



WWJMRD 2017; 3(9): 372-375

www.wwjmr.com

International Journal

Peer Reviewed Journal

Refereed Journal

Indexed Journal

UGC Approved Journal

Impact Factor MJIF: 4.25

e-ISSN: 2454-6615

Sulok B. Raghuwanshi

Asst.Prof, Department of
Social Work, Orange City
College of Social Work,
Nagpur, India

Deplorable Afghan Women Characters in ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’: Women Empowerment Epitomized

Sulok B. Raghuwanshi

Abstract

The novel ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ by Khaled Hosseini is a narrative told from the perspectives of the two women characters, Mariam and Laila. Each shows how they were raised, what they lost as the result of war, and how in the end, their strength and enduring hope helped them face their fate. The story covers three decades of anti-Soviet jihad, civil war and Taliban tyranny seen from the perspectives of two women. Mariam is the scorned illegitimate daughter of a wealthy businessman, forced at age fifteen into marrying Rasheed, who grows increasingly brutal when she fails to produce a child. Eighteen years later, Rasheed takes another wife, fourteen year-old Laila, a smart and spirited girl who's only other options, after her parents are killed by rocket fire, is prostitution or starvation. Mariam and Laila become allies in a battle with Rasheed, whose violent abuse is endorsed by custom and law. The author gives a forceful portrait of despotism where women are dependent on fathers, husbands and especially sons, the bearing of male children being their only path to an accepted social status. Each woman in the end is forced to accept a path that will never be completely happy for them. Through the analysis of the marginalized status of Afghan women in the light of the novel ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ by Khaled Hosseini we learn that these women in burqa of Afghan stand as an example for every woman in the world stating that their relentless endurance of hope is the only key to survive in the world of continuous trials and tribulations. The paper essays to track the journey of these characters from being someone vulnerable and deplorable to the molders of their own destiny at the backdrop of the ‘Talibani’ culture.

Keywords: Polygamy, the Talibans, Burqa, Chadari, Gender Apartheid, Purdah, Sharia Law

Introduction

A Thousand Splendid Suns is a 2007 novel by Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini. It is his second, following his bestselling 2003 debut, ‘The Kite Runner’. Ten years since its publication, it holds the same enchantment and ethos it did when its first edition saw the light of the day. It is a story of two women characters, ‘Mariam’ an illegitimate child, who suffers from both the stigma surrounding her birth along with the abuse she faces throughout her marriage and ‘Laila’, born a generation later, is comparatively privileged during her youth until their lives intersect and she is also forced to accept a marriage proposal from ‘Rasheed’, Mariam's husband. www.wikipedia.org 2017 the title of the book comes from a line in the Josephine Davis translation of the poem "Kabul", originally written by the 17th-century Iranian poet Saib Tabrizi:

"Every street of Kabul is entralling to the eye
Through the bazaars, caravans of Egypt pass
One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs
And the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls"

Hosseini visited Afghanistan in 2003, and "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". This motivated him to write a novel centered on two Afghan women.

Correspondence:

Sulok B. Raghuwanshi

Asst.Prof, Department of
Social Work, Orange City
College of Social Work,
Nagpur, India

Washington Post writer Jonathan Yardley suggests that "the central theme of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the place of women in Afghan society", pointing to a passage in which Mariam's mother states, "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam." A *Riverhead Trades Weekly* review states that the novel consistently shows the "patriarchal despotism where women are agonizingly dependent on fathers, husbands and especially sons, the bearing of male children being their sole path to social status." www.wikipedia.org 2017

