

FEMINISTIC ANALYSIS OF KHALED HOSSEINI'S NOVEL A *THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the elements of feminism in Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. This paper analyzes the impact of oppression toward women, which, of course, is not something new in our society. Women's oppression has existed for a very long time, especially in countries with a strict patriarchal society like Afghanistan. The author portrays the oppression of women through the two characters in the novel, Mariam and Laila. The method used in this paper is based on a qualitative research of the study. Close reading is used to better understand the characters of Mariam and Leila and the oppression they suffer throughout the novel. Moreover, learning about the experiences of Afghan women as portrayed in this novel is important for various reasons: first, depicting pictures of Afghan women in the Western media as oppressed, weak victims of war who need to be supported and protected serves to remove the continuous struggles of Afghan women during thirty years of civil war.

Keywords: *patriarchal society, oppression, suppression, discrimination, women's status, struggle, Taliban regime*

1. Introduction

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini is one of the many literary works that are written about women's lives in a patriarchal society, which can help people realize that until recently women faced gender discrimination. In the novel, the compassionate conditions of women living in Afghanistan are described. The author emphasizes the strict laws that Afghan women practice and the torture they tolerate in their daily lives.

Afghanistan is known as the most dangerous place for women, as they face violence, torture, abuse, and a lack of economic rights. Eastern Women used to live in a patriarchal society for a long time. Their status was always inferior to that of men. They accepted having a menial role in their society and being under control. For them, being subordinate and marrying the one that the elders choose is a destiny, and they should accept it. (Kilinc, 2017, p. 95) There is a message in the novel for all those women who are experiencing any kind of oppression in their lives to be strong and stand against oppression.

Hosseini introduces female characters who are victimized and oppressed by men, but despite all this, they challenged barbarity, found ways to live their lives, and proved that if you have the courage to endure, you can endure any misfortune in the world. Hosseini depicts the story of two Afghan women who deal with the unfortunate situations of being women and represents the chaotic last three decades of Afghanistan's story when women experience harsh treatment and are discriminated against by both their husbands and society.

The novel is split into four parts, with a focus on Mariam as a teenager living with her mother in the first part, continuing with Laila, who is being educated thanks to her father, and the kinship between Mariam and Laila in the third part, whereas in the last part they travel to different destinations. The author tries to attract his readers by demonstrating the reality of gender roles in Afghanistan through Nana, Mariam, Fariba, Laila, and other female characters and helping readers understand the misery in which women in Afghanistan live every day. (Yeasmin, 2020)

Moreover, Yeasmin points out that during Mohammad Daoud Khan's regime, Women got the right to freedom and education. After the murder of Khan, the Soviet Union came and was supported by many progressive people. Likewise, the Soviet Union changed the political and social structure of Afghan Society. They had the right to get educated, to get employed, and to choose the one they wanted to marry by themselves. (Yeasmin, 2020). In my view of literature, after the novel's publication, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was admired and valued by the media and many literary critics. Also, many researchers want to investigate it. As a very famous work, this novel continues to affect the world's nation about Afghan society, and especially Afghan women.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Political changes impact on Women

In this novel, Hosseini represents the political changes in Afghanistan and the people's desires to be independent. In this novel, readers of Western literature will be encouraged to define their perception of Afghan women. Hosseini portrays in the novel, the position of women changes from one region to another and as a result of the changing political situation, women's status in Afghanistan is being affected. And as we can see in the novel, all those changes are displayed in Kabul, where the reader can experience the differences in women's status. The differences were especially noticeable when Mariam moved to Kabul and was forced to marry Rasheed. She was amazed by modern life and by the fact that women could wear anything they wanted, go out whenever they wanted without being accompanied, drive, and work, and were even allowed to hold professional positions. (Hooda, 2013)

During the regime of Daoud Khan, the people of Afghanistan saw progress in all sectors. Women had the right to be educated and free, but not to a broader degree. After the murder of Daoud Khan, the Soviet Union entered Afghanistan. During Soviet rule, even though poor Afghans experienced a lot of changes, people enjoyed modernity and education. Additionally, during the communist regime, women could be educated and hired in government positions, the army, or police departments. (Yeasmin, 2020)

