

A Thousand Splendid Suns: A critical study of the patriarchal hegemony in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The paper attempt to envisage the layers of patriarchal monopoly prevalent in Afghanistan; the constructed mind set people regarding dos and don'ts of women; how these layer of thought process evolved and the future consequence of such thought process. Indeed, this paper would be focusing on the living standard and conditions of women during the turbulent period in Afghanistan; the degree of independence they enjoyed and their contribution in the field of education, jobs and other sectors. This research article would not only focus on the aspects of the livelihood of women but also the system, which is responsible for such unexpected consequence; the relationship amongst men and women; amongst woman themselves, to bring change in the fortune and to get rid of a life which is akin to hell on earth. The taboos of the society expect women to bear the burden of sin and men to disgrace them. If truth be told, the condition is completely reverse women are subjected to be disgraced because they are subjugated, subverted and undermined by male dominated society. A serious enquiry can be expected from *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, where many such similar stories are being revealed through Nana, Mariam, Laila and Rasheed. The gist of this article is to analyze the legacy of patriarchal thought, its consequence; outcome of such thought process and to suggest remedies.

KEYWORDS: Hegemony, Patriarchy, Matriarchy, Structure, thought process etc.

The Process of patriarchal hegemony is as old as society itself is. The patriarchal power struggle exists at every level of social structures like politics, economy religion, family etc. The inevitable truth of the society is Darwinism i.e. the power struggle for survival. The victorious in the process survives and could retain in existence. The power struggle for hegemony amongst men and women is not a new phenomenon. Euripides also highlighted such issues in *Medea*, a play of before Christian era, later translated into English. khaled Husaini is also one such writers, who very candidly and explicitly mentioned the contemporary issues related to women of Afghanistan in *A thousand Splendid Suns*. *A thousand Splendid Suns* is not merely a piece of literature but a testimonial of criticism for centuries, which revealed the original picture of Afghanistan; a country fully devoid of modern education and technologies; women are expected to take household responsibilities and the most valuable creature. Despite of having plurality of wives man could have unlawful relation with number of sweet hearts. A man is free to tie knot with a girl beneath than half of his age, where women have no words of affirmation or negation. They are supposed to act according to the whims of the patriarch of the family, as it happened in case of Mariam, Laila and many more.

Mariam was an illegitimate child of her father. Though he acknowledged the fact of illegitimacy but never recognized it. He looked after all her needs but never recognized her as his daughter. She was a perpetual source of agony to her mother, Nana, who lived in an abandoned place. She bore the sin of illegitimacy whereas, Miriam's father never took any pain to understand the psychological trauma and restrictions prevailed on Nana. Mariam was often treated as 'Harami'(an illegitimate child), but as a child she was completely unaware of the meaning and significance of 'Harami'. As an innocent child she would often contemplate about being a 'Harami'. Nana often cursed her as 'Harami', but why did mother call her daughter 'Harami'? Why was she accounted for being a 'Harami'? The ambiguities remain untouched. It is society which constructed such notions. Otherwise, they would have accused the mastermind, who injected the seed of illegitimacy.

“At the time, Mariam did not understand. She did not know what this words harami-bastard meant. Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the harami who are capable, not harami, not the harami, whose only sin is being born. Mariam did surmise by way Nana said the word, that it was an ugly, loathsome thing to be harami, like an insect, like the scurrying cockroaches. Nana was always cursing and sweeping out the kolba.” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:4).

Mariam become the symbol of disgrace. Nana could not bear the shame cursed on her. Patriarchy never accuses men for anything being done wrong. Mariam was not allowed by her father to visit the theatre of his own. Infect, she was treated as an outcast when she left her mother's house. The Shock of disgrace could not bear by Nana and breathed her last. Nana warned Mariam and said, “Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter; Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a women. Always you remember that, Mariam.” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:7).

“Nana said to Mariam, what a stupid girl you are! You think you matter to him, that you are wanted in his house?

You think you are a daughter to him? That he is going to take you in? Let me tell you something. A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb.” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:27)

Afghan society holds legacy of centuries old. Women are expected to get married just after attaining the age to puberty irrespective to what physique stands for. Physical maturity was considered for marriage and conjugal affairs. Whims of women were never considered and understood. Besides having a wife, a man could have any number of wives just to satisfy his carnal appetite. The taboo of the society expects woman to bear all such mental and physical tortures. Even the matriarchs of family were trained to follow suit such constructions. They were advised to give informal training to their subordinates and children. Mariam and Laila are such characters, became the victim of the system; fall into the hands of reckless villain, Rasheed, their aged husband. The disgrace of the society, Mariam was not welcomed at her father's house. On the contrary, she was married to Rasheed, almost thrice of her age, against her wishes. Afsoon, one of her step mothers, convinced Mariam, “Now he is little older than you.” Afsoon claimed in, but he can't be more than..... forty. Forty five at the most, wouldn't you say, Nargis?

