

Feminine Sensibility in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns

Pranati Mishra¹ and Manisha Panda²

¹Gandhi Institute for Technology, BBSR, Odisha

²Gandhi Engineering College, BBSR, Odisha

Publishing Date: July 21, 2015

Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's "A Thousand Splendid Suns" depicts the social, cultural and political structures that support the devaluation, degradation and violence endured by the female characters in the novel. From the Post-Colonial Feministic perspective, this paper attempts to investigate the plight of the two female protagonists of the novel endured. In this novel we learn how powerful and life-changing the bond can be between the two female. Women in Afghanistan had been oppressed by the different norms of the society and Veiling by Burqa in this novel represents how male authorities misuse religion to suppress women. This is a story of intense beauty and strength buried under the surface of the cruel and capricious life of two Afghani women. "A Thousand Splendid Suns" provides a vivid portrait of a country shattered by series of ideological leaders and wars imposed on it by foreign and internal forces. The narrative, which spans several decades, is driven by the stories of two women, Laila and Mariam, who, despite starkly different beginnings, find themselves intimately connected and dependent upon one another. Hosseini's women, much like the country Afghanistan itself, appear to be propelled by the whims of outside forces, familial and societal, with little chance of influencing their own lives and futures, yet Laila and Mariam are neither passive nor helpless as they make choices and accept the consequences. Hosseini claims to write a simple love story, but his portrayal of Laila and Mariam and their dreams, trails, challenges and present a complex view of women in Afghanistan that goes beyond oppression and the stereotype of veil.

Introduction

The history of feminism is the chronological narrative of the movements and ideologies aimed at equal rights for women. While feminist around the world have differed in causes, goals and intentions depending on time, culture and country. Sensibility emerged as a concept in the enlightenment era but continued to be defined during the romantic period and beyond. The term describes people's capacity to be affected by the world around them. It also directly correlates their emotional capabilities with their moral development. People thought that sensibility led men to knowledge, whereas appropriate feminine sensibility resulted in good behavior. From Christine-Pisan to Mary Wallstone

Craft, from Simon-de-Beauvoir to Jane Austen and beyond, women have been demanding their rights in a male-centric world. Feminism is a protest movement launched by women of the West for equal, social, political, legal, moral and cultural rights with men. Mary Astell's "*Serious Proposal to the Ladies*" 1697 stressed the role of women's education in removing their inferiority and insecurity. Much later, Virginia Woolf stated that "Education alone can expand woman's consciousness of the world so and how her place in the society".

'A thousand splendid suns' is not just a story, but a pain-staking examination of a woman's world characterized by repression and marginalization, and the ultimate desire of the irrepressible human spirit in making a choice for itself, even if that choice is death. It is a story how certain situation and circumstances brings out the true capabilities of a person, the strength which he himself is unaware of. Every conversation in this story is marked by a realization of the limitations faced by the character for the sin of being a woman in a world where male patriarchy is the rule of the day.

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. Afghanistan is a landlocked country that is located approximately in the centre of Asia. Khaled Hosseini novels depicts about afghan society in the era of political upheaval and unrest. Hosseini's second novel 'a thousand splendid suns' is an expression, for the first time in literature of Afghanistan, of the reality of lives lead by women in a country where they are doubly marginalized-first, as women in a male dominated society, and secondly, as pawns caught in the crossfire between warring factions on one hand and the Taliban with their misplaced Islamic ideology on the other. The novel published in 2007 and is a powerful examination of power paradigms, gender roles, the use of language as a weapon for subjugation and most of all, the role of literature in a world where

www.ijesonline.com (ISSN: 2319-6564)

gender has been increasingly used as a tool to bracket, segregate and ultimately to repress. The novel is about two women, Mariam and Laila belonging to very different afghan families and circumstances, but end up in the same circumstances. It is in this book we learn how powerful and life changing the bond between can be between the two women.

Methodology

A Thousand Splendid Suns as a primary source has been studied and quoted. Critical materials from secondary sources on the author and the novel have been referred. Collected data from print and e-sources are evaluated and interpreted according to research methodologies. To interpret texts and data, interpretation of scholars and critics are cited with the help of MLA Handbooks for Writers of Research Papers seventh edition.

