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“A man’s accusing finger always finds a woman”: Towards a Critique of Third-World
Women Representation in Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Abstract

Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) is a fascinating tale of Afghanistan, a ‘Third-World country’ that contributes to shape the attitudes and beliefs of readers towards Afghan women. The novel functions as a witness to the Afghan culture and acts as a device for interpreting the worlds within which the lives of Afghan women are reticulated. The persistent conditions of conflict and violence in Afghanistan that has been continuing for almost thirty, forty years by now caused huge destruction in terms of human and material losses. Therefore, this research study is an attempt to put forth a deconstructive reading of the bias representation of Afghan women with reference to the novel that has been selected for study. The analysis also underscores how Hosseini deploys his characters like Mariam and Laila as agents of resistance to fight against the patriarchal injustices and atrocities against Afghan women in general.

Key Words: Third-World, patriarchy, representation, resistance

Representation is a critical concept not only in postcolonial studies and academia, but in the larger cultural milieu. Often we think of representation as something of ‘presence’ or

‘appearance’ where there is an implied visual component. Representations can be clear images, material reproductions, performances and simulations. The idea of representation always comes in various forms: films, television, photographs, paintings, advertisements and other forms of popular culture. Written materials like academic texts, novels and other literary criticism, journalistic pieces are also important forms of representation. Yet how can the simulations be completely true or how does one judge the accuracy or truth content of a representation is significant to learn. Or rather, how does one interpret or read the representation is an important question that has been raised in contemporary critical theory.

The motivated representation of Afghan women in colonial discourse often locates them as what we call Third-World Women. It is due to this designation, the Third-World Women are often represented in terms of their underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism, and also with overpopulation. Consequently, we see the production of the Third-World Women as a singular monolithic subject, frozen in time and space, in Western feminist discourse. Moreover the heterographic representation of women in South Asian countries as ‘ignorant’ and ‘poor’, ‘uneducated’ and ‘tradition-bound’, ‘domesticated’ and ‘family-oriented’ are proposed by Western feminists only to homogenise them in one category of Third-World Woman. This, as a result, facilitates and privileges the self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. However, Khaled Hosseini’s representation of Afghan women in his country serves as a critique to the stereotypical representation of the West as they are capable to speak or answer for their marginalisation.

Hosseini in his depiction of Afghan women brings home the real image of what life is like for women out there. He in the very beginning of this novel titled *A Thousand Splendid Suns* captivates our attention by displaying the reality of gender roles in Afghanistan thereby

inviting the readers to understand the distress and turmoil that Afghan women must face on a daily basis. For instance, in the first chapter of this novel, we are introduced to Nana, the bitter mistress of a wealthy business man Jalil, and their 'harami' as Nana would call her, more politely known as the illegitimate child, Mariam. Nana addressing her daughter with the word 'harami' has the tone of a feminine anger, pain and inequality. For instance, she says to Mariam:

You are a clumsy little *harami*. This is my reward for everything I've endured. An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little *harami*. (4)

Despite Nana's angry outbursts, Mariam was only five and she could not understand the hatred and anger in her mother's mind. Nana would always express her anger as: "A man's heart is a 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" (27). Nana would also advise Mariam that: "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman" (7). Moreover, when Mariam aspires to go to school, Nana speaks the truth of her condition that she is a 'harami' and that she has to suffer throughout her life without any fault of her own. According to Nana:

There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school . . . *tahamul*. Endure. (17)

This bitterness to her own daughter commences in Nana from her sense of crisis which comes to her as soon as Jalil discarded her. It is told that "Nana had been one of the housekeepers. Until her belly began to swell" (6). But as she fails to resist the disgrace of being illicitly pregnant when Jalil blames Nana and disowns her because his honour in the society would be harmed. On this, Nana tells Mariam:

You know what he told his wives by way of defense? That I *forced* myself on him. That it was my fault. *Didi?* You see? This is what it means to be a woman in this world. (7)

From this, we understand that Nana always want Mariam to deal with the practical hardships of life and want her daughter to see the real condition of Afghan women as victims of male domination. However, Nana being positioned on the margin of the dominant norm also seems to express herself by resisting the gendered spaces that has been inscribed on her. When Nana says that a man's accusing finger is always directed towards a woman, or when she mocks and accuses Jalil of his lies to Mariam, she can be seen as an agent of resistance. She says to Jalil, for instance:

What rich lies! Rich man telling rich lies . . . don't let him charm you. He betrayed us, your beloved father. He cast us out. He cast us out of his big fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily.

