



**TRACING THE VOICES OF THE DOWNTRODDEN: A READING
OF KHALED HOSSEINI'S NOVEL *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS***

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to find out the voices of the downtrodden in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and how he portrays female characters realistically as oppressed, marginalized exploited, alienated and crushed under patriarchal structures. It is a qualitative study based on the close-reading of the primary text along with feminist theorists such as Spivak and Bhabha. This is an attempt to find out Hosseini's belief that the voice of the downtrodden can be heard and the marginalized can grow to challenge the center. This paper argues that the absence of a strong feminist voice in Afghan and scarcity of proper study of women's actual status in the country has opened various ways for scholars to expose females' issues. Further, this paper shows that how the women are demonstrating courage and developing gradual awakening to recognize their social status, power, and identity as well as the awareness that having a strong voice is essential for survival.

Keywords: Downtrodden, Marginalization, Subaltern, Alienated, Afghan-American

Khalid Hosseini is a courageous Afghan-American novelist of the present era with marvelous ideas presented in his second top-selling novel 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' published in 2007. It is the time of social discrimination, political upheaval, and ethical turmoil. Afghanistan was passing through the era of change. The effects of war and extremism have been devastating and the writer has captured the chaotic situation (Imran, Yuee, Wei & Akhtar, 2020). This novel is about the suffering, marginalization of and suppression of the Downtrodden in Afghanistan; a war-torn place for decades. Unlike

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Hosseini, debut novel; “The Kite Runner” which deals with the story of a father and the son, this understudy novel tells the story of mother and daughter. Continuous war in Afghanistan has affected the whole population but the most affected subaltern, the females; they are tortured both physically and psychologically by known and unknown. They were treated as the chattel and considered the property of husband and they are the victims of patriarchy (Imran & Hart, 2019a, p.3). They are even deprived of their basic rights. Ferguson, A. (1989) elaborates that the females are socially, politically, emotionally, financially and psychologically are abused and deprived (p.32). This struggle for tracing the voice of the downtrodden is presented in many other novelists’ works like Bapsi Sidhwa, R K Narayan and Arundhati Roy, etc.

Silence and speech are two opposite characters even if they belong to the same character. The powerful are capable to produce the finest and deepest discourse but does the downtrodden and the marginalized to have the same capacity; most probably the answer is in negative; Spivak comments that subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (p. 83). Yet if it is assumed, somehow, that they can produce the voice of their own; what might the form and shape of their voice be; their own or borrowed. Edward Said stresses “domination and resistance” (p. 42). While Homi Bhabba explains in yet another way that the subject-formation is an incomplete and imperfect process because the subject is constructed and transformed that is helpful to zoom in the subaltern and downtrodden. Spivak, on the other hand, entertains the different views that the downtrodden can't speak; still, she holds the idea in words of Gramscian maxim; ‘pessimism of the intellect’, ‘optimism of the will’ (p. 92) can take the



discourse. The history shows us the traces that the downtrodden speak and their voice is heard. Many of the women as marginalized characters learned the art of speaking and being heard all over; they moved to the center position who helped the marginalized to resist.

‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ by Afghan-American novelist Khaled Hosseini is such a venture to give vent to the voices of subaltern and downtrodden Afghan women. His debut novel ‘The Kite Runner’ remained the best seller novel in America owing to its uniqueness. Novel writing after 1980, all over the world witnessed a new change in the mode of the writers especially in developing countries; India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. The majority of the population of such countries are Muslim though they belong to different sects. Hosseini a young Afghan-American doctor and novelist depicts Afghan background in ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ very effectively. In this novel, his focus is on the female characters who suffered as downtrodden throughout the novel. These female subaltern characters are taken as servants, slaves and inferior creatures by their male members as well as the female members of society who rule over them physically and psychologically. Hosseini shows that women are marginalized and devoid of speech by male culture, society and prevailing system in his country Afghanistan. Hosseini, with the help of his female characters; Nana, Mariam, and Laila, wants to highlight that the women suffer physically and psychologically, they are tortured in their pursuit to attain independence and free life of their own (Null & Alfred, 2008).

The novel is written in Afghan background; thirty years of Afghan history are chronicled comprehensively as the depiction seems to be the epitome of Afghan culture. This novel is a mirror of the wounds of Afghan people on both outward and inward conflicts. The



outward conflicts are the horror of war is on one side which they can do little to alter the course of history while the inward conflicts get stronger as the result of external forces (Moghadam, 1992). So the life of Afghans is a bitter and difficult life that continuously gives birth to dilemma, the inhuman attitude, and ugly behaviors.

