

## **Postcolonial feminist reading of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

Ensieh Shabanirad<sup>1\*</sup>

Elham Seifi<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** Postcolonial feminism is an exploration into the interactions of colonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities in different contexts of women's lives. Postcolonial feminism or the 'Third World feminism' originated as a critique of mainstreams in the Western feminist theorists, investigating the portrayal of women in the literature and society of the colonized countries as marginalized and oppressed ones in every aspect of life, namely, cultural, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic, in such a way that they are considered as inferior beings. Postcolonial feminism declares that an inclination towards homogenizing and universalizing women by focusing exclusively on the involvement of women in Western lifestyle is a heedless attempt, because in this case, they are only defined by their gender and not by social class, race, feelings, ethnicity, sexual preferences, and setting of the colonized territories. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* depicts the social, cultural, and political structures that support the devaluation, degradation, and violence endured by the female characters in the novel. From a postcolonial feministic perspective, this paper attempts to investigate the plights of women, particularly the two major characters of the novel, Mariam and Laila, which are enforced on them through the patriarchal culture and standards.

**Keywords:** feminism, Khaled Hosseini, postcolonial, Third World, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

- 
1. (Corresponding Author), PhD Candidate, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran, Email: eshabanirad@gmail.com.
  2. MA in English Language and Literature, University of Semnan, Semnan, Iran, Email: Elham.seifi9019@gmail.com

## Introduction

Leela Gandhi (1998, pp. 82-83), a well-known theoretician in postcolonial criticism, asserts that feminist and postcolonial theory,

have concerned themselves with the study and defense of marginalized 'Others' within repressive structures of domination and, in so doing, both have followed a remarkably similar theoretical trajectory. Feminist and postcolonial theory alike began with an attempt to simply invert prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race, and they have each progressively welcomed the poststructuralist invitation to refuse the binary oppositions upon which patriarchal/colonial authority constructs itself.

Meanwhile, "Postcolonial feminism cannot be regarded simply as a subset of postcolonial studies, or alternatively, as another variety of feminism. Rather it is an intervention that is changing the configurations of both postcolonial and feminist studies" (Schwarz & Ray, 2008, p. 53). Furthermore, as Sara Mills (2003, pp. 39-43) declares: "Post-colonial feminist theory has begun to be established as a form of analysis in its own right." To this, she adds:

feminist post-colonial theorists are not a unified group. However, they can be said to be those of feminist who have reacted against the lack of address to gender issues in mainstream post-colonial theory and also against the universalizing tendencies within Western feminist thought (pp. 24-27).

Postcolonial feminism emerged from the gendered history of colonialism. Colonial powers often imposed Western norms on colonized regions in the light of Eurocentrism, and established a binary opposition of the West/the Other, which regards the European ideas, ideals and experiences as the standards to which all other non-Western cultures are negatively contrasted. Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar state that the white feminists fail to acknowledge the differences between themselves and non-white and third world women. They criticize the idea that the "white Eurocentric and Western, has sought to establish itself as the only legitimate feminism in current political practice" (Parmar & Amos, 1984, p. 3).

"Many scholars and activists have critiqued the Western feminist project for its negligence of racial and colonialist politics" (Loomba, 2005, p. 138).

Postcolonial feminists object to the portrayal of women in non-Western societies as passive, docile, voiceless victims, who submit to an immutable patriarchy, the sufferers of ignorance, and a restrictive culture and religion; while, the Western women are represented as modern, educated, progressive and empowered. As McLeod (2000, p. 200) states:

The assimilation of "Third World" women within Western feminist discourse suggests that Western feminism remains the primary means by which patriarchy, sexism and chauvinism are challenged. As objects of Western feminist analysis, "Third World" women are robbed of their agency.

Western feminists' ethnocentric assumptions, which assume all women have similar situations, led to the universalization of female characteristics and experiences, remarkably in radical feminism and liberal feminism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003, p. 19), one of the leading figures of the 'Third World feminism' movement, argues that much Western feminist writing about Third World women:

discursively colonize[s] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/ representing a composite, singular "third world woman" [,] an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse.

