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ISSN (Online) : 2455 - 3662
SJIF Impact Factor :4.924

EPRA International Journal of
**Multidisciplinary
Research**

Monthly Peer Reviewed & Indexed
International Online Journal

Volume: 3 Issue: 11 November 2017

 **Published By :**
EPRA Journals

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DEPICTION OF WOMEN SUFFERINGS AND ENDURANCE IN AFGHANISTAN UNDER THALIBAN IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S NOVEL A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS

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As an established fact, women constitute about half of the total human population on this earth. Amidst plenty of others, she plays an important role for reproduction of human species. But she is considered as weaker sex and discriminates on various accounts in almost all societies with varying degree and magnitude all across the world. Women have been explicated tortured and humiliated from the ancient times itself. Cases of women being raped, kidnapped, beaten and tortured in a variety of ways are still reported.

Women are also discriminated under religions. The misinterpretations of religion caused to the sufferings of women especially in Islam. Though Islam was the first religion in the world to grant a respectable status to women at par with men, Muslim women in several Muslim countries lack of this equal status. Women are subservient and often fall to violence and abuses. Situations in Afghanistan is also the same.

Khalid Hosseini's A thousand Splendid Suns is the story of women sufferings and endurance in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. Hosseini said about his decision to write this novel that:

"I suppose there were some easier roads I could have gone down, but I chose this one because, both as a writer and as an Afghan, I couldn't think have a more riveting or important or compelling

story than the struggling of women in my country"(P.409,Hosseini)

The women are treated differently by the various regimes that take control of Afghanistan. When Afghanistan was under the soviet control of the women enjoyed the freedom and equality. The government made statements on women's right by declaring equality for their sexes and introducing them to political life. After the withdrawal of Soviet Union from Afghanistan, the Taliban extremist came in to power. They disempowered the Afghan women.

The novel 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' portrays the real picture of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban. The image of the burqa wearing women and the glaring face of the Taliban officials which struck in Hosseini's mind repictured in this novel through the life of Mariam and Laila.

Mariam reached Kabul after her forced marriage with Rasheed, and elderly widower. The beginning of their marriage life doesn't seem so terrible though she is not happy with her situations. The life in Kabul was a new experience to her which is different from her home town Herat. She is insisted to wear burqa which she had never wore before. It makes some difficulty to Mariam that it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen. She thinks it was like a one way window. But the women in Kabul were different from Mariam. This we can see in the amazement of Mariam by seeing

the ‘modern women’ in the street. Mariam notices that:

“These women were all swinging hand bags and rustling skirts. Their nails were long, polished pink or orange, their lips red as tulips. They walked in high heels, and quickly, as if on perpetually urgent business. They wore dark sun glasses” (P.74, Hosseini)

Though the Afghan women enjoyed their freedom, Mariam’s life with Rasheed is not a pleasant one. After four years of marriage, Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid. And Mariam was afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, all occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies.

Laila at this point was a nine year old child who lives in Kabul. Her father Hakim was a university educated man and he made it clear to Laila from a young age that the most important thing in her life, after her safety, was education. He said to her:

“Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they are probably more free now, under the communist, and have more right than they have ever had before. But it is true; it is a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that, Laila. Of course, women’s freedom- is also one of the reason people out there took arms in the first place” (P.133, Hosseini)

During this period Kabul was relatively liberal and progressive. But the tribal areas, especially the Pushtun¹ regions in the south or in the east near the Pakistani border, when women were nearly seen on the street and only then in burqa and accompanied by men. Hakim said that those regions were men who lived by ancient tribal laws and rebelled against the communists and their decrees to liberate women, to abolished forced marriage, to raise the minimum marriage age to sixteen for girls. There men saw it as an insult to their century’s old tradition, to be told by the government, and a godless one that their daughters had to leave home, attend school and work alongside men.