In patriarchal Afghan society, the Afghan women are marginalized through the means of tribal traditions; as the suffering of the center increased; the deprivation of education and proper upbringing in a free and liberated atmosphere; the suffering of marginalized increased heavier (Joyia, Farooq, Ghafoor & Gull, 2017). The downtrodden Afghan women do not have something lighter to be offered. Throughout the novel; the woman characters; Nana, Mariam, and Laila, are victimized and marginalized to the ultimate capacity; these characters are not individual, they represent the whole Afghan culture as Hosseini himself admits in his interview that he kept on observing Afghan women and many and many of them were before his eyes playing their role of life like Naina, Mariam, and Laila (p.3). So the women characters, here, are generalized and they represent the Afghan society and culture as a whole (Kakutain, 2007).

The story is presented in the double narrative; Mariam on one hand and Laila on the other; both of them are a contrast of each other because of their difference in background, upbringing, and education. Mariam has resigned to her sufferings finding no other refuge and she sees every act of tyranny and oppression as her fate or even fate of every woman like her. (...woman of our lot.....); she was brought up this way. Her mother; Nana kept on telling her “*Women like us. We endure. It’s all we have. Do you understand?*” (p.18). Laila, on the other hand, a confident smart and educated young woman who knows herself; who can oppose the oppression; who is the symbol of hope in the novel.



The depiction of marginalization begins right from the start of the novel; the atmosphere is well set to suit the depiction; Nana gives birth to a ‘harami’ child; Mariam. The destiny of suffering starts right away. Nana was kept by Jalil who exploits her physically and psychologically; who does not dare to take her to his house among his other three wives; his hypocrisy did not let him do. She becomes pregnant; Jalil takes her to a lonely house outside of Herat city where she gives birth to Mariam in 1959. It was the dump overcast day (Hosseini, p.11). Nana had to wait too long, painful days to deliver her baby girl. She had neither midwife nor any doctor; nothing but herself on cold and hard kolba’s floor. The personal account narrated by Nana is painful agony; the cruelty of numb, senseless inhuman attitude whereas on the other hand the account narrated by Jalil to Mariam through clippings from ‘Liiifaq-i-Islam’ is a daring contrast of the world of Nana and Mariam lives in. There seems to be a world larger than their own; a world of trains, of soccer, of museums and rockets. All this was narrated to Mariam by Jalil, and how both Mariam and Nana were unaware of that mysterious, shining bright world outside their four walls.

Mariam grows with the legacy of disdainful illegitimacy; she does not know the meaning of ‘harami’ but she has listened to it with an expressionless face. Nana’s way of saying the word ‘harami’ tells her that it is an undesired, ugly and loathsome thing to have. The realization comes eventually as she grows older. The sting of the word bites her as she realizes how hard it is to be an unwanted thing devoid of love, family and home (Hosseini, p. 5).

Nana’s death brings Mariam out of the ‘rat-hole’ and into the crowded house of Jalil where he lives with his three wives; where Mariam feels strange and lonely; where she feels that



she does not belong there; where she remembers her mother's words that she is the only being that belongs to her and without her she (Mariam) is nothing; she remembers her mother reiterating these words (Hosseini, p. 28). That was not her place. Jalil's wives cannot bear her in the very front of their eyes, and the suffering of the unfortunate has to prolong and grow into a monster.

Rasheed is a typical cunning conventional Afghan male who can marry Mariam taking the benefit of the situation in which Mariam was strangled after the tragic demise of her mother; Nana. Having nowhere to go, she has to come to his father's house. Jaleel; Mariam's father, has three wives who cannot find themselves to reconcile a 'harami' girl even though she shares the fact with them of being a female. They did not hesitate to marry her to a man thrice older than she. Mariam does not find it easy to accept the new reality that was imposed upon her, reconcile to the situation tries her best to be what her husband wants. Rasheed after failing to get a baby out of her comes to his level, starts abusing, exploiting, punching, kicking and doing whatever he can (Gamble, 1999).

Laila is a fine young beautiful girl whose parents have been lost in rocket fire. She is an educated lady and she dares to challenge the existing patriarchal order. She was in love with a young man Tariq who has gone to Pakistan. Rasheed appears on the scene with a plan and he manages to impart her by the news of the death of Tariq. She finds herself in a blind alley to know about her pregnancy by Tariq. Rasheed's proposal seems to be the perfect plan, so she, having no choice, has to marry Rasheed. She is a young girl; fourteen years of age and her entry worsened Mariam's position who is already being victimized. Rasheed's adverse behavior turns gruesome; he now beats her with his belt. Mariam has stiffened herself, she tries to become numb and senseless against his 'scorn and reproach



his ridiculing and reprimanding' but she is not able to control her fear when she sees Rasheed 'sneering and tightening (Hosseini, p. 145).

