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Reforming Beliefs

**A FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVE IN A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS****Ab. Majeed Dar****ABSTRACT**

In this paper, we will analyze Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and explore the societal expectations of women in Afghanistan. Women are displayed through the Islamic cultural lens of females, which causes the readers to sympathize with them. While novel may be disagreeable to people who operate under Islamic Shari'a, a moral code of laws the suffering of women is rightfully exposed by the author which brings every individual to tears irrespective of his religion and geographical location. He presents the story of Mariam and Laila hailing from diametrically opposite backgrounds linked by a common fate, experiencing similar stereo-typical trials and tribulations of being Afghan women. They struggle to survive in Afghanistan as they traverse the mine-littered road of sexual hierarchy, nonstop war and overwhelming guilt for the sins of others. We come to know about their hardships, their daily struggle for survival against all odds, to raise a family and seek happiness. Khaled Hosseini allegorically juxtaposes the character's personal narratives with the dreary and violent politics of Afghanistan over the last half-century, ranging from the communist takeover in the late 70s through the United States invasion of 2001 till 2003, when Taliban were ousted and Hamid Karzai became the interim president of Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** Love, Sacrifice, Chewing pebbles, Rape, War, and Destruction

**Introduction**

Feminism is the, "*The theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes.*"<sup>1</sup> This straightforward definition of feminism defines it as a movement for social, cultural, political and economic upliftment of women equal to men. This campaign strives against gender inequalities and for equal rights of every single woman so that she can make a choice to live a life which is not discriminatory that works within the principles of social, cultural, political and economic equality and independence.

Feminism, in this global world can be defined as a global phenomenon which addresses various issues related to women across the world in a specific manner that applies to a particular culture or society. Though the issues related to feminism can differ for different societies and cultures, but they remain intact with the underlying philosophy to achieve equality of gender in every sphere of life. Feminism cannot be tied to any narrow definitions based on a particular class, race or religion. The definition of feminism may differ for every individual based on her experience in life. Two different women may come across to campaign for feminism entirely based on their own experiences influenced by the practical experiences of their specific lives. Feminism is not only related to women, but to men also because all gender based equality is a balance between the male and female with the intention of liberating the individual. Here feminism includes all movements and campaigns that target men for gender sensitizations with a goal to end gender based discriminatory practices and achieve gender based equality.

Khaled Hosseini captivates his readers through an adherence to displaying the reality of gender roles in Afghanistan through Nana, Mariam, Fariba, Laila, Aziza, and other minor female characters, and enables the readers to understand the distress and turmoil that women must face on a daily basis in Afghanistan. While the women struggle for survival, war and political upheavals sweep Afghanistan right from the abolition of Monarchy. We are first introduced to Nana, the bitter mistress of a wealthy businessman, Jalil, and their *harami*, more politely known as an illegitimate child, Mariam. This character was cleverly placed in the first chapter, not only for chronological purposes, but to begin the novel with a tone of feminine anger, pain and inequality. Nana grabs Mariam's wrists and through gritted teeth, said:

*You are a clumsy little harami. This is my reward for everything I've endured.*

*An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little harami. (A Thousand Splendid Suns, 4)*

At the age of five Mariam couldn't understand the anger and hatred in Nana's mind but later she regrets that, "A *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, home and acceptance."(ATSS, p-4) That was because of Nana's personal dismay of being cast aside to live in a shack with her *harami*, Mariam that she is driven to hate Jalil and resent Mariam for her loyalty towards him. She expressed her anger as, "A man's heart is a wretched,

wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed; it won't stretch to make room for you." (ATSS, p-27)

Initially one views Nana as a harsh mother, one is able to understand her reasoning through the later portrayal of Mariam and Laila at the hospital. With Nana's attitude, a comment is made on the Islamic way of dealing with the sin of adultery. Nana was a simple housemaid used by a powerful man and later discarded when his other three wives protest. She was lucky to not have been punished in a more severe way of stoning to death in Pre-Russian invasion of Afghanistan. In this respect, Jalil was a generous man. He did not, however, provide Nana with any aid in conceiving but built her a rat-hole, Kolba. She advises Mariam, "*Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman.*" (ATSS, p-7). Nana's suffering of giving birth without care can be representative of the suffering of thousands of women.