Review of Literature

A Thousand Splendid Suns is not an outstanding novel qua novel; there's nothing stylistically breathtaking or formally innovative about it. Hosseini's novel, in contrast, seems extraordinarily grounded, from its detailed descriptions of the landscapes and cityscapes of Afghanistan to its careful chronicling of the shifting of power among nations, factions, and individuals. A Thousand Splendid Suns shows the social and cultural—and, ultimately, political—structures that support the devaluation, degradation, and violence endured by Mariam and Laila. The novel performs superbly one of the things fiction has done so well and vitally since at least the nineteenth century, with novels like *Oliver Twist* or *Mary Barton*: it puts a human face on systematic failures and abuses, ensuring that abstractions such as “severely undermining women's human rights” get, as it were, fleshed out. Here's the slightly laboured expository summary Hosseini gives, for instance, of the changes after the takeover of Kabul by the Mujahideen:

“The freedoms and opportunities that women had enjoyed between 1978 and 1992 were a thing of the past now.”

The strongest part of the novel is Hosseini's portrayal of the lives of two women and the daughter they come to share becomes an allegory

of the ways in which all women's lives in this misogynistic world are truncated into one awful shape, while men stew lazily and sensually in their own power.

Feminine Sensibility

Sensibility emerged as a concept in the Enlightenment Era but continued to be defined during the Romantic Period and beyond. Since concepts piety, modesty, and obedience defined the moral standard for women, feminine sensibility required women to display such qualities in their behavior. However, feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, argued that true virtue could not exist without well-developed knowledge. Therefore, useless women were properly educated; they were merely mimicking good behavior with no more backing. Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) provides the most obvious example of these negotiations. Marianne Dashwood is guided by too much passion and acts inappropriately, while her sister, Elinor, reacts with too much prudence. Eventually, both sisters are rewarded with marriage once they learn how to regulate the appropriate amount of emotional response. Maria Edgeworth's *Leonora* (1806), on the other hand, offers a much more scathing criticism of sensibility. In *Leonora*, Olivia claims to be a woman of sensibility, but other characters note that it is mere emotional exhibitionism. In other words, Olivia only appears to feel, and her feelings are not backed by elevated morals. Additionally, she seems to follow Rousseau's proscription, using her emotional displays to garner attention from male lovers. Edgeworth takes Rousseau's suggestions to their logical and dangerous conclusions in the character of Olivia. Virtue in display only is morally bankrupt. Wollstonecraft proposed that all women receive an education equal to that of men. With such an education, women would be able to reasonably subject their passions to necessity. They would practice good judgment and align their behaviors with usefulness rather than “artificial grace” and false “female weakness.” Additionally, women would develop a “conscious virtue,” which would be active and aware rather than passive and “local.”

Over 1400 years ago, Islam demanded that men and women be equal before God, and gave them various rights such the right to inheritance, the right to vote, the right to work, and even choose their

own partners in marriage. For centuries now in Afghanistan, women have been denied these rights either by official government decree or by their own husbands, fathers and brothers. However, during the rule of the Taliban (1996 - 2001), women in that country experienced conditions that were worse than in any other time or imposed by any other society. They were forbidden to work or even to leave the house without a male escort; they were not allowed to seek medical help from a male doctor, and were forced to cover themselves from head to toe while out of doors. Women who were doctors and teachers were suddenly forced to be beggars and even prostitutes in order to feed their families. No matter where they were brought up, women in Afghanistan faced the same fortune throughout.

‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ forges an inexorable link between reality and fiction, bringing to the fore a story of the politics of repression and domination, a mockery made of the most basic of human rights for half the total population of a country in a conflict that has left an indelible scar across the length and breadth of a land once rich in Buddhist and Islamic culture and heritage.

In spite of the riveting tale told against the background of politics and brutality, Hosseini’s novel is not just a story, but a pain-staking examination of a woman’s world characterized by repression and marginalization, and the ultimate desire of the irrepressible human spirit in making a choice for itself, even if that choice is death.

The two main characters in ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’, Mariam and Laila, are based on the “collective spirit” of all the women in Afghanistan, an exploration of their “inner lives”—a story of millions shrouded beneath the ‘veil’ of domesticity and traditional honour. At the heart of the story lie these two characters whose lives are a study in contrast - one a poor villager born in a remote area of Afghanistan; the other the smart, educated daughter of a school teacher in Kabul, both brought together through marriage to a common husband, Rasheed. The backdrop to this tale is formed by the upheavals in Afghanistan which shape the lives of these women – a chronicle beginning with the Soviet invasion, moving through the civil war to the era of the Taliban. The images are real, and the tragedy is vividly played out through the lives of Mariam and Laila. Ironically enough, though

education has given one the power of expression, that power is limited within bounds set by male domination and the prevailing political atmosphere.

