

Endurance and Resilience: A study of the subaltern voice in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

Dedicated to the women of Afghanistan, Khalid Hosseini's second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* delivers a heartbreaking portrayal of women in Afghanistan during the years of Soviet occupation, then the civil war and the Taliban dictatorship. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the subaltern women are more susceptible to oppression and pressure than subaltern men because they are the second sex destined to be silent. The subaltern women community in Afghanistan portrayed through the lives of Nana and her daughter Mariam, Laila and her daughter Aziza in the novel, is triply suppressed by patriarchy, militarization and religious fundamentalism. This paper studies the existence of the subaltern women community in Afghanistan as portrayed in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and their attempts to "speak". The two central characters Mariam and Laila, belonging to two different generations and brought together by their violent and cruel husband Rasheed, develops a mother-daughter relationship between them and use their love as a weapon to combat patriarchy. Through them the novel tells the story of a thousand splendid women who through their courage, endurance and resilience becomes the hope and future of Afghanistan.

Keywords: Subaltern, Afghanistan, women, endurance, resilience, colonialism, patriarchy, militarization, religious fundamentalism

1. Introduction

The Subaltern is a term used by Antonio Gramsci to indicate groups in society that are subjected to the control of ruling classes. While subaltern classes traditionally include peasants, workers and others denied access to controlling power, Gramsci, interested in politics and the state, focused on their historiography. It was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who specifically linked the notion of the subaltern to that of Eastern women, silenced, marginalized and disenfranchised economically and socially. According to Spivak subaltern women are subject to more oppression than subaltern men. Women bear a double burden being oppressed by authority powers and subordinated by men.

Afghanistan was controlled by successive colonial powers for thirty years starting from the invasion of the Soviet Union and then civil war between ethnic groups such as Najibullah, Mujahideen and Taliban followed by the control of the United States. The idea of panopticism put forward by Foucault can also be applied here. It feels as if common Afghans were constantly watched and monitored and a slight deviation from the rules of the dictatorial regimes resulted in their highest punishment. Rosemarie Skaine in the book *The Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban* said that "while much of the Afghan population suffers under the Taliban, women bear more specific, unrelenting and often violent adversity, including the denial of basic human rights, veiling, seclusion and segregation". Life in Afghanistan puts female as the second sex and the victims of patriarchy.

Khaled Hosseini's second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* delivers a heartbreaking portrayal of the life of the women in Afghanistan. Aptly dedicated to the women in Afghanistan, the novel provides an inside view of warridden, oppressed Afghanistan and its women through the lives of Nana and her daughter Mariam, Laila and her daughter Aziza. The central characters Mariam and Laila, belonging to two different

generations and brought together by their cruel and violent husband Rasheed, develops a mother-daughter relationship between them and uses their love as a weapon to combat patriarchy.

From Nana to little Aziza every female character in the novel is a victim of patriarchy one way or the other. Afghan men had the right to marry as they wanted but still Jalil refuses to marry Nana and legitimize their relationship. Thus Mariam has to live as a "harami" all through her life. Nana has to live away from the city secluded from society because of their relationship while Jalil live in his mansion with his three wives and family. Nana is the only one accused of everything that has happened in their lives and she suffers. She tells Mariam Like a compass needle pointing north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always". Nana knows that Jalil will never accept Mariam as his daughter though he meets her every week with presents and seems to care for her. When Mariam expresses her wish to go to school Nana tells her "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." (18), a hard lesson she learned from her own life. Mariam never believes what her mother tells of her father and visits his mansion in town irrespective of her mother's warning. Unwanted and unacknowledged by her father and his family, she returns home to find Nana dead. The guilt that she is responsible for her mother's suicide remains with Mariam all through her life and she suffers all the atrocities she faces as a punishment for the same. She is hastily married away to Rasheed, a very elderly man, when she is just fifteen by her father's wives while her father remains silent. No one cares about her opinion. Mariam takes her revenge on her father by never again acknowledging his existence. After marriage, even though Mariam shifts to Kabul, the most liberal place in Afghanistan, life fails to liberate her. Rasheed was a staunch patriarch. He considers Mariam only as an

