

Women's Predicament and Harassment in a Thousand Splendid Suns

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ABSTRACT

Khaled Hosseini, a novelist of the Twenty-first century, skilfully portrays the pitiable condition of Women in Afghani society. This paper attempts to examine how people were humiliated, brutally treated and tortured on gender-based issues. Not only their fundamental human rights violated, again and again, but they were also abducted, forced to marry and sold as slaves. The present paper is a modest attempt to show the suffering of women from different perspectives such as verbal, psychological and physical. Verbal harassment includes negative words which impact victims severely. Psychological harassment inflicted by one man to another man is even more dangerous and painful. Physical Harassment exhibits the physical grief of women that is nearly equivalent to the pain of death.

KEYWORDS: *Afghani Society, Humiliation, Harassment, Verbal, Psychological, and physical*

INTRODUCTION

Literature is the imitation or reflection of the world and human life. It can be seen as a portrait of human life, experiences, and values of life. So, literature influences people's emotions.

Novel is a kind of literary work besides drama and poem. As the others, it is produced by the human mind and soul. It depicts all about human life whether it is about an intrapersonal or interpersonal relationship. "The novel is a picture of real-life and manners and of the time in which it was written" (Clara Reeve, 1785). In the process of making a novel, the author never leaves his/her background of life as the important element. Therefore, the novel reveals the story of individuals and also the story of society whether it's about love, hate, harassment, oppression, bigotry, sadness, loneliness, solitude and friendship.

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the second novel written by Khaled Hosseini published in 2007 after *The Kite Runner*. It narrates three decades of anti-Soviet jihad, civil strife and Taliban rule seen from the perspectives of two women (Mariam and Laila). Mariam is the disgraced illegitimate daughter

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of a wealthy businessman, who is forced to marry Rasheed at the age of fifteen. After she fails to bear a child he becomes very brutal towards her. Eighteen years later, Rasheed married again, fourteen-year-old Laila. Laila is a bright and spirited girl who is full of life, whose parents died of a rocket attack. Mariam and Laila joined hands against Rasheed. The author gives a vivid picture of a dictatorship in which women are fully dependent on their father and husband and bearing a male child determines their social acceptance. Each woman in the end is forced to accept a path that will never be completely happy for them. Mariam will have to sacrifice her life to save Laila after she murders their husband. While Laila, despite marrying her childhood love, will have to find a way to ensure Mariam's sacrifice is not in vain.

DISCUSSION

According to the Holy Qur'an (2:228) "women have rights similar to those against them in a just manner,". A society is based on the equal, mutual but distinct contributions of both genders, male and female. But, in Afghanistan, women go through distressing cruelty and different kinds of Harassment such as verbal,

psychological and physical or sexual because Afghanistan is a patriarchal society, a male-dominated society and controlled by Taliban Rule. As Wulandari (2009) claims that Mariam and Laila are the representation of oppressed women in Afghanistan. In the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the protagonist Mariam and Laila go through different kinds of predicaments and harassment. Many unfortunate events happen either because society does little to stop it, or at times even encourages this destructive behaviour, and misuses the name of religion and culture as an instrument of oppression.

Simon de Beauvoir has written in her introduction to *The Second Sex* (1953):

“thus humanity is male and men define women not in her-self but as a relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being...He is the subject; he is the Absolute- she is the other.”

Like men, the patriarchal set-up never recognizes women as equal members. Women, taken as inferior, naturally weak, and submissive, are defined in relation to any other man. They do not determine their existence in society, says Eagleton (2008).

As Tyson (2006) points out that in a typical patriarchal society, social and cultural meaning is given to sex and gender, and the concept of manhood, external and internal oppression, and social oppression of women result into psychological oppression, acculturation and de-centralization of women. Thus, women are labelled as innately inferior and men as innately superior. The deprivation and devaluation of women begin in all the aspects of a patriarchal society and the meaning of sexes is based on biological or cultural constructionism. Women are taught and trained to serve the family as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers in a patriarchal and stereotypically conservative society like that of Afghanistan as portrayed in Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007).

Verbal Harassment- Words pose immense power. Words can be life-giving as well as life-threatening. Words have the potential to mould and shape the life of an individual as they are the expressions of thought, held in mind. Positive words have a prospering power while harsh words harass the human psyche.