“Yes, but I have seen nine year-old girls given to men twenty years older than your suitor, Mariam we all have what are you, fifteen? That’s a good, solid marrying age for a girl.” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:47).

Mariam as a girl of tyrannical past could not understand everything Rasheed wanted. He wanted an heir of his own and that too particularly a boy child. He doesn’t like female children as his own. Mariam went several cycles of miscarriages and that was the perpetual source of her sorrows and agony. Rasheed, gravely the opportunity of the circumstance, tortured her severely and looked for the opportunity to get married again. Mariam said about Rasheed, “It wasn’t easy tolerating him taking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insult ... but after four years of marriage, 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 insistence on stalling even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on a occasion he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not.” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:97, 98)

Rasheed was man of dry humor and calculating nature. He always treated women as an object of bed. Mariam often finds it difficult to measure and understand his psyche. The reckless Rasheed, never tried to accommodate with her traumatic past. Indeed, he was looking for opportunity to get remarried and that too of a girl, who is destitute, beautiful, young and mature. Rasheed, gave shelter to Laila when Russian rocket devastated everything of hers. His eyes fall on Laila, a girl who had lost all of her kiths and kin during war. He insisted Mariam to accept his decision and said, “She is too young, you are too old to do this for me... Mariam replied “I’m too old. Too old for you to do this for me... don’t be so dramatic. It’s a common thing and you know it. I have friends who have two, three, and four, wives. Your own father had three.” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:208, 209) Rasheed’s evil intention reached its zenith and he said, “She could keep warm in one of those Peshawar brothels. Business is booming there, I hear a beauty like her ought to bring in small fortunes, don’t you think?” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:209).

Helpless women Mariam and Laila eventually accepted his will. He tied the knot with Laila and began to enjoy and embrace his new young wife. He expected that now he would have a male heir. He was always suspicious regarding Laila’s childhood crush with Tariq. He occasionally demanded explanation from Laila regarding her affair with Tariq. Laila, being trained by Mariam, regarding the true nature of Rasheed, never revealed to him anything. Laila shared the news of her pregnancy to Rasheed. “It was this story that was circling in Laila head after she gave Rasheed the news about the baby. He had immediately hopped on his bicycle ridden to a mosque and prayed for a boy”. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:222). He started recording every minute detail of Laila’s physical changes and began to shower love and affection towards her. At the same time he became scornful towards Mariam. He instructed and advised Mariam to do household chores and Laila to take rest. He always wanted a male child to be his heir and always remained busy in building castles in the air. Once he calculated the change occurred in Laila’s belly and said, “Swelling so quickly. It’s going to be a big boy. My son will be Palawan! Like his father.” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:226). Rasheed’s wild nature

returned to its original savage instinct, when he saw the new born is a girl child. She was named Aziza, whose looks did not resemble with him. He began to suspect Laila, who may have had possible affair with Tariq .Another 'Harami' in his home. He does not look after Aziza, as it was expected to be. He began to contemplate to through her out once she reached the age of puberty.

He said to Laila, "you would be surprised how much they can bring in ...there will be others like her, younger even, everyone is Kabul is doing the same" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:291).

War broke out in Afghanistan, Mujahedeen and the Taliban group fought against Russia. State wealth and private properties have been confiscated. Poverty ransacked in every nook and corner of the country. The impact of war particularly falls on women. Most of them lost their husbands and other male relatives on whom they were dependent for bread and other crying needs. Big guns from the different strata of the society took the opportunity and used women to satisfy their lust. Women were the most vulnerable; many of them were being raped; some of them were sold in brothels etc. Laila was also one such victims of the time. Rasheed intended to through Aziza into prostitution or else she should be sent in an orphanage. Zaman, the caretaker of the orphanage said to Laila, "We get mothers like you all the time-all the time- mother who came here who can't feed their children because the Taliban won't let them go out make a living. So you don't blame yourself. No one here blames you. I understand." (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:311) Rasheed's scornful rowdiness induced him to send Aziza in an orphanage without revealing her father's identify. She was trained, "If they ask you about your father, what you say?The Mujahedeen killed him" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:307). On many occasions Laila and Mariam visited the orphanage to see Aziza but Talibs didn't allow them without male escort. They never gave the opportunity to understand the original circumstance which compelled Laila to move out of the home without legal male escort. One day on the way to orphanage Laila encountered a Taliban soldier and "a young Talib beat-Laila with a radio antenna. What he was done, he gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said, "I see you again; I beat until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones." (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:313)

