

# SUBJUGATED STATUS OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN WITH REFERENCE TO KHALID HOSSEINI'S 'A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS.'

*Tania Shaikh\**

*Dr. Komal Ansari†*

*Dr. Rafique Ahmed Memon‡*

## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the status of women in the Islamic world, particularly Afghanistan with reference to Khalid Hosseini's 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' through application of feminist literary criticism. Through close reading analysis method, the qualitative study intends to unfold different forms of gender discrimination and the response of women to such oppression. The study uncovers the fact that though Islam has assured the rights of women, but still Islamic world is juggling in gender politics. The findings of the study reveal that women, within the aforementioned novel, are represented as performing stereotypical traditional roles such as caretakers and mothers. They are subjected to different forms of gender subjugation as physical and psychological violence, sexual abuse, forceful marriages, preference to have sons, ill healthcare facilities, marginalization from education and limited mobility. The novel also shows women's responses to such inequalities; acceptance and resistance. Nana (character) accepts her subjugation as her fate. She defenselessly bears without challenging because of her educational deprivation which never grants her courage to stand for her rights. While Mariam and Laila defend for their rights because of Laila's educational spirit that enables them to realize their worth and dignity. The thorough understanding of the text illustrates the positive role of education that strengthens women to raise their voice against established patriarchal system.*

**Keywords:** *Islamic World, Afghanistan, Gender Discrimination, Feminist Literary Criticism.*

## INTRODUCTION

Nature has created everything in pairs that are opposite and counteract each other (Qur'an, Surah Zariyat, 51: 49 A). Accordingly, men and women are

---

\* M.Phil Research Scholar (English Literature), University of Sindh, Jamshoro

† Associate Professor, Institute of English Language & Literature, University of Sindh Jamshoro

‡ Professor, Institute of English Language & Literature, University of Sindh Jamshoro

also nature's creation, bound with responsibilities best suited to them and stated the rights of both. Though the distinct spheres of influence for both genders have been created yet the myths in society consistently create discrimination and specific roles on the basis of gender. Gender discrimination is a practice in which any one side is favored and the other is not well-treated. Mostly women are prone to gender inequalities and are neglected to secondary position (Burki, 2017).

Gender-based violence is not a new thing. It is one of the crucial social mechanisms which force women to a subservient place. Burki (2017) also remarks that no other issue is as contentious and well-debated in the contemporary society as of gender. Women's subjugation exists in cultural, political and economic fields. Biased social setup, cultural patterns and conservative traditional norms overshadow gender equity and are apathetic to women. In a general World Report, Taylor (1985) reports that women occupy an inferior position and the discrimination against them remains prominent. In everyday life, many women are treated adversely and oppressively (ibid). They cannot breathe the air of freedom. They have less access to medical care, health-services, property and employment. Educational facilities are also rare for women (Burki, 2017). The educational infrastructure, the social conduct and traditional mindsets are not always in favor of women's education. Typical norms suggest that education for girls is not necessary because they are specific to household. Thus, Burki implies the misconception that women don't need any formal education. The researcher likewise believes this mentality defines women's place in houses and men as the breadwinner. This system restricts women to remain confined to their homes and not to meet career outside. Patriarchal mindset thinks that women's life is all about getting married, having children and taking care of family. But no one notices that women play very important roles in society. They are mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. They are the builders of future generation.

Women's participation in employment or workplace is also viewed as inappropriate, subtly wrong and dangerous to their chastity. They are kept at home as symbol of family's honor (Burki, 2017). A woman is expected to keep her wishes and interests next to those of her family. She dares not to exercise her freewill in the important matters of her life e.g. marriage, education etc. In parents' home, a girl is bound to accept whatever the opinions of the family are. When she gets married, she is supposed to follow her husbands' views because her opinions are not considered worthy enough to listen. Moreover, son is preferred to keep up family's name and is regarded

more valuable to the family as income supporter and pillar of tomorrow. Daughters may not support to family's income as they leave the family after marriage, therefore not seen as worth investing in. This system puts sons on a higher footing than daughters for future economic stability (ibid).

Such constraints and impediments have immensely devastating effects on women's lives. It can affect women's personality, identity, psychology and even their performance. As King (2001) rightly says that the societies which discriminate on the basis of gender pay a significant price in terms of higher poverty, lower quality of life, slower economic growth and weaker governance.

Although considerable progress has been made in many spheres of social life of women, there still exists huge gender gaps. In the current period of modernization, social taboos still rule. Women are still being discriminated. In western societies, such cases of women's degradation are rare. But unfortunately, we dwell in such a society that is greatly influenced by stereotypical and conservative mindset. Such a stubborn mindset doesn't allow any flexibility to women. The society we preside in is an Islamic society that is built upon the teachings that encompasses the essence of well-being and the development of Muslims at the individual, familial, social and universal level (Bardakogu, 2008). It attaches great importance to equality, liberty and human dignity. It emphasizes equilibrium and justice and guarantees equality to all mankind. We preside in an Islamic society but paradoxically its' practices, norms are in direct contradiction to Islamic teachings. Hence, with regard to the status of women in the Islamic world, Afghanistan is under consideration, an Islamic country lags behind in providing special spaces to women. Afghanistan ranks 1st as the most dangerous country for women to live in (The Express Tribune: 2011). The social structure of the country is patriarchal where the male authority leads and accord derogatory position to females. Women in Afghanistan live in a world where traditional laws are determinate to women's position, cultural norms exacerbate favoritism towards males and demarcate gender-specific roles. Newspapers are full of miserable stories of the torture women go through I-e stories of honor killing, acid throwing, sexual abuse, domestic violence and forceful marriages often cover the lines of newspapers. The differing ideologies in the country have affected social status of Afghani women. Women's rights were eroded and undermined under Taliban regime who imposed severe restrictions and draw on Islam as a justification for their brutality. They shared a vision of existing an ideal Islamic society. Moghadam (1997) explores that the patriarchal mindset deeply embedded in