Verbal Harassment is considered as any conscious and repeated attempt to humiliate, demean, insult, or criticize someone with words. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini describes the reaction of Rasheed who, at first, treats Mariam tolerably, but after the bath incident, she suffers miscarriage. This

miscarriage begins her trauma. Rasheed starts abusing her both physically and verbally:

“It is shown that most nights when he comes home, he hardly conversed with his wife. He eats, smokes and goes to bed, sometimes comes back in the middle of the night for a brief and of a late, quiet rough session of coupling (93).” He still goes with Mariam for walking as usual on Friday but he walks quickly without speaking to her and “he is not ready with a laugh on these outing anymore (93)”. In response to Mariam’s question, “are you angry with me? (93),” he often sighs and does unbearable actions which disturb Mariam's peace of mind. And the scene of stone crushing is a combination of both verbal and physical violence. He always uses savage tongue upon Mariam’s question and answers ridiculously. The description of Rasheed’s harsh behaviour and ridiculous words for Mariam may be seen clearly in the following passages: After the miscarriage when Mariam was in deep grief she asks for Rasheed’s permission over the proper burial to forget the miscarried baby, Rasheed reacts with offensive words “What for? It’s idiotic (94)”.

Continuous use of the harsh words keeps on pouring: “Then you do it”, “I’ve already buried one son. I won’t bury another. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m trying to listen (94)”.

After that, he turns up again the volume of the radio while kneeling his head back and closing his eyes. Rasheed also answers rudely when she wants to know about Afghanistan's political situation. When she asks, “What is a communist?” He snorts and raises both eyebrows. “You don’t know what a communist is? Such a simple thing. Everyone knows. It’s common knowledge. You don’t...Bah. I don’t know why I’m surprised.” Then he crossed his ankle on the table and mumbled that it was someone who believe in Karl Marx? (97)”. When he raises another question that seems to add more irritation “Rasheed sighed (97).”

Since he thinks that these questions are more irritating than before, and these bitter words come from his mouth, “You know nothing, do you? You’re like a child. Your brain is empty. There is no information in it (97).”

Psychological Harassment- It is the most potent, humiliating, and intimidating of all harassments as it is often difficult to detect leaving no evidence other than victim reports and complaints. It can be defined as, “an ongoing process in which one individual systematically diminishes and destroys the inner self of another. The essential ideas, feelings, perceptions, and personality characteristics of the victim are

constantly belittled" (Loring). There are different types of psychological harassment like denying, degrading, emotional responsiveness, terrorizing, rejecting, criticizing, accusing and mind control.

Nana's psychological condition-

Nana is struggling hard to live in society because her husband Rasheed refuses her as a wife. She loses her freedom in society and family, and she is mentally pinched all the time. Even though Jalil is not assaulting her physically or verbally, whatever he does is scaring her spirit. Nana informs Mariam that Jalil is a person without love and compassion. Jalil throws her out of his house and forces her to live alone in kolba rather than save her honour. She raises Mariam all by herself, and always tries to convince Mariam that Jalil is not the man she thinks. And she also prepares Mariam's mind that "Women like us. We endure. It's all we have." Her psychological pain can also be viewed through her words when she abuses Mariam by saying 'harami' again and again. After this bitter experience, Nana teaches Mariam:

"Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman" (7).

Rasheed's negligence towards Mariam-

Rasheed never gives a proper answer to Mariam's questions, most of the time he ignores her. This is evident in the following lines:

"Most nights when he came home, he hardly talked anymore (93)".

"... he walked quickly and always a few steps ahead of her, without speaking, unmindful of Mariam who almost had to run to keep up with him (93)". While rarely talking to Mariam Rasheed seems irritated by Mariam's question as it is seen from the following quotes:

"Then stop pestering me!" I'm sorry. Bakhsh, Rasheed. I'm sorry." He crushed out his cigarette and lit another. He turned up the volume on the radio. (94) The winter narration shows how it is difficult for Mariam to cope with her husband's attitude. "It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her ... his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat (97)."

The following act shows how Rasheed gives no attention to Mariam's query.

"What is going to happen? (99)" instead, "Rasheed shot her a sidelong glance. He made a sound between a sigh and a groan, dropped his legs from the table, and turned off the

radio. He took it upstairs to his room. He closed the door (99)."

