

Women as the Victim of Patriarchy : A light on the lives of Afghan Women

Namita Singh*

Abstract : Afghan women played a critical role in 20 years of war and proved themselves as one of the major components in the process of nation building in Afghanistan. The increasing awareness of the significance of women in the development of a nation led to the need of equality between men and women. A movement to create a decolonized space in which the past and present histories of the oppression of Afghan women need to be discussed, challenged, and become the bases for transformative encounters. With a view to create awareness regarding the wretched condition of women in Afghanistan, the paper aims to discuss the plight of Afghan women who are the victim of not only patriarchy but also a long and continuous war in the country. In order to get a close analysis of their life, the paper has taken into consideration *A Thousand Splendid Suns* a novel by Khaled Hosseini which reveals the life of several Afghan women represented by the war-torn life of Mariam and Laila.

Apart from serving as a vehicle for nurturing human life, a woman is a producer, a consumer and an equally capable agent for nurturing a wholesome political, social and economic development in society. Despite having the capability to nurture the society, women still does not possess a just position. They are considered subordinate to males in most of the societies of the world and the case is at its extreme in Afghanistan. In the conservative Afghan society the world has entirely been for men because they gain premium status by most of the existing cultures in the country. Being a country with tribal background, Tribal laws and sanctions in the Afghanistan took superiority in Islamic and constitutional laws in deciding gender roles, especially through kinship hierarchies in the rural regions. Tribal power plays, concept of honor, and inter-tribal display of patriarchal control have put women's position in jeopardy. Tribal laws view marriages as alliances between groups: women are forced into marriages and not allowed to divorce, obedience to the husband and his family is imperative, and women are prevented from getting educated. Women are perceived as the receptacles of honor; hence they stay in the domestic sphere, observe the veil and are voiceless. The honor of the family, the tribe, and ultimately the nation is invested in women. All these problems faced by Afghan Women are depicted in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* written by an Afghan itself who has dealt with a day-to day

* Assistant Professor
S. S. Jain Subodh P.G. (Autonomous) College, Ram Bagh Circle, Jaipur

life of women of his country. The writer has raised several issues related to the lives of Afghan women in the novel. The socio-political changes in the history of Afghanistan directly influenced the lives of women and indirectly of the children too. These changes have also been traced in the writings of KhaledHoussini. KhaledHoussinihas traced through his novel the happenings in Afghanistan and their influence on women. He seems to concern about the situation of the people of Afghanistan specially women who have suffered during the socio-political upheavals in the country. Through in-depth research framed within a detailed historical context, KhaledHoussini present accounts of the injustice perpetrated against the women of Afghanistan and violence faced by the people of Afghanistan.

throw light on the impact of social and political changes on Afghan woman. The issues raised in KhaledHoussini'sA Thousand Splendid Sunsare representative of accounts of Afghan women during war and their experiences thereof. As race, gender, and social class cannot be isolated from the broader historical, cultural, and socio-political context that influenced his writings, he focused on the interlocking nature of oppression arising from racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of discrimination that was rampant in the Afghan society.

Though Hosseini touches on the role of women in both of his novels The Kite Runner and A Thousand Splendidid Suns but it is the main theme of A Thousand Splendid Suns. He was raised at a time in Afghanistan when women were free to attend schools and seek professional employment. Many women in his family were professionals, and he was not raised with the worldview of protecting women from outside intrusion. He wrote in an interview with Book Browse that he hopes readers will develop a sense of empathy for Afghans and specifically for Afghan women on whom the effects of war and extremism have been devastating. This novel brings depth, nuance, and emotional subtext to the familiar image of the burqa-clad woman walking down a dusty street.

The novel can be divided into four main sections on the basis of subject matter. The first part focuses on the upbringing of Mariam, a child with illegitimate birth who was raised in a small hut outside of the city of Herat. The second section focuses on Laila, who is a generation younger than Mariam. Laila is born in Kabul and stays with her parents. Her father, an educationist hopes that she will contribute to the development of Afghan society. The third part follows the intersection of Mariam's and Laila's lives. In the last part, they travel their separate paths. Through Mariam and Laila, KhaledHoussini examines the life of young female child, their girlhood, their sexual initiation and the phenomenon of the exploitation during the brutal regime of Taliban. He looks at the situation of women in society: the married woman, the mother, and the older woman. It analyses three forms of defense mechanism unconsciously adopted by women to help them to survive in a patriarchal society: selfishness, the role

of the woman who sacrifices everything for love, and mysticism.