The author, in this novel, captures the speech of Khala Rangmal: She said that the Soviet Union was the best nation in the world, along with Afghanistan. It was kind to its workers, and its people were all equal. And everyone in Afghanistan would be happy too, he said, once the ant progressives, the backward bandits, were defeated. (Hosseini, 2007, p. 11) Also, Jennifer Heath, in her book about "The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women," captures the speech of Roshanak Warden, who is a member of the Afghan Parliament: "As a doctor, as a woman, as an Afghan, the last regime was not bad," she says. "They were well-disciplined people. In their time there was security. At midnight, at 2 a.m., I could go to my hospital when I was on call for an urgent operation and come back without any bodyguards. This is a major difference and I will never deny it." "As a woman, however, Wardak says she could never accept the Taliban's restrictions on girls' education. And worse, the new Taliban are very different. "They are criminals. They are thieves and they are not acceptable." (Heath & Zahedi, 2011, p. 4) .

But the women got harassed by Soviet soldiers, and that is the reason that they resisted against the Soviets. Then, the mujahedeen were armed and supported by USA. They increased their power and reduced human rights of women. The politic rules of Afghanistan changed drastically. After the civil war, the Taliban gained complete control of the power and controlled the state by putting their tough rules. (Yeasmin, 2020). Under the rules of Taliban, school were closed, women were not allowed to work and were isolated. Disloyalty was punished with stoning to death. Widows were not allowed to go outside without male relatives even if they have to find food for their children. Many of them did illegal works such as prostituting or tutoring girls in their houses. By doing so, they risked at being executed. Moreover, the Taliban's thought that by isolating women, Pashtun males honor and women's sexual honor will be protected. (Heath & Zahedi, 2011, p. 55)

Also, in the name of religion, they strengthen cruel rules to keep their tradition. As a result, they prohibited music and television. Khaled, in his novel makes a distorted representation that religion is controlled by the tyrants, not the God: "Our watan is now known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. These are the laws that we will enforce and that you will obey:

All citizens must pray five times a day. If it is prayer time and you are caught doing something other, you will be beaten. All men will grow their beards... All boys will wear turbans... Singing is forbidden. Dancing is forbidden. Playing cards, playing chess, gambling, and kite flying are forbidden. Writing books, watching films, and painting pictures are forbidden. If you keep parakeets, you will be beaten. Your birds will be killed. If you steal, your hand will be cut off at the wrist. If you steal again, your foot will be cut off." (Hosseini, 2007, p. 270). The Taliban applied many rules and forced people to follow them. People, being scared that they will get punished because of unimportant causes preferred staying at home away from everyone. So, because of the cruel rules of different regimes, people started to lose hope and accepted their pitiful fate. (Raj, 2022).

This novel captures these entire historical events when the US supported mujahedeen by declaring an attack against the Taliban and when the country got destroyed by the rockets. In the war against the Soviet Union, they killed many men and young boys in their religious battle. In his novel, Rasheed refers to this situation: "They're forcing young boys to join," he said. "The Mujahidin are. In plain daylight, at gunpoint. They drag the boys right off the streets. And when soldiers from a rival militia capture these boys, they torture them. I heard they electrocute them—that's what I heard—that they crush their balls with pliers. They make the boys lead them to their homes. Then they break in, kill their fathers, and rape their sisters and mothers." (Hosseini, 2007, p. 248)

In the beginning, people supported mujahedeen hoping that they will bring positive changes but they just enforced strict laws especially on women, and prevented them from education, work place or health services. However, people of Afghanistan hoping for a better future started to rebuild the country. Moreover, in the novel Laila returns to Afghanistan and together with Tariq and Zalmai rebuild the orphanage which symbolizes the renovation of the country. Hosseini shows how the lives of the characters are affected by political situation. (Khan, Khan, & Naz, 2019)

Debora Ellis in her book blame the government for women's sufferings in the whole world. "I am not a social scientist, a sociologist or an historian. I am a social justice activist, and I believe that what we let our governments get away with today affects what happens to people tomorrow. (Ellis, 2000, p. 13) Additionally, the portrayal of Afghan women in this book *A Thousand Splendid Suns* seems to be a worthy topic for academic research.