traditional societies of Afghanistan and the existence of a weak central state are the constraints which make it unable to ensure gender equity. It is unfortunate that an Islamic country handicaps the rights of women provided by Islam. The image of an Islamic country becomes shady when people all over the world read such incidents of gender oppression. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) affirms that human beings are equal in dignity and right. It is said that men make houses, women make homes. Both are just like two wheels of chariot. But in the world, women are still trying to get their deserved place (Lasic, 2017; Walker, 2018).

Illiteracy, ignorance and unawareness of ones' self-esteem are major allies in the maintenance of the status quo. Low female's literacy rate provides a sound basis for such gender-based violence. Mary Wellstone (1791) argues that education equalizes the status of women with men and is the only means to combat gender discrimination. Education promotes consciousness and awareness of one's rights and equips women to exercise their just demands. Education creates favorable social milieu conducive to women. Sultana (1965) claims that women's status increases with educational access. Across regions, educated women are in better position and more on a par with men as compared to uneducated women. Thus, to eradicate this social ill, education is obligatory.

Since literature is not passive and neutral but a powerful tool for creating and contesting social realities. Concerning gender politics as a serious social ill, many scholars have taken great interest and produced literature about women issues. Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is one of the literary works about women's lives in a male authoritative society that explores women's subjugation and demonstrates a kind of strength to women to challenge the traditional typical norms. The novel, keenly crafts the story of gender politics in Afghanistan. Therefore, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is selected in order to illustrate the debate on the status of women in Afghanistan.

### ***Research Questions***

- (i) What forms of gender inequalities women face in Afghanistan as delineated in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?
- (ii) How do women respond towards the inequalities they encounter with in the context of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?

- (iii) What role does education play in empowering women to stand for their legal rights with reference to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The development of society is almost dependent upon the quality of human resources. Family is the basic unit of society and has a significant place in the social structure (Grimm, 2013). A sound family produces a sound social setup. But in patriarchal society, women have been neglected and subjugated in the family as well as in workplaces (Lasic, 2017; Walker, 2018). The issue of gender inequality has wide potentialities for enquiry. Throughout recorded history, women have been subjugated, dehumanized, marginalized and secluded on the basis of their gender. From history we have clear examples of oppression to women. In ancient India, widows were supposed to be burnt alive along with their dead husbands. Prior to the advent of Islam, female infants were buried alive. The conditions of women are quite deplorable and pitiable in the present time as well as they suffer from multitude of issues and dilemmas. Morris (1993) infers that gender differences are the basis of structural inequality between men and women which lead to the social injustice with women. The social structure has placed men on a superior position to women where male authority accords derogatory position to women. Thus chauvinistic and asserting attitude of males relegate women to a lower status. Walby (1990) also admits that patriarchal society is a social system where male dominates over women. Women's oppression and segregation hit certain questions to our minds. These situations compel us to think that when will the society accept women as human beings? When will women be able to laugh and enjoy life freely as daughters, mothers or wives?

### ***Gender Politics and the Islamic World***

Since time immemorial, women have been subjugated and suppressed by male dominance. In western societies, both men and women contribute towards the betterment of society (Hassan, 1995). But unfortunately, Islamic world is greatly influenced by stereotypical and conservative mindset. As Alexander and Welzel (2001) illustrate that Islamic Countries tend to repress their women. Muslim women in Islamic societies suffer the worst case of seclusion. Fish (2011) admits that gender issue is the only place where the Muslim world is consistently different from the rest. A wide range of scholarship has been done on the issue. In the perception of the Western countries, there is often an impression that there is a strong connection

between gender inequality and the teachings of Islam. Many researchers have made religion as a decisive factor for gender inequalities. Abu Sharaf (2006) makes a point that Muslim women live under an extremely conservative patriarchal social system. Azhadi (2010) illustrates that women in Islamic nation have been deprived of their legal and fundamental rights and suffer the infliction of violence. Many critics perceive Islam as a chauvinistic religion that belittles women. They relate gender issues with Islam but they fail to analyze true teachings of Islam and the cultural norms. Islam doesn't call for such oppression. Islam guarantees equality to all and has assigned women an honor and dignity. Smith (1979) infers that Islam provides position of respect, honor, and dignity to women with clearly stated rights and obligations. Unfortunately, over a period of time, this aspect of equality has been replaced. The true essence of religious teachings has been compromised and thus violence becomes the rule of the land. Gender inequality has been socially constructed by patriarchal mindsets and misinterpretations. Mernissi (1991) explores his view that gender differences are historically and culturally constructed. The neglected role of women in the Islamic world is a result of male authoritative social system and misinterpretations of the Holy texts of Islam. Farzana Bari (2000) also admits that gender roles are determined by social norms and traditions, not by religion. Many critics advance the view that there lies a significant gap between what Islam says and what actually is being practiced (Ali, 1993). Islamic teachings are not very much prevalent because the society is much influenced by regional traditions and historical transition periods. Thus, the status of women in the Islamic world needs much improvement.

