



The “Othering” of Women in Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract: This paper attempts to analyse how Khalid Hosseini’s second ground-breaking novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), calls attention to the double marginalisation that breeds and sustains the dehumanising problems experienced by women. It examines how the objectification and debasement of women in the larger public sphere are analogous to the commodification and victimisation women encounter in their domestic spheres, sustained by the patriarchy ingrained in the society. It also explores how Hosseini portrays the women characters as fighting against all the odds and trying to claim a space for themselves despite all the attempts to subdue them.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Warfare, Marginalisation, Oppression, Resilience

The ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,’ as it is now officially known, has served as a battlefield for multiple warring regimes from time immemorial. Popularly addressed by the sobriquet “Graveyard of Empires,” the country has been the site of numerous military crusades, including those led by Alexander the Great, the Mauryas, Muslim Arabs, Mongols, British, Soviets, and Americans. In the 18th century, the Hotaki and Durrani dynasties established the modern state of Afghanistan. The first Durrani ruler, Ahmad Shah, is known as the founder of the current Afghan nation. The perpetuation of violence has had a devastating impact on the lives of common people who have been victims of numerous human rights violations, crimes, genocides and massacres at the hands of varying rulers. Afghan women, in particular, had to bear the brunt of the oppressive patriarchal policies imposed by the ruling powers, from pre-monarch times to the present era of the Taliban regime. They have conventionally been subjected to oppression, gender segregation, cruelty and brutality by the ruling authorities and the patriarchy prevalent in their families. In his book *Status of Women: Afghanistan*, Wali M. Rahimi points out that

[t]he position of women in Afghanistan has traditionally been inferior to that of men. This position has varied according to age, socio-cultural norms, and ethnicity. In fact, Afghan women, even until the beginning of 20th century were the slaves of their father, husband, father-in-law, and elder brother. Her most valued characteristic was silence and obedience. (6)

Women have been compelled to stay within their domestic spheres for fear of bringing shame to their families and the community. Their claim to social and economic independence is restrained by their fathers and husbands, who try to assert undue authority over them. They have always been the major sufferers and are made to “bear the worst violence . . . in terms of violence on their bodies — rape and dislocation of home, family, and community” (Katrak 80).

However, some Afghan rulers attempted to improve the circumstances of women by introducing some social reforms and promoting freedom for women. King Amanullah, who ruled from 1919 to 1929, was the most significant of the rulers who made some noteworthy changes to improve the lives and position of women in the public sphere to attenuate the control that patriarchy asserted over them. He stressed the importance of female education and encouraged families to send their daughters to school. His wife, Queen Soraya, is credited with being one of the first and most powerful Afghan and Muslim female activists. She firmly stressed the importance of women’s participation in the public sphere and pronounced that “Do not think, however, that our nation needs only men to serve it. Women should also take their part, as women did in the early years of Islam . . . And from their examples, we learn that we must all contribute towards a development of our nation” (qtd. in Hosseini 411). During his tenure as Prime Minister, Mohammed Daoud Khan, who aimed to break free from the ultra-conservative, Islamistic tradition of treating women as second-class citizens, also made some notable changes. All these reforms,



however, had little impact outside the main cities, where the society was deeply rooted in conservative, patriarchal ideology and customs.

Although there are many women Afghan writers like Malalai Joya, Fariba Nawa, and Homeira Qaderi, who have focussed on the plight of Afghan women in their works, very few male writers have captured the predicament of women in Afghan society. The most notable exception is Khaled Hosseini, who, in his second best-selling novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), explicitly dedicated himself to examining the condition of women and the sufferings they had to undergo during the conflicts between different ruling factions. In this novel, he undertakes to explore the position of women as doubly marginalised by both their family members and the country's socio-political system. The novel spans more than four decades and revolves around the lives of two women, Mariam and Laila, who belong to two different generations. Hosseini provides a striking portrait of Afghanistan, devastated by a series of wars and ideological warfare launched by both foreign and internal factions. The torture and abuse that the two female protagonists experience throughout the narrative run parallel to the abuse and trauma the country has been subjected to over decades. In *Reading Khaled Hosseini*, Rebecca Stuhr aptly remarks that

