Giving Voice to Afghan women’s struggle for survival:

Khaled Hossein’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khalid Hosseini exposes the cultural, political, religious and social structures of Afghanistan in degrading and devaluing Afghan women. The strict Islamic laws undermine women’s basic human rights and sabotage their equal participation in human community. This paper analyses the struggle of Afghan women to survive and to free themselves from the suffocating chains of oppression and violence. All the female characters of novel endure terrifying situations where they are abused beyond human imaginations. Hosseini draws a similarity between the fate of two characters, Mariam and Laila, who hail from drastically different backgrounds but are connected by tragic twist in their lives. They share the same pain and agony and undergo similar stereo-typical trials of being women in Afghanistan. The author shows how their struggles and trials lead them to fight back and to hope for happiness and a better future. Further Hosseini underlines the parallel of Afghan women’s suffering with the fate of Afghanistan. He masterfully weaves the personal narrative of Laila and Mariam into the backdrop of Afghanistan’s turbulent recent history. As its women are suppressed by male dominated society and cruel laws of Taliban similarly the country suffers under the deadly invasions of Soviet Russians, Taliban and Mujahedeen and finally its hope of rebuilding under US invasion in 2001.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khaled Hosseini, arguably the best known contemporary writer from Afghanistan, a physician by profession before he became a fulltime literary author, was born in Kabul in 1965 and shifted
to the United States in 1980. He passed his graduation in 1984 and enrolled at Santa Clara University, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in biology in 1988. The following year he entered the University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine, from where he earned a medical degree in 1993. His first novel *The Kite Runner* was published in 2003 and eventually became an international best-seller. The novel has been translated into more than 40 languages, sold in at least seventy countries and spent more than a hundred weeks on the New York Times best seller list. Its big-screen adaptation was released in 2007. That same year, Hosseini published his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which also became a best seller. It has been widely admired and valued by critics and readers all over the world. With the success of his writing career, Hosseini gave up practicing medicine and became a full-time writer. In 2006 he was named a Goodwill Envoy to UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency. He later established *The Khaled Hosseini Foundation* to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. Hosseini published his third much-awaited novel, *And the Mountains Echoed* in 2013. Hosseini, who had no formal training as an author, gave credit to his country’s tradition of oral storytelling as an influence on his writing style. In his novels Hosseini displays his wonderful understanding of human emotions and gradually and gracefully draws these emotions forth from the readers throughout the course of the story. His works specially reflect Afghan culture and heritage and weave tales of recent Afghan history through strong emotional, political themes and characters. The characters he creates in his stories have real life characteristic and traits. As a writer he beautifully depicts his characters’ ability, resilience and capacity for finding hope and joy in darkness.

**INTRODUCTION**

Feminism can be broadly described as a set of movements for deconstruction of gender roles for political, social and economic equality between men and women. It aims at ending sexism and exploitation by establishing equal opportunities for women in education and employment. Feminism is a global phenomenon dealing with gender equality. Man or women who fight against patriarchy, dominance, marginalization and degrading rule and regulations can be considered as feminists. Feminism differs from country to country considering the situations and circumstances of the victims. Islamic feminists fight for the equal rights for Muslim women by providing educational opportunities, international human rights and progressive
interpretation of the Koran. They raise their voice for justice and equality from within Islamic traditions.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Khaled Hosseini portrays how strict Islamic family laws are imposed on women by forcing them to adhere to fundamental values of virginity, marriage and divorce. Author spins out the fate and sharp individual differences of his female characters to demonstrate the breath of commonality among Muslim women in Afghan society during the drastic political upheavals of the 1970’s till 2003. In novel Taliban and Mujahideen believe that proper social order relies on the curtailment of female rights. As Rasheed proclaims his masculinity and control over his wife Mariam, “I am a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman’s face is her husband’s business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand?” (ATSS, 63). All the major female characters in novel Nana, Mariam, Laila and Aziza suffer from the male atrocities either as a wife or a daughter. Women are made to believe that their oppression is justified by Islamic teaching such as the concept of husband’s authority over his wife. Mariam being uneducated and illegitimate daughter of rich business man and a poor maid endures Rasheed’s violence as she had internalized what her mother Nana had taught her “to endure without protest” whereas Laila being educated and spirited girl stands against domestic violence and fight for her survival and rights. Laila having been raised with a strong sense of self by her father is not willing to submit to her circumstances as is Mariam. When she does so, it is because she has something to gain by doing so. She readily accepts Rasheed’s marriage proposal because she is pregnant with Tariq’s child. Miserable plight of female characters shows how religious beliefs and Islamic law practices cripple them and make them powerless. The worst part of patriarchy is that women are blamed and affected directly and indirectly for the mistakes of men. Nana endures endless sufferings just because she is a woman, as a poor epileptic girl she is abandoned by her fiancé, disowned by her father and ostracised by the society for bringing shame by becoming mother without marriage and finally discarded by Jalil khan. Nana’s fate is reflected by advise she gives to Mariam, “Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam” (ATSS,7). Mariam, “a little harami” as her mother calls her, suffers throughout her life without any fault of her own. As it is mentioned, “She understood.... 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, acceptance” (ATSS,4). When Mariam aspires to go to school Nana speaks the truth of her condition, “There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don’t teach it in school.....Only one skill. And it’s this: tahamul. Endure” (ATSS, 17). Aziza daughter of Laila suffers for being a girl child. Her father Rasheed obsessed with male child refused to show affection to her and always refers to her as “that thing”. The solution he provided for the family’s poverty by sending Aziza to orphanage is evident the Rasheed consider her burden. He even wishes her daughter to beg whereas he takes loan to bring new clothes, toys and television for his son Zalmai.

