



**Reading Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: Understanding Gender
Inequities**

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Abstract

Gender has been a topic of discussion in society as well as in literature thereby becoming a site for contestation and confrontation. Since it is undeniably a social construct, it remains perpetually in a state of flux, variable from one historical period to another, within a given period, from society to society, from culture to culture. Interestingly, for centuries the status of woman to a great extent remains static. Monetisation, globalisation and privatization has not been able to dispel the entrenched ghettoization of mindset towards woman, challenge the traditional perception of “womanly woman” forced on her by culture, religion, ideology and

social structure. Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is an apt example to study this inequity even today in a so called civilized society like ours.

Keywords: Gender, inequity, social construct, ghettoization

Let no one be born

But if one must

Let no one be a girl.

If one must be a girl

Then may she never fall in love

If she must fall in love

Free her from her family.

(Vidyapati, 15thc A.D)

Gender discourse, at present is a much contested site of unease rather than of concord, rendering a proper understanding of the expanding gender studies confusing. Amidst the profusion of linguistic terminologies and jargons, near unanimity prevails on the fact that gender is a social-cultural construct, referring to the social and cultural aspects of social difference. It is variable from society to society, country to country, changeable and an effective analytical tool to understand social realities with regard to women and men. At the offset, it must be mentioned

that when the revival of feminist politics came in late 1960s Kate Millet while propounding her theory of patriarchy in *Sexual Politics* (1977) revisited psychoanalyst and anthropologist Robert J. Stoller's book *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* that appeared in 1968 in which distinction was made between sex and gender. The study enabled Millet to underscore that 'sex is biological, gender psychological, and therefore cultural' in short, narrowing the distinction between nature and culture (Millet 29-31) that led to the questioning of the 'fixed and permanent quality' of terms like masculinity and femininity. Gayle Rubin's 1975 essay 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex' remains seminal in understanding the relation between sex and gender on the basis of contrast between nature and culture. She argued that the 'sex/gender system' prevalent in every known society is nothing but

A set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be.

(Rubin 165)

Thus certain codes that were "culturally defined and obtained" in a given society led to the prescription of behaviour acceptable in men and women. A clear social dichotomy between the sexes drawn and men and women placed in "mutually exclusive categories". Rubin's essay based on Marxist economics, anthropological studies and psychoanalysis affirm how men "have certain rights in their female kin", whereas "women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin" and they may be "traded, bought, and sold" (175-76). Teresa de Lauretis claim that gender is being constantly "constructed across a multiplicity of discourses, positions, and meanings, which are often in conflict with one another" (de Lauretis) provoked Chantal Mouffe to argue that notwithstanding "heterogeneity, discourses and practices do not

take place in isolation” and ended up positing ‘feminine’ “as a subordinated pole to the masculine” (Mouffe143). Gender and its related concepts remain warped due to presence of patriarchy.

Various resistance and national liberation movements while signalling the end of colonial powers liberated countries failed to make dent on the status of women. They remain till date peripheral players in the shaping of any decisions. Family, religion, law, political, educational, economic institutions, media, knowledge systems that are the main institutions in a society are explicitly patriarchal in nature and therefore by implication constructs pillars of a patriarchal structure. The manner in which this well-knit and deep-rooted system coalesce makes patriarchy invincible and at the same time natural and beyond questioning. The fact that gender relations are both constituted and conversely help constitute practices, ideas and ideologies in interaction with other structures of social hierarchy like class, caste and race, they remain fragile, provisional and in a state of perpetual flux. Thus neither same in each society nor historically static. However, the fate of women in all this churning has remained constant. This is not to suggest that nothing has changed or improved. Certainly some grounds have been covered but they are minimal. Women have not succeeded in breaking free from the hegemony of paternalistic domination. Discrimination, disregard, insult, control, oppression, violence within the family, at workplace, in society have become common metaphors mapping the existence of a woman. Black, white or brown; American, Asian, African or European-the underlying narrative remains the same- gender relations is not equitable. In every continent the refrain is - women are ‘pokeroot’ ‘mugwort’, ‘a weed’, ‘something you rip out and toss aside’(8). In fact “ learn this now and learn it well, my daughter : Like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing

finger always finds a woman. Always.” suggests Nana to her daughter in Khalid Hosseini *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007:7).