Laila's temperament was quite different from that of Mariam's. She is a courageous and educated girl who can challenge oppression. Mariam's continuous victimization awakens Laila's sympathy. This is the beginning of the awakening process of the marginalized when the victim realizes her or his power to challenge the center. Rasheed draws his belt at Mariam not knowing that an extraordinary thing has happened. Laila comes forward and tries to stop him; who in turn pushes her hard. This only results in slowing Rasheed's beating. But the example has been set, Mariam finds a new ally in the form of Laila and they become united. Rasheed finds a new victim as Laila intervenes and challenges his cruel rule; he now starts to beat and bash both of them. Finally, in his assault at Laila, he tries to overpower Laila's throat, not realizing that Mariam is aiming at him with her shovel, and with a bang, she smashes at him and kills him. Mariam brought down the shovel. This time, she gave it everything she had (Hosseini, p.341).

This is a wonderful part of the novel where the whole development of the oppressed characters takes place and the character grows and acquires maximum strength out of the awareness imparted. Pushing to the wall, while leaving no space to breathe results in revolution; which is naturally needed by the oppressed, such as the power of sleep that does not let its victim to awake; the victim is in dire need to be given a strong push. Mariam feels enough is enough and turns the table. Laila comes to know to her wonder that Tariq is alive and well; she decides to leave for Pakistan with Tariq.

The representation of female characters travels chronologically from Mariam to Laila; it is a journey from ignorance to knowledge; it is the journey of knowing the self-belief of



changing the fate that was imposed (Hosseini, 2009, p. 74). Mariam takes years to take the plunge to drive that shovel into Rasheed's head which is the representation of the oppressor who abused and exploited her for years. Her mother used to tell her "be women, stay women, become women" and further "a woman's face is her husband's business only" (p.48). She used to tell her "*There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school . . . Only one skill. And it's this: tahamul. Endure . . . It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have. Do you understand?*" (Hosseini, p. 18). Mariam practiced that endurance all her life; it was Laila who taught her the lesson of life. This is how Mariam grows psychologically and mentally into a strong and positive woman. She has to give her life to attain that end; Laila was sad to hear that Mariam was executed for killing Rasheed who used to 'kill' her every day (Hill, 2012).

Hosseini seems to affirm that Afghan women can develop themselves and shun their apparent weakness. The seemingly outward chaos can be transformed into order; the marginalization of women can be averted provided the character of Laila be kept alive. Education has to play its role to reverse the existing patriarchal order. Throughout the world, the downtrodden and subaltern not only speak but also resist (Hall, 1990). Spivak (2010) claims that the subaltern has no agency to sponsor. The gestures, the deeds, and their action speak louder than their words. Is there anyone who has the ear and nerve to listen to the subaltern?

Conclusion

The endeavors Mariam and Laila precede are diverse as they have different dispositions and upbringing. Being the female citizens of the country where patriarchy is pertinent it



is difficult for Mariam and Laila to cope with the domination and intolerance of the society. They have to endure the oppression and sex-based discrimination with fortitude, but it does not mean that they yield to it. Moreover, it shows their strength and resisting power to tolerate coercion. In the beginning, Mariam is inclined to be powerless and tolerant, while, Laila is apt to combat. Her decision to leave Rasheed's house along with Mariam and her children confirms that she employs radical feminism to struggle against the subjugation and to find her identity. Although she does not succeed in her daring attempt, it depicts her resolution to decide her personal life. In the end, Mariam uses her strength to fight against her oppressor husband Rasheed and detriment her dear life to save her true affectionate ideals, Laila and Aziza.

The characters truly represent the patriarchal Afghan society, highlight the issues that have restricted women's prospects and hope for a significant and suggestive life. It is the womenfolk who suffer and endure alone, who are deprived of their right to get an education or job. They have no freedom of expression, lack affection and are compelled to repress their essential needs and desires. The novel perfectly mirrors the philosophy of life and identity of Afghan women. Hosseini depicts the brunt of the patriarchal culture in the lives of Afghan women. He exposes the miseries, loneliness, and aggravation that have been imposed on Afghan women by their social, ethical, ideological, political and conventional setup.

The study suggests and emphasizes the policy of self-empowerment of women through unification and confluence. Women's friendship is one of the great resistance forces against the officious and oppressive male-dominated society. Mariam and Laila develop such a friendly relationship with each other that later on enable them to break the authorial



voice. Mariam and Laila's endeavors and resistance against subjugation and loss of identity determine active feminism on their part and subsequently proved that the subaltern can speak even at the risk of their peril.

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