

The State of Afghan Women as Portrayed in a Novel "A Thousand Splendid Suns" By Khaled Hosseini



Sumaira Rauf	M. Phil Scholar Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan. sumirau00@gmail.com
Syeda Faryal	M. Phil Scholar Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan. bachafaryal@gmail.com
Sumbal Imran	M. Phil Scholar Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan. imranaliqasmi105@gmail.com

Abstract: *This research aims to examine the challenges faced by Afghan women, as depicted by Khaled Hosseini in his literary work titled A Thousand Splendid Suns. The work highlights the pervasive problems of misogyny throughout Afghan society. Afghan women reside within a socio-cultural framework characterized by a pronounced patriarchal structure, wherein the prevailing norms of patrilocality and patrilineality impose significant limitations upon them, ostensibly justified by religious and cultural principles such as Pushtunwali. The novel portrays Afghan women as being objectified and used as commodities. The legislative efforts of successive Afghan administrations to promote women's liberation have been impeded by male individuals. Due to their dominant nature, men exercise authority over women and deprive them of their rightful entitlements. In order to maintain the existing social order, they implement stringent regulations, commonly referred to as Sharia rules. The present study arrives at the conclusion that Afghan women have been subjected to flogging and lethal acts, young girls have been coerced into entering into marriages against their will, and educational institutions and healthcare facilities catering specifically to women have been deliberately set on fire. Throughout history, there has been a persistent pattern of men engaging in the mistreatment and exploitation of women. The research additionally asserts that Afghanistan exhibits a deeply entrenched sexist culture, with the challenges faced by Afghan women being further intensified by persistent conflicts.*

Keywords: Afghan women, Women's rights, Patriarchy, Social issues, Feminism

Introduction

The concept of literature has been subject to various definitions throughout scholarly discourse. The term "literature" encompasses various forms of written and oral expression, including creative writing as well as more technical or scientific works. However, it primarily pertains to imaginative works that introduce readers to novel realms of human experience. The realm of literature elicits a range

of emotional responses inside individuals, including but not limited to intrigue, hope, excitement, concern, regret, fear, sympathy, and laughter. Consequently, literature serves as a foundational platform for fostering comprehension and acquiring knowledge in an unbiased manner. According to Robert and Jacobs, literature can be categorised into four distinct genres: prose fiction, poetry, drama, and

nonfiction writing. Fiction refers to narratives that are not wholly grounded in reality but rather are constructed and envisioned. The novel is a kind of prose fiction that serves to illuminate the intricacies inherent in the realm of ordinary human existence. Novels serve as a means to depict and illuminate various aspects of human life and society, often featuring characters who find themselves in conflict with the prevailing social norms (V.Roberts, 2007).

This study endeavours to provide insight into the challenges faced by Afghan women as shown in Khaled Hosseini's literary work, "A Thousand Splendid Suns." The story acquaints readers with a society that endures persistent conflict, resulting in significant repercussions for the populace at large, with a special emphasis on the vulnerable segments, including women, children, and the elderly. Afghanistan, a nation deeply affected by armed conflict, has persistently endured a state of distress, subjecting its populace to the perpetual spectre of violence and mortality. Throughout history, Afghanistan has consistently garnered significant attention from major global powers, resulting in the occurrence of large-scale conflicts on its territory (Chaudry, 2013). This region has experienced a series of invasions, including those by Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and other ethnic factions such as the Mujahideen. Additionally, the presence of the Taliban and the subsequent American intervention following the events of 9/11 have not succeeded in establishing lasting peace. The aforementioned occurrence exacerbated the prevailing disorder in Afghan society (Zia-Zarifi, 2020).

Nations experiencing prolonged periods of civil war and terrorism encounter numerous societal challenges. The erosion of individuals' inherent rights significantly distresses society, particularly impacting the most vulnerable segments, namely women, children, and minority populations. Afghanistan, similarly, is confronted with a multitude of persistent societal challenges since it has undergone a tumultuous evolution over the course of the last five decades. Gender specialists have designated Afghanistan as the country with the highest level

of danger for women globally, according to a survey conducted by Trust Law. Afghanistan's current state of conflict, along with elevated levels of violence, pervasive poverty, and inadequate healthcare, positions the country at the lowest echelon in terms of women's safety and well-being (Ullah, 2017).

