

ISSN : 2454-2423

Glocal Colloquies

An International Journal
of World Literatures and Cultures

Vol. 4

October 2018

A Peer-Reviewed Refereed Research Journal

The Muffled Voices of South Asian Women, Conflict and Concord in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract: "A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini, the Afghan-American novelist reflects political plight in Afghanistan and how the political scenario of a nation makes and mars its citizens' lives, especially women's lives. The political crisis which subsequently culminates in national crisis cause to ruin harmony in society and induces a sense of discord. The political turmoil causes upheaval in society and women confront the existential crisis. The all-pervasive conflict, peace processes and security agenda are completely oblivion of disempowered women's views. Women's approach to conflict and peace processes are situational. The marginalised position of women, gender stratification is put under scrutiny and investigated in the novel and its resistance is properly revealed. It highlights the journey of women from margin to centre with a sense of solidarity aiming to play a constructive role in the unification of the nation.

This paper provides insight into women's narratives of war, conflict, clash, bloodshed in the wake of the establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and peace and a growing sense of security with its demise. It also calls attention to women's pivotal role in nation building.

Keywords: Woman, Violence, Peace, Conflict, Security, Vulnerable, Nation

The novel entitled "A Thousand Splendid Suns" highlights the political crisis in Afghanistan from feminine perspectives. It reflects how the national crisis destructs and destroys peace and serenity of humanity in general and women in particular. They (women) confront the heart-rending crisis with multitudinous layers characterised by an Iceberg phenomenon.

Historically, the South Asia region is acutely affected by long tenure inter-state tensions, internal conflicts which consequently consume political stability, economic development, peaceful and progressive governance, violation of human rights(even fundamental rights), the collapse of judicial systems, deprivation which finally culminating in annihilation of women in all perspectives. The violence exercised on women encompasses domestic violence (initial stage), trafficking, sexual exploitation in personal and public spaces leading to dehumanization.

The dominant conflict, peace processes and security agenda have no regard or better to say turn a blind eye to disempowered women's standpoint. Women's role and responses in conflict and peace are different. The Subaltern status of women, gender hierarchy is questioned and investigated in the novel and its resistance is properly revealed. It throws light on how the peripheral existence of women has been transformed into centre stage existence with their sense of sisterhood and playing a significant role in the nation-building process.

The story of the novel "A Thousand Splendid Suns" is narrated through the female characters Nana, Mariam, Laila, Giti, Hasina, Aziza who forge a strong bond among themselves in the face of the resistant forces of society and the unfavourable circumstances created by the government. They cultivate their relationships on different levels. Gita, Hasina and Laila form a bond of girlish friendship whereas Mariam and Laila develop a much more strong and sustainable familial bond. The relation between Mariam and her mother Nana does not seem so strong in the beginning but throughout the novel, the remembrance of Nana by Mariam reflects the existence of strong bond existing between their relationships. The beginning of the novel brings forth the word "harami" for Mariam from her mother Nana, a word which is beyond the comprehension of Mariam. Her father Jalil appears as the standard for 'legitimacy' as per societal norms. But once he lets Mariam down and subsequently rejects her presence at his home, his legitimacy as a father is called into question. Mariam and her mother Nana express hope many times but their hope always spirals into despair, a trajectory that recurs throughout the novel. Mariam even in her childhood realises the fact that the attainment of formal education would not only be impossible for her but also that such an education would be wasted in her. Nana's views on women's education reflect its futility for Mariam.

'What's the sense in schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon. And you'll learn nothing of value in those schools.'

There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life and they don't teach in school.

Only one skill. And it's this: tahamul, Endure (pg. 17)

This statement of Mariam is borne out of sexual violence experienced by her and other members of the gendered class. Women who are the victims of sexual violence feel dehumanised if they are blamed for this act of savagery by society. They are socially ostracised. They are made to feel a sense of powerlessness, worthlessness, aloofness, apathy and denial.

Throughout her life, Mariam blames herself for Nana's suicide. And whenever she suffers in her life, she regards it as a punishment for her betrayal of Nana. Her first miscarriage made her believe that she doesn't deserve a child on account of her insensitivity to her mother. She dreams of a jinn stealing away her baby. During the four years of her marriage, she has undergone six more miscarriages which make her life miserable beyond measure. The dehumanized treatment which she receives in the hands of her husband Rasheed moves her on the verge of extinction.

It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat...each trip to doctor more crushing for Mariam than the last (pg.89). Even he forces her to chew on rocks, breaking her teeth.

