

Women's Shared Traumas in Khalid Hosseini's Selected Novels: *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *the Mountains Echoed*, and *The Kite Runner*

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Received: 18 May

Accepted: 25 July

Volume: 1

Issue: 2

KEYWORDS

Subalternity, Patriarchy,
Gender Discrimination,
Hosseini

This study looks at some of the novels by Khalid Hosseini, an American writer of Afghan descent. Khalid Hosseini's novels chiefly, "A Thousand Splendid Suns, And The Mountains Echoed, and The Kite Runner" were a huge success, becoming international best-sellers. What distinguishes these novels is that their main ideas address some of the challenges and difficulties that Afghan women face in a patriarchal society. Women face severe dilemmas and trials as a result of exclusion, inequality, violence, discrimination, and a negative perception of women. The study will also look at Spivak's concept of subalternity and how it has come to be associated with women in societies where there is no true equality among its members. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that in societies experiencing violent and persistent internal conflicts and challenges, women are always the main victims and the biggest losers.

1. Introduction

Khalid Hosseini is an Afghan-born American author. His numerous writings have received a lot of attention and recognition. Some of his books, particularly "*The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*", have become international best-sellers. Afghanistan provided rich ground for Khalid Hosseini's works, as he shone light on the Afghan people's suffering following Soviet oppression and the internal struggle that followed the Taliban's capture of power. Afghan women are an essential theme in Hosseini's works since they are the weakest link in the struggle. Afghan women have been and continue to suffer from patriarchal culture's dominance, exclusion, inequality, and inferiority in a society that perceives women as the source of all ills.

Spivak is widely regarded as one of the most powerful postcolonial thinkers. Her most famous work is her article "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" and her translation of Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie*. Since the release of her article "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" she has established herself as an authoritative postcolonial voice. She has broadened her debate to include Marxism, feminism, and deconstruction. Spivak attempted to undermine the legacy of colonialism via her cultural and critical views. She refused to acknowledge the idea that the Western World had an advantage over the Third World because it had been cleansed of the ugliness of severe savagery. Her critical discourse addresses marginalised themes, such as subaltern women's social status and empowerment. Though the people may be free of colonial authority, they are nonetheless influenced by it and governed by its power structures.

The word "subaltern" is derived from the Italian phrase "subaterno," which means "inferior or of lower rank." Since then, the term "subaltern" has been employed in a variety of settings and with various connotations. The term was coined by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist thinker, to refer to lower socioeconomic strata such as women, proletariats, slaves, peasants, and religious organizations. Every society has an elite class that rules the public realm with different degrees of authority, freedom, and domination. The lower classes, on the other hand, are economically and culturally oppressed. This group is oppressed and marginalised, with little autonomy or representation. Spivak uses Antonio Gramsci's word "subaltern" to describe the underrepresented group of people in society. She uses the word "subaltern" to refer to oppressed subjects or, more generally, lower-ranking people, particularly women.

Patriarchy, as a notion of female oppression, refers to the male-dominated institutional structure. Patriarchy has been addressed as a perception, as the authority of the father, and as a technique for managing women's sexuality all across history and in various ways. Women had no rights centuries ago, and they couldn't even demand them because men had the upper hand in everything. Men in the family, whether they are the father, brothers, or even the spouse, suppress and marginalise women. Women had a lesser position, at least among males who were so violent and abusive to them that they became psychologically and physically unwell.

Gender discrimination is defined as gender-based unequal treatment. In any patriarchal culture, men rule women, control their education and access to public jobs, and restrict their movement, reinforcing the issue of gender inequity. Afghanistan is unquestionably one of the most hazardous countries on the planet for women. A substantial majority of women, up to 87 percent, are subjected to physical and psychological abuse and ill-treatment. (Istikomah, 2015)

Discussion

Spivak adopts Antonio Gramsci's term "subaltern" to refer to the underrepresented segment of individuals in society. She favours the word "subaltern" since it accurately describes the lower-class individuals. Hassan's mother is Sanaubar, Ali's wife. She does not play an essential part as a character in *The Kite Runner* in the beginning, and the writer does not offer us with adequate information about her. Sanaubar, in contrast to her presence at the beginning of the storey, comes to play an essential and vital part later in the sequence of events. Sanaubar's character in Afghan society is inferior and downtrodden since she is of the Hazara race, which is at the lowest of Afghan social structure. Despite the Soviet invasion and Taliban rule, she did not leave Afghanistan. Sanaubar is described as a beautiful woman by Amir: "a woman nineteen years younger, a beautiful but notoriously unscrupulous woman who lived up to her dishonorable reputation" (Hosseini, 2003, PP. 7-8).