She criticizes the way Western feminist theory colonizes the heterogeneity of the experience of 'Third-World women' and urges for the deconstruction of the stereotypical images of the third world woman as the victims of a male-oriented tradition and culture. Third world women are the production of culturally and historically bound relationships in the societies in which they live and act; thus, the universalism of womanhood erases all cultural specificities, whether social, racial, cultural, or sexual. It could also be asserted that the third world women are devoid of voice and agency.

Another influential literary critic and an outstanding postcolonial feminist intellectual is Gayatri Spivak who is concerned with the issue of female subaltern in her controversial essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. She studies the possibility of the marginalized people and female subaltern to achieve a voice in the context of colonial production. Some construe the main point of

the text in this sense that the oppressed and marginalized can never achieve a voice. Later, Spivak's interview on the questions and debates generated by reading *Can the Subaltern Speak?* was written in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Here, Spivak clarifies her argument about the inability of the subalterns to speak; "the subaltern cannot speak, means that [...] she is not able to be heard" (As Cited in Landry & MacLean, 2013, p. 292). The failure of female subalterns to speak is not the production of their inability to articulate themselves; it is a failure of "transaction between the speaker and listener" (Landry & MacLean, 2013, p. 289). Hence, if the transaction takes place, the voice of marginalized women can be heard.

Female characters in Khaled Hosseini's (1956, p. 16) *A Thousand Splendid Suns* display assumptions contrary to the Western feminism theoretical framework. The novel depicts women who are in search of their own identification as an individual- not simply to be identified as the man's 'Other'- as Simone de Beauvoir argues to be "defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her", and to be "the incidental, the inessential."

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays the resistance of the females against the patriarchal and male-oriented society of Afghanistan and the gender oppression imposed on them through their culture, lifestyle, norms and principles of their community. This particular written text shows the conflicts and struggles that the major female characters undergo when they try to find their place in their own specific culture and to achieve their subaltern voice.

### **Factors in the role of Afghan woman as a Third World woman**

Afghan women's status in the society should be considered based on the traditional, cultural, religious, political and class structures which formulate and define the regulations and requirements for women in a way that perpetuate male ideology. Examining the impact of these institutions on Afghan women's lives is an attempt to avoid the ethnocentric principles of the Western feminism in homogenizing women from different parts of the world as a universal group. As Mohanty (2003, p. 20) points, Western

feminisms appropriate and colonize "the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes." Furthermore, the beliefs and positions of the females in the Afghan community are intensely affected and controlled by patriarchal thoughts. The patriarchal factors which underlie the Afghan public constitution depict females as subordinated and inferior compared to men in different aspects of the social life. Wali M. Rahimi (1991, p. 6) the author of *Status of Women: Afghanistan*, argues:

The position of women in Afghanistan has traditionally been inferior to that of men. This position has varied according to age, socio-cultural norms, and ethnicity. In fact, Afghan women, even until the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century were the slaves of their father, husband, father-in-law, and elder brother. Her most valued characteristic was silence and obedience.

The image of a perfect Afghan wife in her community is most prevalently depicted as a slave to her husband and his family members. A good wife is considered to be one of the many belongings of her husband, whose mastery over her is also taken for granted. He even controls her every movement, dismisses her ideology and imposes his own ideas on her. Apparently, the preferred course of action for a perfect wife is to serve and satisfy her husband. It shows how the patriarchal dominating mindset in the Afghan community applies to whatever cultural/religious asset is at hand in order to further marginalize the females. This is an approved ethos in the Afghan community through which they dominate females. Aside from being a slave for her husband and his close relatives, the role and status of a wife is a simple reproduction device to bear his children.

This demonstrates the fact that satisfaction and fulfillment for a perfect Afghan wife can be found nowhere but in the happiness of her husband. In other words, the perfect picture of an Afghan woman in society is a woman who sacrifices her whole life and retracts herself to get along with the new personality and identity that is imposed on her by the male ideology.

There are several factors involved in oppressing women. One main factor, as noted above, is the political institution. Afghanistan witnessed the colonial power and successive transition of power, such as the invasion of

the Soviet Union, civil war, Taliban's sovereignty and United States invasion in 2001 which resulted in the instability of the political system. Women in this situation suffer more, as outlined below, the governmental rules in the Taliban regime with regard to women were so strict and harsh. Examples are as follows.

- You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a *mahram*, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent 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 clothes.
- 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 lose 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 (Hosseini, 2007, p. 142).