The political life of the country significantly shapes and influences the lives of its citizens. On April 27th 1979, there was the Communist rebellion of the Daoud Khan administration and all members of his party were killed. The nation was now to be known as the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan stands for the end of the era of inequality. The novelist paints the picture of terror in the following words:

Days later, when the Communist began the summary executions of those connected with Daoud Khan regime, when rumours began floating about Kabul of eyes gouged and genitals electrocuted in the Pole-Charkhi Prison, Mariam would hear of the slaughter that had taken place at the Presidential Palace (pg.91-92). Terror and terrorism are incompatible with peace, peace-making and the struggle to pacify existence. Terrorism is a dual phenomenon, a tactic used by states (terrorism from above) and by non-state actors (terrorism from below) to induce fear in terrorised

common mass particularly the vulnerable one's such women and girls.

The political stability of the nation was debilitating steadily but the Communist have focussed on literacy initiatives for women consequently women are enrolling more frequently at the university in Kabul. Laila's privilege to acquire a formal education may be contrasted with Mariam denial to it.

In April 1988, the Soviets sign a treaty to vacate Afghanistan and subsequently, they left it. And with the collapse of U.S.S.R. President Najibullah tries to make an agreement with the Mujahideen but ultimately he surrenders and the Communist regime and jihad comes to an end. Afghanistan becomes the Islamic State of Afghanistan which is administrated by a jihad council which later on will be substituted by other councils and ultimately by-elections. The novelist quotes:

The jihad was over. The various communist regimes that had held power since the night Laila was born were all defeated.... And now, after more than a decade of sacrificing everything, of leaving behind their families to live in mountains and fight for Afghanistan's sovereignty the Mujahideen were coming to Kabul, in the flesh, blood and battle-weary bone (pg.144).

It was dizzying how quickly everything unravelled. The leadership council was formed prematurely. It elected Rabbani President. The other factions cried nepotism. Massoud called for peace and patience. Hekmatyar, who had been excluded, was incensed. The Hazaras, with their long history of being oppressed and neglected, seethed.

The Mujahideen, armed to the teeth but now lacking a common enemy, had found the enemy in each other. Kabul's day of reckoning had come at last. The city of Kabul witnessed the raining down of the rockets. The different factions of Mujahideen began to fight with one another. In 1992 there was heavy fighting in West Kabul between the Pashtun forces of the Warlord Sayyaf and the Hazaras of the Wahdat faction. The shelling knocked down power lines, a pulverized entire block of shops and homes. In the words of the novelist: Pashtun militiamen were attacking Hazara households breaking in and shooting entire families, execution style, and that Hazaras were retaliating by abducting Pashtun civilians, raping Pashtun girls, shelling ... their tongues to cut out (pg.159). Now the citizens of Kabul are resolved to move to some safe place from Kabul.

Women and girls have to undergo all sorts of physical, emotional and sexual forms of violence at the time of armed conflict. Violence is manifested in the form of physical torture, rape, mass rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced sterilization, termination of pregnancies on account of rape and multiple mutilations. In countries directly affected by war, women and girls may be lured by offers of protection and access to safety zones. The conditions in Afghanistan resulting in women and girls being trafficked into India, Pakistan and other countries in central Asia. Trafficked women and girls face severely compromised physical and mental health, in particular, reproductive health problems on account of rape, sexual abuse, STIs including HIV/AIDS, trauma and unwanted pregnancies. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported there were 19.8 million refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people out of which women and children constitute 80% of the world's refugees and IDPs. Internally displaced women and girls are subjected to physical and sexual attacks; rape, domestic violence and sexual harassment, increased spousal battering and marital rape, forced marriages, abduction etc.

In one of the explosions, Laila lost her parents and is barely survived. She was found by Rasheed amongst the rubble and it is Mariam's care and concern revived her. Laila has no choice but to marry Rasheed in order to protect her unborn child. She gives birth to Aziza who is the greatest source of hope and comfort amidst despair and devastation and the war-ravaged scenario of Afghanistan. The relationship between Mariam and Laila is one of antagonism and enmity. Initially, both of them try to avoid each other. But it is because of Rashid's intervention they all have their dinner together. Mariam divides daily chores with each other. But it's the birth of Aziza and Mariam's attractions to her gradually change the nature of relationship existing between Mariam and Laila. Mariam begins to look after Aziza and she also becomes fond of her. Besides, Laila tries to protect Mariam from Rasheed's beating and it is for the first time someone has stood for Mariam which brought about a significant turn in her thinking and she herself admits it to Laila. They talk and enjoy the company of each other also share the secrets of their lives. In the novelist's words: Laila examined Mariam's drooping cheeks, the eyelids that sagged in tired folds...And, for the first time, it was not an adversary's face Laila saw but

a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotested, a destiny submitted to and endured (pg.223).

