

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

Nilima Adhikari

Lecturer, English Literature, Kathmandu Model College, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

*This research analyses the modes and kinds of oppression and gender based violence faced by Afghan women represented in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Afghan women are the victims of physical, sexual and religious violence, the violence inflicted upon women by the strict Islamic laws of the then Taliban reign. The research also analyses how Afghan women have resisted the patriarchal oppression. I also focus on the role of education and sisterhood among women as the means to struggle and resist the oppression to survive and free themselves from the suffocating chains of marginalization and gender based violence.*

KEYWORDS: *Oppression, Gender Based Violence, Sisterhood, Marginalization*

INTRODUCTION

I argue that the male dominated cultural, political, religious and social structure as institutions of power are responsible for degrading, devaluing and oppressing women. The Afghan women represented in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* have undergone both sexual and socio cultural violence. How resistance has led to survival and empowerment are the key concentration of my paper. The main female characters in the novel undergone gender inequality, forced marriage, rape, domestic violence, lack of freedom and identity perpetuated by patriarchy. At the same time their sufferings were intensified by the rules of Taliban regime. Women lost their participation in the public sphere. Women's rights diminished in the society. The objective of the study is to analyze how the patriarchal social structures acts as the machinery to perpetuate violence against women.

Mariam and Laila are the two main female characters who act as the representative of all the oppressed women who protested, struggled and resisted patriarchy through sisterhood and education. Education played a main role to develop the conscious that the oppression inflicted upon them is inhuman and they needed to struggle against it and overthrow it. This consciousness gave them energy and strength to fight against the oppression and injustice they were bearing. Laila is the epitome of modern women who believe in transcending all the odds and carving her own destiny.

The three generations of female characters like Nana, Mariam and Laila in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* goes through both sexual violence and violence inflicted by the religious ideology of that time. Mariam's mother Nana the housemaid of the wealthy businessman named Jalil becomes pregnant with Jalil's child and when Jalil's family knows that she is pregnant she is fired from her job. Jalil denies to take the responsibility of the child she gives birth to. He denies to give little Mariam his name. Mariam throughout her life lives with the stigma of being a bastard and longs for the love and care of a father figure. Nana's father a mere stone carver feels so ashamed by his daughter's act he leaves his village to be never seen again.

Mariam goes through more or less the same fate her mother goes through. She is married to Rasheed a twenty years senior to her. She goes through both physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Mariam is just 15 when she married Rasheed. Mariam is always afraid and tries to escape from the clutches of Rasheed. He forces himself on Mariam and excuses himself "There is no shame in this Mariam", he said, slurring a little. It's what married people do. It's what the Prophet and his wives did. There is no shame" (76). Rasheed who is twice the age of Mariam coerced Mariam to have physical relationship with him and he legitimizes his act giving the example of Prophet

Rasheed wants a son who could continue his lineage but Mariam miscarries more than five times. He pressurizes her to give birth to a son, his heir. He starts being physically violent, starts beating and spanking her in trivial matters. Rasheed harasses her with every possible means he can. He leaves no opportunity to assert that Mariam is a bastard so whatever he is doing to her is justifiable. Rasheed is the man who is loaded with sexist ideology who can never think women as a free and independent being. Rasheed's abuses Mariam his cruelty towards Mariam is inhuman.

Laila's house gets bombarded and both her parents get killed, she wakes up in Rasheed's house. She is devastated by that tragedy and her life changes forever. Rasheed who is almost forty years elder coerced her to marry him taking advantage of the difficult circumstances of her life. Laila pregnant with Tariq's child at that time had no choice so ends up marrying Rasheed.

Laila too is physically, sexually and emotionally abused by Rasheed. But she never succumbs to Rasheed's brutality. She gives birth to two children one from Tariq and another from Rasheed. Laila gives birth to a daughter disappointing Rasheed, Rasheed hoped for a son, he starts being violent towards Laila. One day when he realizes that Laila was meeting Tariq, Laila's childhood sweetheart. Rasheed brutally beats Laila, Mariam intervenes and kills Rasheed when he was trying to entangle Laila. Mariam, who never shows any sign of rebellion against Rasheed and his barbarous beating, gained courage to fight back and ultimately kill Rasheed. Mariam makes the ultimate sacrifice for Laila and her children by taking the blame of Rasheed's murder. This murder is Mariam's revolt against the suffocating oppression of her husband and his cruelty and it marks the end of his dominance and control. She was no more afraid or frightened when she was taken to the Ghazi stadium for her final verdict:

Mariam wished for so much in those final moments. Yet as she closed her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the harami child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Miriam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate belongings. (361)

Mariam is a Christ figure in the novel. Even Mariam is subjugated and marginalized since her birth she resurrects like a phoenix and marks her existence before the world. The peace and happiness that Laila and her children enjoy is nothing other than a most precious gift given by Mariam. When she succumbs to the death, she is actually living her life in its fullest at the hearts of Laila and her children

Mariam's action is heroic but, as the narrative suggests, she is doing what mothers have always done and continue to do for the sake of their families and children. She has chosen death so that Laila and the children, together with Tariq, can find a sanctuary where they will flourish in peace and security.