I must confess the reason for choosing *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The novel is usually read as a chronicle of Afghanistan’s history in turmoil, Soviet invasion, talibanization and the subsequent effects of war and extremism on Afghan people. It has all these. To me, however a close reading of the novel offers the most viable matrix in understanding gender inequalities. All the subtexts and the varied forces that go into making this discourse one of injustice, exploitation and subjugation are fully interplayed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It captures the ghettoization entrenched in the minds of men towards women and succeeds in exposing the deep seated misogyny embedded in a civilized society like ours. The novel reiterates the widespread perception that “God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can” and therefore men “relished his authority, who saw offences everywhere, thought it his birth right to pass judgement” (324). Religious rhetoric is the easiest way to controlling lives.

The setting is Afghanistan undoubtedly but to me it is the narrative of every woman being enacted in different parts of the globe with varying degrees. True, patriarchy is not the same everywhere, its nature can and is different in different classes in the same society; in different societies and in different periods in history. Each historical period and each social system throws up its own variations on the functioning of patriarchy. Nevertheless the broad and operating part remains the same as pointed earlier i.e. men control most economic resources and all social, economic and political institutions. Manu, the codifier of Hindu law spelling the ‘duties of women’ stated that “Men must make their women dependent day and night, and keep under their control those who are attached to sensory objects. Her father guards in childhood, her

husband guards her in youth, and her sons guards her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence". Thus, "she must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband or sons"(Doniger and Smith197). We are now into twenty first century and we have writers like Khalid Hosseini and many others validating that for women, dependency, commodification, the struggle and victimization continues. This malaise is neither region nor religion specific. It is not episodic rather epidemic. The statistic from so called modern, industrialised, egalitarian countries like U.K and U.S.A which have had universal education for a long time reflect their inability in actuality to get rid of this malady. The core reason being that no serious attempts have been made to alter the patriarchal structures and the attitudes that perpetuate inequalities. Oprah Winfrey shows are sufficient to believe the workings of these societies from close quarters.

Khalid Hosseini's family, when they left Afghanistan in 1976 hardly realized that they were uprooted for ever from their homeland. "We took nothing with us. We didn't bring any mementoes or family photos because we expected to go home," Hosseini recalled in an interview. Later the family sought political asylum in America and "reinvented themselves and adjusted to the new reality of their lives."He had grown up in a privileged segment of Kabul society where women were treated as equals and had best education. Hosseini's sister Raya never experienced any social disadvantage from being a girl. It was after a visit to Afghanistan in 2003"to educate myself" that Hosseini returned with "vivid and heart breaking" stories. The "collective sense of what women in Afghanistan went through," resulted in the convincing delineation of the female characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

The novel is hugely loaded with political overtones. It is a fact that in the contestation of power game, it is always smaller countries like Afghanistan that become a 'playground' (274) for super-powers, offering the most fit space to flex their superiority, "a place the West could

point to and prove to the world that they weren't just funnelling arms into Afghanistan." But once the purpose is served the "West moved on. There was nothing at stake for them in Afghanistan anymore and the money dried up" (298). We may pride ourselves in averting the outbreak of Third World War, but have to contend with the knowledge of failing miserably in containing violence. Conflicts both inter and intra blots the face of the world today. The worst sufferers undoubtedly are women and children, the non-players in these power games. So Hosseini on his return could not erase the memory of seeing the "burqa-clad women walking in pairs up the street, trailed by their children in ragged clothes and wondering how life had brought them to that point. What were their dreams, hopes, longings? What had they lost, whom had they lost, in the wars that plagued Afghanistan for two decades?"

