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GENDER INEQUALITY IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*: A STUDY

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Abstract:

The present paper focuses on the body of work, on the suffering of women, who coerced succumbing to the power structure designed by men. They always treat women as objects of sexual pleasure and not as a human. Khaled Hosseini goes into the oppression of women in his novel A Thousand Splendid Suns. In the story, the women are oppressed by the society. This is narrated through the delivery of the main antagonist's id, the gender inequality in enforcing laws and the marginalization of women. This novel emphasizes on gender discrimination in education, child marriage and pregnancy, sexual violence and unrecognized domestic work. These are some types of gender inequality. His works depict the plight of women subjected to the constant subjugation at the hands of male domination. He shows how the Afghan society is in the adamant grip of patriarchal and repressive mores that confer privileges upon men while depriving women of the most fundamental rights.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Child Marriage, Pregnancy and Sexual Violence etc..

The gender discrimination is a term to describe an unequal treatment based on sex. Many people wrongly understand the concept of gender, and they often relate it to sex. Gender and sex, though often seen related, are not synonymous or substitutes for each other. According to Lorber, "Sex is the state of being females and males; meanwhile, gender refers to women and men. All gender has its own identity and roles based as femininity and masculinity" (Lorber, 144).

Beauvoir differentiates sex and gender and notices that there is a relationship between natural and social functions. According to her, being female and being a woman are two very different kinds of being because the term 'female' refers to natural facts. In contrast, the term 'woman' refers to something that has been constructed by society. She clarifies that one is not born, but instead becomes, a woman.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is written in 2007. This novel has two main women characters, Mariam and Laila. With these two characters, Hosseini has presented the problems and isolation of women in Afghanistan. At another side, it will not be an exaggeration to say that these problems and seclusion of women is still in many parts of the world. They were also not exposed to! is another part of their sad story. The novel begins with the character Mariam. With this character, Hosseini has given the basic idea of the status of women in society. Mariam was an illegitimate child with that she could never claim for any legitimate things in her life. She was obsolete from the love, happiness, family and acceptance. When Mullah Faizullah supported Marriam for her school at that time Nana denied and said, "Learn? Learn what, Mullah Sahib? Nana said sharply. What is there to learn?" (Hosseini, *TSS*, 18). It was the response of male-dominated society on a girl child who wanted to go to school.

Mariam heard the word 'harami' when she was five years old. She knew that this word was referred for her though she did not know the meaning of the story: "At the time, Mariam did not



understand. She did not know what this word harami- bastard-meant. Nor was she knew the injustice, to see that it is the creator of the harami who are culpable, not the harami, whose only is not is being born” (Hosseini, *TSS*, 4). The condition of women in Afghan society is visible from the above phrase. They were marginalised from society. They did not have any freedom to do anything. Even they did not have the space to present their thoughts in front of the male. They were considered puppets by the male-dominated society.

This paper discusses women’s issues surfacing in novel discrimination, violence, endurance and courage, child marriage/arranged marriage, struggle, cultural oppression, patriarchy, and women’s freedom, empowerment, and equality. Thus, it focuses on Afghanistan's backdrop and how Hosseini’s works reflect a society mired in several inequalities. Under this chapter, the reader-response theory by Richard Beach will be used to analyse the above mentioned socio-political issues.

This novel depicts an evident prevalence of female characters and a focus on the women. While reading the book, it was found that the story revolves around Mariam and Laila's lives. It narrates the struggle of women in Afghanistan through the perspectives of the two central characters. It includes Afghanistan's history, its political events, and various invasions and attacks in Afghanistan by presenting a story across nearly forty-five years, associated with the characters' personal lives. Despite the distinct themes observed throughout the novel, it was found that Gender equality is one of the pieces that are present throughout this masterpiece.

The lives of the two women, abundant in struggle, abuse, misery, and sufferings resonate with us and invoke a sense of empathy for the characters. By examining the beginning of the novel, set in the early 1970s depicting Mariam’s teenage life, we observed the events that had a lasting effect on Mariam’s life. The disparity among the characters' roles and lives based on gender can be observed throughout the novel among all surfaces and the central characters. It also includes the male characters under focus to keep their privileges, powers, actions, and subjugation of women to juxtapose them against the difficulties, helplessness, restrictions, and oppression of women in the novel. It is noticed that “the domination of men over women was mainly due to the consideration of gender as an ideological, social structure, as Lazar postulates. It leads to a dichotomy into men and women, based on their sexual differences. As a social group, men are systematically privileged by the patriarchal social structures that disempowered, exclude, and constrict and disadvantage women as a social group” (Lazar, 145).