Laila has realised that the freedom and opportunities that women enjoyed between 1978 and 1992 were a thing of the past now since the Mujahideen take over in April 1992. It framed rules for women based on Shari'a, strict Islamic laws that ordered women to cover, forbade their travel without a male relative, punished adultery with stoning (pg.232).

Research conducted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reflects that armed conflict exacerbates existing inequalities between men and women and puts women and girls at heightened risk of physical and emotional abuse from male family members. The unrestricted procurement of and access to weapons heightened the risk of severe injury or death casualty. Women run SOS hotlines for abused women and children reported high levels of abuse during and after the war. Even if women are not directly wounded during armed conflict, the devastation suffered by their families and the threat of violence can contribute to women's isolation. Widowhood, flight to cities and remaining inside the home to avoid violence, all serve to the breakdown of social institutions and isolate women.

Laila who had already decided to run away from Kabul with her daughter Aziza also invites Mariam to join them: 'we're leaving this spring, Aziza and I. Come with us, Mariam (pg.229). But their plan of running away from Kabul had been thwarted by Mujahideen's Police Officers and they had to face the tyrannical and dehumanized behaviour of Rasheed. On the political front, the situation gets deteriorated. At last the wars among the different factions of Mujahideen brought to an end because of the arrival of the Taliban in Kabul in September 1996. They uprooted Mujahideen from Kabul and most of the cities of Afghanistan. For two years now, the Taliban had been making their way toward Kabul, taking cities from the Mujahideen, ending factional war wherever they'd settled. They had captured the Hazara commander Abdul Ali Mazari and executed him... The Taliban had one thing the Mujahideen did not, Rasheed said. They were united (245).

With the coming of Taliban to power in 1996, they instituted a system of gender apartheid which put women in a state of constant house arrest unless accompanied by a male relative. Women's progress in education and employment was crushed with the harsh laws imposed by the Taliban regime. Women have been stripped of their visibility, voice and mobility. Women were no longer in control of their lives

decisions. It encouraged girls under the age of 16 to enter into marriage. It appointed a religious Police force who often would beat women who violated the Taliban code which regulated the behaviour of women.

You will not, under any circumstances, show your face. You will cover with burqawhen outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.

Cosmetics are forbidden.

Jewellery is forbidden.

You will not wear charming clothes.

You will not speak unless spoken to.

You will not make eye contact with men.

You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.

You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger.

Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately.

Women are forbidden from working.

If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death (pg.248-249).

The weak position of women and girls are deeply reinforced by social attitudes. Women and girls have been tortured for holding prominent political or community positions, for speaking out against opposing groups, or for resisting violence against themselves and their families. They have been targeted for being educators and for their roles as cultural symbols of their communities. They have been tortured as a means to attack the men in their lives whether fathers, husbands, sons or intimates rather than on account of their own actions or public identity. The torture of woman and adolescent girls has been carried out to violate the victim's sense of herself as a person and as a woman. The psychological and social impacts of armed conflict are intertwined. Changes in social interactions may create psychological distress.

In a study on women's health in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime, interviews attributed their depression to Taliban policies that restricted their movement, access to employment and education opportunities, caused isolation, financial hardship and fear. In a study, 65% of women reported considering suicide and 16% reported having attempted to commit suicide. The destruction of health care facilities, schools, public offices and other infrastructure makes it difficult for common mass to meet their basic needs.

The process of healing is most often accompanied by mitigating fears and contemplating hope for sustained growth in the future. Compassioned mediations on the psychological, social, political and economic situations are usually more fruitful.

In the period of Taliban regime, for her second delivery, Laila along with Mariam are forced to travel around Kabul to find a hospital which treats women only as per rule of Taliban. They made the rule of the separate hospital for men and women. And at last, they arrive at a hospital only to discover that there is no x-ray, no suction, no oxygen, not even simple antibiotics, no anaesthetic and at last Laila requests doctor to cut her belly to deliver the baby.