The situation in Afghanistan remains precarious for girls and women due to a combination of factors, including political dynamics, religious extremism, military activities, patriarchal systems, and insurgent aggression. The presence of extremist religious and socio-cultural components is a significant obstacle to the progress of restoration and development endeavours. The presence of these constraints and hurdles significantly and detrimentally affects the well-being of girls and women in Afghanistan, leading to a notable decline in their overall quality of life and, in certain cases, a decrease in female life expectancy (Kristensen, 2016). Despite the concerted endeavours undertaken by Pashtun kings, regimes, and external entities to enhance the status of Afghan women in relation to their independence, rights, and overall well-being, the current state of affairs continues to be lamentable. The enduring cultural practises, persistent fighting, and the intervention of NATO airstrikes collectively contribute to the perilous conditions faced by women in Afghanistan. Moreover, when a woman in Afghanistan endeavours to express her opinions or assume public positions, she confronts the deeply entrenched gender norms dictating appropriate behaviour for women, regardless of whether she is employed as a policewoman or a news broadcaster. She frequently experiences intimidation and mortality (Chassy, 2008).

In the context of Afghanistan, the maternal mortality rate stands at approximately one in eleven, indicating the likelihood of women experiencing fatal outcomes during childbirth. The individual in question has been deprived of fundamental human rights and has experienced a distressing incidence of maternal mortality, inadequate access to and substandard quality of healthcare services, prolonged periods of conflict, and a complete absence of economic

rights (NBC, 2011). Despite gaining attention from the international community, women's rights and freedoms in Afghanistan continue to be marginalised in various aspects, resulting in a persistently grim situation for them (News, 2012).

With due consideration to the numerous acts of violence and oppression experienced by Afghan women, Hosseini effectively amplifies their voices in his literary work, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The work encompasses a significant period of time, chronicling the arduous journey and challenges faced by Afghan women. The author provides a narrative account of the severe mistreatment of Afghan women, exemplified by the experiences of the main characters, Mariam, Laila, and Nana. The author provides an overview of the dire conditions faced by women in Afghanistan, exposing the prevalent and deeply rooted misogyny. According to Akbar (2010), Afghan women believe that men are manipulating and controlling them (Akbar, 2010).

“He caught her, threw her up against the wall, and struck her with the belt again and again, the buckle slamming against her chest, her shoulder, her raised arms, her fingers, drawing blood wherever it struck” (Hosseini, 2007).

Upon perusing the aforementioned excerpt, the reader may have a sense of unease; yet, it is important to note that the described scenario is considered commonplace within the majority of households in Afghanistan. In Afghan society, women are often perceived as possessions and commodities rather than being recognized as individuals with inherent human rights. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* explores a range of political concerns, including the status of women, the impact of war, socioeconomic disparities, and societal challenges related to the position of women within Afghan culture. The Afghan woman conforms to societal expectations by adapting her behavior and appearance to align with the preferences of masculine individuals. The evaluation of Afghan women is predominantly influenced by the perspective of Afghan males (Meheidli, 2008).

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to assess Hosseini's depiction of the challenges faced by Afghan women in his novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Second, it asks if the Pashtun society is male-centered and limits women in the name of Pushtunwali, which is an unwritten set of rules that Pashtuns follow. In addition, it shows how an Afghan woman is "objectified and commodified" and not seen as a person.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does Hosseini's book depict the predicament, social standing, and prejudice faced by Afghan women under several regimes?
2. Does Pashtun culture limit women's rights and is it patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilineal?

Research Methodology

Because the nature of this research is qualitative, descriptive and analytical research methodologies were utilized to examine the information gathered from interviews. Using semi-structured interviews, a non-probability sampling purposive sampling strategy was used to gather primary data. The novel's topics were examined and analyzed critically using a thematic analysis approach.

Discussion and Analysis

During the process of the interviews, certain participants exhibited signs of embarrassment while responding to inquiries pertaining to domestic, verbal, and sexual assault. However, a significant number of individuals readily recounted their experiences.

Domestic Violence

In accordance with Hosseini's exploration of the issue of domestic violence within Afghan society, one respondent exhibited reticence when recounting the treatment she experiences within her household. Nevertheless, the participant disclosed to the researcher the instances of physical abuse inflicted upon her by her spouse who is grappling with substance

addiction. According to her account, the individual mentioned that her mother-in-law is her paternal aunt and exhibits a high degree of compassion. Consequently, she endures her abusive spouse for the sake of her mother-in-law. The individual further asserts that in instances where her spouse experiences an excessive intake of drugs resulting in a state of unconsciousness, any requests made by her, such as for the procurement of groceries, elicit a hostile response from him, leading to physical violence. According to her statement, the individual mentioned that her spouse operates a rickshaw and utilizes his earnings only for the acquisition of narcotics. He lacks the financial resources to supply us with sustenance. She further stated that both my mother-in-law and I engage in the practice of sewing garments, which serves as a means of generating income to cover our housing expenses and get essential food items. Due to the debilitating effects of drug consumption, the spouse has intermittent incapacitation, resulting in occasional absences from their professional obligations. Consequently, he engages in physical violence towards her, subjects his mother to mistreatment, and solicits financial support from them to sustain his drug addiction. *"Many times my husband has thrown me against the wall and threatens to kill me. But I cannot leave my husband as that is against my culture"* (Ranrra, 2023).