She is presented like an unethical girl who fled her house with a singer earlier, leaving behind her baby son Hassan and her husband Ali. Amir also learns later in the storey that his father, Baba, was having an affair with Sanaubar. Amir deems this a betrayal by his father of his companion Ali, as described in a paragraph from the novel:

"Please think, Amir Jan. It was a shameful situation. People would talk. All that a man had back then, all that he was, was his honor, his name, and if people talked [...] We couldn't tell anyone, surely you can see that." (P. 223)

According to the preceding extract, Hassan's father, Baba, had an illegal bond with his friend's wife, Ali, due to a profound societal difference in Afghanistan between the two ethnicities, the minority and the majority. This is the point at which she freely departs from Baba's house shortly after Hassan's birth. The depiction of tensions involving national identity and ethnicity is shown here. Hosseini tells the stories of three female characters, Soraya, Jamila, and Sanaubar, to depict ethnic differences in Afghanistan. *The Kite Runner* also depicts how the female and male characters symbolise familial, societal, cultural, and ethnic tensions in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, Sanaubar's marriage to her cousin, Ali, exemplifies traditional ideas in family honour and the value of marriage. This circumstance encourages readers to believe that Afghan women are the guardians of the family honour. As previously said, Soraya is presented as a famously dishonest lady who fled with artists and bands. Furthermore, Sanaubar expresses her distaste for Ali's physique, stating "This is a husband? I have seen old donkeys better suited to be a husband" (P. 10). Nonetheless, she is forced to get married to her uncle, Ali, in order to aid reinstate dignity to the tainted reputation of her family. The scenario demonstrates that engaging according to the Afghan ethos is "arranged and organized by the families of the marrying couple, rather than resulting from a relationship initiated by the man and the woman themselves." (Ramphiphatthamrong, 2020, P. 46) In this scenario, Sanaubar has no choice over who she marries because her father arranges her marriage. In other terms, a marriage, which is regarded the most important and obligatory rite for Afghans, signifies the consent of Ali's uncle, Sanaubar's father. Through Amir, Hosseini tells the storey of Ali and Sanaubar's engagement.

In the end, most people suspected the marriage had been an arrangement of sorts between Ali and his uncle, Sanaubar's father. They said Ali had married his cousin to help restore some honor to his uncle's blemished name, even though Ali, who had been orphaned at the age of five, had no worldly possessions or inheritance to speak of. (Hosseini, 2003, P. 10)

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam's depiction as an outsider has caused her mother a tremendous deal of sorrow and despair, since she has been presented as a social outcast and undesired. In addition to her geographical seclusion, Mariam's mother is referred to as a culprit, an outcast from society, despite the immense agony she endures. Mariam and her daughter have fallen into despair and disease as a result of constant disappointments, sadness, vexation, ostracism, and desertion. All of this caused Nana to flee the society that hates her, particularly her poor father, and

compelled her to endure all of the accusations levelled against her with agonising silence. She frequently exclaims: “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”(Hosseini, 2014, P.5). Nana's seclusion and terrible loneliness compelled her to become devoted to and captivated by motherhood. She has grown too protective of Mariam, whom she regards as the only link between her and the outside world. “You’re all I have. I won’t lose you to them...” (Ibid, P. 18) In a nation where there is little chance for justice, a strong man has wronged her. Nana does not want her daughter to face the same rejection that she went through: “This is what it means to be woman in this world...Learn it. Now and learn it well...a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman.” She goes on to say: “It’s our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It’s all we have” (Ibid, P. 18).

