Taliban era, many in the liberal world saw the burqa as the symbol of Taliban oppression. But even after Taliban were ousted from power, yet the burqa remained firmly on the heads of all sorts of Afghan women. Burqa was a symbol of traditionally conservative Afghan society which pre-dates the Taliban, in which women were viewed as men's possessions, to be kept hidden from other men...the same applied to a range of other issues - such as inequality between men and women and underage marriages - which were embedded in the traditions of Afghan society. These customs were extremely hard to change, as most Afghan people and institutions either passively endorse or actively followed them (Bahman 2008)

The protagonist Mariam has never before worn a burqa and had a terrible time adjusting to its weight and length. Rasheed helped her put it on, but she had the most trouble adjusting to the loss of her peripheral vision. This “loss of vision” could be criticized as the loss of vision of the world created by male dominated society where women have a trivial role to play.

The education of Afghan women was always in question. In the novel, Mariam did not get an opportunity to learn because of her personal and economic problems as her mother itself is uneducated. But in the case of Laila, she attended school since her father Hakim was educated and was a school teacher before soviet invasions. Mujahideen wars destroyed both her life as she lost her parents and also she was hooked up with Rasheed by marriage and did not find any chance to further pursue her studies.

On contrast to it, when Taliban power was retracted, Laila, who believed in education restarted a school which was attached to the orphanage and became a Farsi teacher which was reflected as a ray of hope to the future generations. This activity of Laila could be seen as a kind of redemptive action from the part of woman who want the resurrection of the woman folk through the clutches of education which was earlier in off-limits to them.

Another serious problem encountered by women is domestic violence as portrayed in the novel. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is about Mariam who always got mistreatment in her family. Nana (Mariam's mother), call Mariam as *Harami* and torture her. But the main propagator of violence both physical and verbal as usual is masculine gender especially when he plays the role of a husband. Rasheed, when he was married to Mariam in the beginning showed his affection towards her. But when she had undergone many miscarriages, he started to show many kinds of cruelties which can be understood as inherent him as a male dominator and aggressor. In one of the incidents portrayed in the novel, one can see the real face of Rasheed who is the representative of the Afghan male society. He reprimanded her for giving him so called “bad food” and asked her to chew pebbles. Rasheed chided 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” (Hosseini 94). The typical male psyche is shown here where the man cannot recognize woman and her mental emotions.

Laila also had undergone many physical afflictions on her body when Rasheed whipped her with his belt and kept her under duress. But the courage showed by another woman i.e. Mariam helped her to escape the situation of violence. But the escape culminated in the death of Rasheed. But the trial for Mariam was not held by any legal council or any public hearing or any kind of appeal. But was tried under a Talib who questioned her guilt, but did not take into consideration that she had committed the crime in order to save a life, i.e., a kind of self-defense for Laila. But according to the Sharia law, she had committed adultery as well as killed her spouse and her punishment should be only a corporal one and did not have any loophole to escape in that law as it was strictly enforced.

2.1.3 Child marriage and Polygamy

Child marriage is generally viewed as a ‘harmful traditional practice’ although viewed as somewhat inevitable and deeply ingrained as a tradition. The research found that in the northern region of the country, most families aim to marry female children by the age of fourteen. While some members of the community justified the practice on the basis of tradition, others justified the practice pragmatically to protect daughters from possible kidnapping, rape and forced marriage to local commanders and members of illegal armed groups. Some held the view that men prefer to marry young girls because it is easier for a husband and in-laws to establish and maintain control over them. The study also found that due to widespread poverty, child marriage also led to “selling” of girls, particularly to much older men, who could pay impoverished families for a young girl’s marriage. As older men often take young girls as additional wives, the practice of polygamy can promote child marriage, thus highlighting the interconnectedness of discriminatory social institutions. (UNHCR, “Polygamy”)

The right of divorce rests with a husband rather than with wife. While a woman has to show grounds for a divorce in court, a husband can divorce his wife through repudiation (talaq). The grounds for women seeking divorce are limited to the husband suffering an incurable disease, his failure or inability to maintain his wife, his absence from his wife without reason for more than three years or his imprisonment for ten years or more. The World Bank reported that divorce was not common in Afghanistan, and it is considered shameful for a woman to seek divorce. In the event of divorce, women lose custody over older children. The law on adultery or ‘zina’ also discriminates against women, with the law subjecting women to disproportionate prosecution for adultery compared to men.