Hosseini is a cultural theorist of the post-colonial era. His novels depict the traumatic experiences of the people caught in the web of cultural collision. His stories are quite compelling and the language is quite bewitching. He questions assumptions that break and disrupt the lives of women. He gives details of history, culture, and daily life in Afghanistan. (77-8)

The novel opens with Mariam and her mother Nana living in a *kolbaon* the outskirts of the village of Gul Daman. Mariam was born out of wedlock and is addressed frequently in the novel as a *harami*, an illegitimate child. Nana conceived Mariam with Jalil, one of Herat's wealthiest men, in whose house she worked as a housekeeper. Since Jalil did not stand up to his family and instead blamed Nana for *forcing* herself on him, Nana was sent off from his house and was bound to spend her entire life in what she calls a "rathole" away from the main society (9). Jalil had not even bothered to send for a doctor or a midwife to assist Nana's delivery, and Nana had to "cut the cord between" them herself (11). Nana, thus, represents the first generation of women who are ostracised and marginalised not only by Jalil's family to whom she is nothing more than "a pokeroot [and a] mugwort"

but also by her father, who disowned her and left her to face the disgrace alone (8). She has faced rejection throughout her life which has embittered her towards all men. She alienates Mariam from the outside world and warns her that "[a] man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing . . . It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you. I'm the only one who loves you. I'm all you have in this world . . . and when I'm gone you'll have nothing" (27). When Mariam insists on going to school, she dismisses her by saying that "you'll learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life And it's this: *tahamul*. Endure It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have" (18). Nana has passively submitted to her lot and teaches Mariam from her childhood itself to embrace the hardships submissively. Nana's warnings prove true when after her suicide, Mariam is imposed on Jalil and his three wives. In order to get rid of her, Jalil's wives marry her off to a widower who is thrice her age. Mariam realised that she was being sent away because "she was the walking, breathing embodiment of their shame" and "this was their chance to erase, once and for all, the last trace of their husband's scandalous mistake" (48). When she beseeches Jalil to prevent his wives from doing this to her, she is appalled to hear that her "father has already given Rasheed his answer" (49). In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that men have reduced women to the status of the second sex, and as a result, a woman "doesn't possess anything, [she] is not raised to the nobility of a man; she is a piece of man's patrimony, first her father's and after that her husband's" (93).

Laila, on the other hand, is born in a very liberal household in Kabul during the Soviet regime. The Communist government sought to emancipate women and launched literacy campaigns to fight against women's illiteracy. As Laila's father Babi told her, "[w]omen have always had it hard in this country . . . but they're probably more free now, under the communists . . . it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan" (133). He gives immense importance to Laila's education and has, in fact, made it clear to her that "the most important thing in his life, after her safety, [i]s her schooling" (114). Even after the Mujahideen took over the city of Kabul and Laila had to drop out of school, Babi made sure that her studies did not suffer and started teaching her every day. During the Mujahideen rule, many educated and professional women in Kabul were kidnapped and murdered because their minds were thought to be contaminated. The narrator mentions the instances of "looting, murder and



increasing rape, which was used to intimidate civilians and reward militiamen.” Many women killed themselves “out of fear of being raped,” and those who were raped were killed by their husbands and fathers “in the name of honor” (247). The stories that Laila had heard from Babi about her parents’ courtship and marriage made her develop a romantic notion of love and marriage. She loves her childhood friend Tariq and dreams of spending a happy married life with him. Her dreams, however, are shattered when the increasing instances of killing and fighting compel Tariq and his family to run away from Kabul for safety. Her misfortunes further aggravate when her parents are killed in a bomb blast, and her illegitimate pregnancy leaves her with no choice but to marry Rasheed.