A Thousand Splendid Suns deals with the hopes, dreams and disillusionment of Mariam and Laila with their inner lives and the specific circumstances that bring them together to evolve into something meaningful and powerful even as the world around them crumbles. The story of Mariam and Laila is closely linked with the history of Afghanistan. The intimate and personal is intertwined inextricably with the broad and historical. The turmoil in Afghanistan and the country's recent past slowly becomes more than a mere backdrop. Gradually Afghanistan itself and more specifically Kabul emerge as a character in this novel. The impact of socio-political changes and their impact on the common man are visible in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Laila's life with Tariq and the children, promises happiness, but the socio-political changes in the Afghan society separated her from Tariq and took away Mariam, her brothers, her mother, her father, and her home. The war wrecked society of Afghanistan with oppressive and violent elements waiting to resurface, instill in her no real sense of safety.

The book opens with young Mariam being verbally chastised for breaking a tea set that belongs to her mother Nana, who calls her a harami or bastard child. Mariam, being a child does not understand what the term mean:

"...Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the Harami who are culpable, not the Harami, whose only sin is being born." (14)

KhaledHoussini depicts the feelings of a sensitive child growing up with the pressure of social and intellectual constraints imposed on her by family or society. Nana refers to Mariam as a "harami" (bastard or illegitimate child) to indicate that Mariam's birth was the consequence of an extra-marital affair. The term "harami" frames her upbringing as one who is illegitimate. Mariam was again and again called by her mother 'Harami' and initially being a child she was unable to comprehend its meaning. Her innocent mind was not ready to accept the definition that was given by the society:

"Harami was an unwanted thing that she Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, house, acceptance (14).

In Afghanistan, the tribal leaders blocked reform efforts that aimed to establish women's identity as apart from that of her family and tribal community, and ultimately any attempts at modernizing the state. The power of tribal or community leaders defined the role of women and they successfully resisted any modernization that would challenge their patriarchal authority. The writer hints at the condition of an illegitimate child in Afghan society who is deprived of the relations and emotional links within the social framework.

In an interview with Houssini asserted that under the Taliban, women were denied education, the right to work, the right to move freely, access to adequate healthcare, etc.

However, the writer wants to distance himself from the notion regarding the need of West exerting pressure on these countries to grant women equal rights. Houssini is of the view that this approach dismisses the complexities and nuances of the target society as dictated by its culture, traditions, customs, political system, social structure, and overriding faith.

Khaled Houssini depicts the patriarchal society of Afghanistan where women are subservient to man. The writer also provides an insight into Mariam's dual existence as a child. She lives with Nana's harsh realism, imbuing her with a sense of longing for a better life. Jalil provides Mariam a new perspective on life, one that is fanciful and denies anything ugly or unpleasant. Mariam is forced to choose between these two opposing forces and ultimately chooses the idyllic view, as most children would in all likeliness. Nana's encouragement of Mariam to learn endurance, foreshadows the life that Mariam will lead, one that will require her to endure a childless abusive marriage later in the novel.

Mariam and Nana spend their days feeding and milking animals, making bread and rice. Nana doesn't like visitors or people, but a couple of characters do visit the Kolba. Bibi Jo is an older woman who comes to complain and gossip. Mullah Faizullah visits to tutor Mariam. He teaches Mariam the Koran prayers and her how to read. Mariam likes Mullah Faizullah, because he listens to her opinions and ideas. During one tutoring session, Mariam tells Mullah Faizullah about her wish to go to school. Mullah Faizullah approaches Nana about the issue. Nana refuses to send Mariam to school, chastises Mullah Faizullah, and tells Mariam that the only skill she needs to learn is how to endure life:

"If the girl wants to learn let her, my dear. Let the girl have on education." "Learn? Learn what Mullah Sahib?" Nana said sharply "what is there to learn?" She shaped her eyes towards marrow...She belongs here at home with her mother. There is nothing out there for her. Nothing but rejection and heartache. I know, akha Sahib. I know"(18)

The issue of women's rights in Afghanistan has been historically constrained by the patriarchal aspect of gender and social relations deeply embedded in traditional communities and the existence of a weak central state that has been unable to implement modernizing programs and goals in the face of tribal feudalism and control. Mariam's insistence to attend school and Nana's refusal initiates the discussion about education for women that resonates throughout the novel. Mariam learns early on that the attainment of a formal education would not only be impossible for her, but also that such an education would be wasted on her. A woman's responsibility is her home and her family is repeatedly determined into her. Nana's emphasis on Mariam learning to endure suffering not only suggests how bleak Mariam's future will be, but also the type of lessons that Mariam must have learned as a child in Nana's home. Ultimately, throughout the rest of the novel, Mariam's capacity for endurance is what allows her to

survive the horrible conditions and depressing personal losses. Additionally, as Mariam grows up, she becomes steady and solid enough to endure her surroundings but rarely proactive enough to change her situation revealing a pattern of behavior which most likely reflects her upbringing.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* while raising the issues of burqa clad Afghan women the writer also includes the main events of Afghanistan's history covering the past three decades from the Communist revolution to the Soviet invasion, to the U.S. led war against the Taliban. Hosseini had left Afghanistan before the Soviet takeover, and Time suggests that this novel is an act towards his redemption for his family's choice not to return to the country. Unlike Hosseini's first novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* contains no parts set in America. The novel, which spans Afghan history from before the Soviet war until after the Taliban rule, has been considered better than the Hosseini's critically acclaimed *The Kite Runner* by some critics.