object to satisfy his lust, to cook for him and to provide his male child. When she fails to provide him his child life becomes hell for her. He even makes her eat gravel which causes her losing her teeth. She is subjected to domestic violence and also not allowed to have social connections. Rasheed makes burqa compulsory for Mariam before the Taliban makes it compulsory for all women. Rasheed proclaims his masculinity by differing himself from “soft men: like the teacher Hakim and other educated Afghan men by claiming “But I’m a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilt. Where I come from a woman’s face is her husband’s business only.” Mariam endures everything silently.

When Mariam is the symbol of a traditional woman Laila is a symbol of modern women. Laila, the free spirited daughter of the teacher Hakim lives a vivacious life like any other girl in any independent country during the Soviet period. Though affected by the fact that her brothers are fighting with the Mujahideen and her mother grieved by the same fails to take care of her, she finds love and support in her father and her friend Tariq and his family. Laila is the representative of a period in which women in Afghanistan had much freedom and was part of the nation building process being doctors, lawyers, teachers etc. According to Hakim “women had always had it hard in this country, Laila but they are more free now, under the communists and have more rights than ever had before...It’s a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan.” But life changes forever for her when her family is killed in an explosion and Tariq is lost among the refugees. Rasheed marries her, to which Laila consents because she had to take care of her child by Tariq. Rasheed was nice to her until childbirth and changes his attitude as the child is a girl. Mariam who initially hates her later develops a close bond with Laila and the baby. Laila’s strength mesmerizes Mariam and gives her the strength to fight as well. The hospital scene in which Laila undergoes a caesarian without anesthesia proves Laila. It is said in the novel that Mariam would always admire her for the time passed before she screamed. The women find love and support in each other. They try protecting each other from Rasheed’s violence. Laila’s second child Zalmai alone receives care from his father as he is a boy. Aziza is sent to an orphanage. The Taliban do not allow women to travel alone without a marham, a man and Laila is caught again and again in her attempts to see Aziza. She is punished severely but she never steps back from visiting her daughter being a symbol of strength and resilience. Rasheed never accompanies her and even wish to get rid of her with the help of the Taliban. The Taliban also is against the education of women. But we find in the novel Aziza and other children in the orphanage taught in a clandestine manner by Kaka Zaman. This symbolizes another resistance and also proves the strength of Afghanistan where there were still men who believed in the rights of women as humans. The two women tries to escape but is caught. Finally Mariam takes the greatest decision in her life- to kill Rasheed so that Laila and her children can live peacefully. “This was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life.” She sacrifices her own life for her love for her children. In the prison she is treated as a celebrity by other prisoners who were arrested for the crime of running away. It seems they saw in her the hero they all wanted to be. Laila’s return to Afghanistan from the peaceful life in Pakistan suggests the

strength and future of Afghanistan to grow again and fight back.

1.1 Khaled Hosseini himself says

Women suffered not only through the bombings and indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas like everyone else, not only were beaten and tortured and humiliated and imprisoned, not only had their fundamental human rights violated over and over again, but in large number also suffered from gender-based abuse.(411)

In the novel we find the subaltern women eventually raising their voice. Mariam was a passive victim of Rasheed’s domestic violence because she had internalized what her mother had taught her – to endure with silence. When Mariam accepts Laila as her daughter, she is amazed to see Laila’s courage and resistance. It is after this Mariam regains her lost voice. The women in Afghanistan are victims of not simply colonization but the triple oppression of militarization, patriarchy and religious fundamentalism. These two women realizes their common enemy and their need to fight for each other. It is Laila who actively fights against Rasheed but the final blow comes from Mariam. It can be said that all the women in the prison respected her for she is a winner against patriarchy.

2. References

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