Hosseini contrasts Nana's emotions with the innocence of Mariam as a young girl. She admires her father, his family and his riches, even though she does not share in them. Jalil's occasional visits to Kolba are satisfying because she does not know anything else beyond reality. The fact that Mariam relishes her time spent with Jalil, even prays for his long life portrays that many women are born ignorant of reality. Mariam is kept ignorant of how carelessly Jalil regards her till she too is betrayed by him. Jalil is the representative of wealthy men who are more concerned with appearance and status than a child who is his own flesh and blood. He lives the greater part of his life disregarding his mistreatment of Mariam and lets her sleep on the doorsteps when she visited her house for the first time. It is the society's brutally negative outlook of *haramis* that Jalil acts in this manner. Nana is left powerless in the situation, just as women are essentially powerless in the society. Similarly, Mariam was rejected by both of her parents, Jalil was ashamed of her and Nana in her deep despair committed suicide, rejecting Mariam and leaving her to suffer from the cruel hands of the society.

The allowance of multiple wives in the novel is displayed through Jalil and Rasheed. In this society, it is acceptable for multiple women to be bound to one man. Jalil had three wives: Afsoon, Khadija, and Nargis and ten children in addition to Mariam. Rasheed married Mariam and then Laila, just for his sexual desires but defends himself on religious grounds. Upon the marriage of Rasheed and Laila, Mariam is scared and unsure. Mariam, at this point, holds deep

contempt for Laila even though both were compelled by the circumstances though different. The sharing of one husband can cause great rivalry among women; however, they realize that without creating peace, they are even more powerless and miserable. Mariam's initial discontent for Laila and Rasheed's marriage draws attention to the demeaning practice.

Society's emphasis on the male dominance is displayed with Rasheed's treatment of Mariam's miscarriages. His mood changes dramatically, *"With each disappointment (six other miscarriages), Rasheed had grown more remote and resentful. Now nothing she did pleased him."*(ATSS, p-98) He is irritable and enraged so Mariam dreaded his home coming and felt that she has "failed him" and has become "nothing but a burden to him." As Rasheed's distaste for Mariam grows, military planes and bombs are heard overhead. She could see military planes heading north and east, and sudden plumes of smoke rising to the sky. The Tanks had broken into the premises and a fierce battle was going on there. The novel displays Rasheed's growing anger towards Mariam as communism infiltrated Afghanistan and President Daoud Khan was murdered during the coup of 1978. The Radio announces,

The era of aristocracy, nepotism, and inequality is over, fellow *ham-watans*. We have ended decades of tyranny. Power is now in the hands of the masses and freedom-loving people. A glorious new era in the history of our country is afoot. A new Afghanistan is born. (ATSS, p-100)

Shortly after this is mentioned, Rasheed forces Mariam to chew a "handful of pebbles" in order to make her understand how her cooking tastes. He clasped her jaw, forced her mouth open and then forced the pebbles into it. *"Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes."* (ATSS, p-103) He leaves Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood and the fragments of two broken molars. It is this act of brutality that shows Rasheed's impatience at her (Mariam's) ignorance of politics but, more predominantly, his disgust in her inability to reproduce, her inability to replace his downed son. This concept is taken further when Laila gives birth to a daughter that Rasheed would rather not have existed. Rasheed doesn't call his daughter by the name, Aziza- a cherished one but, *"It was always the baby, or, when he was really exasperated, that thing."* (ATSS, p-231)

The exploitation of women in male dominated society of Afghanistan is further highlighted by the fact that once Laila gives birth to a son, Rasheed sheds some kindness on baby Zalmai, his cherished boy. Rasheed began to spend excessive amounts of money on Zalmai, not using any of the Aziza's old toys, diapers, though these were still serviceable. He spoiled Zalmai with gifts they can't afford, including a TV and VCR, both items forbidden by the Taliban but Rasheed procures them on the black market. In contrast, he had previously refused to even buy girl clothes for Aziza, Laila's first child. Shortly after these gifts for Zalmai, he suggests that Aziza go into the streets and beg to cover the debt he has on Zalmai's petty gifts. This cruel contrast enables one to understand the role of women in Afghanistan. Rasheed wishes that Aziza beg and take on the burden of his actions like the other girls there. The solution provided for the family's poverty (to send Aziza away) is evidence that she is the most expendable member of her family. Furnishing the example of male dominated society where girls are being treated unfair and unworthy for living. This irrational way of thinking causes one to pity Aziza and find fault in Rasheed. The Taliban laws of Shari'a provide Rasheed the opportunity to suppress and subjugate all the related characters like, Mariam, Laila and especially Aziza. Being females they all suffer first because of the Afghan politics, its political heads and then because of their personal lives under the dictatorship of Rasheed.