Male Chauvinism and The Trap: The story of Mariam and Laila

A Thousand Splendid Suns is at once an incredible chronicle of thirty years of Afghan history and deeply moving story of family, friendship, faith and the starvation to be found in love. The story is divided into four parts. Part One tells the story of Mariam, an illegitimate child of a wealthy merchant named Tariq who has three wives and 9 “legitimate” children. Mariam lived with her Nana in the outskirts of Herat. From her childhood Mariam has been taught by Nana about this male-centered world and how women have always been blamed for every wrong.

“Like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman. Always.”

Part Two introduces Laila. She is a girl growing up in Kabul who is close friends with Tariq, a boy living in her neighborhood. They eventually develop a romantic relationship despite being aware of the social boundaries between men and women in Afghan society. War comes to Afghanistan, and Kabul is bombarded by rocket attacks. Tariq’s family decides to leave the city, and the emotional farewell between Laila and Tariq culminates with them making love. Laila’s family also decides to leave Kabul, but as they are packing a rocket destroys the house, killing her parents and severely injuring Laila. Laila is subsequently taken in by Rasheed and Mariam.

Part three of the novel begins with Laila in her neighbour Rasheed’s house, rescued after her own house has been bombed and her parents killed by a rocket. Alone, helpless, and with no option but to accept Rasheed’s offer of marriage as a final lifeline, she is sucked into the vortex of what had become a woman’s life in Afghanistan : having to endure the attentions of a man almost sixty years old; forced, as Mariam was, years ago, into the impenetrable ‘burqa’, which would now define her relationship with the outside world. The two women are thrown together by circumstances, and the reader cannot but think of the irony at the similar fates suffered by the illegitimate social outcast, Mariam, and the liberal, educated Laila –

their destiny is forged by the simple fact that they are 'women' in a patriarchal world.

The two main characters in 'a Thousand Splendid Suns', Mariam and Laila, are based on the "collective spirit" of all the women in Afghanistan, born and brought up completely contrasting environment ended up with the same fate. The backdrop to this tale is formed by the upheavals in Afghanistan which shape the lives of these women a chronicle beginning with the Soviet invasion, moving through the civil war to the era of the Taliban.

Born a generation apart and with very different ideas about love and family, Mariam and Laila are two women brought jarringly together by war, by loss and fate. As they endure the ever escalating dangers around them- in their home as well as in the streets of Kabul they come to form a bond that makes them both sisters and mother-daughter to each other, and that ultimately alter the course not just of their own lives but for their children's. With heart- wrenching power and suspense, Hosseini shows how a woman's love for her family can move 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 of survival.

The bond that freed: The transformation of Mariam and Laila

The contrast between the lives of women in cities and the countryside during the 1970s is stressed by the two characters in the novel. Though the secular nature of the government was welcomed by the majority of the people in the cities, it was unpopular with conservative Afghans in the villages and the countryside who favored traditionalist 'Islamic' restrictions on women's rights in daily life. This contrast in lifestyle of the two characters introduced us to different prospects of our life. Mariam was a true example of patience and perseverance on the other hand Laila was an example of strength. Laila protected Mariam and herself from the tortures of Rasheed. Laila was able to sneak money from Rasheed's pockets and planned for eloping from his clutches. The contrasting nature of Laila and Mariam helped each other to come out of that dreadful situation.

Domestic violence, behind closed doors and boarded windows, was an accepted feature of the

day with the police refusing to interfere. Rasheed punches Laila and beats Mariam till she bleeds, before locking them and Laila's child up without food or water when they try to escape. The effect of years of torture is visible on Mariam's face which is "a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotected, a destiny submitted to and endured." Things reach a climax when Rasheed attacks Laila, brutally hitting her even as Mariam tries to stop the attack, but she is helpless before Rasheed's huge form. Seeing that he really meant to strangle Laila this time, she runs out and gets a shovel. By the time she returns, Rasheed's hands are still firmly around Laila's throat and her face is already turning blue. "All the self-denial, all the sacrifice, all the sheer exertion it had taken her to live with him for all these years" finds expression at last as she brings the shovel down and "as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life."

The friendship between Mariam and Laila is transformative. Hosseini's concatenation of the concluding action is a violent and bloody as that of a renaissance revenge tragedy when the women are forced to rise up against their common oppressor. At first Mariam and Laila divide the household chores and responsibilities in a way that minimizes their contact — for there is no reason for them to get along — over the years they come to love one another as dearly as any mother-daughter pair and each generously sacrifices what little she can to spare the other the wrath of their shared despotic husband. Hosseini makes clear in his depiction of daily life the severe limitations placed on Afghan women. Their safety and well-being were entirely contingent on the nature of their fathers, their brothers, their husbands, and their own ability to produce sons. They couldn't leave the home, choose their own spouse, arrange an education, or travel without permission, and unescorted women were subject to sanctioned harassment and beatings by men on the streets. When one of the women is forced to temporarily entrust her young daughter to an orphanage because of widespread hunger, her weekly visits (unaccompanied) required running a gauntlet of abuse at every corner. Soon she learned to wear protective padding under her Burkha. Sometimes she persevered across town to her destination, and at other times she was overcome by the violence, leaving the child feeling bereft and abandoned without the much-anticipated rendezvous.