The male participant expressed a perspective on domestic violence that aligns partially with the issue emphasized by Khaled Hosseini, however attributing the responsibility for the violence to women rather than men. According to the the participant, Afghan women continue to face instances of physical assault, although in cases where they have made mistakes or errors (Zardan, 2023).

Verbal Violence

In relation to the issue of verbal violence, it was disclosed by one of the participants that women in Afghan society are subjected to verbal abuse for trivial reasons, such as infertility, failure to produce male kids, and non-compliance with their husbands' directives. According to her statement, a woman who does not have a son

may experience psychological torture to such an extent that she becomes indifferent towards her husband's decision to enter into subsequent marriages. The virtue of her compliance is seen in her acquiescence to her husband's choice to enter into a second marital union. She acquiesces silently, driven solely by the imperative of self-preservation and tranquility (Hajra, 2023).

According to another respondent, living in a joint family with a mother-in-law and three married brother-in-laws, along with their children, leads to both verbal and physical violence. They have to cook, clean, and take care of this huge family. The respondent said that her mother-in-law is in charge of all the affairs within the house and controls their social mobility, such as visiting their parents' home, health centers, markets, et cetera. In such a huge family, the food is sometimes insufficient. All the women living in the house were complaining about their mother-in-law. They said she reports to her sons, and as a result, they are verbally abused and get physically beaten. The respondent even said that she is not happy living in a joint family, as life in extended families is harsh and miserable. She added that despite all the problems in joint families, she can never think of living away from her in-laws (Gul, 2023).

A large number of the participants hold the perspective that they encounter instances of verbal mistreatment on a daily basis. The evidence unequivocally demonstrates that the verbal mistreatment endured by the characters Maraim, Laila, Aziza, and Nana in Khaled Hosseini's work accurately reflects the societal position of women in Afghanistan with regard to verbal abuse. The individuals held the perspective that men in Afghanistan do not perceive verbal abuse as a form of violence.

Sexual Abuse

With regard to the inquiries of the issue of sexual abuse inflicted against women in Afghanistan, as brought to attention by Khaled Hosseini, certain individuals characterized him as an American. Critics have asserted that his depiction of women is hyperbolic, with the intention of tarnishing the reputation of

Afghans. Supporters of Hosseini's perspective argue that women face degrading treatment when they venture outside their residences, as they are subjected to objectifying gazes and derogatory comments on their physical attributes. He also asserts that predominantly married men engage in extramarital relationships by taking advantage of women from impoverished backgrounds and compensating them with minimal remuneration. It is disheartening to observe that certain individuals exhibit a desire to safeguard their own female family members, although do not extend this inclination towards the well-being of women outside their immediate kinship circles (Munir, 2023).

A significant number of women experienced homelessness due to the unfortunate circumstances of their dads, siblings, husbands, and sons falling victim to terrorist strikes, hence exacerbating the vulnerability of Afghan women. Due to their prior experience of sexual assault, in the absence of male breadwinners, they turned to engaging in prostitution as alternative employment opportunities were not available to them. During times of conflict, it was seen that regional warlords would unlawfully enter residences and forcibly abduct young women who they found visually alluring, disregarding their marital status. These women were then coerced into becoming wives against their will, a flagrant violation of human rights (Saira, 2023).

The subject of sexual assault shown by Khaled Hosseini through his characters, including Nana, Maryam, and Laila, is substantiated by the replies. The prevailing viewpoint among the respondents indicates that, in addition to the sexist behavior exhibited by men, warfare has also been a contributing factor in the vulnerability of women to instances of sexual abuse and harassment. The aforementioned circumstances have resulted in the loss of financial providers and caretakers within families, leading to the necessity for early marriages with older men. Additionally, some individuals have been compelled to engage in prostitution as a means of survival.

Proof of Virginit

Engaging in open discussions regarding this topic proved challenging, especially among the participants, due to the cultural norms of the Pashtun community, which discourage conversations about sexual matters in the presence of men. Khaled Hosseini adeptly depicts a significant thematic element, namely virginity, which is considered a taboo subject and is generally avoided in public discourse. Notwithstanding the delicate nature of the subject matter, a small number of participants did furnish accurate data and exhibited no reluctance in divulging the actuality. One of the interviewees concurred with the assertion that the examination of a bride's virginity continues to be observed in contemporary times. In Afghanistan, a significant number of brides have been subjected to acts of violence resulting in their death or forced return to their parental residence, based on the perception that they engaged in premarital sexual activity (Sarmad, 2023).