Rasheed serves as more than a symbolic character, representing the evil and oppression that Islamic law places on women. There is a comparison regarding the concerns of women between the Taliban and Communist rule. The communists paved the way for the women to get education and work in offices. The Taliban, especially created an environment that made it unbearable for a woman to get education and function on her own. Rasheed happily compels his wives to wear burqas after their marriages. It is the evil that emanates from Rasheed, his joy in the restrictive laws enforced by the Taliban that made him an unfavorable character. He finds pleasure in listening to "Voice of *Shari'a*", a radio program for the long list of the punishments by Taliban to the culprits. Rasheed was not bothered by the Taliban because "All he had to do was grow a beard... and visit the mosque", two things which he already did. He regarded the Taliban with a forgiving, affectionate kind of bemusement, as one might regard an erratic cousin prone to unpredictable acts of hilarity and scandal. The Taliban laws had not changed his lifestyle. In his

mind, the laws helped him by placing restrictions on his wives and the little power they had left. Rasheed had mockingly crushed Laila in asking, "What good are all your smarts to you now" is accurate in expressing that women in Afghanistan are helpless. Laila expressed her shock at forced house arrest of women doing nothing according to Taliban laws. Rasheed informed her that such practices were common in the rest of Afghanistan already. Mariam agreed with Rasheed for the first time because she and Laila were already under such control, so why should the rest of the women live differently? During this discussion, Mariam realized,

In the eyes of the Taliban, being a communist and the leader of the dreaded KHAD made Najibullah only slightly more contemptible than a woman. (ATSS, p-272)

Fariba, Laila's mother, was introduced as a woman who was shockingly different from Rasheed's point of view because her husband, Hakim, treated her with respect and care. Fariba did not serve the role that a typical Afghan mother pursued. She was defiant and "ferocious" when angered. Hakim, also, lacked the normal role with his "delicate hands, almost like a woman's". This description enables us to see that Hakim was not a man of malice or violent discipline. Fariba took to lying in her bed on most days after their sons Ahmad and Noor went to fight against Russia. Laila was ignored by her mother, who remained preoccupied in the thoughts of her son's. She believed, "*People shouldn't be allowed to have new children if they'd already given away all their love to their old ones. It wasn't fair.*"(ATSS, p-117) Laila was responsible for completing chores and preparing meals that her mother seemed incapable of doing. One witnesses the disintegration of Fariba's strength as the days go on. After the death of her two sons she took to wearing only black, never leaving her bed. This loss transforms her into a ghost, who completely disregarded any duties, including being a mother to Laila. Although this woman possesses the ability to act on her own, she is crushed by the result of war. It is the war that costs her sons and, ultimately, her life and Hakim's too.

Death seems like the most probable option for an escape from the harmful invasions of the Soviet Union, the oppressive Taliban regime, or abusive husbands like Rasheed. In accordance with the *Shari'a* law, a woman must only leave her home when accompanied by a *mahram*, a male relative. Laila and Mariam were unsuccessful in their first attempt at escaping from their miserable life with Rasheed, mainly because there was no male family member with

them. With the return of Tariq in 2001, Laila was successful to escape from Afghanistan to Pakistan with her two children, but at the cost of Mariam. She had to stay in Kabul and face the consequences of killing Rasheed, who was responsible for their sufferings for years. While attacking Rasheed, Mariam recounts her miserable life with Rasheed as:

Mariam lost count of how many times the belt cracked, how many pleading words she cried out to Rasheed, how many times she circled around the incoherent tangle of teeth and fists and belt,... (ATSS, p-338)

She remembered every act of tyranny imposed upon them and murdered because,

Had Mariam been certain that he would be satisfied with shooting only her (Mariam), that there was a chance he would spare Laila; she might have dropped the shovel. But in Rasheed's eyes she saw murder for them both. (ATSS, p-340)

While in 'Walayat prison' for women guarded by the Taliban, she was listening to Naghma, Mariam remembered that a man always finds a woman to blame. She pleads guilty, explained that Rasheed will have killed them all if she had not struck him first but the Judges didn't believe her and she was sentenced to death saying '*they must follow the law of Allah*'. (ATSS, p-356)

It was in the moments before Mariam's execution that she thought: "She was leaving it (the world) as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother... This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings." (ATSS, p-361) She felt happy to have become a "person of consequence," having loved people in her life. Just like the flimsy state of Afghanistan, one was not entirely safe under the house of a man like Rasheed. The message that is put forth is that the options are scarce for women in Afghanistan. The death of Rasheed brings temporarily relief that enables Laila to escape. Mariam's death offers a final relief. In relation to the country, there cannot be relief until the war ceases, one passes away, or one flees.