Patriarchy is another recurring theme in Hosseini's works. It refers to the institutional framework of male dominance. Throughout history and in various ways, patriarchy has also been considered as a philosophy, as paternal authority, and as a process for managing female sexuality. Women had no privileges centuries ago, and they couldn't even request them since males had the upper hand in everything. The character of Jamila Taheri mostly exemplifies patriarchy in *The Kite Runner*. Unlike her daughter Soraya, Jamila Taheri, the wife of the affluent General Taheri, is a feminine figure regarded by Afghan culture as an ideal wife and mother. The author depicts her as a typical Afghan woman who is meek and submissive. Furthermore, it is her obligation to preserve decent behaviour and morality. She must also behave properly and express herself in a courteous and conventional manner. Jamila does not sit with a foreign man other than her husband. She married General Taheri in Afghanistan before moving to the United States. Then, when the Soviet army conquered Afghanistan, she, her husband and parents were forced to flee to the United States due to a change in state power.

Jamila is a typical Afghan woman who strictly conforms to the traditions of Afghan cultural customs. She attempts to illustrate that Afghan societal standards must be maintained by all women, including those residing in the United States. In the aftermath of her daughter's escape to Virginia with an Afghan guy, Jamila went through a stroke. Just like Soraya clarifies to Amir, “ever since her mother’s stroke, every flutter in her chest was a heart attack, every aching joint the onset of rheumatoid arthritis, and every twitch of the eye another stroke”(P. 177). Furthermore, Jamila's depictions show how “Afghan women are positioned in patriarchal Afghan society where women are lesser individuals compared to their male counterparts such their husbands and fathers.”(Ramphiphatthamrong, 2020, P. 41)

In this situation, the inequality involves constraints and prohibitions on women. Jamila, for instance, will be unable to exhibit her talents in public when she marries. Jamila used to publicly perform before being married, and she was a Kabul vocalist who could sing simultaneously famous and local Afghan music. Despite the fact that she never sung professionally, she has the ability. Unfortunately, Jamila was compelled to quit singing after marrying General Taheri. Jamila, according to Soraya,

That she never sing in public had been one of the general’s conditions when they had married. Soraya told me that her mother had wanted to sing at our wedding, only one song, but the general gave her one of his looks and the matter was buried. (P. 177)

This excerpt demonstrates Jamila's limitations. Because she was unable to travel freely in public areas to demonstrate her abilities such as singing, etc., and was limited to a large amount of homework. The explanation is undoubtedly attributable to General Taheri, who enforces his commands in line with patriarchal Afghan culture, which stipulates that the husband personally monitors the conduct of his wife and children. As a result, she promises to never perform in public again and abandons her singing career. Furthermore, Jamila's decision confirms the traditional idea that the wife's condition after marriage is to stay at home, be submissive, and be guarded by her husband. As a result, in terms of religion and culture, this confirms Afghans' notion that women are reliant on males.

The patriarchal worldview is shown as firmly ingrained in Afghan culture and traditions in *The Kite Runner*. General Taheri is presented as an Afghan guy who, predictably, wields authority and domination over others, especially women. General Taheri has been a pompous individual his whole life, arrogant and capable of controlling people, just as he was in his own nation of Afghanistan. Despite the fact that he no longer has any influence in Afghanistan, he still exerts patriarchal control inside his family, keeping his close relatives subservient and subordinate to him.

In Afghan customs and traditions, women are supposed to give birth several times. Nila in ‘*And the Mountains Echoed*’, adopts a small girl called Pari after visiting Nabi's family in a destitute village, who soothes her of emotions of emptiness and loneliness. Nila understood that Afghanistan would not offer her with the life she desired, and that migrating to a developed nation would provide her with a contemporary lifestyle that would be more liberal, and that she would be able to enjoy an ideal way of life free of societal constraints. Although the narrative portrays Nila as a contemporary and independent woman, she revealed in an interview that she was frequently in conflict with her father and had been beaten several times,