### ***Feminist Literary Criticism***

Feminism is a well-known term in the context of gender issues. The power structures, cultural rituals and social institutions are instrumental in confining the scope of women's intellectual exposure and in assigning marginalized position to women. Thus, to change oppressive structures and to challenge the established patriarchal gender roles, many women raise their strength, voice their thoughts, stand for their rights and speak for their individual identity. As Bhasin and Khan (1993) illustrate:

*“Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels in society. It is a struggle to achieve equality, dignity, freedom for women. It demands female suffrage, equal legal*

*rights, right to education, decision-making and abolition of domestic violence” (p.03).*

It demonstrates that women should be treated fairly. Feminist discourse calls for attention to the exploitation of women and advocates equal status quo.

Since man has brought literature into his own world, Feminism has transformed the study of literature and has given a new lens to analyze the patriarchal gender roles prevailing in our society. Feminist Literary Criticism has emerged out of the feminism-literature inter-relation at the end of 1960s (Literary Theory, Eagleton, 2008). Its emergence brought a new light that makes women as its center of study. Feminist literary criticism is evaluation of any literary work from feminist perspective (ibid). This school of thought seeks to analyze and evaluate the ways in which literature portrays the gender differences by identifying the female characters, power relations in the work, what the work reveals about patriarchy and what does the work say about women. The feminist approach in literary criticism tries to reveal violation, injustice, oppression and subjugation of women and implores the strengthening power and awareness to women inside the literary texts. Tyson defines feminist literary criticism as:

*“The ways in which literature reinforces or undermines the economic, social, political and psychological oppression of women” (Tyson 2006, p.118).*

Thus, feminist literary critics attempt to critique gender politics, double standards of society as inscribed in literature and present how power imbalances due to gender in a given culture are reflected in or challenged by literary texts (Eagleton, 2008). In the view Eagleton, the theory analyses women's issues as painted in any literary work. It questions male domination and criticizes patriarchal traditional and typical stereotypes that cast women as irrational, emotional, weak and feeble creature and advocate men as strong, protective, decisive, breadwinner and rational. It aims to teach women to struggle for their individual identity that who are they and should no longer allow men to dominate, suppress, abuse and violate their opinions and value. Hence, feminist literary criticism has focalization over the treatment of women in literature. It uncovers the gender issues with a view to change the typical mentality and let women gain their dignified position in society.

### ***Women's lives in Afghanistan under Male Domination***

The history of Afghanistan is marked by socio-political turmoil, prolonged war, collapsed infrastructure and transitional political regimes i.e. the Mujahedeen group and The Taliban. The differing ideologies and political conflicts in the country have affected the social status of Afghani women. Afghanistan ranks 1<sup>st</sup> as the most dangerous country for women to live in (Khan, 2012). Moghadam (1997) also infers that the patriarchal setup is uneven and strong in the Middle East and South Asia, but Afghanistan is the strongest patriarchal society in the area. The social structure of the country is patriarchal where the male authority leads and accord derogatory position to females. The religious extremism and political instability in Afghanistan has created strong patriarchal system. Taliban put strict system based on gender politics which place women undeveloped. Women's rights were eroded and undermined under their regime. They shared a vision of establishing an ideal Islamic state thus they imposed severe restrictions and draw on Islam as the justification of their brutality. They imposed harsh edicts by forbidding women to work out of their homes, restricted women's advancement in the field of education, prohibited women's mobility and liberty, forced women to wear Burqa that covers the whole body, banned them to leave their houses or to travel alone without accompaniment of male relative and in health care issues, prohibited from concerning male physicians. Thus, women lived in an atmosphere of fear. Such policies have devastated women's position in society. Moghadam (1997) explores that patriarchal setup, traditional mindsets and weak central state in Afghanistan fail to reinforce gender equity. The report of UNAMA (2009) projects that gender-based violence is widespread and highly practiced in Afghanistan. This shows that the atmosphere is extremely hostile towards women in Afghanistan. A country that is based on the pre-text of Islam, it is very disheartening to see that religious principles are frequently twisted and avoided in giving women their due rights. Afghanistan can't be a progressive and prosperous Muslim country until and unless it offers equal opportunities to men and women. If half of the population would spend life marked by strong feelings of fear and insecurity, then how can the country, which claims to be Islamic be a role model for other Islamic countries?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For an in-depth study of the status of women in Afghanistan, the study uses text analysis as the primary source of data collection because the method is found suitable to attain the reliable data. Close textual analysis of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* seems to be fit to this study to access the status of women in Afghanistan. According to Krippendorff (2003), textual analysis is a research technique for making valid inferences from the text. In order to collect up-to-date information about women issues in Afghanistan, the reviews of the related books, research journals and articles and the existing knowledge in the area are also browsed and used as the secondary source of collecting data. The findings and discussion of the present study are purely based on the information gained by the text references have been put to analyze the data.

The current study has applied Feminist literary criticism as a lens to evaluate the novel.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Gender politics is a bitter social reality that gives birth to male-oriented society with its cruel tenets (Lasic, 2017). This is the manifestation of the fact that society differentiates on the basis of gender and prescribes separate sets of values, norms and specified roles. Women are trapped in suffocating chains of oppression and suffer from male atrocities. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* allows readers to perceive gender inequalities that women face. The setting of the novel provides an ample lens that permits the analytical gaze to penetrate into different forms of violence. It also investigates the dilemma, perplexity, extremity and bitter circumstances of women's sufferings in a strong patriarchal society of Afghanistan.

### *Forms of Gender Inequalities Women face in Afghanistan in the context of a Thousand Splendid Suns by Khalid Hosseini*

#### *Violence*

Women in the Islamic world face multiple forms of violence. Galles and Strans (1975) illustrate that violence is an inhuman and brutal act carried out with an intention of hurting someone physically or psychologically. According to International Planned Parenthood Federation (Annisa, 2010), three types of violence are the most obvious; physical, psychological and

sexual violence. All of that can be traced out from the novel.

