

The Patriarchy conspiring with the ‘Sacred’ in Khaled Hosseini’s A Thousand Splendid Suns

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ABSTRACT

From decades women have been marginalized in every part of this planet. Hundreds of writers, activists especially feminists have tried to give voice to these unvoiced. One among them is well known Afghan writer Khaled Hosseini; known for his three famous novels: The Kite Runner, A Thousand Splendid Suns & And The Mountains Echoed. His second novel published in 2007 all together presents a class of suppressed and harassed women, who in the novel defies all the boundaries of suppression and oppression. Through the female characters in the novel Hosseini has shows how women, if they have the courage, can bear and defeat any human calamity be it oppression, abuse, violence and suppression. Being women is nature’s blessing but to bear the human calamities after being women is itself a disaster. The main aim of the paper is to highlight the efforts of the writer in exposing the conspiracy against the women in society through his work.

Keywords: *burkha-clad , feminists, oppression, patriarchal society, harassment, violence.*

INTRODUCTION

The oppressed ‘burkha-clad’ women of Afghanistan, after the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and the consequential US ‘War on Terror’, gained visibility all over the world in visual and print media. Scholars have got a kind of source for the study of Afghani women, as western media represents them as passive war victims of war, violence and religion, to be liberated only by the Western military intervention, since the attacks on US. Actually, due to the portrayal of women of Afghanistan as victims of powerlessness of religious intolerance that US rested its justification for attack on a country medieval in mindset and cruel in religious observance, “. . . against a regime whose avowed mission is to take a country back to a purist Islamic society of medieval times” (Chengappa 22). So in a way it seems to be a moral responsibility of the English (white people) to uplift the backward class of people which lead to the concept and revival of ‘White Man’s Burden’. Hosseini’s novel is the story of two typical Afghan women Mariam and Laila. The novel, on the one hand, through them expresses the history of pulsating socio-political dimensions of Afghanistan. And on the other hand deals with the position of women under the regime of Taliban has been chosen for this paper to understand that how sacred was employed as a tool to subjugate Afghan women.

Women in Islam were brought in the center of debate in which Islam was presented as promoter of oppression and medieval in its belief. The real face of Islam was accepted as presented by Taliban’s atrocities on women. Many concepts and words, like the power of Sacred, were distorted and exploited and employed as means to further the battle between the West and the Orient.

According to Smeal, “. . . in the 1950s, (when) women made up 50 percent of university students, 40 percent of doctors, 70 percent of teachers, and 30 percent of civil servants in Afghanistan. A small number of women even held important political posts and most Afghan women did not wear burqa (2001). Since 1964, women enjoyed the basic rights such as universal suffrage and equal pay. In the early 1990s, a large number of Afghan women participated in the workforce and public life.

The freedoms and opportunities that women had enjoyed between 1978 and 1992 were a thing of the past now – Laila could still remember Babi saying of those years of communist rule, *It's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan, Laila*. 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 now with hardliner mullahs who did away with the communist-era decrees that empowered women and instead passed rulings based on Sharia. Strict Islamic laws that ordered women to cover, forbade their travel without a male relative, punished adultery with stoning (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 253).

It a fact that Kabul was a place where there was freedom of everything: dancing at weddings and at other functions, co-education, loving and dating, but unfortunately as soon as Taliban ascended it the things were totally different:

College was co-ed, like most other colleges in the city. Although families did not encourage it, young people were known to fall in love and even date. There were parties all the times, with music and dancing through the night into the morning hours. We usually wore trousers and skirts in our cities. Nobody raised an eyebrow . . . only about 10 percent of the women wore burqas in those days, and most of them were really old or lived in the villages (Hewadpal 44).

The religion-tinted oppression of Afghanistani women began with the insurgence of Taliban. The Taliban, a Muslim fundamentalist group, took control of Afghanistan's government in 1996 and ruled until the 2001 U.S. led invasion drove it from power. Taliban began as a small group in Kandahar. They had never seen their country at peace and had no knowledge of its complex ethnic identities. Many were orphans who had grown up without mothers and sisters in the confines of segregated male refugee camps and the *madrassa* system where only war and a puritanical Islam gave meaning to their lives. The Taliban's leaders came from the poorest, the least literate and the most conservative Pashtun areas in the southern provinces of Afghanistan. Their treatment of women was based on the conservative norms and values of *Pashtunwali* that they had absorbed in the *madrassas* rather than on the Shari'a law. Restrictive policies were applied in all Taliban-controlled areas, but their impact was felt most acutely in Kabul, Mazare-Sharif, Herat and other Dari-speaking urban centres where women had traditionally enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than in the more conservative Pashtun heartland cities of Kandahar and Jalalabad, their education was largely limited to learning the Koran by repetition. Many of them had limited exposure to girls and women as they were growing up and were raised by men who had a total disregard for women.