The exclusion of women from education, work and public places expunges any social activities from them and it relegates them to mere insignificant beings who are extremely dependent on their male counterparts. These governmental principles have their roots in the traditional and religious thoughts of the Taliban. They interpret religion in a way that they can gain their personal aims, so religion is turned into a means and an excuse for oppression. Veiling by the *burqa* in this novel represents how the male authorities misuse religion to suppress women.

Rasheed who is a domestic Taliban compels both his wives, Mariam and Laila, to wear the burqa. The novel delineates the first time Mariam wore the burqa:

The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through the mesh screen. She practiced walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth (Hosseini, 2007, p. 42).

A similar situation has happened when Laila wore it for the first time:

For Laila, being out in the streets had become an exercise in avoiding injury. Her eyes were still adjusting to the limited, grid like visibility of the burqa, her feet still stumbling over the hem. She walked in perpetual fear of tripping and falling, of breaking an ankle stepping into a pothole (Hosseini, 2007, p. 120).

The descriptions show how they are limited by a piece of cloth in their power of sight, movement and speech. On the other hand, both of them also found the *burqa* comforting; in the case of Mariam, it is said, "It was like a one-way window. Inside it, she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of the past" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 42).

And for Laila it is described as,

Still, she found some comfort in the anonymity that the *burqa* provided. She wouldn't be recognized this way if she ran into an old acquaintance of hers. She wouldn't have to watch the surprise in their eyes, or the pity or the glee, at how far she had fallen, at how her lofty aspirations had been dashed (Hosseini, 2007, p. 120).

Here, the *burqa* only provides them with a wrong shelter and makes a false sense of comfort to overlook their hopes and yearnings. It is a garment to practically hide their fears without confronting and overcoming their fears. Consequently, these fears gradually but firmly become established in their minds.

Another factor is the tradition that plays a role in the unjust treatment towards women. As when Babi, Laila's father mentions:

[In] the tribal areas, especially the Pashtun regions in the south or in the east near the Pakistani border, women were rarely seen on the streets and only then in burqa and accompanied by men... There,

men saw it as an insult to their centuries-old tradition, Babi said, to be told... that their daughters had to leave home, attend school, and work alongside men (Hosseini, 2007, p. 74).

This novel shows how religion, tradition and culture are intricately intertwined in restricting women's power and freedom in social activities. Culture affects this restriction in favor of maintaining honor and reputation for men. Rasheed speaks with Mariam about his customers:

The women come uncovered; they talk to me directly, look me in the eye without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their knees. Sometimes they even put their feet in front of me, the women do, for measurements, and their husbands stand there and watch. They allow it. They think nothing of a stranger touching their wives' bare feet! They think they're being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education, I suppose. They don't see that they're spoiling their own *nang* and *namoos*, their honor and pride (Hosseini, 2007, p. 40).

The influence of culture in the Afghan society is not the same in different parts of it and between different classes of people – educated and uneducated ones. For Babi who is a university-educated man, Laila's schooling is "the most important thing in his life, after her safety" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 62). He says to Laila:

Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very, very bright girl. Truly, you are. You can be anything you want; Laila I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance (Hosseini, 2007, p. 62).

On the other hand, Rasheed is represented as a person whose patriarchal principles lead to have low opinion about similar issues. And Nana, Mariam's mother, who is afflicted and has suffered from male domination, while she does not have the ability to confront and go against this mainstream, finds nothing valuable in schools and she says to her daughter,



What's the sense schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon ...There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and I need in life, and they don't teach it in school...Only one skill and it's this *Tiahmul*, Endure. (Hosseini, 2007, p. 10)

### **Afghan female characters' resistance in *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the author makes it obvious that he is engaged with the circumstances of females in Afghan society. The novel portrays the female characters, Mariam and her mother, Nana, as well as Laila and her daughter, Aziza. The central characters, Mariam and Laila, are combating a patriarchal society in which they live through a form of mother-daughter bond.

Quite early in the novel, Nana is introduced as a poor servant who is repudiated by the society for having sexual affairs with Jalil Khan, a rich businessman who defends himself by putting the entire blame on her. In the beginning, Nana considerably speaks of "our lot in life" the lot of the inadequate and oblivious "women like us" who are condemned to bear the patriarchal pressures as well as ostracization from the community.

"Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: like a compass needle that points to the north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that Mariam." (Hosseini, 2007, pp. 91-92) Nana urges her daughter Mariam.

The label of *harami* which means an illegitimate child, for no fault of her own was attached to Mariam throughout her life. As it is mentioned "she understood then what Nana meant, that a *harami* was an unwanted thing, that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance" (Hosseini, 2007, p.1). When ambitious Mariam, regardless of Nana's cautions, aspires to rise above her position by claiming her rights, the dire consequences she is doomed to suffer are her forced marriage to Rasheed and Nana's suicide.

Rasheed coerces her to put on a burqa and dismisses her; even "walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat" (Hosseini, 2007, p.45). Mariam lives in a constant fear of "his shifting moods, his volatile

temperament... on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not" (Hosseini, 2007, p.54).

The other main character of the novel is Laila, an educated young girl who turns to be Rasheed's second wife. Rahimi (1991, p.6) states: "Girls were usually raised to be good mothers and tolerant housewives. Thus no one paid any attention to their education, except in very rare cases in some well-to-do families." Laila is the one who benefited from living in such a family. His father is an intellectual man who prompts her daughter to occupy herself with knowledge and learn ardently and seriously. Although she has experienced a different lifestyle compared to the majority of girls about her age, her life comes to a tragic situation when she loses her parents in a bomb attack.

War, fate and misfortune make a strong bond between Mariam and Laila, and gradually they become companions who strive to survive and also counter Rasheed's ill-treatments. They fight for their own individual identity in order to subvert the oppressions imposed on them by a male dominated society and the prescribed roles and images of women that they are identified with. As Gordan and Almutairi (2013, p. 244) write in their article on *A Thousand Splendid Sun*,

Mariam demonstrates the battles of the Afghan females who live in the conservative/ Orthodox community and the knowledge she obtained from decades of sustained various sufferings as a woman. They indicate the females who are split between the conventional principles and discovering their personal feeling of self-turned off from community and responsibility.

Mariam's complete disregard for her roles and abandonment of the town is in favor of a new self-identification, far from the previous world and its entanglements. As a newlywed, Mariam seeks the role of the true woman, regardless of the fact that she may carry herself to the point of enslavement to Rasheed. Although she tries her best to meet up with her roles with perfect dedication in order to gain the ideal status of an Afghan woman and to win the appropriate respect from her accomplishments, her husband, Rasheed, rewards her with harsh treatment.

When she is with Laila and Aziza, she feels a great pleasure because "Mariam had never before been wanted like this. Love had never been declared to her so guilelessly, so unreservedly" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 115). The love of Laila and Aziza is a great reason to stand against the suppressing power of Rasheed by devising a plan to run away from the house with the awareness that if the plan fails, a severe punishment awaits them. This runaway plan represents one of the significant signs of resistance against patriarchal principles and assumptions for oppressing the women.

Later on, Mariam's decision to kill Rasheed in order to save Laila's life is an outstanding part which demonstrates Mariam's disaffection of what has been internalized in her, what Nana taught her to endure without protest. But now she is no longer an unresisting victim to Rasheed's domestic ruthlessness; she gains power. During the course of the novel, it is depicted that Laila is the one who progressively acts against Rasheed's ideology, but Mariam comes upon with a fatal strike and "this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life" (Hosseini, 2007, p.182).

Furthermore, Mariam gains some "notoriety among prisoner[s]" inside the Walayat women's prison, as it is portrayed:

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 ... the women eyed her with a reverent, almost awestruck expression. They offered her their blankets. They competed to share their food with her (Hosseini, 2007, p.188).

It is not a total fallacy to say that the other women admired her for the thought of her as the victor against patriarchy. In the above quoted paragraph, the other evident point is that most of the imprisoned women suffer from not being heard in a patriarchal society and their act of resistance is confronted with oppression, as Spivak explores this fact in "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*".

Similarly, the novel depicts one of the most significant female resistances and combats when Laila decides to abandon all the sufferings behind and build a new sense of self, detached from her compulsions to fulfill other people's expectations. And here Laila realizes she has never achieved any

happiness by building a sense of self that is predetermined by prejudices in her culture and society.