There were strains between us. We were quarreling. Quite a lot, which was a novelty for him. He wasn't accustomed to being talked back to, certainly not by women. We had rows over what I wore, where I went, what I said, how I said it, who I said it to. I had turned bold and adventurous, and he even more ascetic and emotionally austere. We had become natural opponents. (Hosseini, 2013, P. 237)

Hosseini, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, portrays Afghan women as psychological and physical assault victims. Laila, like Mariam, was subjected to psychological and physical abuse at the hands of Rasheed. Laila was plagued with wounds in both her head and body, as evidenced by the following quote:

[. . .] Laila said. It hurt to talk. Her jaw was still sore, her back and neck ached. Her lip was swollen, and her tongue kept poking the empty pocket of the lower incisor Rasheed had knocked loose two days before [. . .] Laila never would have believed that a human body could withstand this much beating, this viciously, this regularly, and keep functioning. (P. 315)

This excerpt demonstrates the vulnerability of Afghan women to physical and psychological violence both before and after marriage. Laila has been subjected to flagrant physical abuse, since no area of her body is free of serious damage as a result of Rasheed's abusive behavior. Rasheed's actions and beliefs appear to be supported by Afghanistan's patriarchal society, which thinks that a woman is the property of her husband and that he has the right to treat her however he sees fit. This kind of aggression, harassment, and psychological and physical abuse occurs frequently.

Undoubtedly, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, uncovers the violence endured by women in polygamous marriage. Rasheed tries to defend his marriage to Laila to Maryam, saying: "We need to legitimize this situation" [. . .] "People will talk. It looks dishonorable, an unmarried young woman living here. It's bad for my reputation. And hers, and yours, I might add" (P. 208).

Mariam is subjected to gender discrimination and sexual prejudice against women. First, her body is constrained by the clothing code. Rasheed frequently keeps reminding Mariam of wearing the traditional burqa. Wearing a burqa is essential for Afghan women for it symbolises women's honour and dignity. It is thought that by wearing it, a woman's body is shielded from male sight. Wearing a burqa, according to Rasheed, indicates how a woman maintains their modesty and reverence. Mariam, on the other hand, is anxious to wear it. She is bothered by wearing a burqa for she feels uneasy in it. It also restricts her mobility and makes eating tough for her. Actually, the burqa has been the subject of much controversy throughout history. A prohibition on wearing the burqa goes against the principles of women who desire to dress it, as does imposing the veil on women who do not wish to wear it. Some women might not even mind at all wearing it. When burqa irritates women, it becomes a symbol of tyranny and subordination in Afghan society. As shown in the novel, Mariam is upset to wear a burqa since it makes her feel uncomfortable on the inside. It restricts her mobility and makes eating challenging for her. It's also weighty, weird, and unsettling because, as indicated in the passage below, she misses her eyesight.

Mariam had never before worn a burqa. Rasheed had to help her put it on. The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen. She practiced walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth. (P. 71)

Furthermore, Rasheed's unwillingness to enable Mariam to communicate with his visitors allows Hosseini to exemplify how Mariam's movement in society is limited. Whenever he brings his friends to his place at this time, he instructs Mariam to remain in her private bedroom till the guests depart, as revealed in the extract below,

They had Eid visitors at the house. They were all men, friends of Rasheed's. When a knock came, Mariam knew to go upstairs to her room and close the door. She stayed there, as the men sipped tea downstairs with Rasheed, smoked, chatted. Rasheed had told Mariam that she was not to come down until the visitors had left. (P. 80)

Conclusion

Khalid Hosseini's novels '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *And the Mountains Echoed*, and *The Kite Runner*', accurately depicted Afghan society, particularly the portrayal of women. Afghan women encounter several challenges. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Taliban control, and patriarchal society's view of women obscured women's true role in society and stripped them of all basic human rights. Afghan women face numerous challenges, including

gender inequality, discrimination, and violence. Gayatri Spivak has shed light on the suffering of women in third-world societies by applying the term "subalternity" to women and demonstrating that women in these previously occupied societies suffer twice as much as men. Women, too, are denied rights and are the weakest link in these societies. Through an analysis of the main female characters in Khalid Hosseini's novels, the research revealed the difficulties that women faced in Afghanistan.

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