### *Physical Violence*

Physical violence includes kicks, slaps or beating that cause physical injury or harm to body. (Anissa, 2010). In the novel, Mariam and Laila experience divergent forms of injuries. Rasheed conducts his coercion on his wives. He sees them just like an object to beat them at any moment. In his instantly changing bad moods, he treats Mariam very harshly, inhumanly and brutally. Thus, she always lives in fear of Rasheed's shifting moods and his volatile temperament. Rasheed treats her badly, subjecting her to scorn, scolds and threat. When Mariam fails to cook as perfectly as he wants, he beats her with his belt. For instance, at one moment in the text, Mariam cooks rice that gives a hard taste to Rasheed. According to him, the rice is as hard as stones or pebbles. Out of anger, he takes some pebbles from the yard and forces Mariam to chew them in order to show her the hardness of rice. As the textual lines reveals physical harm to Mariam:

*“He snatched her hand, opened it and dropped a handful of pebbles into it. His powerful hand clasped her jaw, forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes. “CHEW!” he bellowed.*

*He left Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars” (p.94).*

This shows the inhuman and brutal act of Rasheed that forces Mariam to chew pebbles and caused her mouth to bleed and thus breaks her molars. This physical threat results in fear, trauma, loss of self-confidence and one's self-honor. Thus, it negatively impacted on Mariam's personality, identity, psychology and even her performance.

Laila is also victimized of such physical violation and threat with brutality. She comes across terrible physical injuries many times. Once she gets hurt on her lips, tongue and mouth that cause breaking of lower incisor. This illustrates the brutality, cruelty and harshness of male dominant rule and control over women. Laila is also beaten by Taliban who came over to hold Afghanistan. They beat Laila on an account that she travels alone to meet her daughter, Aziza without accompaniment of *mahram* or any male family member. The following reference from the text shows the violence that

women face:

*“One day, a young Taliban beats Laila with a radio antenna. He gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said, “I’ll beat you until your mother’s milk leaks out of your bones” (p. 303).*

This demonstrates the horrible, fearful, pity, heart-breaking, haunting and extremity of men’s gender-based violence to be authoritative and to hold their power over women.

### ***Psychological Violence***

Psychological violence includes verbal aggression, humiliation, threatening, mocking, bitterly criticizing, insulting and alienating from social gatherings or making isolated within for walls of house. In psychologically abusing women, they are affected in their dignity and individual creativity. This kind of violence is also evident in the novel. Rasheed always mocks and insults his wives to show his superiority to them. For instance, once Mariam puts makeup and maintains herself beautifully for her husband, Rasheed. But when Rasheed looks at her with such distaste, anger and harshness that she rushes to the room and takes off all with tears and feeling of shame and embarrassment. At another place, Rasheed informs Laila of Mariam’s low status in humiliating way during a dinner scene. He says:

*“A blessing really, we are city people you and I. Mariam have you told her that you are a Harami?” (pp.222).*

The use of the word ‘Harami’ degrades Mariam and made her feel ashamed and as worthless thing on earth. The text also describes how Rasheed used to insult her bitterly and scorns her which she feels difficult to bear.

*“It was not easy tolerating him talking this way, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his ignoring her as she was nothing but a house cat. 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 confrontational paths, kicks, punches and slaps” (pg.89).*

This illustrates that how Mariam is psychologically violated that brings her fear, trauma, anxiety, loss of her creativity and lack in her individual

performance. Rasheed's loose temperament always frightens Mariam. Laila also gets psychological torture by Rasheed who always insults her and expresses his anger to her. He restricts her and scorns her the way she dresses and combs her hair.

### *Sexual Violence*

Sexual violence includes the forceful sexual action without complying with or consent of the partner. Anissa (2010) calls such type of sexual violence as sexual harassment, spousal abuse or marital rape. The novel paints how women are sexually abused by men. Jalil, a wealthy businessman sexually abuses Nana and makes her expected with his illegitimate child. As the text shows:

*“Nana had been one of the housekeepers until her belly became gantos well.”* (pp.:06).

This ironical and witty statement uncovers that Jalil, after using her for his physical comfort, casts her out of his home. He even refuses to give the child his name or to give dignity. He sends Nana in remote area *Kolba* to maintain his reputation so that nobody would come to know about his disgraceful act or causes him shame. That sexual violation leaves a lasting unpleasant effects and grief in Nana's life. Her father leaves her and Jalil also disowns her. She gives birth to a baby girl, Mariam which is regarded as bastard or *Harami* child because of her illegitimacy.

Meanwhile, Mariam also sexually violated by Rasheed who forcefully fulfills his sexual desire without her consent. That physical contact with Rasheed sickens Mariam and she feels disgust. When Rasheed marries Laila, Mariam feels somehow relaxed and grateful that now he would never touch her. As the text unfolds that Mariam thanks that now the chapter of sex is closed in her life. Thus shows her feeling of relaxation that she feels thankful of not to have sex anymore with Rasheed. Laila also experiences the same situation. Rasheed always forcefully does whatever he wants. After the birth of her 1st child, Aziza, the doctor restricts Laila to have sex in six weeks but again in that situation Rasheed fulfills his sexual desire no regard of her weak condition. Hence, Laila is forced to serve his sexual desire without her consent.