The text emphasizes the protest of Afghan women in the patriarchal society. KhaledHousseini's account highlights the forced veiling and polygamy that women in Afghanistan face, but there is little analysis of the situation in which they find themselves. This dichotomy of the oppressed traditional and liberated modern Afghan women is viewed largely by the west that is biased against Islam and the Muslim as depicted in *Orientalism* by Edward Said 1993, and it's most visible symbol: the veil. Leila Ahmed points out that the veil is the discursive marker between the western and the Muslim woman and the most significant symbol of Muslim woman's oppression. KhaledHousseine projects burqa as a refuge for Mariam from her undesirable past:

"It was like a one-way window, inside it she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance all the shameful secrets of her past" (66).

For Mariam, burqa became a shelter that could hide her identity and her illegitimate birth as well. Houssini points out in an interview that the women have been wearing burqa in Afghanistan for centuries before the Taliban came to power. It is not the concern for women in Afghanistan as it is for the West. Infact at times burqa despite physical discomfort becomes a source of comfort for them in the male-dominated society. AlthoughHosseini considers burqa a reliable measure of women's liberation in Afghanistan yet he asserts that the security, food and access to medical facilities and care for their kids are more important issues for the Afghan women than Burqa.

McLeod refers to Spivak's theory about restoring women back to history, which he in some ways doubts, focusing instead on what leads to female oppression. The cause for oppression can be difficult to point out but there are several factors involved in oppressing women. Religion becomes the tool of coercion when male characters interpret religion and female sexuality from within the patriarchal frame. Instead of accepting female sexuality they veil women and use religion as an excuse.

The emphasis of religion shifts and becomes a way of justifying oppression of women. Through Rasheed, Mariam's husband Khaled Houssini projects the patriarchal society of Afghanistan and prevailing condition of women. He asserts in an interview with Jones that he has been criticized for portrayed women who wear and come to terms with the burqa. Both of his main female characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* at some point, are out in the streets clad in the garment, express a satisfaction with the anonymity and sense of protection they experience on from wearing it. Hosseini claims no sympathy for this practice, and states that he wishes every single woman in Afghanistan could lift the burqa and walk the streets freely but he also believes that this should be a personal choice that the women make. Replacing one form of coercion by superimposing another is not an answer to the status of women in Afghanistan. Women should be free to choose.

The biased approach of Afghan man towards women is highlighted by Khaled Houssini through the discovery of magazines containing nude pictures of women in Rasheed's room. The paradox of keeping women covered with veils and at the same time surreptitiously voyeuristic pleasure of watching nude women points at the inherent hypocrisy of society. Afghan patriarchal society made the rules and regulations for women which men themselves imposed as well as transgressed. Those magazines shocked Mariam and she wondered on the harsh attitude of Rasheed regarding the honor and 'nangs and namoos' of his wife while he himself derived covert pleasure by flouting them:

"Mariam quickly put the magazine back where she'd found it. She felt dragged. Who were these women? How could they allow themselves to be photographed this way? ...And what about all his talk of honor and propriety, his disapproval of the female customers, who, after all, were only showing him their feet to get fitted for shoes?" (75). Mariam's questions to the male dominated society that sets rules and regulations only for women. Men are the arbiters of their fate setting the parameters for women that are not applicable on them.

Within the story of Mariam's life, the story of the next character Laila emerges. Laila is born a generation later in the same neighbourhood where Mariam and Rasheed reside. Laila is a daughter of an educationist Hakim who stays with his wife Fariba and two sons Ahmad and Noor. Unlike Rasheed, Hakim is progressive and modern in his approach towards life. He is concerned about the education of his daughter Laila and sends her to school and disagreed with the orthodox practices of veiling for women. His wife Fariba roamed on the streets of Kabul without burka. John McLeod writes that postcolonialism and feminism share the same goal, that is, "challenging forms of oppression" But how can female oppression come to an end? Will female oppression ever be over? These are the questions for consideration. Women need to get educated to be free from oppression. With education, women can get a position in society and

therefore become more independent and contribute the nation construction. Hosseini projects education as a way to freedom for women. Hakim tells his daughter Laila: "Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very, very bright girl. Truly, you are. You can be anything you want, Laila. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance. (103)