The Taliban emerged as a force in Afghan politics in 1994 in the midst of a civil war between forces in northern and southern Afghanistan. They gained an initial territorial foothold in the southern city of Kandahar, and over

the next two years expanded their influence through a mixture of force, negotiation, and payoffs. In 1996, the Taliban captured Kabul, the Afghan capital, and took control of the national government. Taliban rule was characterized by a rigid interpretation of Islamic law, requiring women to wear head-to-toe veils, banning television, and jailing men whose beards were deemed too short, publicly executing criminals and outlawing the education of women:

Attention women:

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 mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home.

You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.

Cosmetics are forbidden.

Jewelry(sic) is forbidden.

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.

Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-Akbar. (A Thousand 271)

Taliban thus, through their decree forbade even simple pleasures of life to women by projecting that these heinous crimes against humanity are dictated by Islam as a religion. The extent to which the Taliban regime threatened the rights of Afghan women so as to implement the sacred word is dangerous in proportion. The Taliban targeted women for extreme regression and punished them brutally for infractions, violently forcing half of its population into virtual house arrest, prohibiting them on pain of physical punishment from showing their faces, seeking medical care without a male escort, or attending school. Taliban policies of systematic discrimination against women seriously undermined the health and well being of Afghan women.

At the heart of the Taliban war was and is a handful of highly motivated, profoundly religious men with a great sense of mission . . . scarred by the experience of exile and war and heavily influenced by the Deobandi neo conservative Islamism they imbibed in the madaras in Pakistan, also believe that only by forcibly purifying Afghanistan will a new, wholesome, righteous, peaceful and prosperous era dawn. Reduced to gun and rubble, it exiled itself from civilized society. It became the laboratory of grim zealots with a fierce commitment to a medieval utopia – a world without music, laughter and beauty – (Burke 42)

Indeed, as a result of implementing these harsh policies, women's situation was getting severely worse. Women who had been once teachers and nurses moved in the streets like ghosts under their enveloping burqas for selling their every possession and begging to feed their children. The children were forced to beg in streets because the widowed women were prohibited to work. Women were beaten for showing up in public without a male *mahram*, a blood relative or for showing their faces. Forced by grim poverty where the family hardly has anything to eat, Mariam is forced to send her daughter to orphanage. When she goes to meet her daughter she is beaten up for not being accompanied by *mahram*:

Crossing the street she was spotted by the Taliban and riddled with questions – What is your name? Where are you going? Why are you alone? Where is your *mahram*? Before she was sent home. If she was lucky she was given a tongue lashing or a single kick to the rear, a shove in the back, other times she met with assortments of wooden clubs, fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps, often fists. (*A Thousand* 313)

During the Taliban regime, their strict purdah regulations made women disappear from streets. Confined to the four walls of their homes, they became an invisible presence in Afghanistan. They were completely forbidden to come on to street except in rare cases, “One day a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna. When he was done, he gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said, “I see you again, I’ll beat you until your mother’s milk leaks out of your bones””(A *Thousand* 313). With the “(w)hip-toting, naswar-chewing Talibs (patrolling) .. Titanic city on the lookout for the indiscreet laugh, the unveiled face” (A *Thousand* 318), Mariam felt the ire of such beatings numerous times, “That time Laila went home. She lay on her stomach feeling like a stupid pitiable animal and hissed as Mariam arranged damp cloths across her bloodied back and thighs . . . Soon Laila took to wearing extra layers, even in the heat, two, three sweaters beneath the burqa for padding against the beatings (A *Thousand* 313-14).

Their singular obsession with covering bodies shows itself in the way they take even a bird's legs as offensive, “When Taliban had found the paintings, Tariq said, they'd taken offence at the bird's long, bare legs. After they'd tied the cousin's feet and flogged his soles bloody, they had presented him with a choice. Either destroy the paintings or make the flamingoes decent. So the cousin had picked up his brush and painted trousers on every last bird” (A *Thousand* 323)

Far from protecting women from prying eyes, an aim with which women were confined to homes, women's positions were contradictorily situated. On the one hand, women were positioned into the role of the chaste women whose mobility and sexuality were strictly controlled, on the other hand, even these pure women were often victims of rape and other forms of violence at the hands of the Mujahidin. There existed no security for women. Their homes were invaded and their bodies were used as rewards for victorious soldiers. Women in custody were raped and sexually assaulted. Mariam, in the confines of prison experiences their duality in terms of women:

