

Khaled Hosseini's "A Thousand Splendid Suns": A Tale of Endurance and Emancipation

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ABSTRACT: *Khaled Hosseini's "A Thousand Splendid Suns" is an immortal work . It is the story of an oppressed woman's victory over the tortures and blows of the patriarchal, society inflicted on women . At the end of the novel , the suppressed , silenced Mariam, the protagonist of the novel takes the role of the saviour to emancipate another oppressed character Laila. . It is the story of suffering , sacrifice and emancipation .*

KEYWORDS: *patriarchal, gender, oppressed , male- dominated society*

The realization of Mariam's mother Nana in Khaled Hosseini's "A Thousand Splendid Suns" strikes the keynote of the novel:

A man's heart is a wretched , wretched thing. Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you. I'm the only one who loves you. I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing!

The mother proves prophetic as at the end of the novel Mariam sacrifices herself on the altar of male-dominated society. This novel depicts the tragedy of Mariam's life. Rather it is better to say that this is the unavoidable destiny of many women. A woman is exploited everywhere in all ages. She is the marginalized , peripheral 'self'. She goes on counting the beads in the rosary of her sorrows. The realization of Nana transcends the personal to become universal . Khaled Hosseini , the writer of international acclaim shakes the world with this moving tragedy of Nana , Mariam and Laila. They are born in all ages to suffer. Generations after generations pass away. But the real picture of women's suffering does not change . Characters like Nana, Mariam and Laila are born only to expiate their curse of being women. Washington Post complements the poet thus :

In case you're wondering whether "A Thousand Splendid Suns" is as good as "The Kite Runner", here's the answer : No . It's better.

Hosseini excels himself in this novel. Isabel Allende's reaction to this heart breaking novel is: A beautifully crafted and disturbing story ...As unforgettable as "The Kite Runner", this novel places us in Afganistan with an open heart.

The novelist is very conscious in handling language to explore the social male/female binaries inherent in Afghanistan .Nana , Mariam's mother is a strong advocate to make Mariam aware of her position in a male – dominated world. According to patriarchy, a woman is the source of all folly and unreason . Nana's sarcastic comment can be termed only in the superlative:

Like a compass needle that points north , a man's accusing finger always finds a woman, Always .You remember that , Mariam.

Mariam , the illegitimate child of Jalil and Nana is always treated as an outcast. But she is continuously deceived by her father under the belief that she is her father's beloved daughter. Nana is not blind to the truth. She always tries to warn Mariam about reality .Jalil casts a spell over her to disguise his hypocrisy. Mariam is mesmerized by her father's knowledge and stories amount Heart. Nana scoffs at his rich lies:

What rich lies , rich men telling rich lies. He never took you to any tree.
and you don't let him to charm you. He betrayed us , your beloved father.
He cast us out . He cast us out of his big fancy house like we were
nothing to him. He did it happily, Mariam.

Nana is true. After her death , her daughter the so- called "little flower" of Jalil is subject to enormous pain, torture inflicted upon her by her father, husband and society at large. Life becomes a nightmare to her .Moments become unbearable to her . The tag of 'harami' , the illegitimate child becomes a haunting reality for her . Nana is completely unpretentious in her observation;

To Jalil and his wives , I was a pokeroot. A mugwort. You too. And weren't even born yet. 'Mugwort' is symbolic of Mariam's life. Like a weed she is ripped out time and again and tossed aside . But Mariam imagines something different about her fate:

Unlike weeds I had to be replanted , you see , given food and water on account of you . This was the deal Jalil made with his family.

Her tragedy lies in her own nature of being too innocent. Nana pierces the reality again:

It's our lot in life , Mariam . Women like us . We endure. It's all we have. .

Mariam lives with her mother in a 'kolba' which is a small mud house. Nana calls it a 'rat hole'. This 'kolba' is symbol of imprisonment, entrapment and poverty which Mariam, the chief woman protagonist is destined to experience throughout her life.

Mariam is caught in the net of patriarchal ideologies . She always tries to overcome her outcast position. She always tries to find a space for herself. She hankers after Jalil's company instead of Nana's. She loves to be identified as her father's daughter instead of mother's. Jalil weaves the veil of romanticism and illusion around her . She wants earnestly to enter her father's world. She becomes rebellious in her attitude to her mother's pessimistic, negative view of life:

You're afraid Nana , ..you're afraid that I might find the happiness you never had .And you want me to be happy .You don't want a good life for me . you're the one with the wretched heart. .