A Thousand Splendid Suns is much more ambitious and incisive novel than *The Kite Runner*. The canvass is vast, woven with a larger set of characters, multigenerational and spanning over almost forty-five years. Hosseini with dexterity has performed a balancing act in writing about the inner lives of the characters tempered with the extraneous factors impacting them, charting and shaping their fate. It is his sensitive dissection of the domestic sphere with precision, the minute sketching of the inner lives of the most marginalised section of society to drive home the different kinds of subjugation and oppression that makes this novel a fit case for understanding gender inequities. It is appropriately dedicated to the "women of Afghanistan", to the spirit of woman, how a "human body could withstand this much beating, this viciously, this regularly and keep functioning" (287).

It is a foregone conclusion that home, relations between family members are all private affairs and hence beyond the purview of the State or Govt. regulations. Whatever happens within the precincts of home is strictly personal and no outside intervention is encouraged. Interestingly

under this plea, glaring inequalities are allowed to continue. Wife battering, marital rape, rape of girls by fathers or other male relations, mental, physical torture, general deprivation experienced have and remain undiscussed, unchallenged and thus an invisible site. What all this division between public and private sphere has done is to give impetus to male dominance and only sharpened inequalities.

Ideology provides fillip to the perpetration of social systems by controlling people's mind and supplying justification for social behaviours. Because any deviation from the roles assigned by society incurs sanctions and the most effective censure is one of social ridicule. Women are the ones who bear the brunt of all social ridicule. The very genesis of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, so to speak, lies in social ridicule. The travails of Mariam, one of the female protagonist begins because she is a 'harami'. Her mother Nana was the housekeeper in the affluent family of Herat. She caught the fancy of Jalil and ended up being pregnant. When "her belly began to swell" all hell broke out. Jalil's in laws threatened "blood would flow" while his three legitimate wives demanded the expulsion of Nana. Her own father, disgraced, disowned Nana. In retrospect, Nana ruefully wished "my father had had the stomach to sharpen one of his knives and do the honourable thing. It might have been better for me.....Better for you too, maybe. It would have spared you the grief of knowing that you are, what you are." Jalil himself lacked courage to "stand up to his family" and "accept responsibility for what he had done." In fact it was the other way around. He squarely blamed the woman, accusing her of having '*forced*' herself, that it was all her 'fault'. Nana then understood "what it means to be a woman in this world". As a "face – saving deal" the woman was 'replanted' far "removed, detached, where neighbours wouldn't stare at her belly, point at her, snicker, or worse yet, assault her with insincere kindnesses" (6-8). Life is scarred with serious consequences as is evident in the novel. This is a bitter reality we

live with. Social ridicule accruing in social exclusion renders woman to peripheral existence. Mariam whose “only sin is being born” grows carrying the burden of remaining an “unwanted thing”, “an ugly, loathsome thing” “like an insect, like the scurrying cockroaches”, “an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance”(4).

Access to education is another guarded domain of male prerogative. This is conspiratorial and deliberate to thwart women from becoming independent readers. Men feel threatened if women have voice and are economically empowered which education definitely allows. Girls of privileged families like Raya, Saideh, Naheed in the world have no problem walking the corridors of education. It is the girls of lesser mortals whose ambitions and aspirations are axed. The refrain thrown up is: “What is there to learn?”, “What’s the sense 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 it in school.” The skill a woman needs to be adept at is “*tahamul*. Endure” (17). Mariam dismissive of Nana’s cynicism and rantings earlier learns the meaning of *tahamul*. Her mother’s suicide and the emptiness of Jalil’s affection made her reassess her existence: “*But where do I belong? What am I going to do now?*” She was left with “*nothing. You’ll have nothing. You are nothing*” (38). With odds stacked heavily against her, Mariam is compelled to marry a man 20 years her senior, her being only 15. The trauma of living with a complete stranger who insists on her wearing a burka is temporarily pushed back. A tentative hopefulness surrounds Mariam, especially when she becomes pregnant.

Women existence is inextricably linked to her being agents of reproduction. Hosseini beautifully presents what life is like for women in a society in which they are valued for

copulation and procreation only. After undergoing series of miscarriages, marriage to Mariam becomes a prison: "Mariam *was* afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile moods, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not."(89). When one wife fails to produce an heir, he simply discards her, and deviously plans her replacement.