Rasheed's silent expressions also kill Mariam a hundred times a day.

Foible in Mariam's cooking-

Rasheed always finds faults in Mariam's cooking and she recalls her experience with her mother at the Kolba while preparing the food:

.... As she remembered the time when she had enjoyed, and even looked forward to cooking for Rasheed. Now cooking was an exercise in heightened anxiety.

"The qurmas were always too salty or too bland for his taste. The rice was judged either too greasy or too dry, the bread declared too doughy or too crispy. Rasheed's fault-finding left her stricken in the kitchen with self-doubt." (99)

Rasheed turns down Mariam's confidence in preparing food for him. It is depressing for a wife when a husband always finds a problem with the food she prepared for him. The women always want nice comments on her cooking, especially from her husband's side. Since Mariam considers that she is the one, who makes Rasheed change. Due to his disappointment with her recurring miscarriages, she opts to surrender to Rasheed's bad behaviour.

Second marriage with Laila-

Considering Laila's young age, which Mariam thinks inappropriate to marry too old Rasheed, who, according to the novel, is over sixty-year-old at that time- "Rasheed had to be sixty or more (207)." Mariam vehemently refuses Rasheed's request for her agreement. However, Rasheed, on the other hand, rebukes her argument, saying,

"Don't be so dramatic. It's a common thing and you know it. I have friends who have two, three, or four wives. Your father had three. Besides, what I'm doing now most men I know have done it a long ago. You know it's true (209)."

Underestimating Mariam with unfavourable comparison to Laila-

Rasheed always uses dirty words for Mariam and takes her inferior in front of Laila as it is seen in the following lines:

Rasheed says "We are city people, you and I, but she is a dehati. A village girl. Not even a village girl. No she grows up in kolba made of mud outside the village". Then he goes on to name Mariam "a harami" (216), the word which jerks on her mind and reminds her bad old days and how people disrespect her and her mother. Not yet enough with that, Rasheed titles

Mariam the Volga which is a kind of old-fashioned car. "She is sturdy, for one thing, a good worker, and without pretensions. I will say this way: if she were a car, she would be a Volga (216)." Still Rasheed once again consciously or unconsciously attacks on Mariam's self-estimation upon Laila by overvaluing Laila with the calls of the queen, and Malika. "As for you, you are the queen, the Malika, and this house is your palace. Anything you need to be done you ask Mariam and she will do it for you. Won't you Mariam (217)." These kinds of contracts have been given to Mariam by our conscience; we can sense how unfortunate the situation for Mariam, she came across a lot of grief.

Physical harassment- Any action that causes hurt or is intended to cause hurt can be considered physical harassment. This is a very painful and commonest type of harassment.

Physically harassed Mariam after finding fault in Her Cooking-

When Rasheed was too much dissatisfied and unhappy by the meal prepared by Mariam, he humiliates her physically, which marks the first time she has been physically harassed, her two molars broke down when she chewed the pebbles given by Rasheed.

"Rasheed made a ball of rice with his fingers. He put it in his mouth, chewed once, then twice, before grimacing and spitting it out the sofrah..... Then the hard front door opened and Rasheed was back in the living room (102).

"Get up" he said. "Come here. Get up." He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it. "Put these in your mouth." "CHEW!" he bellowed..... Then was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars. (102- 103)

The brutality of Rasheed over Mariam and Laila while they planned to escape from his house-

When Mariam and Laila decided to escape from Rasheed's house in the spring of 1994, with Aziza they were caught up by a police officer due to strict Taliban rule, women cannot travel without a male relative. They were taken into custody and after interrogation, the officers drop them at Rasheed's house, despite Laila's pleads "not to send them back to a house in which they would be endangered, but the officers refuse to do that they say that it is your private family matter. Rasheed overcomes anger, beats Laila and locks her Aziza in Mariam's bedroom.

He beats Mariam with barbarity and locks her in the tool shed."

Hosseini writes:

"Laila did not see the punch coming. One moment she was talking and the next she was on all fours, wide-eyed and red-faced, trying to draw a breath. It was as if a car had hit her at full speed, in the tender place between the lower tip off breastbone and the belly button. She realized she had dropped Aziza and that Aziza was screaming. She tried to breathe again and could only make a husky, choking sound. Dribble hung from her mouth (261)."