Rasheed emerges in the novel as a staunch upholder of traditional oppressive patriarchal values who assaults his wives both physically and mentally. He exerts his will over them by restricting their movement outside the house and ordering them to wear a burqa. He makes apparent his imposing nature by telling Mariam that it embarrasses him to see a man who has lost control of his wife. He proudly boasts that “I’m a different breed of man 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” (69). Though Mariam felt suffocated in the burqa and “[t]he padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull,” enabling her to see “the world through a mesh screen,” she obediently submits to his orders (71). The Special Rapporteur of OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) (2014) states that many Afghan women believe it is normal and acceptable for their husbands to victimise and abuse them. Mariam flatters herself into believing that Rasheed is over-possessive because he sees “sanctity in what they had together. Her honor, her *namoos*, was something worth guarding to him. She felt prized by his protectiveness. Treasured and significant” (80). Rasheed’s hypocrisy becomes obvious when Mariam finds a pornographic magazine in his room and realises the hollowness of his talk of honour and propriety. Although Rasheed behaves lovingly with her in the initial days of their marriage — buying her gifts and taking her on some trips — his behaviour changes drastically after Mariam’s multiple miscarriages and her inability to bear children. He turned very indifferent towards her, and Mariam started living in constant “fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament . . . punches, slaps, kicks” (97-8). The narrator comments that “[i]t was the fear of the goat, released in the tiger’s cage, when the

tiger first looks up from its paws, begins to growl” (234). Over the years, however, Mariam learns to solidify herself against Rasheed’s torture and abuse and blames herself for failing him by not giving him the son, he so desperately wanted. Women in patriarchal societies are valued only in terms of their biological capacity to reproduce, reducing their status to what the protagonist of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) calls “two-legged wombs” (Atwood 146). They are conditioned to equate their self-worth with their reproductive capacity, which further represses them and contributes to their feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. The climax of Rasheed’s cruelty towards her can be seen when, at the end of Part 1 of the novel, he forces a handful of hard pebbles into her mouth and constrains her to chew them because he did not like the rice she had cooked for him.

Later, when Rasheed decides to marry Laila and Mariam pleads with him not to make her suffer as she is “too old for [him] to do this to [her],” he denies her outrightly, saying “[i]t’s not your decision. It’s hers and mine” (208). Under the pretence of saving Laila’s life and providing her with a refuge, Rasheed concocts a plot to compel Laila to marry him. He hires an informant and, through him, wrongly conveys to Laila the news of Tariq’s death so that she agrees to marry him. He brags about his charity in taking her as a wife amidst the period of political turmoil when a woman is not safe in the streets and could be “abducted, raped, or tossed into some roadside ditch with her throat slit” as soon as she is found alone (209). The justifications he puts before Mariam adroitly highlight how women are marginalised by the socio-political system of the time: “These days, times being what they are, a woman needs a husband. Haven’t you noticed all the widows sleeping on the streets? They would kill for this chance I’d say this is downright charitable of me The way I see it, I deserve a medal” (209-10). After their marriage, when Rasheed comes to know about Laila’s pregnancy, he starts pampering her, addressing her as “my flower, my gul,” the queen, the “*malika* of my house,” without knowing that she is not carrying his child (224). He is so obsessed with having a son that as soon as he hears the news, he starts buying boy’s clothes and toys without considering that the child could be a girl. When the child turns out to be a girl, he becomes so disappointed that his behaviour changes instantaneously, and he shows no affection towards her. In Pashtun society, having a son is always considered a blessing and a matter of pride. Not only the men but the women too have internalised



this notion and prefer having a son over a daughter. This is evident in the novel when one of the neighbourhood women tells Mariam that a “[b]oy is better . . . they carry the family name” (66). Although Laila’s father dotes over her, her mother, in grieving over her sons who had left their home and joined the Mujahideen group, has not given her due attention, making her feel unloved and unwanted by her mother. Laila has, over the years, acclimatised herself to the fact that she would never be a match for her brothers and “would never leave her mark on Mammy’s heart the way her brothers had, because Mammy’s heart was like a pallid beach where Laila’s footprints would forever wash away beneath the waves of sorrow that swelled and crashed, swelled and crashed” (142). When Laila finally has a son, Rasheed cherishes him and views his mischievous acts as “sign[s] of intelligence” (288). Although their financial condition is not good, he borrows a lot of money to buy him new clothes, bottles, rattles, a television and a VCR. When he fails repay back the loan, he tries to persuade Laila to turn their daughter into a street beggar.