2.2 Laila And Mariam's Struggle against Gender Discrimination

Every day, women struggle against oppression that is displayed over them by the opposite sex. They are abused and tortured by their close male relatives. Most women are banned from staying at home to serve their families and are not allowed to follow their dreams. If women have lost their close male relatives, they are not allowed to leave their home, even if they need medical care. This oppression comes in the form of sexual molestation and the preference of male workers over female workers. (Ramkumar & Suba, 2019)

In an interview in December 12, 2008, Khaled Hosseini states: "I heard so many stories about what happened to women, the tragedies that they had endured, the difficulties, the gender based violence that they had suffered, the discrimination, the being barred from active life during the Taliban, having their movement restricted, being banned essentially from practicing their legal, social rights, political rights" (Times, 2008, p. 8) In the previous quotation, the writer speaks about the stories that he had heard from the women in Kabul when he was visiting his homeland, their sufferings and discrimination by the patriarchal society.

In Afghanistan, it has been a common situation that women are unprotected to discrimination because patriarchy has strongly affected them to be subordinate. The novel portrays the characters of Mariam and Laila as victims under the ancient Sharia laws of the Taliban. Throughout the novel, women are stripped of their rights as human beings. They are not free women and are induced to marry someone that their families have chosen. The hard conditions of women in Afghanistan during several conquests in the country are depicted. As it can be seen in the novel, the domination of men over women in Afghan society is a big issue that relates the story to the feministic aspect. Afghans prefer to have sons rather than daughters. As it is mentioned in the novel, Rasheed was angry because the baby was not a boy, and he sent the baby girl (Aziza) into an orphanage. Whereas the boy, Zalmai, is spoiled by his father and ignores his sister and his mother. (Shabanirad & Seifi, 2014)

According to Stefani Amanda Anggi Riany, gender prejudices still exist because both men and women have grown up in a patriarchal society that considers that men are more powerful than women, and it has become a common truth that they should admit. As a result, girls in Afghanistan accept arranged marriages and obey their husbands for their whole lives. Even more, there are some women who admit being enslaved and consider it their fate to bear it. Besides, men continue to act like kings in society, feeling that they have the right to discriminate against women, especially if the laws declare that men have full control over women. (Riany, 2017)

The patriarchal system usually leads to gender inequality and oppression toward women as the system itself gives more benefits to men. "I wonder," the young Talib said. "God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. Western doctors and their science have proven this. This is why we require only one male witness but two female ones". (Hosseini, 2007, p. 255)

Through the friendship of Mariam and Laila, Hosseini describes the problems that Afghan women face in their everyday lives during the war and oppression, of which women are always victims. Being connected by the same destiny and bad luck, they together challenge the patriarchy. The writer describes the acceptance of discrimination through the character of Nana, Mariam's mother. She is the perfect example of an oppressed woman who believes that it's her fate to be discriminated against. She tried to tell her daughter Mariam how to be convicted and how women in patriarchal societies should approve that: "There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in Life, and they don't teach it in school. Look at me"... only one skill. And it's this: Tahamul. Endure" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 17) And she further expresses: "This is what it means to be a woman in this world....Learn it. Now and learn it well. A man's accusing finger always finds a woman", "It is our lot in life. Women like us. We endure". (Hosseini, 2007, p. 18)

The author also describes how women are blamed in everything. Mariam can be taken as an example when Rasheed blames her for corrupting Laila to become like her or when she serves him rice and he thinks that it tastes like pebbles. Also, Laila is blamed when she gives birth to a girl, and Rasheed refused to show affection toward her. Women don't even have the right to express their thoughts. When Mariam does not want to accept marriage with Rasheed, nobody listens to her opinion and marries her with someone she has never seen. Moreover, when Rasheed decides to marry another woman, Mariam is not even asked if she approves of this marriage or not. (Kazemiyan, 2012, pp. 62,63)

In the novel, Mariam's character tells a story of her struggle throughout her life, her father's betrayal, and her husband's mistreatment, whereas Laila is described as a woman who is aware of equality between men and women. Laila is seen throughout the novel as facing every problem that occurs in her path. She knows the significance of education and women in society. Unlike Mariam, Laila knows that she is being discriminated against by her husband, Rasheed, and that nothing is going well with her life. She is wise enough to understand that she is being pressed by her husband and plans to leave. (Yeasmin, 2020)