THE MALE CODES

The subjugation of women is a universal process existing virtually in every society. Patriarchy has granted the head of the family nearly total ownership over his family members. The head of the family has the right to control his wife and children, and can exercise his power to physically abuse them. Mariam is stuck in such a situation that she was unable to do anything. The social construct of the then society does not allow women to raise voice. Rashid punches, kicks and slaps Mariam. He yells at her, all these acts of abuse makes Mariam lose her confidence. It is how the social construct of the society sanctifies the abuse of women.

Bell Hooks a cultural critic and academician and a radical black feminist in her influential book *Understanding Patriarchy* states that:

Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (2)

Mariam and Laila go through physical, mental and sexual violence and Rasheed a typical patriarch thought he had every right to inflict violence on Mariam and Laila as they fail to fulfil his wish of having a son to continue his lineage.

Bell Hooks in her book *Feminism Is for Everybody* further argues that "Patriarchal violence in the home is based on the belief that it is acceptable for more powerful individual to control others through various forms of coercive force" (6). Rasheed has internalized this belief, he believes that he as the head of the family has the ultimate control over the female members and he uses various coercive force to subjugate and marginalize them.

In "The Gender Knot: Unraveling Patriarchy" Allan Johnson explains how the sexism that people experience is a direct result of the patriarchal structure of our society:

A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified and male centered. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspect of the oppression of women. (3)

It is a system where by men enjoy the special privileges defined by male supremacy, and women's ideas, feelings, desires and thoughts are dominated. In patriarchy, men hold predominated roles in social, political, economic and other aspects of life.

In a patriarchal society, men are viewed as naturally superior, stronger and more rational whereas women are view as naturally weaker, intellectually and rationally inferior, emotionally unstable and incapable of being involved in politics. The traditional practices have set the rules to limit women within the sphere of male domination. Cultures not only indicate the set ideas, practices and belief but also the access to and control of the resources and political power. In Culture, Religion and Gender, Patriarchy is defined as:

A system where men hold more social, economic and political power than women, and exercise authority over women, both in home and in public. Most cultures in the world today are based on a patriarchal system of power. Culture is thus more than just ideas, practices, and expression such as arts: it dictates who in society has access to and control over resources and political power. Tradition, religion and culture provide a set of social

rules, which are used to ensure that men and women confirm to their prescribed gender roles and do not challenge the male dominated order. (26)

The institutions established through patriarchal culture set the goal, vision, ideas and benefits for women limiting them in subordinate position. Women in the novel were banned to go to school, they were not allowed to work in offices, they had to cover themselves with veil, and they were not allowed to play sports, they were not even allowed to talk or shake hands with men, or go out of the house without being accompanied by the male member of the family. Strict Islamic laws were imposed upon women which worked to diminish their potential and their freedom. The strict Islamic laws by Taliban undermined women's basic rights and incapacitated their equal participation in the human community.

Women are the victims of various subjugation those materialized through coercion by male dominated society. This supremacy of men is replicated and passed to the generation through the patriarchal socialization. Women's oppression and subjugation are based on the design of patriarchal power and enforced through social institutions. Greda Lerner a prominent Austrian feminist in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* acknowledges:

Women's sexual subordination was institutionalized in the earliest law codes and enforced by the full power of the state. Woman's cooperation in the system was secured by various means; force economic dependence on the male head of the family, class privileges bestowed upon confirming and dependent women of the upper classes, and the artificially created division of women into respectable and non-respectable women.(9)

Patriarchy not only creates dominance over women with the power and wealth, but also excludes women from the economic and political sphere.

Men hold the supreme position of authority on most of the religions of the world, and have the right to interpret the religious texts whereas women from the historical period hold no leadership position and are denied the same authority and leadership today. The media tinning book, "Culture, Religion and Gender" mentions religious doctrines and beliefs as the bars for the women's progress and development. It indicates:

Women have historically not held leadership positions in the past, and in cases where women had held leadership positions in the past, they are now denied the same leadership position today. Some religions still bar women from holding leadership position. (16)

Religions have propounded the super position for men denying women from such power and positions. Most cultures today are based on patriarchal system where men hold more political, social and economic power, and control women in home and public sphere.