'*A Thousand Splendid Suns*' is a narrative told from the perspectives of the two women characters, Mariam and Laila. Each shows how they were raised, what they lost as the result of war, and how in the end, their strength and enduring hope helped them face their fate. The story covers three decades of anti-Soviet jihad, civil war and Taliban tyranny seen from the perspectives of two women. Mariam is the scorned illegitimate daughter of a wealthy businessman, forced at age fifteen into marrying Rasheed, who grows increasingly brutal when she fails to produce a child. Eighteen years later, Rasheed takes another wife, fourteen year-old Laila, a smart and spirited girl who's only other options, after her parents are killed by rocket fire, is prostitution or starvation. Mariam and Laila become allies in a battle with Rasheed, whose violent abuse is endorsed by custom and law. The author gives a forceful portrait of despotism where women are dependent on fathers, husbands and especially sons, the bearing of male children being their only path to an accepted social status. Each woman in the end is forced to accept a path that will never be completely happy for them: Mariam will have to sacrifice her life to save Laila after she murders their husband while Laila, even though marrying her childhood love Tariq, must find a way to keep the sacrifice, Mariam has made from not becoming an act done in vain. With heart-wrenching power and suspense, Hosseini shows how a woman's love for her family can move her to shocking and heroic acts of self-sacrifice, and that in the end it is love, or even the memory of love, that is often the key to survival. The women of Afghan were marginalized by the opposite gender of their own nation because of the eccentric prevalence of the patriarchal attitude in all walks of normal life. Religion plays a more vital role in shaping the fate of every individual, and it is religion that decides the morality of an individual's life. Consequently, religion plays a vital role in defining the rights and equality of women, as the Political and Social aspect of Muslim countries like Iran, Afghan, Pakistan etc., are completely based on the religious interpretation of the Holy Quran. Endogamy, virilocality and polygamy are common in some Islamic countries. Everywhere, however, polygamy is outlawed or restricted by new family codes, for example the Moudawwana in Morocco. Polygamy is permitted under restricted conditions, but it is not widespread. However, it is strongly discouraged in the Quran, which says, 'do justice to them all, but you won't be able to, so don't fall for one totally while ignoring other wife (wives)'. This also must be taken in historical context, as this was actually a restriction on the number of wives men of the Arabian tribes can take. Sometimes Pre-Islamic men could have up to eight wives. Women are not allowed to engage in polyandry, whereas men are allowed to engage in polygamy. "Dwell with your

wives in kindness for even if you hate them, you might be hating someone in whom God has placed so much good." [Noble Quran 4:19]. In the novel, '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*' Mariam is forced to marry Rasheed, a shoemaker from Kabul who is thirty years elder than her by the wives of her father while they allowed her half-sisters Saideh and Naheed both of her own age were students in the Mehri school in Herat. This compulsion of making a girl of fifteen forcibly enter into a marriage contract is an aspect regarding to the violation of the personal law of an individual. Rasheed beating Mariam and Laila to the core is also yet another instance for a brutal act against the personal law of Islam, where Rasheed violates his responsibility as a husband.

Though there are instances of women of higher social strata in Kabul, who were allowed to wear modern dress codes of their own choice, it is a minority and it is like women in Herat is commonly presented in majority in the novel. In the novel '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*', instances of strict dress codes in the novel are found when Rasheed, inspite of his imperfect rude ways as a husband, insists his wives Mariam and Laila to wear a burqa when they go out from their home; and the Taliban's insistence of making the women, as a rule to wear a 'burqa' even during the time of delivery, in which they were severely beaten at the violation of it.

Secondly, the influence of social norms next to religion in marginalizing the Afghan women is analyzed. It is the society along with religion is an inter-connected, inseparable aspect which plays a vital role in shaping the morality of an individual to lead a peaceful life. Accordingly importance of society in the contribution of defining the terms of the rights and equality of women is inevitable. Men like Jalil Khan, Mariam's father and Rasheed her husband are allowed to get married many times as they wish, while in both the cases they remain unaffected and it is the poor women folk being affected physically and mentally in their silent acceptance of the violations of their own family, which ruins not only the affected individual members but the peace and happiness of the entire family is one of the example of the male dominated society And Rasheed's compulsion of Mariam and Laila, to agree to his decision of marrying Laila, when he is at the age of her grandfather, while she is being sheltered in his home soon after her mental and physical recovery from her severe injuries and the loss of her parents caused to her during the civil war is yet another instance of the violation of personal law of Polygamy for their own comfort. Rasheed's decision of sending Aziza, the girl child to the orphanage while Zalmai, the son was allowed to remain at home provided with all comforts, at the time of draught during the rule of the Taliban's, is yet another instance of giving preference only to the male child in the patriarchal society. The novel mainly portrays the terrible realities of war and suffering experienced by the people of Afghan only in the following chapters during the reign of the Soviets, the Mujahideens and the Talibans.