"We're leaving this spring, Aziza and I. Come with us, Mariam" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 250) Laila wants to make Mariam understand about women's power and show her that it is not her destiny to serve Rasheed for the rest of her life. Mariam becomes aware of the injustice that is done to her, and this can be seen when she kills Rasheed. Hosseini depicts that she has become a woman with awareness of being discriminated against. Mariam knows that Rasheed has done many bad things to her for all the years of marriage, and she does not want to let Laila experience these things. She does not want Laila to be hurt because, with Laila's help, she understood that she could have equal rights with men and be an independent woman.

Even though at the beginning there was tension between the two, later on they became closer to one another. Laila was the first person to ever protect Mariam and make sacrifices for her. Next, they begin to often sit together and share stories about themselves before meeting each other, and as they experience these things together, the relationship between them grows stronger. As a result, Laila learns about endurance from Mariam; on the other hand, Mariam learns the truth about the patriarchy from Laila. (Istikomah, 2015, p. 101). The author shows how their struggles guide them to fight back and to hope for a better future.

2.3 Women's Education

Education plays a huge role in influencing women to struggle against discrimination. Education helps them understand their rights and raises their consciousness about equality between men and women. Laila, growing up and struggling to get freedom, gradually sees the position she has in the world. Even though she realized that in this world only males are dominant, she still does not lose hope (Yeasmin, 2020)

Babi, Laila's father, states in the novel that the most important thing in his life, after her health, was education. "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 has no chance" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 114).

The quotation above describes Laila as a fortunate girl who had the chance of being educated instead of getting married at an early age. Moreover, when she contributed to the re-building of the orphanage, she demonstrated the role of women in society. When the war between the Mujahedeen and Soviets occurred, the conditions of living became hard and the streets unsafe for Laila to go to school. That's the reason Babi dropped Laila out of school, but he took on the teaching duties by himself. He taught Laila every day in his study.

Unlike Laila, who had the chance to receive a formal education, Mariam did not. Mariam was taught to read and write by the elderly village Koran tutor, Mullah Faizullah. He taught her Arabian words and the five daily namaz prayers twice a week at her house. Except for telling stories and teaching, Mullah Faizullah listens to Mariam speak by nodding slowly and smiling. Consequently, it was easier for Mariam to tell Mullah Faizullah things she didn't dare tell her mother. (Istikomah, 2015, p. 82) One day, as they were walking, Mariam told him that she wished she could go to a real school like the other kids of her father. A week before, she had heard that Jalil's daughters, Saideh and Naheed, were going to school in Herat. "Since then, thoughts of classrooms and teachers had rattled around Mariam's head, images of notebooks with lined pages, columns of numbers, and pens that made dark, heavy marks" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 17).

The desire of Mariam to picture herself in a classroom with friends at her age is depicted. As it is mentioned in the book, she longs to put a ruler on a piece of paper and draw lines. So, even though she is an illegitimate child, she wishes to go to school and be educated. She wants Mullah Faizullah to ask her mother for permission. "If the girl wants to learn, let her. Let the girl have an education" (Hosseini: 18).

On the other hand, Laila has everything that Mariam wishes for: a loving father, friends, someone who loves her, and education. Unlike Mariam, who has a mother who is against her being educated and says that girls do not need education because they will end up taking care of their families and doing the housework, Laila has a father who always supports her. As can be seen, education is crucial for both men and women. A dominant leader in a Muslim family must have a proper education to support their daughters and sons. In most cases, educated men like Babi and Mullah Faizullah know how women can change by being educated, leading to a successful country. On the other hand, people like Mariam's mother, Rasheed, and Jalil do not even understand the significance of educated women. (Riany, 2017, p. 24)

