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# Inferior Conditions of Afghan Women in Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*

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### Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the conditions of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's two novels, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* in which women are seen inferior in a male dominated society. The socio-religious and socio-political conditions of Afghan women led them totally illiterate, poor, inferior, marginalized, and oppressed in post-Soviet era. It also aims to depict the status of Afghan women and their struggles towards the gender discrimination and violence through Hosseini's two selected novels. Previous studies and author's novels were read for data collection and thematic analysis technique was applied in this study to achieve the goals. As a result, in the former novel, Mariam, Laila, and Nana under the male-dominated system suffered some tragic events such as abusive behavior of husband; patriarchy; and loss of freedom. Similarly, in the later novel, *Parwana*, *Pari*, and *Nila* both physically and mentally suffered, viz., women's earlier marriage; selling women for dowry; and women's poor economy.

**Keywords:** *Afghan-women, Gender discrimination, Interiority, Marginality, Patriarchy*

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## 1. Introduction

For Darwin, the leading writers, artists, and scientists were almost all men. This inequality reflected a biological fact he supposed. Thus, he argues that man has ultimately become superior to woman. So, treatments and attitudes of women are diverse from society to society. A woman is always subjugated and made to suffer and treat as inferior where there is not the existence of justice, equality, and human rights in the society. Even presently, women are treated with various purposes. Some men expect women are the only tools to give heirs, some suppose them to be mere decorative objects, and for some they are obedient creatures who have to take care of their household chores (Saini, 2017). Nevertheless, Kristeva (2004) on the other hand states that women in a society are creating challenges where men are considered superior. Patriarchy alternatively in Walby's (1990) words is described as a structure arrangement which dominates, exploits and oppresses women. Similarly, Sultana (2011) states that patriarchy deprives women of all rights, especially legal rights along with rights of equality, property and mobility. She for the patriarchy also speaks out that it uses tools, like low wages, violence, religion, discriminatory laws and dowry system in order to oppress women.

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Bhasin (1993) opines that Afghan men dominate women and these women are kept subordinate for various purposes. Heath and Zahedi (2011) write, “unfortunately, the defeat of the Soviet Union, which brought an end to a bloody ten-year war of resistance and the terrorizing of civilians by an oppressive Soviet police state, did not bring an end to the hardships, particularly for women” (p. 80). They also put that between the defeat of the Soviet Union and rise of pre-Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Afghans particularly women suffered a lawless and cruel civil war. These regimes had a less-systematic but equally brutal and repressive effect on women’s lives. Saidi (2018) also writes, “there are plentiful accounts of oppressed women in Afghanistan” (p.124). She says that many Afghan families disliked the harassment, violence, abuse and discrimination against women in the country and they decided to emigrate. Violence in Afghanistan especially against women is a common phenomenon. Most of Afghan women are illiterate particularly those who live in suburbs, they are forced for child marriages for the sake of dowry and/ or polygamy this means that women are sold in the name of marriage regardless of their interest and future. Most of the women die at child birth. They are not given legal and property rights. Oppression against women is deep rooted in the attitudes, customs and culture of Afghanistan (Unama and Ohchr, 2009). Although from the age of the Amir to Taraki (1978–79) as Centlivres-Demont (2015) writes the regime tried several times to improve and reform the situation of women by passing a decree. In Kabul in the 1970s, Western modes of dress and behavior were beginning to spread among the sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie, but the reaction of traditionalists was always violently aggressive. It is clear that Islam, as a faith, does not regard women as being inferior to men but unfortunately as Rostami-Povey (2007) writes, “Afghan women constantly struggle to break free from the confines of traditions, male domination and a life of marginalization...”.

Mohanty (2017) in this regard is of the opinion that there were not many restrictions on women in Afghanistan, but with the advent of post-Soviet rule in the country, the scenario changed totally. For an example, the women always had to wear burqa, without which women were not allowed to step outside and work as men did. She further says that in Afghanistan, the man has the sole right over his wife and she cannot go out without her husband’s permission. Girls in that regime were not allowed to go to schools because they were insecure everywhere in the country. Ahmed-Ghosh (2004) suggests that unlike Westerners, who believed that equal rights include the privilege to divorce abusive husbands, many Afghan women do not consider divorce an option because of their faith. Since the arrival of the regime of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the start of the War on Terror, Afghan women have come under the Western spotlight and are evident in the proliferation of media such as feature films, television programs, documentaries, books, and news reports, through these, the plight under repressive Islamic regimes could be observed (Osman, 2020).