Rasheed seems to accumulate all his efforts to make the torture on Mariam worse. "Briefly after repeating sound of battering with no screaming even pleading from Mariam, Laila witnesses Rasheed dragging Mariam by her hair into the tool shed." "Mariam was barefoot and doubled over. There was blood on his hands, blood on Marias's face, down her neck and back. Her shirt had been ripped down the front" (262). "Rasheed then locks Mariam in the tool shed while Laila and Aziza in a light-closed room and deprive them of food and water for four days (263)."

Finishing all dying punishment, he warps it by uttering a word of threat that if she does it again, he will surely punish her again starting from Mariam, then Aziza and finally Lila herself. "I will make you watch (265)." "And, with that, he left the room. But before delivering a kick to the flank that would have Laila pissing blood for days. (265)

Rude behaviour of Rasheed towards his wives and daughter-

In opposition to Zalmai, Aziza considers her circumstances to be unlucky when Rasheed insists on having Laila sent to be a beggar in one mosque to help cover the money he borrowed from Zalmai's thing- And later will be an orphanage instead. Since Laila refuses to agree, Rasheed then without much doubt loses his anger in the form of physical force:

"Laila did not notice that Rasheed was back in the room. Until his hand was around her throat until she was lifted off her feet and slammed against the wall. Up close, this sneering face seemed impossibly large. Laila noticed how much puffier it was getting with age and nose. Rasheed didn't say anything. Add what could be said, want to be needed saying when you'd shoved the barrel of your gun into your wife's mouth? (293)"

Rasheed's financial condition is worsening contributing to his burning shoes shop and also betting fired from some jobs like kebab restaurants

and others. These circumstances are also a part of Rasheed's abusive behaviour that is increasing in quantity.

"After being fired, Rasheed was home almost every day. He slapped Aziza. He kicked Mariam. He threw things. He found fault with Laila, the way she smelled, the way she dressed the way she combed her hair, her yellowing teeth. (297)"

Another instance of his aggression is. "And then he was on Laila, pummelling her chest. Her head. Her belly with a fist, tearing at her hair, throwing her to the wall...He went on kicking, kicking Mariam now spittle flying from his mouth his eyes glittering with murderous intent kicking until he couldn't anymore (298)."

Learning that Laila has met with Tariq at his back from Zalmai, Rasheed is very angry. Rasheed responds with "Well, what do you know? Laila and Majnoo reunited. Just like old-time" (328). Then Rasheed gradually asks his boy for a more detailed explanation. Soon after she considers it has been clear enough he releases his anger in a merciless attack on Laila after escorting his boy to go upstairs locking all doors and unbuckling his belt to put it on his knuckles. (337)

Without saying a word, he swung the belt at Laila. He did it with such speed that she had no time to retreat or duck, or even raise a protective arm. Laila touched her fingers to her temple and looked at the blood and looked at Rasheed with astonishment.... Rasheed swung the belt again ...He caught her, threw her up against the wall and struck her with the belt again the buckle slamming against her chest, her shoulder, her raised arms, her fingers, drawing blood wherever it stuck. (337-338)

Then the peak of all of this is the finishing from Mariam that she shoves on Rasheed with the shovel she has taken before from the tool shed. Mariam's monumental decision is drifted by the dread that Rasheed will dash to his gun to end all of this fighting. "If she let him walk now, how long before he fetched the key from his pocket and went for that gun of his upstairs in the room where he'd locked Zalmai ... But in Rasheed's eyes she saw murder for them both". (340)

CONCLUSION

As we conclude that any kind of harassment is a scourge of society. Women had to struggle in day-to-day life. They had to battle for survival. The girls do not have any house which could be their own to explore their rights. In the novel **A Thousand Splendid Suns**, we have seen that the writer Khaled

Hosseini portrays a realistic picture of Afghan women, and how they were treated and harassed differently such as verbal, psychological and physical.

The verbal harassment gives a realistic picture of the offensive words insidiously inserting themselves into the human relationship at home or any other place. The character Nana and Mariam faces harsh words in their daily life from their husband or society. It also affects their psychological condition whereas Mariam and Laila go through Physical harassment also.

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