The suffering of the Afghan people, particularly the Afghan women, starts with the former Soviets invasion in 1979. During ten years of war with the Soviets, the Afghan women were subjected to torture, rape and various other inhuman acts in order to obtain information from them on the activities of the Mujahideen, the opposing party of the Soviets. Though many civilians including numerous

women and children were killed by the communist government and their Russian allies during the Soviet war; however, in the Afghan capital and in some of the major cities under the communist government's control, women did get to enjoy some basic freedoms.

Next to the rule of the Mujahideens is the terrific reign of the Taliban from 1996 – 2001. During the rule of the Taliban, women were treated worse than in any other time or by any other society. The Taliban claimed to follow a pure, fundamentalist Islamic ideology, yet the oppression they perpetrated against women had no basis in Islam. Within Islam, women are allowed to earn and control their own money, and to participate in public life. Upon seizing power, the Taliban regime instituted a system of gender apartheid effectively which thrust the women of Afghanistan into a state of virtual house arrest. Under Taliban rule, women were stripped of all human rights - their work, visibility, opportunity for education, voice, healthcare, and mobility. The oppression in various fields such as education, employment, mobility are discussed with reference to similar incidents in the novel. When they (Taliban) took control in 1996, the Taliban initially imposed strict edicts that include the banishment of women from the work force, prohibited schools to girls and women which expelled women from universities, prohibited women from leaving their homes unless accompanied by a close male relative. It strictly ordered that the publicly visible windows of women's houses be painted black and forced women to wear the 'burqa' or 'chadari'; which completely shrouded the body, leaving only a small mesh-covered opening through which to see. It greatly prohibited women and girls from being examined by male physicians while at the same time prohibited female doctors and nurses from working.

Women were brutally beaten, publicly flogged, and killed for violating Taliban decrees. Even after international condemnation, the Taliban made only slight changes. Some say it was progress when the Taliban allowed a few women doctors and nurses to work, even while hospitals still had segregated wards for women. In Kabul and other cities, a few home schools for girls operated in secret. In addition, women who conducted home schools were risking their lives or a severe beating. The secret education provided to girls in home schools is evident in novel,

'A Thousand Splendid Suns' as Zaman, the orphanage director where Aziza, daughter of Laila is being admitted at the time of famine in Kabul, tries to give education to the girls in the orphanage. *"Aziza said Kaka Zaman made it a point to teach them something every day, reading and writing most days, sometimes geography, a bit of science, something about plants, animals. But we have to pull the curtains, " Aziza said, so the Taliban don't see us."* Kaka Zaman had knitting and balls yarn ready, she said, in case of a Taliban inspection. *"...we put the books away and pretend to knit."* Other than the elimination of the rights of women, the Taliban reality for women and girls include terrible events such as a woman who defied Taliban orders by running a home school for girls was killed in front of her family and friends. They also made women and girls die of curable ailments because male doctors were not allowed to treat them, and made a law that two women accused of prostitution were publicly hung and a woman tries to flee from Afghanistan with a man not related to her, shall be caught and stoned to death for adultery. There is a best

example for the cruel implication of this law in the novel, where an elderly woman is brutally beaten with a metal cable until her leg was broken because her ankle was accidentally showing from underneath her Burqa.