As there are many national literatures produced by renowned Afghan novelists and short story writers to portray the inferior conditions of Afghan women but according to Stuhr (2009), Hosseini (2007), the oldest of five children, was born in Kabul in 1965. The Hosseinis returned to Afghanistan in 1973, the year that King Zahir Shah was overthrown by Daoud Khan in a bloodless coup. He, as an Afghan-American novelist, has written three novels, i.e., *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* in 2003, 2007, and 2013 respectively that presents the real picture of Afghanistan and discuss the social, political, religious, and domestic environment, as Dar (2013) explains the fact that these novels are written against a history that have not been told in fiction before. They are delineating the cultural richness and splendor of a country heading towards destruction. Hosseini attracts the attention of his readers towards it. Hosseini has discussed in his writings how the political turmoil in his country has degraded the status of women in the country. Equally, Mohanty (2017) also states, “women are mere puppet in the hands of men and whenever they try to raise their voice they are smashed”. She also writes that school education is forbidden for Afghan women but their life and acts are the great teacher for them. Notwithstanding, Stuhr (2009) puts that Khaled Hosseini was raised in Afghanistan it was when women were allowed to attend schools. Hosseini hoped that his writing would bring depth, nuance, and emotional subtext to the familiar image of the women who are burqa-clad on their streets. Hosseini writes in his second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* that in Afghanistan women were not oppressed at all times but speaks about their untold stories of life. Hosseini among other Afghan novelists focused on the humanity of women behind the burqas, such as their talents and ambitions. In general, Hosseini was to explore the issues of gender discrimination at different levels like social, political, economical and religious and that has happened due to the self-centered policies of governments.

Kakutani (2013) on the other hand writes that the novels of Hosseini for example *The Kite Runner* (2003) focuses on the dynamic between fathers and sons, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) on between mothers and daughters, *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) tells the story through the prism of sibling relationships. This is a theme refracted through the lives of several pairs of brothers and sisters. Hosseini’s novels depict the real picture of Afghanistan that due to the patriarchal culture in Afghanistan, women have suffered both physically and psychologically. As Andrews (2012) for the same purpose pens down, “regardless of the promises of freedom, liberty, and equality made to Afghan women, their situation appears to have only marginally improved” (p.153). Overall, child marriages are on the decline, but both A

*Thousand Splendid Suns*, *And the Mountains Echoed* novels discuss the realities that young Afghan women suffered as a result of the lack of education. As it is evident in the words of Licher (2009) who states that it is estimated that 80% of marriages still involve betrothal in infancy and compulsion by families in Afghan society.

Patriarchal society disadvantages women by marginalizing them from many fields of life, such as educational, political, and others fields. In addition to that, women are also excluded from many public facilities, such as places of worship and health facility etc. Afghan patriarchal men have subjugated Afghan women and kept them inferior by marginalizing and excluding them in various of the fields mentioned above. Afghan women and girls were not treated by the male medical personnel as they were not allowed to do it. So, women in Afghanistan have only opportunity in this medical sector. Saidi (2018) puts, “things became worsened before the new Republic of Afghanistan was prevailed. Rigid interpretation of Islamic norms had a major influence on the situation of female members in society” (p. 58). The women’s university was closed and women were forbidden to work outside home and they were forced to quit their jobs as teachers, doctors and nurses. She further says that girls and women always had to be accompanied by a male member of the household (as qtd. in Skaine, 2000). As in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* it is seen that “it embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who’s lost control of his wife” (Hosseini, 2008, p. 69).

### **1.1. Women’s Inferior Conditions in A Thousand Splendid Suns**

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* according to Kakutani (2013), is presenting the relations between mothers and daughters. It narrates the tragic experiences of two women in Afghanistan, Mariam and Laila. Though born in two different periods, their pathetic life brought them together. They appear as the witness of several tragic events occurred in Afghanistan. For an instance Hosseini (2007) writes, “...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 flesh, blood, and battle-weary bone”. The pathetic and problematic life experienced by Mariam and Laila brought them together. Mariam, an illegitimate child of Nana, is not accepted by the society and she is also called “harami” (Hosseini, 2007). Nana and Mariam tried to remain as the member of society but they were not allowed to do so and, they were always reminded of Nana’s past mistake. Soraya (2015) investigates the characters of Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* for women’s persecution in pre-Republican regime of Afghanistan.

The patriarchal system appears very dominant and apparent in the story of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The pregnancy of Maraim’s mother was a result of Nana’s past mistake that shows the male dominance. Mariam on the one hand exemplifies the rural, uneducated girl that has to contend with the cruelties of an unjust society as Hosseini (2007) in his novel writes down, “Mariam clawed at him. She beat at his chest. She hurled herself against him. She struggled to uncurl his fingers from Laila’s neck” (p. 307). Laila on the other hand symbolizes the urban, educated and ambitious girl. Both of them end up under the same roof, sharing the same husband, the same plight, and eventually the same dream to break free from Rashid.