Soon after the Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996, they brutally imposed social restrictions on women. Although the Taliban emerged with the aim to end the atrocities of the Mujahideen, they intensified the brutalities imposed on Afghan women. In the novel, Hosseini pinpoints some of the atrocious rulings of the Taliban that highlight the essential patriarchal mindset of the regime:

You [women] will stay inside your homes at all times If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately. Women are forbidden from working. (271)

In a 1998 report compiled by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), it was mentioned that besides the Taliban, “no other regime in the world has methodically and violently forced half of its population into virtual house arrest, prohibiting them on pain of physical punishment.” The inhumanity of Taliban towards women can be gauged from how Rasheed tries to intimidate Laila by hinting at the torture she would be subjected to if he could go to the Taliban and express suspicions about her. His assertion — “[w]hose word do you think they would believe? What do you think they’d do to you?” — foregrounds how women were stifled and how their sufferings went unnoticed by the

patriarchal regime (275). In another instance, the author tells us about the suffering of another woman Naghma whom Mariam meets in prison. Naghma had fallen in love with the son of a local mullah who had lured her into eloping with him. When the two were caught, the mullah’s son put the entire blame on Naghma, saying that she “had seduced him with her feminine charms . . . [and] had cast a spell on him” (354). Although he was freed after being flogged, Naghma was sentenced to five years in prison. Listening to Naghma’s story reminded Miriam of what Nana had said to her: “Like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman. Always” (7). In *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990), Sylvia Walby aptly remarks that “the [masculinist] state is engaged with gendered political forces, its actions have gender differentiated effects, and its structure is highly gendered” (150). She furthermore comments that “the state has a systematic bias towards patriarchal interests in its policies and actions” (21).

Hosseini points out the hypocrisy of the Taliban’s laws in the novel. By forbidding women from working outside their homes, the Taliban endangered the lives of many women and children who did not have a male member to support them. There is a mention of a widow in the novel who, rather than waiting to die from starvation, embraced suicide to end her sufferings. The narrator suggests that she “had ground some dried bread, laced it with rat poison, and fed it to all seven of her children. She had saved the biggest portion for herself” (299). Women were even denied access to proper health care. The Taliban decreed that there would be separate hospitals for treating men and women and that all-female staff would be sent to work in one central women’s hospital. However, only the health needs of men are prioritised, and the single women’s hospital is left in a dilapidated state by the government. The hospital has “no clean water . . . no oxygen, no medications, no electricity” and is so overcrowded and unattended that the air “stank of sweat and unwashed bodies, of feet, urine, cigarette smoke, and antiseptic” (279). The lady doctor exclaims how she is helpless to perform Laila’s caesarean without anaesthetic because the Taliban “won’t give [her] what [she] need[s]. [She] ha[s] no X-ray either, no suction, no oxygen, not even simple antibiotics. When NGOs offer money, the Taliban turn them away. Or they funnel the money to the places that cater to men” (283).

Hosseini also captures the cruelties inflicted on women found on the streets without their mahram. Every time Laila stepped out to visit her daughter at the orphanage, she was met with



“assortments of wooden clubs, fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps, often fists,” or if “she was lucky, she was given a tongue-lashing or a single kick to the rear, a shove in the back.” On some days, when she was caught by soldiers multiple times in a single day, “the whips came down and the antennas sliced through the air, and she trudged home, bloodied, without so much as a glimpse of Aziza” (313). The Taliban, thus, terrorise women into following their rules and inflict strict punishments on those who try to violate them to establish their fear in the hearts of women. In his postscript to the novel, Hosseini recalls the shock he experienced when he met a man in Kabul who “kind of casually” told him a story about a woman he had seen being thrashed by a Taliban official on the street. The man, Hosseini writes, had used a “rather grisly” expression saying that the official had beaten her “until her mother’s milk leaked out of her bones” (409). Hosseini could not bring himself to accept that all this could happen in Kabul, where before the arrival of the Taliban, women “were professors at universities, they were doctors and lawyers, worked in hospitals, taught at schools and played an important role in society” (409).