Kabul began to change after the surrender of Najibullah² in April 1992. Jihad was over and the communist regimes were all defeated. The mujahideen³ were coming to Kabul. They had found the enemy in each other in the name of Pushtun and Tajik. Kabul’s day of reckoning had come at last. The rockets began to rain on Kabul. This political change affects the personal lives of the peoples also.

Laila had to stop her schooling. She went out much anymore and when she did, she was always accompanied by Tariq. One day Tariq shows Laila news in a magazine about three sisters who found raped and killed in their home. Their throats slashed and someone had bitten the rings of their fingers.

This incident shows the increasing of brutality against women in the society.

The people were start migrating Pakistan or Iran. Laila hardly recognized anybody on the streets anymore. Finally Tariq too leave Afghanistan for Pakistan. Laila’s family also decided to leave Kabul. But a bomb blasts in the city stolen her parents and sends her alone to the hands of Rasheed.

Laila starts her new life as a second wife of Rasheed. Rasheed consider Laila as a Benz who want special care. He demands her to wear burqa. With the arrival of Laila the relationship between Rasheed and Mariam broke completely. Rasheed started beating Mariam. Mariam’s initial impatience with Laila becomes civil through the event of Rasheed’s violence.

The life in Kabul is also more dangerous during these periods. Rasheed said that the civilians were getting killed daily by dozens. Hospitals and stores holding medical supplies were getting shelled. Vehicles carrying emergency food supplies were being barred from entering the city and raided.

For a week, the fighting forced even Rasheed to stay home. He locked the door to the yard, set booby traps, locked the front door too and barricaded it with the coach. Clearing his gun and loaded it again and again.

Within this time Laila and Mariam had made a strong friendship between them, and they start doing their household chores together. One day Laila revealed Mariam that she decided to leave the house secretly with her daughter Aziza and she asks Mariam to join with them. Mariam agreed.

When Mariam and Laila reached at the Lahore Gate bus station, mujahideen militiamen were patrolling the station. The first risky part for them is finding a man suitable to pose with them as a family member. This makes Laila realize that the freedom and opportunity that women had enjoyed between 1978 and 1992 were a thing of the past now.

Since the mujahideen take over in April 1992, Afghanistan’s name had been changed to the Islamic State of Afghanistan. The Supreme Court under Rabbani was filled now with hardliner Mullahs who did away with the communist- era decrees that empowered women and instead passed rulings based on Sharia, strict Islamic law that ordered women to cover, forbade their travel without a male relative, punished adultery with stoning.

Laila’s planning didn’t work because they were cheated by the man she finds to act as a brother. They were caught by police and questioned. Laila beg the officer to let them go but he rejects. Laila tries to remind him the consequence they have to suffer if they were sent back. But his reply is

“What a man does in his home is his business, as a matter of policy, we do not interfere with private family matters” (P.260, Hosseini)

The police sent them back home with mujahid soldiers. Laila and Mariam had to suffer a lot from Rasheed. He beat them and locked

Mariam for days in the tool shed and kick Laila that would have her pissing blood for days.

Two and half years later Mariam and Laila sees the arrival of Taliban in the city. Rasheed already had brought home the news that Taliban had over thrown the war lords in Kandahar and take the city. They were a guerilla force, made up of young Pushtuan men whose family had fled to Pakistan during the war against the Soviet. Most of them had been raised-even born in refugee camps along the Pakistani border and in Pakistani madrasa. They were schooled in Sharia⁴ by Mullahs. Their leader was a mysterious, illiterate, one-eyed recluse named Mullah Omer.

Taliban had been making their way towards Kabul, taking cities from the mujahideen. Rasheed had admiration for Taliban. He said that the Taliban had one thing the mujahideen did not. They were united. He said:

“Let them come, I will shower them with rose petals” (P.672, Hosseini)

Kabul was overrun by trucks with loud speaker announcements as the voice of Sheria. The message was also written in flayers, tossed in to the street. Mariam found one in the yard:

“Our watan is now known as Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. These are the laws that we will enforce and you will obey.