Mariam is forced to marry an aged, who was double of her age, after the suicidal death of Nana. As Hosseini (2007) writes, “Then the mullah asked Rasheed if he indeed wished to enter into a marriage contract with Mariam”. Rasheed said yes and Mariam didn’t answer for three times. After marriage, Mariam’s husband Rasheed tortured her physically and mentally. Mariam experiences the tastes of horror when she was forced by Rasheed to fulfil his sex desires. It shows her helplessness and her traumatic experience. Due to such ill-treatment given to her, Mariam suffers a miscarriage after her first pregnancy. While Rasheed continuously showers his abusing words and violence for Mariam. Mariam tries to give him a child but she suffers seven miscarriages. Mariam used to look after each and every household thing but still Rasheed beats her for this or the other reasons.

One of the inferior conditions women suffer from in Afghan male-dominated society is the underage marriages about which Andrews (2012) asserts that child marriages overall are on the decline, but both novels discuss the realities that young Afghan women must suffer as a result of lack of education or losing their parents. As Mohanty (2017) about *A Thousand Splendid Suns* also writes that this is a story of Mariam and Laila who from childhood at the age of 14 and 15 are married to Rasheed a “dreadful man” who dominates and governs their life. Mohanty likewise adds that Mariam and Laila have formed a different sort of friendship because of their loneliness and are suffering the same problem in different ways, and when Rasheed tries to kill Laila, she kills him. She released both of them from his tyranny. Their escape from his clutches results to an extreme form of violence. Mariam and Laila are exploited in the name of religion. They appear as the representatives of Afghan women who have experienced the gender discrimination. Laila was not only an ambitious girl but also a very intelligent girl as she received a formal education. Her assertiveness was a very unique, especially in a society that undermines the abilities of women (Khirin, 2018).

Hosseini, through his work *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, shows how the Afghan women suffer physically and mentally. He correspondingly speaks that the Afghan women have started react to the oppressive male dominated

society. Mariam for example hears of women who were killing themselves because of the fear of being raped, and fear of men who would kill their wives or daughters if they'd been raped by the militia (Hosseini, 2007). And, Nana surrenders to oppressive social pressures (Aziz and Nawaz, 2020). The novel also depicts the inferiority of Afghan women in the male dominated community, where this inferiority of women is reinforced through the male construal of religious conviction. Regarding the male dominated society where women were so segregated that sanitary medical conditions Hosseini (2007) puts as such "The doctor took a breath, then told Laila that the hospital had no anesthetic...." Then cut me open", Laila said. She dropped back on the bed and drew up her knees..." Cut me open and give me my baby" (p. 311). It states the anguish of Afghan women and their struggle for survival and existence. Even the proper medical facilities are not available for Afghan women.

Rasheed treats Mariam insanely as he wanted son from her, which she is unable to do. So, Rasheed used to scold her and beat her as he thinks that Mariam is responsible for the death of his child in her womb. Mariam is so horrified by the impudent behavior of her husband, Rasheed. An example of women's inferior condition is evident from Rasheed's "talking this way to her," "to bear his scorn," "his ridicule," "his insults," and "walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat" which is unbearable for Mariam (Hosseini, 2007). It persistently shows the violent nature of Rasheed and his audacious conduct towards his wife, Mariam. Mariam has understood that there is no other choice for her so she learns to accommodate herself with Rasheed and bear him. Rasheed who was not happy with Mariam marries Laila, a young and beautiful woman. Though aware of the reality that Laila is pregnant from another character in the novel, Tariq, Rasheed marries her in the hope of a boy child. But when he gets the news that Laila has given birth to a girl child, Rasheed becomes violent and start beating and abusing Laila.

Mariam speaks to Laila as Hosseini (2007) writes, "you see, your sin is even less forgivable than mine". Laila comes to know about the brutal nature of Rasheed from her conversation with Mariam. Laila was shocked to see how brutal Rasheed was with Mariam and now with herself. According to Andrews (2012), "All women experience an extreme loss of freedom", and in Leila's case, because she is the youngest child in the Khan family, most of the household chores fall on her.

### **1.2. Women's Inferior Conditions in *And The Mountains Echoed***

*And the Mountains Echoed* which is published in 2013 is set against the backdrop of wars in Afghanistan that is regarding the suffering under the heavy toll of destruction (Souissi, 2015) as Hosseini (2013) puts, "... War. Or, rather, wars. Not one, not two, but many wars, both big and small, just and unjust..." It is set during the civil war where Kabul underwent massive destruction. In addition, it exemplifies the oppression of young people especially of women (Aziz and Nawaz, 2020). There are some women characters, like Parwana, Pari, and Nila Wahdati who show their protest against the violence of male dominated Afghan community. These female protagonists suffer psychologically and physically. These Afghan women remain victims of the male-controlled community of Afghanistan. In such a society, women were sold like things having no value and no status, as the female protagonist Pari is sold to Wahdati and Parwana loosed her son due to the cold weather.