He, however, depicts the female protagonists not merely as passive victims but as demonstrating remarkable resilience in the face of sustained adversities. The novel is his attempt to “explore the inner lives” of Mariam and Laila and “look for the very ordinary humanity beneath their veils” (412). Although they had different upbringings, the two women feel united in their shared suffering of having an abusive husband and facing marital oppression. He uses their friendship as a tool to fight against the oppressive forces. SedunathDhakal writes in his review of the novel that “the closeness and unity of Mariam and Laila becomes strength for Afghan women who seem to be tolerating, hopeful and ultimately powerful to fight against the males” (232). After enduring Rasheed’s torture and mistreatment for many years, Laila and Mariam finally decide not to put up with his violent behaviour any longer and, therefore, plan to run away from his house. Their plan, however, fails because the man in whom they put their trust betrays them by taking all their money and handing them over to the police. Although Laila begs the Mujahideen soldier to show compassion towards them and not to send them back to the same violence they are trying to flee from, he turns a deaf ear to her pleadings. On the contrary, he bluntly tells Laila that “[w]hat a man does in his home is his business As a matter of policy, we do not interfere with private family matters” (260). Walby

analyses “the lack of intervention of the state” to prevent the oppression of women as part of the state’s policy of “collusion.” She perceives the masculinist state as “‘an instrument’ of patriarchal domination, its non-intervention part of the logic of the patriarchal system” (156-7). The novel reaches its climax when Mariam, who had never revolted against Rasheed or showed any resistance to his brutal beating, finally gathers courage and fights back against him. When she realises that Rasheed is bent on murdering Laila, she murders Rasheed in the scuffle. In swinging the shovel over Rasheed’s head, Mariam realised that “this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life” (341). Rasheed had already destroyed her entire life and “taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage [that] she would not watch him take Laila too” (340). She makes this brave choice so that Laila and her children can find a sanctuary with Tariq and thrive in peace and security. The killing of Rasheed symbolises the end of patriarchal domination and the beginning of a new era in which women will be empowered and free. Although Mariam is aware that the Taliban will execute her, she does not feel remorse nor is repentance. As she walked towards the goalpost for her execution, she felt no regret but “a sensation of abundant peace.” She reflects on how she entered into this world as “the harami child . . . an unintended thing” and finally, “she was leaving . . . [it] as a woman who had loved and been loved back.” “This,” she felt, “was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings” (361). She was contented that through her sacrifice, she had guaranteed a happy and blissful life for Laila and her children.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent American invasion, Laila decides to return to Kabul. She has firm faith in the resurrection of her country. After she comes to know about the positive changes taking place in Afghanistan, she starts hearing Babi’s voice in her head telling her that “[y]ou can be everything you want, Laila I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you” (378). She asks herself if Mariam sacrificed herself so that Laila could live as a maid in a “foreign land.” “Maybe it wouldn’t matter to Mariam what Laila did as long as she and the children were safe and happy. But it matters to Laila. Suddenly, it matters very much”(378). Therefore, she decides to leave behind the sanctuary of Murree and return to Kabul to realise her full potential. Amid the outside forces attempting to destroy the promise of sanctuary, she finds purpose and healing in her work with the children at Zaman’s orphanage. Hosseini



incorporates Mariam's sacrifice into Laila's mission and the reconstruction of Kabul in the novel. He expresses his belief that the whole project of "rebuilding Afghanistan is doomed if the fundamental human rights of its women are not respected and its women are not allowed to participate" (411). As Laila comes to realise, "every Afghan story is marked by death and loss and unimaginable grief. And yet, she sees, people find a way to survive, to go on" (384). In an interview, Hosseini said that "When [he] began writing *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, [he] found [him]self thinking about those resilient women [he met in Kabul in the spring of 2003] over and over. Though no one woman that [he] met in Kabul inspired either Laila or Mariam, their voices, faces, and their incredible stories of survival were always with [him], and a good part of [his] inspiration for this novel came from their collective spirit." Through this novel, therefore, he wanted to transport the readers and leave them with "some sense of compassion and empathy for Afghan women whose suffering has been matched by very few groups in recent world history" (412).

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