There is a famous proverb in Afghanistan which states: ‘a family without a son is like a home without any light’. The preferential treatment of sons in Afghanistan is reported to be a significant issue. In UNHCR’s report on polygamous marriages, it reveals the discrimination shown towards girls in education:

This discrimination pervades all aspects of life ranging from birthday parties, naming ceremonies, access to health and education and decision-making with respect to marriage. Son preference is reflected in the data on access to education, with girls being substantially less likely to be enrolled in or attending primary school, compared to boys. In the same report, UNICEF states that only 46 percent of girls are enrolled in primary school, compared to 74 percent of boys. Further, data from the 2003 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey finds that 12 percent of girls aged 5 to 14 are engaged in 28 hours of domestic chores per week compared to 6 percent of boys, providing an indication of son preference in the allocation of household tasks (56).

This bias towards boy child is evident in the novel too as Rasheed insisted Mariam of getting a boy child when he received the news of pregnancy. "I think it's a boy .Yes. A boy" tells Rasheed confidently. She finds Rasheed in the tool shed making a crib for the baby. It was going to be a surprise, but now Mariam has found out. Rasheed is not angry about the surprise, and, in fact, he shows her a suede winter coat for a boy that he had bought the baby as well. This weighs on Mariam, that he hitches his hopes on the baby being a boy, and how he worries about all the things in the house that might harm the child. One can glance Rasheed's typical patriarchal mindset where the society and culture assert the prominence of male child.

Tribal or Regional competitions is one of the main reason for polygamous marriages. The interviews conducted by UNHCR for the study of Polygamy in Afghanistan proved that there were competitions among men in many families and tribes as 26.23 % men revealed this truth. And these competitions, in many situations, have affected the personal lives of individuals. If one of them decided to marry for a second time due to some reason, the other, in competition with him, decided to marry for a second, third or even fourth time. Sometimes it happened that they married even four wives (23)

.The living examples of polygamy could be seen in the novel when he was describing Jalil' s household. The protagonist Mariam was in a way forced into marriage as a result of his father's wives insistence. She was married to a widower at young age of 15 years before knowing the concept about marriage. His father's wives kept on repeating the phrase "You may not get another opportunity this good. And neither would they" (Hosseini 30). They had been disgraced by her birth, and this is their chance to erase, once and for all, the last trace of their husband's scandalous mistake. She was being sent away, because she was the walking, breathing embodiment of their shame. Thus Mariam's marriage turned to be a kind of business in the disguise of trying to provide a familial security for her. These kind of child marriage only end in abuse and destruction in the later stage as Mariam is victimized in the end.

3. Conclusion

Women are tortured physically and mentally by the male aggressors who find the weak female body as their field to perpetrate violence. Lack of education for both male and female is the major reason. Providing opportunities for women to challenge rigid gender roles by learning how Islam, Afghan law and international human rights law safeguard gender equality and other women's rights. But many reasons are there which hinders this effort to provide education. Teachers and buildings were short of supply, and girls still have little access to schools, especially in rural areas as one can see in the case of Mariam who stays in a Kolba as a bastard whose mother was not interested in sending her daughter to school as she did not believe in modern education and gives only religious education like Quran verses etc. General comprehension of the value of education, especially for girls, is very low. When they are educated their self esteem may rise and then they might not want the support of the males and they can sustain themselves by the power of education. This fear of actualization of self-reliance by women may be one reason for the men for not sending girls to schools and colleges as their patriarchy may be surely threatened.

But the character Laila becomes an epitome of womanhood who rose like a phoenix bird from the ashes of agony and destruction after the end of Taliban rule and showed her enormous mental strength which she possess in the male society. She had initiated many constructive works and activities like teaching, maintaining orphanages etc which will help for the emancipation of mankind especially for women who is under the cloak of darkness over ages. Thus through Laila, the novelist tries to show the determination of a woman who can succeed and prove their success in all walks of life in spite of many years of injustice done towards them by the Afghan society and thus showcases a positive affirmation for the development of Afghan Women in all realms of life.

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