The last date recorded in the novel is April 2003, when Laila, Tariq, and the children return back to Kabul, at Laila's request. Although Kabul is not developed, there have been improvements. The city is slowly being rebuilt from the rubble. Afghanistan was changing and the changes were mostly good, rebuilding and replanting was going on. "Laila spots flowers potted in the empty shells of old Mujahideen rockets-rocket flowers, Kabuli's call them." (ATSS, p-398)

Hosseini chooses to have Laila's family return to Kabul to express solidarity with the country that is better than it was, and is moving towards the greater safety and choice.

After the Taliban are ousted the, *"Buildings had been reduced to rubble, trees cut down, and streets mobbed by children begging. The Taliban was gone, but a majority of people were living in abject poverty."*<sup>4</sup> The orphanage, which represented a time of despair, in which Aziza was placed in 2001 for a time, is being renovated with the help of Laila and Tariq.

They have repainted both the exterior and the interior of the orphanage. Tariq and Zaman have repaired all the roof leaks, patched the walls, replaced the windows, carpeted the rooms where the children sleep and play. This past winter, Laila bought a few beds for the children's sleeping quarters, pillows too, and proper wool blankets. She had cast iron stoves installed for the winter. (ATSS, p-399)

They were recognized for their contribution in the orphanage which symbolized the developments in Afghanistan. The Laila's new pregnancy offers hope to the end of the book and the determination to name a female child after Mariam is a fitting tribute to her. The end of the novel encapsulates a hopeful moment for Laila's family and for Afghanistan.

## **Conclusion**

The novel *'A Thousand Splendid Suns'* describes the plights of Afghan women under the repressive forces of political parties and at their homes. Islam has really forbidden the woman to come on streets without burqa (veil) because the fair sex can easily be the victim of eve teasing and men's lustful approaches, the veil serves as a sort of protection. Women in Afghanistan overcome adversity and oppression by the opposite sex everyday of their lives in and outside the confines of their own homes. What Khaled Hosseini describes in the novel is really unfortunate not for the women only but for the humanity at large. The Afghan women are really fighting for their existence of being born women. Khaled Hosseini is concerned with their health, education and their being abused by their fathers, their husbands, their neighbours and largely by the politics of unending war in Afghanistan.

From a certain point of view, we merge into it though we were perched high in the sky observing the intersection of several crossfire's. One cross fire is that of Afghanistan itself, war

torn and demolished by conflict. These are the real, literal bullets that rip holes in homes and leave children fatherless and mothers childless and wives widows. Within this larger crossfire is a smaller, more dangerous crossfire, where the women are the targets of spiritual, psychological, physical, and religious abuse by men whose pain, frustration, and warped religious fervour find release against the most vulnerable, but out of the suffering, true character emerges, real love.

Through the optimistic ending with the increased rights of women Khaled Hosseini believes that Afghanistan is heading towards more acceptance and freedom, despite the faults it (Afghanistan) still possesses. Even though Khaled Hosseini wanted to remind us of peaceful Afghanistan, simultaneously he also reveals us the sufferings and the violence that the nation has experienced in a quarter century of conflict. Hosseini wrote in the *Guardian*, “*I think of the strength of the Afghan people. I think of their humility. Their astonishing grace.*”<sup>2</sup> Violence against characters is manifested in several levels – physical, emotional, mental, psychological, verbal, economic and sexual. On the other hand, war or violence experienced by Afghanistan as a nation has devastating effects on the population – children, elderly men and women.

Khaled Hosseini advocates for the great need of creating bonds of amity between the Afghan people and the rest of the world. He has thrown the doors of his country wide open so that the world could see first-hand the real Afghanistan and the great Afghan people who are suffering for being Afghans. A nation that is waiting for the national and international justice that has evaded them for decades.

The Titanic appears as a metaphor for the city of Kabul under the Taliban—the city, like the Titanic ship, is heading for certain disasters. Everyone in Afghanistan watched the movie with their doors locked, lights turned off and volume down, and reaped tears for Jack, Ross and the passengers of the doomed ship. People were attracted to the movie for its song; its sea, the luxury, or the ship; some say it’s the sex in the movie or the attractiveness of its star, ‘Leonardo di Caprio’. But Laila has an idea that:

Everybody wants jack, that’s what it is. Everybody wants jack to rescue them from disaster. But there is no jack. Jack is not coming back. Jack is dead. (ATSS, p-296)

She believes that in this disastrous time in Afghanistan, people are attracted to the idea that someone will save them, just as Jack saves Rose in the movie. However, she acknowledges that nobody will save them because Jack is dead.

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