Evan Stark, a sociologist and forensic social worker acknowledges:

Men dominate women by interweaving repeated physical abuse with three equally important tactics: intimidation, isolation, and control...Although coercive control can be devastating psychologically, its key dynamics involves an objective state of subordination and the resistance women mount to free themselves from domination. Woman's right to use whatever means are available to liberate them from coercive control derives from the modes men use to oppress them, not from proximate physical or psychological harms they may suffer because of abuse...Men deploy coercive control to secure privileges that involve the use of time, control over material resources, access to sex, and personal service. (5)

Patriarchy subordinates women in all domains of life. Tyson in her book *The Critical Theory Today* argues, "Patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women's self-confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as the proof that women are naturally therefore correctly self-effacing and submissive"(86-87). He further argues "Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so." (92). Patriarchy always tries to control woman's sexuality, and demands them to adhere to the patriarchal norms. The inspector exhibit the typical male attitude, that he can do whatever he likes with the woman who has transcended the so called moral boundary created by the society to control and subjugate females. The morality of woman is always and it becomes a tool to oppress them. Women are objectified. Loy Tyson talks about "good girl" and "bad girl" patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities woman can have:

If she accepts her traditional gender roles and obeys the patriarchal rules, she is a "good girl"; if she doesn't, she is a "bad girl". These two roles- also referred to as "Madonna" and "whore" or "angel" and "bitch"- view women only in terms of how they relate to the patriarchal order. Of course, how "good" girls "bad girls" are specifically defined will alter somehow according to time and place in which they live. But it is patriarchy that will do the defining because both roles are projections of patriarchal male desire; for example, the desire to won "valuable" women suited to be wives and mothers, the desire to control women's sexuality so that men's sexuality cannot be threatened in any way. (90)

There are different forms of dominance and subjugation as the prime principle through which men dominate women in many sphere of private and public affairs. Rasheed tried to abuse Mariam using this good girl bad girl dichotomy. He asserted that Mariam being a basted child falls on the category of bad girl and he has every right to abuse a bad girl like her.

Bart and Morgan suggest that "all forms of violence against women are interrelated, coalescing like a griddle to keep women in our place, which is subordinate to men" (1). This means that the abuse of women is systematically receiving cultural and structural support. Woman's subordination is accomplished and maintained by pattern of interpersonal interaction prescribed by culture and social structure (79). The social customs, values and laws in the patriarchal structure undermine the roles and duties of women" (21). Patriarchy asserts the superiority of all males to all females and arranges this fundamental inequality in a hierarchal order in which men hold primary power over all others, controlling economies, militaries, educational and religious institutions. Men in general are more powerful and advantageous than women.

Resistance of Gender based Violence in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Mariam and Laila resist gender discrimination, Gender based violence and patriarchy making sisterhood or the bonding of the women and education a weapon to combat it. Laila and Mariam the victim of the same circumstance and same suffering and pain form a kind sisterly bond with each other and act as the protector of each other. Laila's father had progressive thoughts and wanted Laila to be independent so he sent Laila to school and emphasized the importance of education for women. But the political situation of the country changed, the schools were closed for women when Taliban came to the power He still insisted on her education and gave informal education in home. Thus this education played a great role in making Laila resist the patriarchal violence.

The strong bonding developed between Mariam and Laila could be equated with the idea of feminine Sisterhood. The term sisterhood is used among feminists to express the connection of women who are not biologically related but are bonded in solidarity. The sisterhood of women often refers to their feminism, their participation in the women's movement, their support of other women or their recognition of female qualities that are unique to women's nature.

Mariam initially hated Laila for losing her husband to a little girl. They used to abuse each other calling each other many names until they realized that they are undergoing the same tragic fate under this abusive man and then they started to realize each other and started to share their strength of endurance to each other. Mariam who called Laila a "thieving whore" later becomes a mother figure for her. The strong bonding developed between these two characters serves as a comfort for each other. Laila and Mariam, both of them shared their sorrows as they shared their household duties and stood for each other whenever their husband became intolerable towards them. Mariam took care of Aziza like a grandmother looked after her grandchild. Laila inspires Mariam to take control of her destiny.

Mariam and Laila become so close to each other that they both find themselves in each other "Laila began to laugh, and Mariam joined in. They laughed like this at each other's reflection in the mirror, their eyes tearing, and the moment was so natural, so effortless, that suddenly Mariam started telling her about Jalil, and Nana, and the jinn. (249)

In a strongly patriarchal society like Afghanistan, women faced double marginalization, they are marginalized by the strong Islamic law and the social and political system of the country which is always volatile. Women are taught from the childhood to be submissive. Mariam's mother, Nana who herself was the victim of gender based violence taught her daughter to be submissive. Nana in a way had internalized patriarchy and wants Mariam to be submissive because endurance is one quality a woman should learn. She is an epitome of the oppressed woman who believes that she is born to be discriminated and that she accepts her fate. She tries to transmit this knowledge to her daughter Mariam by teaching her how to be submissive and how women in patriarchal societies should accept that.