All citizens must pray five times a day. If it is prayer time and you are caught doing something other you will be beaten.

All men will grow their beards. The correct length is at least one clenched fist beneath the chin. If you do not abide by this, you will be beaten.

All boys will wear turban. Boys in grade one through six will wear black turban, higher grades will wear white. All boys will wear Islamic cloths. Shirts collars will be buttoned.

Singing is forbidden.

Dancing is forbidden.

Playing cards, playing chess, gambling and kite flying are forbidden.

Writing books, watching films, and painting pictures are forbidden.

If you keep parakeets, you will be beaten. Your birds will be killed.

If you steal, your hand will be cut off at the wrist.

If you steal again your foot will be cut off.

If you are not Muslim, do not worshiped were you can be seen by Muslims. If you do, you will be beaten and imprisoned. If you are caught trying to convert a Muslim to your faith, you will be executed.

Attention women:

You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for all women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and send home.

You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.

Cosmetics are forbidden.

Jewelry is forbidden.

You will not wear charming cloths.

You will not speak unless spoken to.

You will not make eye contact with men.

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

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

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

Women are forbidden from working.

If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death.

Listen well. Obey.” (P.270-271, Hosseini)

Taliban starts work in Kabul. Men swarmed the Kabul museum and smashed pre-Islamic statues. The university was shut down and its students send home. Paintings were ripped from walls, television screens were kicked. Book expects the Koran were burnt in heaps, book stores are closed. Books of poetry are gone up in smoke. They shut down the cinemas too.

Rasheed wasn't bothered much by the Taliban. All he had to do was grow a beard, which he did, and visit the Mosque, which he also did. Rasheed regarded the Taliban with a forgiving, affectionate kind of bemusement, as one might regard an erratic cousin prone to unpredictable act of hilarity and scandal. Every Friday he went to Ghazai stadium to watch the punishment.

But Mariam and Laila had to face the bad treatment of Taliban when they reach to the hospital for the delivery of Laila's second child Zalmi. Hosseini portrays the pathetic situation in hospital in a heart touching manner.

It was Malalai Hospital, were Mariam and Rasheed brought Laila. There was a crowd gathered in front of the hospital. The guard did not allow the people to enter in to the hospital, though it was a women's hospital. Mariam had heard the announcement in January of that year, that men and women would be seen in different hospitals, that all female staff would be discharged from Kabul's hospital and send to working one central facility. The guard told them to go Rabia Balki Hospital.

But the condition of Rabia Balki Hospital was very dangerous. They had no clear water, no oxygen, no medication, and no electricity. The waiting room was teeming with women in burqas and their children. The air stank of sweat and unwashed bodies, of feat, urine, and cigarette smoke, antiseptic.

Before the registration window was a horde of women, shoving and pushing against each other. Some were still holding their babies. Some broke the double doors that led to the treatment rooms. And armed Talib guard blocked their way at sent them back.

They had to wait for alone time for their turn and finally they were called in. the delivery

room had eight beds, all which women moaned and twisted tented to by fully covered nurses. Two of the women were in act of delivering. There were no curtains between the beds. Laila was given a bed at the far end, beneath a window that someone had painted black. There was a sink nearby, cracked and dry, and a string over the sink from which hung stained surgical gloves.

The doctor was in a dark blue burqa she complains about the lack of facility in the hospital. She said:

“They won’t give me what I need. I have no x-ray either, no suction, no oxygen, not even simple antibiotics, when NGOs offer money, the Taliban them away or they funnel the money to the place that cater to men”. (P.283, Hosseini)

The doctor told Laila that the hospital had no anesthetic. And she also complains up on wearing of burqa. She said:

“They want us to operate in burqa”. (P.284, Hosseini)

Laila had to suffer the whole pain of delivery with the unhealthy condition in the hospital.

