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A Marxist-Feminist Study of Patriarchal and Political Credo in A Thousand Splendid Suns

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Abstract

Aims: This research examines how fiction writers from around the globe have portrayed the enslavement and marginalization of women, which is rooted in cultural, social, economic, and political systems rather than individual actions. Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, sheds light on the struggles women endure under patriarchal oppression in Afghanistan, where they are marginalized due to a combination of societal, cultural, economic, and political challenges.

Methodology and Approaches: The novel includes a close reading of the text, with a particular emphasis on feminist elements. The study employs a thematic analysis to examine many issues, including the societal, cultural, economic, and political obstacles of living in a war-torn country. Set in Afghanistan during the last three decades, the narrative depicts the suffering of ordinary folks, notably women, in a society dominated by males.

Outcome: *A Thousand Splendid Suns'* depiction of tyranny is a reflection of the larger patriarchal system. This analysis highlights the political and patriarchal forces at work in the novel using the prism of Marxist feminist theory. Marxist feminism asserts that gender and class oppression are comparable, with men perceiving women as inferior and treating them as the working class, while men see themselves as the ruling class.

Conclusion and Suggestions: The severe gender imbalance relegates women to the lowest levels of society, often treating them as mere objects and sources of shame. The oppression portrayed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* mirrors the broader patriarchal system. The novel also illustrates Afghan history and collective memory. Afghanistan has a long history of resilience amid adversity. As depicted in the story, women are often viewed as a disgrace to society, further diminishing their status in a male-dominated world.

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The novel revolves around the life of a female character named Mariam who is fifteen years old and is married to Rasheed, some 30 years senior to her against her will. Within a week of her mother's death, they've married her off to a Kabul shoemaker three times her age. He beats her and forces her to wear a burqa decade before the Taliban made it compulsory. Mariam is not so beautiful, but she has dignity and fortitude. She is tormented by her husband's coarse behavior as he comes to know that she is unable to bear him children. Harvey Thompson states, "Under pressure from his family, he marries off 15-year-old Mariam to Rasheed, a brutish cobbler 30 years her senior. Repeated miscarriages dash Rasheed's hopes of fathering a son, and he subjects Mariam to cruel acts of physical punishment" (384). Patriarchal society of Afghanistan values the birth of boys and women are considered only a means of reproduction. Archana Hooda has rightly marked:

But Hosseini vividly brings home what life is like for women in a society in which they are valued only for reproduction. A woman's value in Afghan society has often been measured by her ability to bear children, specifically boys. Mariam's life with her husband is truly miserable as she fails to give birth to a son which results in Rasheed's violent attitude towards her (2).

Since her birth, she is an unwanted child in her family. It is so because she is a bastard child. The novel sketches the mental condition of a bastard child who has committed no sin but she has to pay for the sins of her parents. She has to live a life of disgrace and dishonor in extremely traditional and outdated society. It is very painful to see that she is not wanted even in her home. She is rejected by everyone as these lines express:

What a stupid girl you are! You think you matter to him, that you're wanted in this house? You think you are a daughter to him? A man's heart is wretched, wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you..." (Hosseini 27)

The feeling of being rejected even by the people around her makes Mariam gloomy. It is not the condition of only one girl but there are lots of girls who

tolerate this ill behavior in Afghan society. Since the USSR army reached Afghanistan, there have been many cases of rapes. Taliban and militia have been targeting the innocent girls and women. As a result, there are many bastards who are not owned by the Taliban and the militiamen. The only place for them is orphanage which also lacks in supplying food and education to children because of limited financial sources and abject poverty of the nation. Militia has not protected the people rather it has victimized the people there, especially, women. USSR militia's long presence in Afghanistan has increased crime in the country and sexual corruption against women as these lines reveal:

...the streets became littered with the bodies, glass and crumpled chunks of metal. There was looting, murder, and increasingly rape, which was used to intimidate civilians and reward militiamen. Mariam heard of women who were killing themselves out of fear of being raped, and of men who, in the name of honor, would kill their wives or daughters if they'd been raped by militia. (Hosseini247)

Women have to suffer there at anyway. They are raped by the militiamen and then killed by their own men in the name of honor. As a result, there has been a lot of honor killing too in Afghanistan. They are punished just for being a woman. Being a woman is no less than a crime in the Afghan society. The status of women has always been under threat by USSR or by US as Harvey Thompson states:

In all walks of public life, the status of women in Afghanistan today is under threat. The parliamentarian Malalai Joya, who has spoken out against Mujahideen and warlord influence, has faced death threats, and the journalist Zakia Zaki was shot dead. For the average Afghan woman, the threat of violence has been vastly increased either from US-led air-strikes or Taliban-inspired atrocities. (384).

There is too much of poverty in Afghanistan. The facilities for education of women are rare. Even if they manage to go to school, they are not encouraged by the society and family. People starve there as they do not have jobs, education and other means of earning. They do not have even the basic necessities of life. USSR

army has tormented the people. They try to harm the people by all possible means. They use many chemical gasses and explosives even on the civilians. The innocent children, men, and women have been victimized by the USSR soldiers as these lines reveal:

The caption below the photo read: Children are the intended victims of Soviet land mine campaign. The article went on to say that the Soviets also liked to hide explosives inside brightly colored toys. If a child picked it up, the toy exploded, tore off fingers or an entire hand...he said he had seen his mother and sister running for the stream, coughing up blood (Hosseini121).