The windows had no glass. There were no curtains either which meant the Talib guard who roamed the courtyard had an eyeful of the interior of the cells. Some of the women complained that the guards smoked outside the window and leered in with their inflamed eyes and wolfish smiles, that they muttered indecent jokes to each other about them (*A Thousand* 352)

Also, taking a cue from the sadist Taliban, the already patriarchal mindset gave men an excuse to treat women brutally inside the four walls of the house as well. At home, Rashid's reproaches, ridicules, reprimands, kicks, and fists rain down on Mariam and Laila. The fear of being raped and murdered at the hands of the Mujahedin and the fear of being abused and tortured at the hands of the Taliban grow Mariam and Laila's dependence on Rashid and enable him to expand his aggressive dominion:

And then he was on Laila, pummeling her chest, her head, her belly with fists, tearing at her hair, throwing her to the wall. Aziza was shrieking, pulling at his shirt; Zalmai was screaming too, trying to get him off his mother. Rasheed shoved the children aside, pushed Laila to the ground, and began kicking her. Mariam threw herself on Laila. He went on kicking, kicking Mariam now, spittle flying from his mouth, his eyes glittering with murderous intent, kicking until he couldn't anymore. (*A Thousand* 298)

The violence and the horror prevalent in Kabul are shown to be analogous to the brutal, male dominance overshadowing the house. The fear crawls into the life of Mariam from the inception of her marriage when Rashid asks her, "You're shaking. Maybe I scare you. Do I scare you? Are you frightened of me?" and "she quickly shook her head in what she recognized as her first lie in their marriage" (*A Thousand* 60-61). Her life is further haunted by the fear over the years. After four years of marriage, she perceives "How much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid" (*A Thousand* 99). She always lives in fear of Rashid's shifting moods and his volatile temperament that he often resolves with scorn, abuse, and punch. As the novel makes its way, Rashid's sadistic treatment of her wives allows the author to potently illustrate the ferocious setting of the house. One instance of his brutality is well displayed in his violent treatment of his wives when he comes to know of Laila's friend Tariq coming to meet her, "without saying a word, he swung the belt at Laila. He did it with such speed that she had no time to retreat or duck, or even raise a protective arm (*A Thousand* 337) and again they face his wrath after a failed attempt to run away, "Laila did not see the punch coming. One moment she was talking and the next she was on all fours, wide-eyed and red-faced, trying to draw a breath. It was as if a

car had hit her at full speed, in the tender place between the lower tip of the breast bone and the belly button (A *Thousand* 261) He imprisons Mariam and Laila in two separate empty, dark rooms:

Azan rang out a second time and still Rashid had not given them any food and, worse, no water... the room turned into a pressure cooker... The muezzin called azan a third time. Again the heat... Laila was sure now that Aziza, [her daughter], would die in this heat, and Laila would have to lie beside her stiffening little body and wait for her own death.” (A *Thousand* 263-265)

Besides another important area where they curbed women involvement was in the field of health. Laila, in labour pain about to deliver Zalmai is sent away from one hospital to another as according to another of their brutal laws Taliban had declared that, “men and women would be seen in different hospitals, that all female staff would be discharged from Kabul hospitals and sent to work in one central facility” (A *Thousand* 278). The scene at the hospital has been portrayed in all its gruesomeness:

The waiting room at Rabia Balkhi was teeming with women in burkhas and their children. The air stank of sweat and unwashed bodies, of feet, urine, cigarette smoke, and antiseptic. . . Before the registration window was a horde of women, shoving and pushing against each other . . . Mariam waded in. She dug in her heels and burrowed against the elbows, hips, and shoulder blades of strangers. Someone elbowed her in the ribs, and she elbowed back. A hand made a desperate grab at her face. She swatted it away. To propel herself forward, Mariam clawed at necks, at arms and elbows, at hair, and, when a woman nearby hissed, Mariam hissed back. (A *Thousand* 279-280)

The female doctors find themselves helpless in the face of all the restrictions, “They won’t give me what I need. I have no X- ray either, no suction, no oxygen, not even simple anti biotics. When NGOs offer money, the Taliban turn them away or they funnel the money to the places that cater to men” (A *Thousand* 283)

II.CONCLUSION

Hosseini chronicles the last 33 years of the Afghanistan’s tumultuous history of war and depression. He narrates how they tore down the country, shut down universities, ripped paintings form walls, kicked down television screens, burned books, and closed down book stores. He illustrates how they stripped women of their very basic rights of working, educating, going outside without a male relative, and showing their faces. The setting of Kabul provides readers with a broader view of the circumstances of women in the context of political instability of Afghanistan. It demonstrates the author’s effort to place emphasis on the compelling contribution of the political fluctuation of the country leading to the violent suppression of women.

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