Mariam faces reality for the first time when she goes to her father's home. Her condition becomes wretched when she meets the faces full of anger , animosity and unfathomable hatred towards an outcast like her. She is thoroughly humiliated, insulted and driven out of her father's home by her family. For the first time she misses Nana , her protective lap and protective warnings. Hosseini portrays perfectly the lacerated heart of the girl:

And during the ride , as she bounced in the backseat , she cried. They

were tears of grief, of anger , of disillusionment . But mainly tears of a deep deep shame at how foolishly she had given herself over to Jalil.

How she had fretted over what dress to wear , over the mismatching hijab, walking all the way here, refusing to leave , sleeping on the street like a stray dog .And she was ashamed of how she had dismissed her mother's stricken looks, her puffy eyes...

Mariam returns to her mother. But it is too late. Nana has committed suicide after having lost her dear daughter's departure fearing that her daughter has deserted her. Ironically her suicide leaves Mariam completely lonely. After her death life turns totally hostile and bitter to Mariam. She has now none to rebuke, none to warn , none to take care of. She is thrown into this vast , dark world . She will have to pay more. After Nana's death , she is taken to live in her father's house which was earlier her much cherished abode . Jalil arranges for her to be married to Rasheed, a shoemaker from Kabul who is thirty years her senior. Jalil's wives want earnestly to get rid of the outcast. They find a relief and a release in her marriage with Rasheed. Hosseini is unparalleled in the portrayal of Mariam's stepmothers' attitude towards her :

They had been disgraced by her birth, and this was their chance to erase , once and for all , the last trace of their husband's scandalous mistake. she was being sent away because she was the walking , breathing embodiment of their shame.

.Mariam's parting sentence to her father , Jalil touches the theme of 'shame' most ironically and pathetically :

I thought about you all the time. I used to pray that you'd live to be a hundred year's old. I didn't know . I didn't know that you were ashamed of me.

In Kabul, Mariam becomes pregnant seven successive times, but is never able to carry a child to term, and Rasheed gradually becomes more abusive. Mariam is put to sexual violence. She is abused every moment . Part One of the novel ends thus:

His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open , then forced the cold , hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in, his upper lip curled in a sneer .
"Now chew," he said.

Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles , Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes.

“CHEW!” he bellowed. A gust of his smoky breath slammed against her face.

Mariam chewed. Something in the back of her mouth cracked.

“Good,” Rasheed said .His cheeks were quivering. “Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you have given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing else.”

Then he was gone , leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broke molars.

Jeanne M. McGlenn, Professor in the Department of Education at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, says most appropriately:

There are lots of parallels between Rasheed's treatment of his wives and the treatment of slaves by slave owners. Both Mariam and Laila are the victims of domestic violence.

Mariam is the one among the many oppressed women in this world. Khaled Hosseini unravels gender politics, power division, marginalized identity of a woman in this novel. “A Thousand Splendid Suns” is the heart- wrenching saga of the eternal exploitation of women . Rasheed marries Laila. Though at first Mariam is inimical towards Laila. Later she befriends her. It is for her sake she sacrifices her life . She murders Rasheed only to decorate Laila's life. Afterwards, Mariam confesses to killing Rasheed, in order to draw attention away from Laila and Tariq, and is executed, while Laila and Tariq leave for Pakistan with Aziza and Zalmi. At the trial of Mariam, the gender- politics resurfaces most glaringly in the judge's speech towards Mariam:

God has made us different, you women and us men . Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can . . .

At the end of the novel Mariam is not a silenced, peripheral self . She effaces the overwhelming male presence of Rasheed. She turns into a rebel female. She comes out of the typical feminine cocoon . The victim turns out victorious though her selfless love for another woman. She is elevated in her glorious sacrifice. Mariam proves to be a death – defying spirit in her death. She herself becomes the symbol of a thousand splendid suns. Being an outcast, her life is a desperate search for love .Though her marriage is a loveless one she , she finds it in another oppressed ‘self’ of Laila. Her bond with Laila allows her to understand that she can love and be loved in return.Khaled Hosseini paints the character with all his love, affection and sympathy for the oppressed selves. The title of the novel is symbolic. Through Mariam's sacrifice, Laila's darkened world is illuminated with the radiance of a thousand splendid suns. The novel ends on a note of hope . Mariam withers away only to help Laila blossom. She emerges deathless in her courage , sacrifice, love and catholicity of heart : Mariam is in Laila's heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns . [Khaled Hosseini “A Thousand Splendid Suns”]

REFERENCES

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