Various scenes in novel highlights that Afghan women’s right under law are non-existent. They are segregated by conferring them to the traditional roles of women and made victims of polygamy and domestic violence. Laila and Mariam endure polygamy and domestic violence. When Mariam fails to give Rasheed a male child after repeated miscarriages he turns into a tyrant of domestic violence. He forced Mariam to chew pebbles in his impatience and disgust over her inability to reproduce, “Put these in your mouth.....His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold hard 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, 94). Rasheed’s most hypocritical and evil side is revealed when the Laila and Mariam realise that Tariq’s death was a false story made up by him. When Rasheed comes to know that Laila visited Tariq burqa- less, his rage reaches uncontrollable levels. He locked up his son and as always began hitting Mariam with his belt. When Mariam reacted to these by clawing at his face, chipping her nails into his jowls and pulling his hair, he let her go and caught hold of Laila and beat her mercilessly almost suffocating Laila to death. Striving with a hope of survival and tested up to their limit of tolerance both Laila and Mariam truns in to rebel and tries to run away from home. They are caught and returned to Rasheed as Taliban restricts the mobility of women by forbidding them from travelling alone they must be accompanied by “mahram” a male relative. Laila undergoes the crudest form of humiliation at the hands of Taliban, when her motherly instinct urges her to go out alone to meet Aziza in orphanage, she is beaten severally by a Talib, “I see you again, I’ll beat you until your mother’s milk leaks out of your bones”(ATSS,313). The Taliban family law of “sharia” gives Rasheed an opportunity to subjugate his wives and to exercise his control
over them,”you try this again and I will find you. I swear on the Prophet’s name that I will find you. And, when I do, there isn’t a court in this godforsaken country that will hold me accountable for what I will do. To Mariam first, then to her....I’ll make you watch. You understand me? I’ll make you watch” (ATSS,243). A man has right to punish a women of his household as he sees proper without any interference from law. The perfect example of this is the scene when Laila speaks to an officer about returning home and asks if he will protect her from her husband he responds, “What a man does in his home is his business......As a matter of policy, we do not interfere with private family matters, hamshera”(ATSS,238).

Hosseini makes a symbolic use of burqa in the novel. It stands for male-dominance and control by discarding women as a sex object. It eliminates women as a source of seduction and shame that should be covered. By presenting burqa as a gift to his wives Mariam and Laila, Rasheed pretends to protect them from outer world but hypocritically he exercise his control and authority over them. When Mariam wore it for first time she feel that “the padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen. She practiced walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth” (ATSS,65) . Both Mariam and Laila accept the burqa, in case of Mariam it is acceptance of stereo-typical roles of women whereas Laila accept it hide her embarrassment at being married to Rasheed. When the Taliban takes over the country burqa becomes symbol of imprisonment, “Attention women: You will stay inside homes all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets...You will not, under any circumstances, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.”(ATSS, 278). Taliban’s desperation in implementation of burqa is evident that even female doctors have to operate their patients while wearing burqa, “They want us to operate in burqa,” the doctor explained, motioning with her head to the nurse at the door. “She keeps watch. She sees them coming; I cover” (ATSS, 259).