This brings in the other narrative, the saga of Laila whose life is impacted by the political upheavals in the country. An innocent young child with a best friend who is a boy, her family is torn by the war that steals her brothers away from her and in turn her mother's affection. An interesting parallel but with same outcome can be drawn. The circumstances had rendered education beyond Mariam's reach. Laila on the other hand was fortunate to have a father like Babi who believed that "*Marriage can wait, education cannot..... You can be anything you want, Laila., Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men,..... Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance (103).*

Life started to change subtly with the arrival of 'Soviet comrades in 1979' who wanted to help their 'neighbor' from the clutches of 'antiproggressives, the backward bandits' America. Instead Afghanistan became a battleground of infightings among diverse clans and their loyalties to foreign powers. The outcome is the perennial truth. Women and children became the worst sufferers as happens in any conflict. They are the ones caught unwittingly in the crossfire. One day a rocket attack devastated and ripped apart the life of Laila. Orphaned and rescued by her neighbour Rasheed, she is informed about the death of her lover Tariq. With an illegitimate baby in womb and a hostile environment Laila had only two options: become a prostitute or marry the opportunist neighbour. She opts for the latter. Rasheed hides his lechery by disguising it in the

garb of meting a favour to both the women: “How many days do you suppose she’ll last before she is abducted, raped, or tossed into some roadside ditch with her throat slit? Or all three?” Then with an air of superiority adds “I am giving *you* help around the house and *her* a sanctuary. A home and a husband. These days, times being that they are, a woman needs a husband.”(192-3)

Gender indoctrination comes innate with the birth of a baby evident in the response and reception to the new arrival. The second wife brings little comfort to Rasheed as a daughter is born because preference is for male child. Both the women “become one and the same being to him, equally wretched, equally deserving of his distrust, his disdain and disregard” (245). Rasheed demeanour softens only after the birth of a baby boy. We may condemn Nana or Laila or hold women responsible for perpetuating such practices. What is required is an understanding of the overall system and analyse the reasons for this complicity. Women have to keep negotiating their position and it is sometimes at the cost of other women.

Religion plays an important role in creating and perpetuating patriarchal ideology by projecting means stronger, in a decision making position and women mere voracious consumers, a commodity, dependent and jealous. The interweaving of religion and cultural norms in a society impact the daily lives of both women and men. Selective portions from scriptures and religious traditions are foisted to push women backward in a more controlled environment. This phenomena is not limited to any one religion but is operative in all religions. Rasheed’s insistence on burka at one level is more to do with the socio-culture context than religion. It is more to do with “*nang* and *namoos*, their honor and pride’ (63).Lack of female education stops them from first hand reading and judging the issues themselves, thus make them dependent for interpretations of religious texts. The patriarchal mind set is exploited to the optimum.

Unconsciously, perhaps Hosseini has rubbished the notion of women being weak, emotionally imbalanced. Despite the knowledge of having “*How quietly we endure all that falls upon us*” (82), they are not broken down completely. Belittled and bewildered at their lives having shrunk to mere existence, Mariam and Laila devise an escape route. For one of them, the cost will be deadly. Inside the house, the women struggle to survive Rasheed’s rants. Outside, they face danger in the streets of Kabul. They are prisoners both inside and outside. Caught while trying to escape they discover for the first time “not an adversary's face” rather “a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotested, a destiny submitted to and endured”. Their only hope of affection or solidarity lies in sticking together, not just physically but also emotionally. Fearing that Rasheed is going to kill Laila for meeting Tariq clandestinely, Mariam hits him and ‘it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life(311). Or Mariam once convinced that Jalil ‘were ashamed of me’ severs her links forever: I won’t see you .Don’t you come .I don’t want to hear from you. Ever. Ever.’(50) It is to this end that the novel reaches to a new height. Truly a celebration of undaunted resilient spirit of women that makes this novel readable with all sordidness and harshness depicted.

Attributing inequities to culture, traditions, rituals, political system, social structure and the overriding faith as the complexities and nuances of that society is merely shifting the blame. Rather than addressing the core issue, it is used as an excuse to perpetuate hegemony and the paternalistic domination.

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