After living conditions become harder because of the war between the Mujahedeen and the Soviets, Laila is banned to go to school by her father due to the circumstances; when the Mujahedeen took over Kabul, bombs are falling everywhere; it was not safe for people. In the quotation above, the writer portrays the character of Hakim, a soft man who was once a junior high school teacher, still continues to teach his daughter despite the tremendous trouble the country faces.

The women in *A Thousand Splendid* seem to have very different educational experiences. Mariam is tutored by Mullah Faizullah in the Koran, and she learns how to read and write. He came once or twice a week to teach her Arabian words and the five prayers;

It was Mullah Faizullah who had taught Mariam to read, who had patiently looked over her shoulder as her lips worked the words soundlessly, and her index finger lingering beneath each word, pressing until the nail bed went white, as though she could squeeze the meaning out of the symbols. It was Mullah Faizullah who had held her hand, guided the pencil in it along the rise of each alef, the curve of each beh, the three dots of each she. (16)

Mariam wishes to go to school. Mullah Faizullah does not find fault with her simple desire for education and tries to convince Nana to let her daughter get formal education "If the girl wants to learn, let her. Let the girl have education" (17). Yet, when she asks her mother about going to school, Nana insists that the only lesson that Mariam needs to learn is to

endure. This shows the social set up against women who were made to learn endurance since their childhood. She is an epitome of the oppressed woman who believes that she is born to be discriminated and that she accepts her fate. She tries to transmit this knowledge to her daughter Mariam by teaching her how to be submissive and how women in patriarchal societies should accept that.

While on the other hand Laila's father emphasizes the importance of her education. Hakim diligently works with Laila on her homework and provides her with extra work in order to expand her education. He emphasizes that Laila's education is as important as that of any boy. Women need to be educated in any society. Moreover, proper education for men is equally very important. As a dominant leader in the family of Muslim culture, fathers must have had proper education to support their daughters and sons to take the same path. Laila is an educated person.

Education plays a crucial role on influencing women to struggle against discrimination. It enlightens them by giving them insights and raises their consciousness about equality between men and women. In other words, education helps women to understand their rights and teaches them how to request them. Raised to prioritize education, Laila attends school daily, where she is taught that men and women are equal. In her mind, women are not merely destined for marriage and child raising, but careers:

I know you're still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now, he said. 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. (114)

In Afghanistan where most of the women are illiterate, and getting married at early age is their fate. They bear children at the very early age and they are voiceless and their whole fate depends on the hands of their husband. Laila's father doesn't want Laila to go through the same fate. After living conditions become harder because of the war between the Mujahedeen and the Soviets, Laila is banned to go to school by her father due to the circumstances; when the Mujahedeen took over Kabul, bombs are falling everywhere; it was not safe for people. In the quotation above, the writer portrays the character of Hakim, a soft man who was once a junior high school teacher, still continues to teach his daughter despite the tremendous trouble the country faces

Thus it is crucial for men to equally learn proper information of having equal rights with women. After the streets of Kabul become too dangerous, he insists on tutoring Laila himself. He comments about the importance of women attending universities. Although majority of Taliban ruling has suppressed women in Afghanistan, Aziza is educated by both Laila and Mariam, who contribute what they know in order to educate her. Mariam teaches the Koran, and Laila eventually volunteers to teach at her school.

Education plays a crucial role on influencing women to struggle against discrimination. It enlightens them by giving them insights and raises their consciousness about equality between men and women. In other words, education helps women to understand their rights and teaches them how to request them. Laila's father believed that education is must to women for their overall growth and marriage and confinement to domestic sphere is not the only fate of her life. He wants Laila to be educated and he was hopeful that the situation of the country will change and women again will be able to transcend the domestic sphere and will be able to earn for themselves and be independent. Her education gave her the

consciousness to rise above the abuse of Rasheed and find a more meaningful life for herself and her children. It was Laila's influence on Mariam that Mariam who was so submissive for all those thirty years, raised above all the odds of the circumstances and punished her oppressor, her tormentor, and made the future of Laila and her children secure.

After the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent American invasion, Laila begins to hear about positive changes in Kabul, the rebuilding of roads and schools and improvements for women, and she wants to be a part of it. She retains the ambition instilled in her by her father. She recalls his words and wants to fulfill them: "You can be anything you want, Laila, he says. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you" (343). The social, cultural, and political structures that support the devaluation, degradation, marginalization and violence upon women needs to be gradually restructured. Despite the dominant patriarchal culture in Afghanistan and therefore more restricted, oppressed conditions for women, Afghan women are not necessarily voiceless and powerless.

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