Thereafter, when friends at her age consider women unable to get the right education, Laila thinks that men and women should have the same rights. When she has a talk with her friends, she shares her thoughts about women being educated: "But Laila didn't tell Hasina that Babi had said these things, or how glad she was to have a father like him, or how proud she was of his regard for her, or how determined she was to pursue her education just as he had his. For the last two years, Laila had received the *awal numra* certificate, given yearly to the top ranked student in each grade. She said nothing of these things to Hasina, though, whose own father was an illtempered taxi driver who in two or three years would almost certainly give her away. Hasina had told Laila, in one of her infrequent serious moments that it had already been decided that she would marry a first cousin who was twenty years older than her and owned an auto shop in Lahore. I've seen him twice, Hasina had said. Both times he ate with his mouth open" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 114)

From this quotation, it can be understood that Laila is so proud that she has a father that cares about her and is interested about her education. However, the end of the book is hopeful in terms of education. Aziza is educated by Mariam and Laila. Mariam teaches the Koran, whereas Laila volunteers to teach at her school. Zalmai and Aziza go to school together. Further, the opening of the teaching institute by Laila gives hopeful insight for the future.

4. Methodology

The research methodology invokes descriptive and analytical approaches that usher to writing this research from reading the novel, highlighting its main characters and themes, making its ideas more clear and ordering the sequence of its events to taking out the main research findings. In order to have valid and reliable data, this study has applied primary and secondary data. The primary data is taken from the English novel titled *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini that was published in 2007 in Great Britain.

Whereas, the secondary data is taken from other books, journals, and articles. Moreover, the documentary method was applied in this study. There are several techniques used for data collection such as: making ready the research instruments, reading and comprehending the story, noting the sentences spoken by the characters related to the issue of feminism, and reveal the statements of Mariam and Laila that belong to feminism.

The researcher used feminist literary criticism to explain the meaning of the text. This study will address the descriptive model thus; it will be a qualitative research. The descriptive qualitative method is the most appropriate method to analyze the characters of Mariam and Laila and the feminism aspects represented by the main characters in the novel.

5. Results

A Thousand Splendid Suns uses characters like Mariam and Laila to show that femininity is expressed by inner power and courage. The book asserts that women's fear of men not only harms the individuals involved, but also society as a whole. The word feminism was first devised by the French philosopher and socialist Charles Fourier in (1837). The goal of feminism is to bring social, cultural and political equal rights between the two genders.

All the female characters of the novel encounter male dependency/patriarchy in society. Another type of feminism that deals with a character's mental state and unconsciousness is "psychoanalytic feminism" which shows Nana's mental illness. There is also the element of "socialist feminist criticism" where the government and the society oppressed females. Moreover, Liberal feminism is expressed in the novel and focuses on women's capacity to preserve their equal rights through their deeds and choices.

So, at the beginning of the novel, women experience pain a lot. They endure domestic abuse and mental torture, but then they understand how to defend their rights. Mariam's act of killing her husband is the response of suffering for the last twenty-seven years and Laila's act of coming forward as a teacher is very motivating for all the readers.

6. Conclusion

The analysis is conducted to depict the oppressions that were suffered by female characters in the novel and how the oppressions impact the characters. Through the characters of the novel, it is understood that women are seen as second-class citizens in Afghanistan. Therefore, the level of resistance becomes an element that includes ideas, emotions, and activities. The female bonds that are formed through the characters of Mariam and Laila are strong. This bond empowers them to better understand things and overthrow patriarchal norms. We can see Laila and Mariam cooperating to create a better future for themselves and their children. Mariam is indeed a symbol of a courageous woman. Giving up her life so the woman who cared for and protected her could live shows how strong female relationships can be. (Dar, 2013)

In addition, the behaviors of the two major characters symbolize their strength to endure struggles as they unite to seek revenge against the man who has taken away their right to be free and live according to their choice. Thereafter, men were allowed to marry multiple wives, and in the novel, it is displayed through Jalil and Rasheed. The sharing of one husband can cause conflicts among women, but Mariam and Laila realize that they are more powerless if they do not create peace. (Dar, 2013)

The paper analyzes the difficulties, pain, and endurance that were faced by the two main characters. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the conditions of women are described: the way they grew up, how they became connected, and how they resisted many difficult situations together. Moreover, the book is optimistic at the end as it gives us a glimpse of how girls who have the chance to be educated like Laila dare to come back to help future generations and understand the importance of education.

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