Education could restore women's voices back in society as Spivak asserts in her theory. If one woman would educate herself and educate other women and encourage them to get an education, they would be in the limelight. According to Spivak's theory women characters in the novels would have courage to speak up and have their own opinions. KhaledHoussini throws light on the history of the social development in Afghanistan that occurred in 1970s where women got an access to education that led to their freedom and several attempts were made to improve their status. These social changes led to violent, disagreement by subsequent fundamentalist governments. In this period women were redefined by the state. This redefining was objected by the tribal leaders who violently interfered in the modernization process in the status of women. Houssini explores the attempts made by the First World Countries for the good of Afghanistan. Such attempts infuriated the conservative mullahas and were seen as unwelcomed incursions into their culture and beliefs. Hosseini tells the story of two strong Afghan women of different ages from different areas whose lives intersect for a while. KhaledHoussini was raised at a time in Afghanistan when women were free to attend schools and seek professional employment. Many women in his family were professionals, and he was not raised with the worldview of protecting women from outside intrusion.

Through Bibi or Hakim, KhaledHoussini throws light at the historical background of Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and also the condition of women during the spread of communism. Communism favored education of women and during this era women in Afghanistan were flourished both in terms of education and healthcare:

"In fact, Babi thought that the one thing the communists had done right or at least intended to ironically, was in the field of education the vocation from which they had fired him. More specifically the education of women. Almost two-thirds of the students at Kabul University were women now, Babi said, women who were studying law, medicine, engineering" (121).

Women enjoyed the complete freedom during the Soviet reign. They had comparatively more rights during the sway of communism. The freedom given to the women was opposed by the conservative Afghans in the countryside and became one of the reasons of antagonism towards the Soviet invasion. Later on it led to the rise of several Mujahidin fighters in the country. Since the Mujahideen takeover in April 1992,

Afghanistan's name had been changed to the Islamic State of Afghanistan. The Supreme Court under Rabbani was filled with hardliner mullahs who did away with the communist-era decrees that empowered women and instead passed rulings based on Shari'a, strict Islamic laws that ordered women to cover, forbade their travel without a male relative, punished adultery with stoning. People of Afghanistan are touchy about the issues related to women. They have emerged repeatedly as the cause leading to revolt:

"It's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that Laila, of course, women's freedom here is also one of the reasons people out there took up arms in the first place" (121).

KhaledHoussini throws light on the history of the social development in Afghanistan that occurred in 1970s where women got an access to education that led to their freedom and several attempts were made to improve their status. These social changes led to violent, disagreement by subsequent fundamentalist governments. In this period women were redefined by the state. This redefining was objected by the tribal leaders who violently interfered in the modernization process in the status of women. Houssini explores the attempts made by the First World Countries for the good of Afghanistan. Such attempts infuriated the conservative mullahas and were seen as unwelcomed incursions into their culture and beliefs:

"...men who lived by ancient tribal laws had rebelled against the communists and their decrees to liberate women, to abolish forced marriage, to raise the minimum marriage age to sixteen for girls. These men saw it as an insult to their centuries old tradition." (121)

Along with the fundamentalism that flourished under the Mujahedeen and the Taliban, the outside invasions too further aggravated the oppression of women. The issues related to women were an important part of the agenda of nation construction even as early as the 1920s. The foreign interference by the British, Soviet Union and the United States of America, dating to the 1880s, critically impeded socio-cultural development in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's political history highlights the periodic efforts made for the empowerment and progress of women, in an attempt to create a sense of nationhood that was undermined by the tribal resistance and the outside invasions. Though the literature on Afghan women is growing, it still lags behind the coverage of Afghan women's suffering, struggle, and resistance during the past wars. The analysis of women's situation in Afghanistan needs to be done, not through the ideological formulation of before and after the Taliban, but within the larger historical context of Afghanistan. Such a perspective goes a long way in ensuring women being seen as essential to the rebuilding of the Afghan nation. In the years following 9/11, U.S. policy in Afghanistan has yet to receive intensive scrutiny, from the media and the public. Despite official claims of democracy and women's freedom, Afghanistan has yet

to emerge from the ruins of decades-long war.

References

Ahmad, A. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London: Verso. 1992. Print.

Alexander, M.J. and Mohanty C.T. (eds) *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, London and New York: Routledge. 1997. Print.

Butler, Judith. "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia" in *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising* Ed. Robert Gooding-Williams. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Mohanty, C.T. 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Feminist Review* 30, pp.65-88. 1988. Print.

Spivak, GayatriChakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Rev. ed. reprinted in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. 1988. Print.

"Women in Afghanistan: Pawns in Men's Power Struggles," New York, 1999b. Print.

Hosseini, Khaled. *Journal - Brief History of Khaled's work*. www.khaledhossemi.com
The Khalid Hosseini Foundation: www.khaledhosseni.inforundation.org. 2007. Web.