### *Double Standards of Society*

Society puts men as superior and casts women as inferior, weak, irrational

and emotional. The double standards of society are very much brought on the surface level in the novel. The novel shows the socio-political and cultural structures that support degradation, devaluation and suppression of women. Nana gets victimized by Jalil. He tries to protect his reputation and to avoid any shame or disgraceful remarks from society, he puts off Nana out of his house, not marries her and disowns his child. Nana's father also leaves her because of her shameful act of being pregnant without wedlock. As narrated by Nana:

*“Nana's own father shifted in the nearby village of Gul Daman, disowned her, disgraced, he packed his things and boarded a bus to Bran, never to be seen or heard from again” (p.05).*

In all these circumstances, Jalil was equally responsible in committing that disgraceful act. But instead of taking his responsibility, he leaves her alone and society blames, disgraces and raises finger over Nana for her shameful act. But Jalil is also equally be blamed but he frees because he is a man. This shows the gender politics of our society that it always points finger upon women. Nobody would blame or indict men for their shameful acts. As Nana says:

*“Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. This is what it means to be a woman in this world” (p. 07).*

In case of Mariam also, Rasheed restricts her to wear *Burqa* to cover her whole body, not to meet his guests and also limited her mobility that not to go outside or roam in the streets. He remarks that

*“Woman's face is her husband's business only”. (pp.:75).*

But he himself enjoys full freedom and has magazines of half-naked women. Mariam finds nude magazines lying hidden in his closet. As it is written in the novel:

*“One very page were women who wore no shirts, no trousers, no socks or underpants. They wore nothing at all” (p.75).*

It implies the double standards of society that the thing if a woman does is subjected wrong and if the same thing a man does is acceptable. It shows the stubborn mentality of men that they insist their sisters and wives to cover

their bodies and not to talk to any stranger but they themselves enjoy such cheap and rubbish kind of things. Thus, such mindset exacerbates favoritism towards males and demarcates women to subservient position.

### ***Forced Marriages***

Since women are being subordinated, they are expected to keep their wishes and interests next to those of family. A woman dares not to exercise her freedom of thought and expression in the important matters of her life. The typical and conservative traditions give no right of decision-making to women. A woman is expected to sacrifice her views, wishes, dreams, career and even her decision regarding the selection of her life partner. Mariam and Laila also cast into forceful marriage with Rasheed, an unwanted suitor. After Nana's suicide, Mariamis forced to marry Rasheed who is much elder than her. As the textual lines unfold:

“You have a suitor. His name is Rasheed, lives in Kabul.  
He's a shoemaker. He is a little older than you, can't be  
more than . . .Forty. Forty-five at the most.

*Mariam looked at Jalil, “I don't want this. Don't make me”  
(P.44).*

Thus, at the age of fifteen that is an immature age to get one's married, Mariam's forceful marriage is settled despite of her refusal. This demonstrates that women's decisions are not worthy enough to listen. Laila also gets married under complexed situations. She loses her parents in the war. She is orphaned and expecting with a child. Society never allows and accepts women to live alone and also there is Taliban's rule that women should always be accompanied by male relative. She gets pregnant out of marriage and if she wouldn't marry, she would be sentenced to death. Thus, to cover her pregnancy and to save her life, she has only the choice to marry Rasheed. The forceful marriages in both cases prove to be unfruitful, tragic, horrible, bitter and disgusting for Mariam and Laila. This portrayal of forceful marriage shows subordination of women in the important decisions of their lives.

### ***Educational Deprivation***

In a patriarchal setup, educational facilities are rare for women (Walker, 2018). The educational infrastructure, the social conduct, typical and

conservative perceptions are not always in favor of women education. They think that women are supposed only to serve their families and are assigned to carry out household chores as traditional responsibility. Thus, they are deprived of such worthy educational insight and clear understanding (ibid). In the context of Afghanistan, Taliban forbid girls to get education and even girls' schools were closed. In the novel, women's educational deprivation is uncovered that Nana is not educated that's why she never realizes her worth, dignity and rights. She willingly accepts inequalities because of her unawareness and lack of courage. She even never allows Mariam to go to school because she is of the opinion that education is not beneficial for girls. When Mariam asks her for admitting her in school, she remarks that:

*“Sending a girl to school is like shining a spittoon. You will learn nothing of value in the school. There is only one skill for women to learn. You need in life to learn enduring. They don't teach this you in school” (pg.17).*

This shows that women are marginalized from getting formal education which is the most important and basic source to build one's personality and gives the courage to fight for their due rights.

Later on, when Taliban took the power, they forbid female education and banned all the girls' schools and colleges. As the textual lines unfold the idea: *“Girls are forbidden from attending school. All girls' schools would be closed immediately”* (p. 271). Thus, they restricted women's advancement in the field of education. This announcement of The Taliban is completely against the teachings of Islam that emphasizes on education as obligatory for all Muslims irrespective of gender.

### ***Stereotypes***

Society casts men as authoritative, strong, powerful, breadwinner, rational and superior. Meanwhile women are considered as inferior, weak, fragile, emotional and irrational. This kind of stereotyping curb one's creativity and individual identity. Society has constructed such kind of stereotypes that they consider women as foolish and submissive. The novel also unfolds this form of gender inequality. Mariam is always insulted, demotivated and stereotyped by Rasheed. For instance, when Mariam asks Rasheed about Soviet communism, he answers that you are foolish and you know nothing. At another place, when Mariam, Laila along with Aziza were fleeing to Pakistan without any male guardianship and were arrested, a Taliban officer remarked:

*“God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can”*  
(p.355).

These stereotypes affect women to behave as they are supposed and perceived to be. This restricts women to breathe the air of freedom.