Souissi (2015) asserts that Parwana is the young girl whose sense of jealousy makes her push her twin sister off the oak tree (Hosseini, 2013). She is also the grown-up woman who has to spend years paying for her mistake and nursing a crippled sister. Parwana is representative of the rural, dignified Afghan women who lives an uneasy life without complaining or breaking down. According to Aziz and Nawaz (2020), the reason behind Parwana's inferiority is that the men have never given any kind of value to the women. Another reason behind the devaluation or inferiority of women is that conventionally the male dominated society in Afghanistan have given more importance to the physical beauty. Parwana and Massoma came together and revolted against this patriarchal society, which is a kind of reaction towards the abusive behavior of male members of the society. Though Parwana is represented as "shuffling" her movements and described as "flat chest" and "sallow complexion" but she appears as a rebel in this novel.

Ruzmatova (2019) asserts that Pari is another poor girl who is sacrificed by her family. Saboor, her father, sells her to rich lady Nila whose marriage with Suleiman could not give a child because physically she was not able to be a mother. Nila adopted Pari and decided to leave the country. Abdullah, on the other hand, finds it shocking when Pari was sold but no one speaks about her. Parwana convinces him that it was essential to sell her and even apologizes for this action. Though Parwana is a woman but she is very coldhearted towards Pari. As she feels that being woman it her responsibility to help the other members of the family when they are in difficulty. She knows that Abdullah is the only person who is looking after the needs of the family. So, according to Parwana, Pari has to do sacrifices for the sake of other members of the family. As Hosseini (2013) says, "she had to be the one... the finger cut, to save the hand."

According to Aziz and Nawaz (2020), women's subjugation is not good but their silence is worse than it. As Hosseini (2013) writes, "Roshi saw her mother try to fight, but several swings to the face and chest and she was silenced". Women are just supposed to service the men. They have to do what men order and commend, even if they belong to sacrifice their own will. An instance of inferiority of Afghan women is also represented in Khaled Hosseini's *And The Mountains Echoed* where there is a woman character, Nila Wahdati, who during her child life got discrimination of her father when she was prohibited to come out of house. She was in high control of father's patriarchy. She was ruled in her various activity and attitude. Nila also reacted towards the patriarchal attitude present in the Afghan society. So, it seems that in patriarchal society male members of the family think about the safety of the female members as if it their responsibility to guard them from the immoral activities that occur in the society. But they forget that they are not protecting their women and daughters but they are restricting them from several activities which they wish to do as the part and parcel of the present society. These patriarchal male members of the society think that the body of a woman is not her property but represents the pride and honor ("nang" and "namoos") of the whole family (as qtd in Hosseini, 2013). As Nila tries to get out of her oppressive routineness.

Shahrani (2018) regarding the poverty in the country puts, "one third of Afghanistan's population still live in extreme poverty." Poverty, backwardness, criminality, warlordism, inequalities, and long-term dependency on foreign assistance and uncertainties have deepened, while prospects for attaining peace, national freedom, liberty, and self-reliance sunk beyond reach. Such as Hosseini (2013) asserts, "now another winter approaches; they have another baby boy, Iqbal, who is just one-year-old; and there is still not enough food, fuel or money." He also says that the way Parwana had loved her first baby, Omar. But he had died of the cold the winter before last. Hosseini (2013) in this regard additionally says, "Nothing good came free. Even love. You paid for all things. And if you were poor, suffering was your currency".

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study is made through descriptive analysis based on deductive approach. Primary data were collected by reading Khaled Hosseini's two selected novels, i.e., *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed* by reviewing of the previous published literature, secondary data were collected from e-books, international e-magazines and e-journals along with articles in order to depict the inferior conditions of Afghan women in two selected novels Thematic analysis procedures were used bearing in mind the title of the study. APA style was employed in order to acknowledge other authors.

## 3. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the conditions of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's two novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed* are depicted very well. In these novels, women are seen inferior in a male dominated Afghan society where wars have been affected the social and economical conditions of Afghans especially women who are marginalized and deprived from many social activities. The socio-religious, socio-economic, and socio-political conditions of Afghan women caused many miseries that could for example be illiteracy, poverty, inferiority, marginality, and oppression in both and Pre- and Post-Soviet eras. Khaled Hosseini in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* which is based on stories of mothers and daughter mainly focuses on women conditions in Afghanistan. Mariam, Laila, and Nana are the female protagonists who under the male-dominated system suffered many tragic events some examples could be abusive behavior of husband; patriarchy; and loss of freedom. In the same way, Khaled Hosseini in *And the Mountains Echoed* portrays that there are some female characters, viz., Parwana, Pari, and Nila who suffered both physically and mentally best examples of their living conditions could be seen when issues like women's earlier marriage; selling women for dowry; and women's poor economy are studied.

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