When Zalmai came to their life Rasheed had a great care for him. He began to slap Aziza, kick Mariam and found fault with Laila. After the fire of his shop his anger becomes increased. When the money ran out, hunger began to cast a pall over their lives. Rasheed decided to send Aziza in an orphanage. Laila realizes Aziza that it was a special school and told her to say that her father was killed by Mujahedeen whether they ask about her father.

The children in the orphanage were also in poor condition. They were in bare foot. They had disheveled hair or shaved scalps. They wore sweaters with frayed sleeves, ragged jeans whose knees had worn down to string, coats patched with duel tape. They live in a smell of soap and talcum, ammonia and urine.

Rasheed did not take interest in visiting Aziza in orphanage. So Laila had to go alone. When crossing the street, she was spotted by the Taliban and riddled with questions-“What is your name? Where are you going? Why are you alone? Where is your mahram? Before sent home she was given kick, a shove in the back, met with assortment of wooden clubs, slaps, and often fists. One day, a young Talib with a radio antenna gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said:

“I see you again; I will beat you until your mother’s milk leaks out of your bones” (P.313, Hosseini)

But Laila refused to cave in. she took a different route down side streets. Sometimes she was caught, questioned, scolded-three or four times in a day. Then the antennas cycled through the air. Laila soon took to wearing extra layers even in the heat, two, three sweaters beneath the burqa, for padding against the beating.

Finally Rasheed give permission to take Aziza home. The life becomes almost peaceful. But

it did not long last, with the reentrance of Tariq in Laila’s life. Rasheed questioned her and he swung the belt at Laila. He did it with such speed that had no time to retreat or even raise a productive arm. Mariam saw that she was no longer struggling. He is going to kill her, and Mariam could not allow that to happen. She hit him across the temple. Rasheed died with her hand.

The Taliban arrested Mariam and she was sent to Walayat women’s prison near Chicken Street. A pad lock door separated Mariam and the other women from the surrounding men. The windows were barred and had no glass. There were no curtains either, which meant the Talib guards who roamed the courtyard had an eyeful of the interior of the cells. None of the women in Mariam’s cell were serving time for violent crime. They were all there for the common offense of ‘running away from home’. As a result Mariam gained some notoriety among them, become a kind of celebrity. Though Taliban executed her she thinks that her’s was a legitimate end of an illegitimate beginning.

In the present novel ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’, Hosseini portrayed the various issues like role of women, status and problems of discrimination etc. Here I like to conclude my paper that the Afghan women were empowered and disempowered before, during and after the communist regime. After the fall of communist government, the Taliban came in to power, with their strict interpretations of sharia law.

The Taliban were actually misinterpreting the Islamic sharia law because Islam was the religion which grants respectable status to women. The misinterpretation of the sharia law takes away women’s right for education and freedom. If they receive proper education they become conscious of their rights as well as their duties and they can easily break their chain. But the misinterpreted Islamic law make the women depressed ignored and they placed under many fetters of customs and artificial tradition which is not sanction by Islam. This is what Taliban has been doing to the Afghan women.

In this present work I try to analyze the depiction of women sufferings and endurance in the novel ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ through the life of the women protagonists Mariam and Laila. They had to face sufferings from their husband as well as from the Taliban guards. Marriage of both women with Rasheed leads them to abuse and oppression.

The coming of Taliban makes their life more complicated. The continues war make their family fall into starvation and insecurity. Taliban banned women travelling alone in the street. They caught Mariam and Laila in the bus station and questioned them. The poor unhygienic condition of women’s only hospital in the novel throw light to the grave reality of women sufferings. The violence against the women also increased. Hosseini clearly portrayed their violence in this present novel ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’.

The novel leaves the reader some sense of compassion and empathy for Afghan women whose suffering has been matched for very few groups in recent world history. It was Hosseini's modest tribute to the great courage, endurance and resilience of women in Afghanistan.

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