Feminist concept is taken further by the author in personifying Afghanistan as a woman. Hosseini’s female characters, much like the country itself appear to be propelled by the whims of outside forces, familial and societal, with little chances of influencing their own lives and futures. Yet Laila and Mariam are neither passive nor helpless, they make choices and accept consequences to affect desired ends, hopeful and tragic. Just as Laila and Mariam experience
abuse from Rasheed in their home and from random men as they venture out on the streets of Kabul, the country has been traumatized by deadly foreign invasions, civil war and strife between different religious sects. Hosseini make his characters representative of different political situations. Hakim represents the secular and progressive ideas of communist by providing education to his daughter Laila, “women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they’re probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they’ve ever had before” (ATSS,121). Babi encourage Laila to gain education,” I want you to understand and learn this now.....Marriage can wait, education cannot......Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, may be more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated” (ATSS,103). On the other hand Rasheed stands for the the evil and oppression of Taliban’s. Internal strife between Taliban and Mujahedeen’s is depicted by rockets, bombs, hand grenade and landmines. One such rocket destroyed Laila’s home leaving her orphan and homeless. Rasheed took her advantage by forcing her to marry him, “but I suspect she won’t get far. No food, no water......How many days do you suppose she’ll last before she’s abducted, raped, or tossed into some roadside ditch with her throat slit” (ATSS,192). Rasheed’s treatment of Mariam symbolises the soviet invasion and civil war whereas his relationship with Mariam and Laila both symbolises the Taliban rule over Afghanistan. With his atrocities Rasheed give mental and physical agony to Mariam and Laila, similarly foreign invasions and civil war destroy geography of country by polluting its land water and air with landmines, bombs and rockets. The devastation caused by war was further symbolised by Tariq’s lost and the death of Laila’s brothers. Babi, Laila’s father aptly comments that the “only enemy an Afghan cannot defeat is himself”.

Communists introduce reforms by declaring Afghanistan a secular state and equal right for women but they face fierce opposition from deeply religious sects as best depicted by scene in which Mariam come across a gun in Rasheed’s room indicating increasing presence of weapons and unrest, “she saw the gun.....It was black, with a wooden grip and a short muzzle.....It was disquieting to her that Rasheed owned something whose sole purpose was to kill another person” (ATSS,74).Ironically Afghan people welcome the Taliban as a force that will change Afghanistan’s chaotic and improvised state, when they overtook the communist the radio, to announce, ”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, 100). Taliban’s along with Mujahideens and their feudal lords impose death and destruction on Afghanistan and its people. They declare Afghanistan “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” and enforce fundamental religious laws on its people. After taking control Taliban begin their decimation of Afghan culture and eradication of basic human rights. The Taliban smash the remnants of the Kabul Museum and do away with any aspect of Afghan culture that conflicts with Islam religion, “The University was shut down and its students sent home. Paintings were ripped from walls, shredded with blades. Television screens were kicked in. Books except Koren, were burned in heaps.....The poems of Khalili, Ansari.......Rumi, Khayyam, Beydel, and more went up in smoke” (ATSS.250). They banned all source of entertainment and destroyed the artifice of country, “the Taliban had planted TNT in the crevices of the giant Buddhas in Bamiyan and blown them apart, calling them objects of idolatry and sin” (ATSS, 278). Under the name of religion women are prohibited from going to school and are not allowed to work, “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” (ATSS, 249). Rasheed being an embodiment of cruelty of Taliban crushed Liala’s pride and spirt by taunting her about the uselessness of her education” “what good are all your smarts to you now”. The utmost atrocities of Taliban’s on women is revealed by hospital scene where Laila gives birth to her son Zalmai through a caesarean operation without anaesthesia, “They had no clean water,...,no oxygen, no medications, no electricity. “There is nothing there”(ATSS,255). Helplessness of general public and their circumstances is depicted by Fariba’s “Laila’s mother” response, “when the rocket began to rain down on Kabul people ran for cover. Mammy did too, literally. She changed into black again, went to her room, shut the curtains, and pulled the blanket over her head” (ATSS,155). The infiltration of Titanic phenomenon symbolizes that nation is sinking and its people are just doing to hold on to what they are left with in their lives.