On reading the novel, it is observed as a poignant tale of feminine struggle, depicted beautifully and tragically through Mariam and Laila's lives. Other characters, including Nana and Mariam’s stepmother, enduring and subverting the constraints and limitations imposed on women in Afghanistan. This novel is relevant to the women in the contemporary world, regardless of their communities and geographical locations. The fight for gender inequality observed in the novel is ongoing in the real world. The women in the story trapped within a confined space-restricted and constrained by the men in their lives, society, Mujahideen and the Taliban.

It is found that the gender norms, roles, and restrictions were depicted as dynamic, changing throughout the novel. The gender relations differed depending on the forces and laws prevalent in the region. The norms were restricting under the communist rule, which attempted to exercise equality between men and women and permitted girls and women attend school and step outside their homes to work. This regimen is supported by Laila’s father, Babi, who urges Laila to take advantage of the opportunity, indicating his liberal and progressive thoughts. However, despite the freedom to study and work, women were discouraged from mingling with men before marriage. It is also found that the gender norms and rules varied according to traditions and regional standards. For instance, wearing a burqa is obligatory for Mariam even before it became law due to the region she lived in and the practices that are followed by Rasheed. Despite the communist rule and a relatively simple regimen, it



is found that the prevalence of gender disparities to some extent, especially when men, including Laila's brothers, is sent to fight in the war. At the same time, the women stay home and grieve their loss.

It is consider and incorporate Fish's notion of an interpretive community, which includes adopting interpretive techniques and strategies based on our cultural experiences and communities, interpreting a shared experience, understood better by the people belonging to the same culture or society. Similarly, being a woman, the plights of the women in the novel resonated well. It was relating them to the women throughout the world; although intensity and severity of the condition of women in the world around might not be as severe as those of Mariam and Laila, being subjected to the same oppressor, patriarchy, makes it easier for the women to relate to them.

On examining the characters in the novel, I noticed that men and women subjugated women. Jalil's wife played an essential role in the subjugation of Mariam and her tragic fate by denying her the right to education and by urging Jalil to marry her off, as a mere teenager to a man much older. The female characters are subjected to patriarchal oppression, sexism, and gender inequality since they are born, and throughout their lives. The lives of the central female characters found that gender inequality and sexist comments, disrespect, and oppression of these women are present in their lives since their childhood. Mariam has a complicated life from the very beginning, being an illegitimate child she is shunned by the society and abandoned by her father. Her mother's stringent rules restrict her, when she attempts to break the rules by meeting her father; her mother commits suicide, leaving Mariam with guilt for the rest of her life. Her life worsens when she is 'sold' by her father to Rasheed. Marriage gives her no hope for amelioration. Rasheed further constrains Mariam as he forces her to wear a burqa and not expose her ankles in public saying that her face must be the "business" of only her husband, not visible to any other man.

On analyzing the couples' intimate moments in the novel, one can notice a presence of toxicity. Rasheed's character was positive, and he was looked to be a kind man. However, after coming across his view for women, his sexist language, comparison of wives with cars, and his treatment of his wives, including their mental and physical abuse, make him a close-minded and abusive chauvinist. Jalil also exhibits toxic masculinity traits, his ill-treatment of Mariam's mother, the abandonment of Mariam, and his obsession with what the society thinks affected most of his actions that harmed Mariam. Although the traits of toxic masculinities in two crucial male characters, it is noteworthy that contrasting men are presented in the novel too like Tariq, Laila's father.

Thus, Human life consists of the coexistence of men, women, and other genders. The existence or voices of women are always ignored in various ways. As Susie Tharu states, the women's experiences and voices are suppressed and muted by the patriarchal narratives. The socio-cultural sphere itself is made up in favour of men. Men are the ones who create the social-cultural codes and women are expected to practice it. The lack of women in the administrative and judicial set up depicts the poor condition of women. As we all know, the historical narratives created the women figure as a reproducing or a subordinate to the male. In Afghanistan, this narrative plays as the main instrument to control women and exert male dominance. Moreover, "with the rise of the Taliban, the situation became appalling, particularly for women. Afghan women are still seen fighting for their voice and position in society" (Patar, 1053). Even today, we are subverted, marginalised, exploited, subjugated under the patriarchal rule, and considered an object of violence.



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To Cite the Article: *Bhosale, Suresh*, “*Gender Inequality in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns: A Study*”. *Literary Cognizance*, II-4 (March, 2022): 41-44. Web.