### **FEMALE RESPONSES TO GENDER INEQUALITIES THEY ENCOUNTER WITH IN THE CONTEXT OF A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS**

Gender equity faces a lot of impediment and hindrances due to lack of awareness. Most women accept their segregation and oppression as part of their lives (Hutson, 2007). While there is a high incidence of violence against women, many women are struggling against this menace (ibid). The Afghan women are painted in the novel through the characters of Nana, Mariam and Laila. They encounter different forms of gender discrimination and each reacted differently against those inequalities. Nana accepts her devaluated status willingly. She never raises her voice for her rights. On the contrary Mariam and Laila struggle to challenge patriarchal system of society. Let us analyze deeply how each female character reacted against gender inequalities in the novel.

#### ***Nana's Acceptance towards Gender Inequalities***

Society constructs gender differences, but these gaps get strengthened when women accept the things as they are. The acceptance of women towards such kind of violence makes men's position stronger and powerful. Difference in surroundings, background and different factors shape and mould women therefore, every woman reacts differently against the inequalities of patriarchal society. In the novel, Nana willingly accepts her deprived position. The influencing factor that compels Nana not to struggle for her rights is her Educational Deprivation. The very basic reason of accepting marginalization is Nana's poor educational background. Education is the actual bedrock on which the structure of a progressive society can be established (Hutson, 2007). Women need dire courage and strength to struggle for their rights and education is the only tool that can help to break the pattern of gender subjugation and to combat gender conflicts. Education empowers women and makes them able to realize their worth and is influential in developing one's personality. Educated mothers, suggests the aforementioned researcher, possess greater autonomy and power to act and

make decisions for their children. Since Nana has never gone to school, she never realizes her rights and her dignity. She even never allows Mariam to go to school as she is of the view that education has nothing to do important with the girls. That's why her illiteracy passes and transfers through generations. Such mindset also affects Mariam who never learnt to question her fate or challenge her destiny. She initially accepts the brutality of Rasheed. She prefers to be silent, obedient and do whatever is ordered by her husband. She owns a fragmented self-hood with weak self-recognition. This lack of knowledge makes both; Mariam and Nana limited, feared, anxious and unaware to know their rights and worth. Thus, Nana becomes victimized and violated by Jalil. Patriarchal society teaches her to obey men and accept her fate in any condition. Therefore, she prefers to tolerate and endure sufferings at any cost. She accepts violation and subjugation as her fate without reacting, defending, questioning or challenging. She holds the view that women are powerless and are incapable of doing anything or raising voice against typical traditional gender roles. As she says:

*“As a reminder of how women like us suffer”, she said:  
“How quietly we endure all that fall sup onus” (pg. 85).*

This demonstrates Nana's belief that women's job is to endure all such inequalities because women are powerless and are not courageous enough to fight against patriarchal authority. This acceptance makes her to accept defenselessly her sufferings instead of struggling. She never resists towards Jalil who brings her desperation. That desperation leads to frustration, self-destruction and finally forces Nana to commit suicide. Conclusively we can say that Nana accepts her sufferings as her fate because of her educational deprivation that makes her to believe in women's powerlessness. Hence lack of education results in vicious cycle of gender oppression. This gender discrimination would go on as long as women would accept this as their fate instead of struggling.

### ***Mariam's and Laila's Resistance to Victimization***

Contrary to Nana, Mariam and Laila resist against gender politics and challenge patriarchal norms. The influential source of their struggle is Education. Education is the only milestone to make women confident, empower them not to allow men to control their lives. Education is the tool which gives awareness that men and women both are equal, and both should be treated equally. Hooks (2000) also affirms the constructive role of

education as an underlying force to shape people's thought and to fight against gender differences that evaporates and dilutes gender conflicts. In the novel, Laila is the only character who gets education, goes to school and knows her worth as a woman. Laila is the daughter of a school teacher and raised in an atmosphere of educative family. She lives a life filled with books, schooling and hope for the future. Her educational background serves her and Mariam to struggle for their rights and resist inequalities. She learns from her teacher, Shanzai at school that:

*"She said, women and men were equal in every way and that was no reason women should cover if men didn't." (pg. 79).*

This shows that education emphasizes upon the equality among men and women. Laila's father himself is also an educated school teacher. Laila learns many things from her father who also insists and emphasizes the importance of education. He remarks:

"Marriage can wait, education cannot. You are a very bright girl; you can be anything you want. And I know that when the war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated" (p.110).

Laila learns the importance of education above all things from her father. Her father implores the idea that educated women are building block of any successful society. Thus, education makes Laila aware of her rights, dignity and worth as a woman. Her educational spirit brings her consciousness of being discriminated that build strength in her to voice for her rights. Mariam, initially accepts all the miserable behavior of Rasheed and sufferings as her fate because of her uneducated background. She is ignorant and prefers to be silent and to surrender. But soon, in the company of Laila, she learns to know her rights and becomes conscious of being violated. That results the shift of her attitude to struggle and resist instead of acceptance. She faces many miserable things from Rasheed in her 27 years of marriage but after being conscious, she kills him in order to save Laila from his brutality. They both joined in sisterhood bond with love and affection for each other. In that sisterhood bond, both save each other many times from the physical harm that Rasheed gives. For instance, once Laila refuses him to have sex because of doctor's restriction after Aziza's birth. Rasheed turns his anger and blames Mariam that she restricts Laila not to have sex. In that circumstance, Rasheed beats Mariam with his belt and in order to save her, Laila accepts to do

whatever Rasheed wants. Thus, education plays as an underlying source that compels both to struggle against the injustices that Rasheed does with them. Because of access to education, women are becoming more vocal and active in demanding their rights assured by religion and constitution.