USSR has disintegrated the whole Afghan society. Nothing could be escaped from the destructive hands of the soldiers. People have to stand against these forces that have disrobed the honor of their women and killed their kids, parents and siblings. When they join hand in hand to take revenge, they are called jihadis. Jihad cannot be justified in any way and so the action of USSR army. In a way, they are the same. There is no difference between a jihadi and a soldier. Their intention is the same to kill the people. The soldiers kill in the name of peace and the jihadis kill in the name of revenge that they have, themselves approved from the religion. USSR is equally responsible for the present condition of Afghanistan. Women have been the greatest victims of this scenario. They are, sometimes, victimized by the soldiers to satisfy their lust and sometimes by the jihadis.

The Taliban closed all the schools, as they wrongly believe that women's education is against Islam. It is quite ironical to see that the Taliban closed the school for girls. They try to portray that Islam does not allow to go women to school though this is not true. Islam encouraged education of women and considered them equal to men. Moreover, Islam treated both men and women equally in matters of education them as Surah Baqara of the holy Quran states, "And women shall have equal rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable" (qtd. in Iqbal 16). Girls are not allowed to go to school and that makes them backward and their condition more pitiable in the society as

these lines express, “Girls are forbidden from attending schools. All schools for girls will be closed immediately” (Hosseini271). Laila, an intelligent girl in the novel, is not encouraged to go to school. Her education is discontinued and she is married to Rasheed, an old man. The same had been the fate of Mariam, his previous wife who was also much junior to her husband. She was also forcibly married off. Her family wanted to marry her off by hook or by crook because she was a bastard child. Her parents did not treat her well because she considered her as a sort of disgrace to their family as described in these lines, “Nor she was old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the harami who are culpable, not the harami, whose only sin is being born”. (Hosseini 4). It is quite surprising to see that Islam encouraged education and uplifting of women 1400 years ago in the days of Prophet Mohammad. Taliban has taken the Afghan society to dark ages unfortunately in the name of Islam. Al Hassani has rightly remarked:

From the early years of Islam, women had crucial roles in their society. They contributed substantially to the prominence of Islamic civilization. For example, Aisha bint Abu Bakr, wife of the Prophet Muhammad, had special skills in administration. She became a scholar in hadith, jurisprudence, an educator, and an orator. There are also many references which point to Muslim women who excelled in areas such as medicine, literature, and jurisprudence. (Hassani)

It proves that either Taliban are fake agents of Islam or they are not familiar with the teachings of Islam. However, they can never be representatives of Islam. Quite contrary to the teachings of Islam, man is the head of the family and he dominates the family affairs. It is the most applicable in context to Afghan society where men are taken in high esteem and a symbol of chivalry. Women are the part of this world to suffer and not enjoy. As we see that Mariam is programmed since her childhood that her fate is to endure throughout their life. They are born to bear the sufferings of male dominated world that treats women as sort of slave. Archana Hooda has rightly remarked, "The novel follows two Afghan women, born two decades apart, whose lives are brought together through a series of

largely tragic events. It lays bare the truly horrendous existence of women and girls. From its opening page, the novel relentlessly exposes the injustices to which women are subjected"(2). When they are grown up, they take it as but natural to consider themselves second to men. It is ironical to see that even fathers hate their daughters and consider them a sort of disgrace to the family. They are not treated the same way as a boy is treated. Girls are always treated harshly in their home. Rasheed, the husband of Mariam and Laila treats her own daughter Aziza the same way as she treats his wives as these lines throw light on the pitiable condition of females, "After the fire, Rasheed was home almost every day. He slapped Aziza.He kicked Mariam. He threw things...her yellowing teeth". (Hosseini297) It becomes even worse when he takes a girl, Laila, as his second wife. Rasheed succeeds in marrying her because her parents are killed in a rocket attack by USSR. She is an orphan and needs shelter. These orphaned girls easily become the victims of the men like Rasheed. Yvonne Zipp writes:

Kabul itself also becomes a major character, as war against the Soviets is replaced by internecine warfare between factions of the mujihadeen. Laila's parents are killed by a rocket, and Rasheed pulls her from the rubble. Evidently believing in the "Finders, keepers" rule, he takes the teen as a second wife. The two women eventually forge an alliance against the monster at home and the chaos raging outside (Zipp).

She is no more enthusiastic about this than Mariam was, but she has a reason to agree. She is newly pregnant by the young man she loves whom she denied to marry. As Michiko Kakutani comments:

Her beloved boyfriend, Tariq, has already left Kabul with his family — they have become refugees in Pakistan — and she suddenly finds that she is an orphan with no resources or friends. When she discovers that she is pregnant with Tariq's child and learns that Tariq has supposedly died from injuries sustained in a rocket attack near the Pakistan border, she agrees to marry Rasheed, convinced that she and her baby will never survive alone on the streets of Kabul. (Kakutani).

She does not tell this to Rasheed. She is sure that he will believe her child is his own. The novel is full of incidents where atrocities against women are very common. It gives an insight into the untold stories of the female world. The whole country is devastated by the war. Women are the prime target of the war torn country.



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