The novel is about survival, love and hope for better future. U.S military campaign in Afghanistan after Sept 11,2001 attack which overthrow the Taliban’s shows ray of hope for nation rebuilding, "Laila spots flowers potted in the empty shells of old Mujahideen rockets—rocket flowers, Kabulis call them."(ATSS, 363). Similarly the bond that established between Laila and Mariam gives them strength to transcend their limitations and to perform devastating acts of self-sacrifice. They find solace and happiness in each other’s company. Their bond gives
them freedom from pain not only physically but emotionally by trusting each other. Mariam who never shows any sign of rebellion against Rasheed and his barbarous beating, gained courage to fight back and ultimately kill Rasheed by love and respect that she received from Laila and her childrens. Mariam makes a calculated decision to kill Rasheed as he is in act of murdering Laila. Mariam makes sure that Rasheed sees her so that he can acknowledge her action. Mariam, who did everything to appease and accommodate Rasheed is able to resist not only his brutal force but her own revulsion of violent action to save Laila, “He’s going to kill her, she thought. He really means to. And Mariam could not, would not, allow that to happen. He’d taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too” (ATSS, 310). Mariam remains clearheaded enough to assure her results, “Mariam raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could, arching it so it touched the small of her back. She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life”(ATSS,311). Mariam makes the ultimate sacrifice for Laila and her children by taking the blame of Rasheed’s murder. This murder is revolt of Mariam against suffocating oppression of her husband and his cruelty and it marks the end of dominance and control. Mariam’s execution symbolizes the illegitimacy of power, authority and control. Mariam does not lament even while being lead to the Ghazi stadium, to be prosecuted instead she labels herself as a person of consequence. Once a drab woman stripped of her femininity and social rights because of her status as a bastard child, Mariam is now a class-breaking rebel. It gives her life a meaning and purpose as she is leaving this world, “as friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last....Mariam thought.....This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings” (ATSS, 329). Laila finally finds the life she has been dreaming. Mariam sacrifice enable Laila to escape from Afghanistan with her childhood love Tariq and children but she eventually come back to her country to be a part of its rebuilding. The narrative of Mariam and Laila merges with the narrative of the rebuilding of Afghanistan and of Kabul. As Laila and Tariq set to work at Aziza’s orphanage , Laila feels Mariam’s sprit everywhere and sense it as a force behind Kabul’s reconstruction. ” Laila sees now that.... Mariam is never very far. She is here, in the walls they’ve painted’ in the trees they’ve planted......she is in children’s laughter. She is in the verses Aziza recites and in her prayers....But, mostly, Mariam is in Laila’s own heart, where she shines with bursting radiance of a thousand suns” (ATSS,366).
CONCLUSION

Khalid Hosseini gives an optimistic ending to his novel by showing increased rights of women and depicting that Afghanistan is heading towards freedom, progress and acceptance. The chief concerns of his characters in the novel are universal. They struggle to survive all odds to raise a family and find happiness. Khaled Hosseini describes the unfortunate condition not only of women but of humanity at large in Afghanistan. Afghan women are really fighting for their identity and existence while suffering under the repressive social, political and religious forces. Through his story Hossieni reflects his concern about the emancipation of women, their education, employment and their exploitation by the male members of family and by the politics of unending war. Amidst all death and destruction Hosseini describes the rich culture, literature, art and beauty of country. As the novel opens jalil khan, Mariam’s father tells her that Herat her birthplace, “had once been the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, painters, and Sufis” (ATSS, 4). Further Laila’s father continue this idyllic history lessons as he relates the story of Afghanistan as a country of poetry and literature. Finally, as the novel ends Laila returns to Herat to visit Mariam’s birthplace, she experiences the peace and quiet beauty of nature. Hosseini advocates that there is great need for creating the great bond of amity between Afghan people and rest of the world.
References


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