### ***The Power of Education in Strengthening Women to Challenge Patriarchal Norms as Delineated in A Thousand Splendid Suns***

Acceptance or Resistance to victimization is well-knitted and intimately tied with education (Hutson, 2007). Not so surprisingly, the rise of education has led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition (Celis, Kantola, Waylen, & Weldon, 2013). The role of education in the growth of individual creativity, personal identity and social development is significant because it is capable of increasing women's sense of agency that supports gender equity and social status quo (ibid). Women need to acquire intensified courage and strength to struggle for their due rights. Education is the only tool that can help to break the chains of gender differences (ibid). Education enables women to know their worth and stand against the inequalities they encounter with. In the novel, education plays constructive role by which Laila and Mariam are able to stand against patriarchal norms. We have seen that Nana, being educationally deprived faces violation and injustice of Jalil as fate of her life instead to struggle. If she would be educated, she might stand against whatever she encountered with. Meanwhile, Mariam initially also accepts Rasheed's harshness and inhumanity but Laila's educational background ties them in sisterhood bond. Educated women also influence other women and empower them to resist. In the novel, Laila being educated also influences Mariam not to defenselessly accept the brutality of Rasheed. As she knows the importance of education by her father. Thus, education is the only tool and underlying force that assures strength to Laila and Mariam to fight for their rights. By struggling, they break the chains of gender inequalities and also challenge the belief that women are weak, fragile and should only tolerate and endure sufferings. Thus, education serves as milestone in empowering Laila and Mariam and ensures them tremendous courage to realize their worth and dignity as women.

### ***Findings***

From the data analysis, the findings of the study reveal that:

Different forms of gender subjugation in the novel, physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence, double standards of society, forceful marriages, preference to have sons rather than daughters, less access

to medical care and health facilities, marginalization from education and limited mobility.

It explores that how women react against gender discrimination they face. Nana accepts her sufferings and injustices as her fate. She willingly and defenselessly bears without challenging, reacting or struggling because of her educational deprivation which never granted her courage to stand for her rights. While Mariam and Laila react and defend for their rights because of Laila's education spirit that enables them to realize their worth, dignity and rights.

The thorough understanding of the text explores the constructive influence of education that empowers women to raise their voice against traditional established patriarchal system and to fight for their rights.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing upon qualitative method, the current study has made an endeavor to access the deprived status of women in the Islamic world, specifically Afghanistan with Reference to *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khalid Hosseini. For accessing the status of women in Afghanistan, the novel is interpreted from feminist perspective, in the light of Feminist Literary Criticism Theory. This theory seeks to analyze the ways in which literature portrays the gender differences and tends to critique gender politics in society.

The findings of the research are extracted through data analysis. The findings reveal that the female characters in the novel face different kinds of gender discrimination like physical violence which includes kicks, slaps, beating and physical harm or injury. Mariam, Laila and Nana are subjected to psychological violence as in the form of insult, fear and threatens. They are sexually abused as well. The novel uncovers the double standards of society that prefers to have sons rather than daughters as the sign of pride and financial supporter. Mariam and Laila are also compelled in forceful marriage with Rasheed. The characters are also marginalized from healthcare services. They are deprived of educational asset.

In facing such kind of discrimination, each character reacts differently against gender oppression. Nana defenselessly accepts the discrimination as her fate. She willingly bears without challenging, reacting or struggling because of her deprived educational background that never grant her courage to stand for her rights. While Mariam and Laila resist to victimization

because of educational influence that ties them in the bond of sisterhood, strengthens them to raise voice for their rights and enables them to realize their worth.

The thorough understanding of the text explores the constructive influence of education that empowers women to raise their voice against conventional patriarchal system and to fight for their rights. Education is an influential factor and underlying force that empower Laila and Mariam to resist against the inequalities of patriarchal domination.

Thus, it can be concluded that gender inequality is a bitter social reality. Though Islam posits the message of equality, peace and prosperity and has enshrined the rights of women to have education, share in inheritance, their consent in marriage etc. but all the gender games are played in the name of Islam. There exists huge gap between what the Quran says and what actually is being practiced. Islamic world is juggling between repressive customs and borrowed modernization. Therefore, it is essential that Women's status must be reviewed, and their rights must be understood and implemented in the light of true teachings of Islam.

## REFERENCES

- “A Second Look at the Role Education Plays in Women's Empowerment.” International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW). Vol. 1. 2005.
- “Afghanistan: The 1st most Dangerous Country for Women.” The Nation, 16 June, 2013, [online web] Accessed on 24 September, 2013. URL: <http://www.nation.com.pk/Afgahanistan-news-2011/Afghanistan-1st-most-dangerous-country-for-women>.
- Alexander, A.C. and Welzel. 2011. How Robust is Muslim Support for Patriarchal Values? A cross-national multi-level study. Technical Report, Centre for the Study of Democracy, U.C. Irvine.
- Balatchandirane, G. 2007. Gender Discrimination in Education and Economic Development: A Study of Asia. External Trade Organization, Japan.