At the novel's climax, when Mariam makes a calculated move to kill Rasheed as he is in the act of murdering Laila, she makes sure that Rasheed sees her as she acknowledges her action. This act of killing Rasheed is the portrayal of Mariam strength. Mariam has been a quiet person taught from the very beginning that it's a male-dominated society but this act of her shows the reversal of her own characteristics. As the story proceeds, we see the power of love, the love that Mariam has for Laila. The character of Mariam develops from a young little girl who lived in a fantasy world to a woman who is capable of making her own choices, even though its death.

We see many instances where love and bonding helped the characters to overcome different situations. Mariam was the only strength of Nana so when Mariam decides to cross the river to meet her father, Nana commits suicide being unable to stay without Mariam. Another instance of such love and bonding can be seen when Laila is ready to marry Rasheed just to save her and Tariq's child. Laila bears the tortures of Rasheed just to protect Aziza. And one of the biggest example of the is of Mariam, whose eternal love helped everyone to get out this environment. Mariam is aware of what she will miss: her companionship with Laila and seeing Aziza grow, marry, and have children of her own. "She would have liked that very much, to be old and play with Aziza's children" (Hosseini 329). Despite this, she is at peace with her actions and is cognizant that although she came into the world unwanted, she leaves it "as a woman who had loved and been loved back. . . . This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings" (Hosseini 329). Mariam has chosen death so that Laila and the children, together with Tariq, can find a sanctuary where they will thrive in peace and security.

Conclusion

"I am different; I am an entity" — Kamala Das. The sense of feminine sensibility is very much prominent in the words of Kamala Das, as she projects a separate identity of women. Women have generally been projected as "devoted", "self-sacrificing" and yet devoid of the ability to think or make decisions. The chosen novelists serve a common purpose in showing how the feminist sensibility in their women springs from the fountain head of desire to be treated fairly and

judged equally. The novelists endeavored to give voice to the voiceless if they are unable to attain complete success it is because they are still interacting in the male world. They also show how women cannot be devoid of the feminine self; such depiction may come closer to post feminist stance that feminism is pro-woman without being anti-man. The feminist sensibility rests in woman's urge to explore the new self through an affirmation of positive values. The story of Mariam & Laila & their development through the male dominated world & finally holding their own ground & finding their own voice present a new dimension of women in the society where their vulnerability & sensibility are not their weakness, instead they act as their biggest strength.

The narrative of Mariam and Laila merges with the narrative of the rebuilding of Afghanistan and of Kabul in particular. As Tariq and Laila set to work at Aziza's old orphanage, Laila feels Mariam's spirit everywhere and senses it as a force behind Kabul's reconstruction.

Laila sees . . . that Mariam is never far. She is here, in these walls they've repainted, in the trees they've planted, in the blankets that keep the children warm, in these pillows and books and pencils. She is in the children's laughter. (Hosseini 366)

Mariam's sacrifice is infused into Laila's purpose and the reconstruction of Kabul. As Laila comes to realize, "every Afghan story is marked by death and loss and unimaginable grief. And yet she sees that people find a way to survive, to go on" (Hosseini 350), as such, Mariam's death is not so unusual and her sacrifice is not so remarkable. It is part of the continuing narrative of Afghanistan. Yet, Laila's knowledge that Mariam not only chose this fate but chose it for Laila's well-being gives Laila a sense of purpose and allows her to grow beyond the tragedies she has experienced and to choose to devote her life to others and to something as seemingly impossible as the reconstruction of Kabul and Afghanistan.

References

- [1] Hosseini, Khalid. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007. Print. 5 Oct. 2017

- [2] "Sensibility." The Oxford English Dictionary Online. Oxford English Dictionary, 2012. Web. 13 Nov. 2017.
- [3] "Women in Afghanistan: A Human Rights Catastrophe".
<<http://www.rawa.org/ai-women.htm>> Web. 10 Nov. 2017.
- [4] "Feminine Sensibility & Virtue".
<<http://web.utk.edu/~gerard/romanticpolitics/sensibility-and-virtue.html>>. Web. 10 Nov. 2017