At some point in the novel, Laila's resistance against Rasheed, the domestic patriarch tyrant, is portrayed when Rasheed was beating Mariam with a belt and Laila "lunged at him. She grabbed his arm with both hands and tried to drag him down, but she could do no more than dangle from it. She did succeed in slowing Rasheed's progress toward Mariam" (Hosseini, 2007, p.126). Or in another part when Mariam asserts that Laila will get used to the ruthless situation of living in Rasheed's household, Laila answers firmly that "I won't", "I couldn't let him...I wasn't raised in a household where people did things like that" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 130).

It illustrates how Laila's mentality is different from almost the majority of Afghan females who choose a passive way of living, to endure. Her attitude towards the injustice and despotism of male authority is to resist, whether this unjustness is a domestic one or a governmental one. As when she overlooks Rasheed's disagreement to accompany her to visit Aziza, who is forced to live in an orphanage for a period of time, Laila states "You can't stop me, Rasheed. Do you hear me? You can hit me all you want, but I'll keep going there" (Hosseini, 2007, p.164). Although Rasheed's refusal to accompany Laila challenges her with another problem of being beaten by Taliban agents, she decides to do what she wants. Therefore, Laila represents the middle-class Afghan female who has her own point of view and has more opportunities to discover life.

Laila returns to her country Afghanistan, even though she had experienced a peaceful and pleasant family life with her love, Tariq, in Pakistan. She wanted to fulfill Babi's dream that Laila will be needed in Afghanistan's reformation and construction process; and also materialize the prediction of her friend, Hasina, that one day Laila's photo will be on the front page of the newspaper. The home-coming is Laila's most remarkable decision and it represents how these marginalized people find their way to the center. Laila becomes a teacher at the orphanage in order to prevent illiteracy among her people. As Skaine (2002, p. 9) argues, "One of the most destructive effects of the Taliban's restrictions on women working is that a generation of children is growing up uneducated because most of Afghanistan's teachers were women".

## Conclusion

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays the image of Afghan women and the rules governing them in the constitution of a patriarchal community. A careful scrutiny into the characters of Mariam and Laila, self-evidently indicates that females are regarded as second-class citizens in the substructures of orthodox Afghan society.

The inferiority of women is defined as a natural concept and it is reinforced through the male interpretation of religion in the ideologically male dominated cultural construct. The rules that are accepted as norms for perfect womanhood are in contrast with the reality of women's individuality.

Afghan male ideology establishes a framework in society which leads to the deprivation of women's voice and self-identity. An excellent example of this authoritarianism is represented in the novel where women must be highly reliant on their fathers, husbands and sons for their living. The marginalization of women is a significant characteristic of the patriarchal lifestyle. Being second-class in all aspects of life is somehow internalized in women's mentality; women have no right to ask for equality. In such a system, some choose to endure the social and domestic violence and become the victim of a misogynistic society, whereas others choose to resist against the familial, political, cultural and religious institutions which develop the woman's identity. The level and nature of resistance towards such institutions is represented through the character of two major figures in the novel, Mariam and Laila, who undergo many hardships so as to have their individual identifications in life. Their efforts indicate that female subaltern's voice can be heard through strong resistance against oppression. The depiction of Mariam and Laila undermines the assumptions about third-world women made by Western feminists:

as a group or a category [that] are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious (read 'not progressive'), family oriented (read 'traditional'), legal minors (read 'they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights'), illiterate (read 'ignorant'), domestic (read 'backward') and sometimes revolutionary (read 'their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war-they-must-fight!') (Mohanty, 2003, p. 40).

## References

- Gandhi, L. (1998). *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Gordan, M., & Almutairi, A. S. (2013). Resistance, a Facet of Post-colonialism in Women Characters of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 2(3), 240-247.
- Hosseini, K. (2007). *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hosseini, K. (1956). *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistic & English Literature*, 2: 240-247.
- Landry, D. & MacLean, G. (2013). *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Loomba, A. (2005). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. New York: Routledge.
- McLeod, J. (2000). *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Mills, S. (2003). *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Mohanty, C.T. (2003). *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press.
- Parmer, P. & Amos, V. (1984). Challenging Imperial Feminism. *Feminist Review*. 17: 3-19.
- Rahimi, W.M. (1991). *Status of women: Afghanistan*. UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.
- Schwarz, H. & Ray, S. (2008). *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Skaine, R. (2002). Neither Afghan nor Islam. *Ethnicities*, 2(2), 142-144.