- Basharat, Shameem. 2014. Living on the Edge: Women in Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *Research Journal of English language and Literature (RJELAL)*: 2 (4), pp.62-66.
- Belsey, C. and Moore, J.1989.*The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the politics of literary criticism*. New York: Library of Congress.
- Boden, Alison L. 2007.*Women's Rights and Religious Practice Claims in Conflict*. New York: Macmillan.
- Bressler, Charles E. 1999.*Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Burki, S. J. 2017. Treatment of women in Pakistan. [accessed 25 September, 2009) available from The Express Tribune, Pakistan: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1515421/treatment-women-pakistan/>
- Carolyn Medel, A. 1995.*Women, Education and Empowerment: Pathways towards Autonomy*. UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg, Germany.
- Celis, K., Kantola, J., Waylen, G. and Weldon, S. L. 2013. Introduction: Gender and Politics: A Gendered World, a Gendered Discipline. In G. Waylen, K. Celis, J. Kantola, & S. L. Weldon, *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford Press.
- Chima, Christiani. and Owan, Joseph.2014. Violence against Women in Igboland, South-East, Nigeria: A Critical Quest for Change. *Inter. Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*. 6 (2) pp.49-58.
- Cortright, David. and Wall, Kristen.2012. *Afghan Women Speak: Enhancing Security and Human Rights in Afghanistan*. University of Notre Dame.
- Cresswell, John W.2007.*Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. California: Sage Publications. 2007.
- Eagleton, T. 2008. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- “Education Plays Key Role in Advancing Women: Girls and Communities.” Washington, May, 2014.

- Fish, M.S.2011.Are Muslims Distinctive? A Look at the Evidence. Oxford University Press.
- Grimm, J. 2013.Family- the basic unit of society. [accessed 18 November 2013] available from Prezi: <https://prezi.com/kcvknyfmqgr/family-the-basic-unit-of-society/>
- Hassan, Daniyal.2016. Women's Protection Bill: A Case of Men's Insecurities.DAWN News, 24 May .
- Hosseini, Khalid. 2007.A Thousand Splendid Suns. New York: ATSS Publication.
- Hooks, Bell. 2009.Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics. Cambridge, Canada: South End Press.
- Hutson, S. 2017.Gender Oppression and Discrimination in South Africa. [accessed 1 January 2017] available from Essai: <https://dc.cod.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com.pk/&httpsredir=1&article=1026&context=essai>
- Istikomah, Nurul. 2015. Women's Attitude towards Gender Discrimination in Hosseini's a Thousand Splendid Suns. Thesis: Yogyakarta State University.
- Jaccobs, A.J. 1996.Gender Inequality and Higher Education. Annual Review of Sociology. 22 pp.: 153-185
- Jayachandran, Seema.2014. The Roots of Gender Inequality in Developing Countries. Annual Review of Economics: North-Western University: Vol.07.
- Kabir, Naila. 2005. Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal. Gender and Development: Vol. 13, No.:01: Common Wealth Secretariat, London.
- Kazimiyani, Azam.2010. A Thousand Splendid Suns: Rhetorical Vision of Afghan Women. University of Ottawa: Canada.
- Krippendorff, Klaus.2003. Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology. London: Sage Publications.

- Kusnadi, Nurul Hamzah. 2008. *An Analysis of main Character on Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns through Feminist Approach*. State Islamic University, Jakarta.
- Lasic, G. 2017. 15 Things Women are Still Fighting Every Day. [accessed 8 May 2017] available from Grey's Anatomy: <http://pop.inquirer.net/2017/03/15-things-women-still-fight-everyday-in-2017/>
- Mernessi, F. 1987. *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Modern Muslim society*. Indiana University Press.
- Moghadam, Valentine. 1997. Patriarchy and the Politics of Gender in Modernizing Societies: Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. *International Sociology Journal*. 7(1) pp.35-53.
- Moghadam, Valentine. 2004. Patriarchy in Transition: Women and the Changing Family in the Middle East. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. 35[2] pp137-163.
- Morris, Pam. 1993. *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publisher.
- Offenhauer, Priscilla. 2005. *Women in Islamic Societies: A Selected Review of Social Scientific Literature*. Library of Congress: Washington.
- Plain, G. A. 2007. *History of Feminist Literary Criticism*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Shapiro, B. Lindsay. 2010. *Middle Eastern Women's Issues: An Analysis of A Thousand Splendid Suns and The New York Times*. University of Florida.
- Shetty, Sowjanya S. and Hans. V. Basil. 2015. *Role of Education in Women Empowerment and Development: Issues and Impact*. SSRN: India.
- Silima, Nanda. 2013. Subjugation: A Study of the Women Characters in Khalid Hosseini's and Arundhati Roy's Novels. *Academic International Journal of Literature*, 4 (10) pp456-461.
- Singh, Namita. 2013. *Feminism vs Gender Equity: Socio-Political Activism in Khalid Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *International Journal of Educational Research and Technology*, 4 (2) pp.88-92.

- Sruthi, P. Gender Bias Crossways Borders with Reference to Khalid Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns. IOSR journal of Humanities and Social Sciences: 49-51.
- Stuhr, Rebecca. 2013. A Thousand Splendid Suns: Sanctuary and Resistance; Critical Insights: Cultural Encounters. Ed. Nicholas Birns, MA: Saleem Press.
- Sultana, Abeda. 2010. Patriarchy and Women's sub-ordination: A Theoretical Analysis. The Arts Faculty Journal, July 2010- June 2011: University of Dhaka.
- Thompson, Harvey. 2009. A Thousand Splendid Suns: The Plight of Afghan Women only Partially Depicted. Penguin Group and Bloomsbury. pp.384-398.
- Tyson, Lois. 2006. Critical Theory Today. New York: London. Library of Congress.
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 1948. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Retrieved from UN Organization: <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>
- Walby, Sylvia. 1990. Theorizing Patriarchy. London: Blackwell, Oxford UK and Cambridge MA.
- Walker, S. 2018. Why are women still fighting for their rights, 100 years after getting the vote? [accessed 20 January 2018] available from News The Essential Daily Briefing: <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/women-vote-rights-march-sophie-walker/>