The natural calamity of drought in the fall of 1998 degenerated the condition furthermore. While Rasheed is profligate so far as his son Jalmai is concerned, he proves himself to be a penny-pincher in the case of Aziza. He decides for Aziza to beg on the streets in order to sustain the family. Finally, she is resorted to begging despite the strong objections from the women of the family. And at last, she is left in an orphanage to cut the expenses of the family. She seems to be well taken care of within the orphanage still she develops stammering which indicative of her suffering and internal pain. She is the representative of the nation and its fate. It is this gender disparity encouraged the Member States of the UN to conceptualise the strategy of Gender mainstreaming. It is defined in the Economic and Social Council agreed conclusion 1997/2 as: "the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women and men an integral dimension of design, implementation, monitoring and appraisal of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres consequently women and men get equally benefitted. The achievement of gender equality is the ultimate destination. Gender mainstreaming necessitates incorporating the perceptions, experiences, knowledge and interests of women and men which may play an instrumental role in policy-making, planning and decision making. It has nothing to do with the erasure or replacement of gender-specific policies and programmes.

The arrival of Tariq and his frequent meetings with Laila resulting in the struggle between Laila and Rasheed which culminates in the murder of Rasheed by Mariam. It is Mariam who has endured the longest span of abuse and she is sentenced to death by the Taliban Administration.

With 9/11 attack in 2001 on World Trade Centre, suspicion quickly fell on al-Qaeda. The USA reciprocated by initiating the War on Terror and annexed Afghanistan to topple Taliban which had ignored US command to deport Osama bin Laden and banish al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. The novelist records: Back home, bombs are falling once again, this time American bombs.... The Americans have armed the warlords once more and enlisted the help of the Northern Alliance to drive out the Taliban and find Bin Laden (pg. 342).

Taliban has been chased out by coalition forces and an interim President, Hamid Karzai, has been appointed. Life is gradually returning to normalcy in Kabul. Laila along with Tariq and her children return to Kabul and contribute to the rebuilding and replanting of the nation. She and Tariq assist Zaman in the renovation of the Orphanage and their photographs with an article on their contribution to society were published in a local newspaper. And with this Laila's life comes full circle. In today's Afghanistan, women are playing a major role in the task of building the country's security. The Constitution of Afghanistan ensures fundamental rights for men and women and includes provisions for positive discrimination in favour of women. It reserves a minimum of 25% of seats in the parliament for women candidates. It makes women's participation mandatory in different sectors including the security sector. The Afghan Women's Network (AWN) has been involved in peace-making efforts since its establishment. Considering that the family is the foundation of a society and the energy of women a mobilizing force within the family, it is transparent enough that women are essential not only to the process of reconciliation but also to stability and nation-building. In 2010, in the first peace jirga, a national consultation on bringing peace to Afghanistan was organised and in which women were allowed to be part of the reconciliation process.

The prominent discourse of peace and security have completely neglected women's participation in the context of national security and peace processes. But the fact remains that the human security discourse must address the problems of marginalised, toiling masses and dispirited women. In the post-colonial South Asia, people's security particularly women and children have been ignored by policymakers.

The United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 is considered as the first out of eight resolutions on women, peace and security which acknowledge that women and men have different experiences in terms of war and conflict. It presumes that in order to achieve sustainable peace and stability, the experiences of both gender

are equally feasible and should be taken into consideration. The Resolution concludes with the demand of the active involvement of women in the different domains such as participation of women in peace processes, protection of women in war and peace, prevention of conflicts and prosecutor of perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence and involvement of women in post-conflict reconstruction endeavours.

The incident of armed conflict in South Asian Countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India especially in Jammu and Kashmir, North East is the heart-rending narrative of subjugation and oppression of women and girls. They don't have to face only death threat or killing rather rape, gang rape is the common phenomenon. They are victimised by soldiers of enemy camp not only to humiliate but also to force the opponents to surrender. Women are easily targeted for all sorts of violence whether it is domestic, political or cultural. The devastating effect of war and conflict may be easily witnessed in the form of fragmentation of families, death of men and children (family members). The brutality which is borne during armed conflict and social unrest is an additional one along with barbarity exercised on women at the time of peace. "The war and the patriarchal culture consider women as their property. The issue of rape is linked with community honour. In the case of rape and abduction violation of women's body becomes a secondary issue. The community and family honour becomes dominant discourse".

Despite all the issues of sadism, women play a very crucial role at the time of the peace process and restructuring of the nation. They act as the bread earners of the family; provide their caring services to war victims, play the role of effective counsellors. Women's approach to peace and violence is intertwined with the cause and effect of violence and peace.

This paper provides insight into women's narratives of war, conflict, clash, bloodshed in the wake of the establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and peace and a growing sense of security with its demise. It also calls attention to women's pivotal role in nation building.

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