Saweera emphasizes the significant role of demonstrating virginity on the wedding night for Afghan women. In certain cultural contexts, there is a belief that it is necessary for a bride to experience bleeding during her wedding night. Additionally, in situations where the husband or in-laws harbor suspicions regarding the bride's virginity, there have been instances of extreme violence resulting in the woman's untimely demise. In accordance with customary practices, the mature women residing in the bride's household engage in the task of replacing the bed linens throughout the morning hours. According to Saweera (2023), it has been observed that a significant number of young women seek medical intervention to restore their virginity before their wedding. This practice is driven by the fear of potential consequences, such as the threat of lethal violence, should their lack of virginity be discovered.

The perspectives expressed by Pashtun men originating from Afghanistan regarding female virginity are remarkable. One of the participants expressed their perspective, asserting that a lady who ventures outside her residence to pursue education or employment cannot maintain her

virginity. Given her interactions with male peers and colleagues, it becomes challenging to ascertain her virginity. The individual proceeds by asserting that women of this nature are subject to the curse of Allah and will perpetually remain unmarried, since it is the divine retribution designated for them. In order to be regarded as a lady of moral fortitude, it is expected that she provide evidence of her virginity; failure to do so may result in severe consequences, including the possibility of capital punishment. Furthermore, the individual holds the belief that a woman's sphere of existence is confined solely to her domestic environment and eventual demise. According to this perspective, any woman who aspires to transcend these confines will inevitably forfeit her chastity and forever lose her state of purity. Anwarullah (2023) had a firm belief that all girls of this nature maintained clandestine relationships.

Conclusion

The novel encompasses the historical occurrences in Afghanistan spanning from the 1960s to 2003. Hosseini provides readers with insights into the socio-political landscape of Afghanistan prior to the Soviet incursion, the successive socialist regimes, the emergence of the Taliban, and ultimately the United States' invasion. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, the nation underwent a notable shift towards a more progressive, inclusive, and receptive culture, with a special emphasis on the advancement of women's rights and opportunities. In the past, individuals enjoyed a significantly greater degree of autonomy and entitlements compared to their present circumstances. The wearing of burqas had transitioned into a matter of personal choice, women had gained access to school, co-education was implemented, and they were granted the opportunity to engage in employment until the occurrence of the Soviet invasion in 1979. The contemporary state of Afghanistan can be mostly attributed to a series of armed conflicts. Following the Soviet invasion, women had a profound sense of unhappiness, as effectively shown by Khaled Hosseini through the depiction of his characters.

The author offers a glimpse into the chauvinistic society prevalent among his readers, shedding light on the dominance exerted by the patriarchal structure in Afghanistan on its female population. Consequently, individuals are subjected to domestic violence and abuse, which engenders a range of impacts on both the individual and societal levels.

This study aims to analyze the representation of patriarchy in Afghan society as depicted in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The author conveys readers to a world in which women are entirely dependent on male family members, particularly sons. Consequently, the birth of a male kid becomes the sole means for a woman to attain a socially recognized status. The female protagonists of the tale are subjected to the pervasive violence that exists throughout Afghan society. Women are compelled to embrace the trajectories that have been determined for them by men. Navigating within a patriarchal culture characterized by male dominance, wherein men perceive themselves as superior to women and perpetrate acts of violence against them, regardless of the existence of legal frameworks designed to provide protection and ensure gender equality. Afghan women encounter persistent discrimination and marginalization, with ongoing instances of their commodification and sale as assets within the context of Afghanistan.

Hosseini has classified conflict as a significant factor contributing to their unfavorable state. The phenomenon has had a significant and ongoing influence on the lives of women. The conflict resulted in widespread destruction throughout all aspects of society. The displacement of Afghan individuals from their residences led to their relocation to unoccupied areas, accompanied by the loss of all possessions, thereby precipitating their descent into poverty. The individuals in question faced significant challenges in their efforts to secure their survival, leading many women to engage in the exchange of sexual services, either voluntarily or involuntarily, as a means of sustaining themselves. The character Rasheed, who serves as the adversary in the narrative, conveys to Mariam that the brothels in Peshawar

are anticipating the arrival of females like Laila. In addition to this, armed conflicts have resulted in the denial of educational opportunities, compromised access to healthcare, and limited employment prospects for females, so subjecting them to various forms of exploitation. During a limited period of tranquility during the Taliban administration, the available societal sphere was occupied by a rigorous application of Sharia law and adherence to Pashtunwali principles in relation to women. Hosseini concludes his story by expressing optimism for a more promising and affluent future in Afghanistan subsequent to the downfall of the Taliban rule. Nevertheless, the United States also fell short in fulfilling its commitment to women's rights in Afghanistan.

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