Yet another significant element of women's suppression during the Taliban rule is Gender Apartheid. From the age of eight, women were not allowed to be in direct contact with men, other than a close blood relative, husband, or in-law. Other restrictions were like women prohibited from wearing high-heeled shoes as "no man should hear a woman's footsteps lest it excite him". It also had brutal implications like women must not speak loudly in public as no stranger should hear a woman's voice and all ground and first floor residential windows should be painted over or screened to prevent women being visible from the street. The photographing or filming of women was banned as was displaying pictures of females in newspapers, books, shops or the home. To the extreme the Taliban tried to modify the name of all the places that included the word women. For example, "women's garden" was renamed as "spring garden". Women were forbidden to appear on the balconies of their apartments or houses, and women's presence was banned on radio, television or at public gatherings of any kind. The Taliban rulings regarding public conduct placed severe restrictions on a woman's freedom of movement and created difficulties for those who could not afford a burqa or didn't have any 'Mahram'. These women faced virtual house arrest. As many women lost their male members in the battle and had no close male relatives to accompany them and hence they had no way to escape the beatings from the Taliban officials. A field worker for the NGO Terre des hommes witnessed the impact on female mobility at Kabul's largest state-run orphanage, Taskia Maskan. After the female staff was relieved of their duties, the approximately 400 girls living at the institution were locked inside for a year without being allowed outside for recreation. Decrees that affected women's mobility were included laws such as women were forbidden to ride in a taxi without a mahram, and segregated bus services introduced to prevent males and females traveling on the same bus. The incident of Laila being beaten by the Taliban officials many times in spite of Rasheed's refusal to accompany her during her visit to Aziza's orphanage is an instance that authenticates the Taliban restrictions on female mobility, in the novel. The other important feature of the Taliban's suppression was greatly reflected on the employment of Afghan women. The Taliban disagreed with past Afghan statutes that allowed the employment of women in a mixed sex workplace. They claimed that this was a breach of 'purdah' and 'sharia law.' On September 30, 1996, the Taliban decreed that all women should be banned from employment. It is estimated that 25 percent of government employees were female, and when compounded by losses in other sectors, many thousands of women were affected. This had a devastating impact on household incomes, especially on vulnerable or widow-headed households, which were common in Afghanistan. Another loss was for those whom the employed women served. Elementary education of children, not just girls, was shut down in Kabul, where virtually all of the elementary school teachers were women. Thousands of educated families fled Kabul for Pakistan after the Taliban took the city in 1996. Among those who remained in Afghanistan, there was an increase

in mother and child begging as the loss of vital income reduced many families to the margin of survival. D. ALICE LIGORIA 2016

Conclusion: The status of women appears to be very pathetic and deplorable, and that too surprisingly at the wake of globalization and universally helmed slogan of “Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization”. However, through the analysis of the marginalized status of Afghan women in the light of the novel ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ by Khaled Hosseini, it is found that these women in ‘burqa’ of Afghan are living in a world which is estranged, aloof and exiled life where the ideals of women emancipation has a last laugh at these ideals. These women of Afghan, in the novel, who struggles hard against the “tilted” standards of society claiming women as deplorable and vulnerable and forever dependent on their male counterpart: Father, Husband, Son, Grandson, stand as an example for every woman in the world stating that their relentless endurance of hope is the only key to survive in the world of continuous trials and tribulations. However, Hosseini at the least ends the novel with the silver lining, with Mariam and Laila violating against the tyranny of Rasheed, embodying thousands of despotic natured Afghans and Taliban at the hands of Mariam. Moreover, the other principal women character Laila, thereafter living a peaceful and happy life with Tariq and her children, lends nothing but catharsis to the hearts of the readers gone soared during the entire narration.

Reference

1. ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’: Khaled Hosseini: Riverhead Books: United States: 2007
2. www.wikipedia.org 2017
3. Study of Marginalized Afghan Women in Khaled Hosseini’s ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’: D. Alice Ligoria: 2017
4. www.academia.edu 2017
5. www.google.com 2017