. . . Jalil didn't have the *dil* . . . To stand up to his family, to his wives and in-laws, and accept responsibility for what he had done. Instead, behind closed doors, a face-saving deal had quickly been struck. The next day, he had made her gather her few things from the servants' where she'd been living and sent her off. (5-7)

Here, Nana seeks to deconstruct the image erected by the discourses stemming from Western feminism. So the assumptions of Western feminists and their tendency to see the Third-World Women as a paragon of softness, passivity and docility who submits to an immutable patriarchy is nothing but a fallacy. This is because in case of Nana, her lack of formal education cannot be the criteria to see her as traditional and backward. Infact Nana is neither passive nor docile as she sacrifices her own life for the sake of her daughter to induce in her the ability to understand the real world outside their little hut. Therefore when Nana commits suicide, we can diagnose her act as her protest or in a way resistance as she triumphs over Jalil's falsity and in a way gains for Mariam the truth of her father's deceptions.

Focusing on the modes and means of representation, the subaltern or women in postcolonial context sheds light on one of the main issues raised by the collusion between the subaltern

studies discourse and feminist discourse: so how do we narrate the 'oriental woman', or Third-World Woman without speaking for her, without condemning her to an archetype (the docile wife or the vengeful goddess)? So it is necessary to edify a postcolonial feminism that could consider cultural specificities, which would be consistent with the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman and understand identity as being relational.

Spivak's popular rearticulation of the histories of subaltern women has brought about a change which is radical as far as the terms and focus of the Western feminist episteme is concerned. Spivak considers that West has failed to look at the actual lives, experiences and material histories of the colored women or Third-World Women as far as their struggles and situations against oppression are concerned. Spivak raises the question of voice in her most popular essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"(1988). In it, she explores the possibilities to recover the long silenced voices of the subaltern women. So whether women do possess any agency in a society like Afghanistan where patriarchal customs always come into view as hard and as rigid as its landscape is a debatable question.

As depicted in this novel, the prolonged conditions of heavy conflicts in Afghanistan have taken a heavy toll on human life and brought enormous sufferings to the people especially women and children. But despite such condition, we get to witness the situations of Afghan women where they are playing an active and integral role to the rebuilding of Afghanistan. In this context, we may consider the cases of Mariam and Laila who are seen to be the two worst sufferers and victims to patriarchy as well as their life living under the rule of Taliban. Yet their diverse range of socialisation makes them aware of the need to procure for themselves their own independent spaces.

In case of Mariam, after her forced marriage at the age of Fifteen to Forty years old Rasheed, she is seen to respond quickly to the attention and praise her husband gives her: "It surprised her, this thrill she felt over his small compliment" (63). Infact she is taken aback

when he makes clear the extent of his will and his possessive nature, “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. I want you to remember that” (63). Rasheed’s insistence that while out in public she must wear a burqa, a garment that covers her from head to foot with just a small mesh opening to see through, is, though at first shocking, but later on became for her a source of comfort. But as time passes by and Mariam is unsuccessful in bearing children for him, she finds that Rasheed’s affection turns to indifference and then animosity. She began to feel that there is no refuge, no sanctuary in her life with Rasheed because of

. . . his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat . . . Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid . . . She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, . . . punches, slaps (89)

Parallel to Mariam’s story is that of Laila, the beautiful, vivacious 14-year-old daughter of a schoolteacher who dreams of going to California. Laila lives a life filled with books, schooling, and hope for the future. Laila’s story begins in 1987 when she is nine years old. She is born the same spring as the Communist takeover of Kabul in 1978. Mariam is nineteen at that time. Their stories come together in 1992, as Laila turns fourteen and the Mujahideen battle for control of Kabul. Laila is separated from her family as the war ravaged Kabul in which her parents are killed. Therefore Laila, being homeless, had no other option rather than to marry Rasheed.

In case of Laila, if we see her character, she devises her own agenda when she realises that she is pregnant with Tariq’s child. For her, time is of the essence and she quickly agrees to marry Rasheed. Laila believes that she has hidden the truth from Rasheed, but he realises before too long that this child is not his. Although Rasheed does not expel Laila, he uses this truth to threaten her. But Laila is the one who has been raised with a great sense of self by her

father, and is not willing to submit to her circumstances. Laila's undeterred schemes over and over again to deceive and escape Rasheed shows her resistance to patriarchy. Moreover, at the novel's climax, we find that Mariam also shows her resistance through her calculated decision to kill Rasheed:

Mariam raised the shovel high . . . she turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and as she did it, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life. (311)

Again in a patriarchal society like Afghanistan, women are discouraged to feel anger because they are prohibited and punished if they express it. The society considers it inappropriate for women to get angry and moreover, using physical strength as a means to express anger is really unforgivable. For instance, a wife who beats her husband in return to his violence is termed as dishonourable and the husband may feel ashamed for having a wife like her. Yet, Laila is a different breed of woman. She is an educated woman who is really aware of her right and she also knows how to claim them. Her education moulds her to be brave enough to express her anger to Rasheed. For instance, the first time Laila uses her physical strength to fight Rasheed is when he asks Aziza, Laila's daughter to be a street beggar due to his bankruptcy. To this, Rasheed slaps Laila but she punches him back.

"I won't let you turn my daughter into a street beggar!" Laila snapped . . . The slap made a loud smacking sound, the palm of his thick fingered hand connecting squarely with the meat of Laila's cheek. It made her head whip around. It silenced the noises from the kitchen. For a moment, the house was perfectly quiet. Then a flurry of hurried footsteps in the hallway before . . . Then Laila punched him . . . It made a sound like dropping a rice bag to the floor. She hit him hard. The impact actually made him stagger two steps backward. (292)

Another fight occurs when Rasheed knows that Laila speaks with Tariq, Aziza's biological father, who comes back after years passing and is considered dead. Initially Rasheed pays a

man to lie to her that Tariq is dead and she is easily duped. After knowing that Laila has met Tariq, Rasheed tortures Laila violently. But Laila is not passive, instead she uses all her strength to fight him.

But just as he was bearing down on her, Mariam saw Laila behind him pick something up from the ground. She watched Laila's hand rise overhead, hold, then come swooping down against the side of his face. Glass shattered. The jagged remains of the drinking glass rained down to the ground. There was blood on Laila's hands, blood flowing from the open gash on Rasheed's cheek, blood down his neck, on his shirt. He turned around, all snarling teeth and blazing eyes. (339)

For Laila, this is the peak of her anger of being marginalised throughout her whole marriage life. Seeing Rasheed tortures Laila violently, Mariam too cannot hold herself.

Mariam clawed at him. She beat at his chest. She hurled herself against him. She struggled to uncurl his fingers from Laila's neck . . . And so Mariam raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could . . . (339-341)

This instance showcases Mariam as liberated since it is the first time for her to decide the course of her own life. Before this fight, she never releases her anger; all she does is only enduring all things that falls over her. Using physical strength to fight the oppressor, Mariam and Laila have broken the stereotype that women are powerless. Thus, Western feminists' assumptions of the Third-World Women as ignorant, uneducated does not fit into the character representation of Laila and Mariam. It is their resistance which marks a rupture in the earlier representation of Afghan women as weak and non-resistant. These two women offer a counter-representation to Western feminism by enabling us to understand them as persons who are composite and multiple, and therefore in this novel, they are seen to be divided into several distinct agents like aspects. Again, their consciousness, education, and sisterhood encourage them to struggle, to participate against the domination of patriarchy as

well as to the society. Living together in the same house and sharing the same spaces with one another has made Mariam and Laila influencing each other. The educated Laila influences Mariam and on the contrary, the patient Mariam also does the same. Thus they struggle against discrimination by working together in sisterhood to escape from Kabul and run to Pakistan, using physical strength to kill Rasheed and using education to end patriarchy that defines their resistance.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini gives two different pictures of women; one is that of who do not wear burqas and another representation of women who wears it, yet both the two acts as a tool of resistance. In the narrative, Hosseini paints a 'modern' Afghanistan as we can see through the eyes of Mariam which she encounters shortly after her marriage with Rasheed. According to her,

The women in this part of Kabul were a different breed from the women in the poorer neighborhoods— like the one where she and Rasheed lived, where so many of the women covered fully. These women were—what was the word Rasheed had used?—"modern." Yes, modern Afghan women married to modern Afghan men who did not mind that their wives walked among strangers with makeup on their faces and nothing on their heads . . .

These women were all swinging handbags and rustling skirts. Mariam even spotted one smoking behind the wheel of a car. Their nails were long, polished pink or orange, their lips red as tulips. They walked in high heels, and quickly, as if on perpetually urgent business. They wore dark sunglasses, and, when they breezed by, Mariam caught a whiff of their perfume. She imagined that they all had university degrees, that they worked in office buildings, behind desks of their own, where they typed and smoked and made important telephone calls to important people. (74)

The above instance indicates that Afghan women are in no ways backward and traditional. Therefore West's claim that orient or Third-World countries are bereft of modernity is not

appropriate. The idea of women wearing burqas cannot determine whether they are modern or not. In case of Mariam's mother Nana, she has never been mentioned of wearing the burqa because women like her, living in remote areas are always seen to be engaged in agricultural practices. Therefore, they only seldom wear burqas as it interferes with women's work in fields. So it can be said that women like Nana are highly mobile and active and do not consider any strong taboos of the society.

So here it can be concluded that Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* serves as a foil to the discourses of the 'first-world' feminists. Both the characters Laila and Mariam proves the idea that they cannot win by trying to be conventional subjects rather they may redefine their spaces only when if they decides to struggle and gives a new definition to patriarchal gender relations. And as they do so, they now move into the space of agency where they succeeds in deconstructing the heterographic representation maintained throughout the lens of Orientalism, by the imperialist invaders etc. Thus it can be said that Afghan women are able to pull themselves from any depths of seclusion and oppression; and also that they are able to exercise free space of agency in terms of their capability and empowerment.

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