Laila had to wear layers of cloth to protect her body from the severe beatings of Taliban. The poverty of Afghanistan and the miserable condition of women is a beggar description. "Aziza's began to push through the skin and the feat from her cheeks vanished. Her calves thinned and her complexion turned the color of weak tea." (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:315). Rasheed was indifferent towards Aziza because he could easily make out- that Aziza was belonging to Tariq. After Laila's reunion with Tariq, Rasheed tortured her very savagely, "The belt made a thump when Rasheed dropped it to the ground and came of her some jobs, that thumb said, were meant to be done with bare hands (P339). Rasheed said to Laila, "you think I didn't figure it out? About your *harami*? You take me a fool you whore?" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:329).

Mariam and Laila shared a bond of friendship with each other. The joined hands together to give lessons to Rasheed. Mariam helped Laila to elope with Tariq after their reunion, but as ill luck would have it, they were caught by the Talibs and eventually handed over

to the police. All their efforts to abscond from Afghanistan and particularly that too from Rasheed proved futile. Although the police took bribe and gave illegal pass to many people but in their case, the police turned reverse. The police officer said to Laila, “You can be imprisoned for running away; I assume you understand, nay?” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:259). Police returned Laila and Mariam to Rasheed’s custody. Rasheed grew more violent that he used to be. He locked her in a room without giving food and didn’t even allow her to go to toilet.

“Laila didn’t see the punch coming...she realized she had dropped Aziza, That Aziza was screaming...she was being damaged by the hair. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:262).

“Azan rang out second time and still Rasheed had not given them any food, and worse not water. That day, a thick, suffocating heat fell on them. The room turned into a pressure cooker”. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:263).

Both of them tolerated him every now and then. All their efforts to get freedom from him proved futile and all their hope nipped in the bud. One must take one’s life to reach at conclusion. One day Rasheed went violent on Laila, as if he would murder her on the spot. Mariam realized the vitality of the time and circumstance took a shovel and stroked Rasheed. He immediately falls on the ground and breathed his last on the spot.

“He looked up”

Mariam Sway.

She lit him across the temple; the blow knocked him off Laila” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2013:346).

Laila gained independence from the tyranny of Rasheed and eventually eloped with Tariq. Mariam was sent in a prison for the crime of murder and finally sentenced to death. There was no systematic legal and judicial process. No authority came forward to inquest the actual circumstance which compelled her to murder Rasheed. Mariam accorded with the whims of the fortune and system and at the end, she accepted the sentence with wide arms, she gained independence through her death.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is not a novel which directly deals with feminism rather it highlighted the layers of patriarchal system which dominates and governs the Afghan society. Feminism and patriarchy are closely associated terms; where none of them can be discussed in isolation. Laila and Mariam are the mad women in the attic. Their characteristic features can be traced with *Medea* of Euripides and *wife* of Bharati Mukharjee. They are the representative figures of all Afghan women. Now a question arises, what could be the possible causes for such atrocities and tyranny? Is it religion or the mindset of people? Nowadays western society is assumed to be free from gender biases but if we look into the history of West then we would find that they were more conservative in comparison to Afghan society. For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *the scarlet letter* highlighted the punishment for committing adultery. George Eliot concealed her original identity because women were not expected to write and to gain education. World leading Universities like Oxford and Cambridge didn’t allow women for degrees

initially. There are many examples which can be cited to justify atrocities against women in Western society. The Western world mostly follows Christian religion, so should we blame the Gospels of Jesus Christ for such atrocities? Definitely not, because it is the constructed ideology which constructed the system. Similarly, Islamism as a religion cannot be blamed for such situation in Afghanistan. Taliban are using the name of Islam but they have their own ideology and interest. They are being trained, manipulated and brainwashed by a system to act according to their whims. Islam never advocated and advised such atrocities against women. It is ignorance which attracts people towards the darker side of civilization. Yes, it is education which is the solution of everything, it lead towards the lighter side, which is full of peace and happiness. True religious teachings either it is Islamism, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism etc. makes man a social animal. Islam is a religion of peace; it has no place for atrocities and terrorism. Modern scientific education and the study of humanities lead towards the advancement of life and society. Combination of religion, humanities and sciences makes a man perfect human being. Women are almost half of the entire population. So we must bring them into the main stream of education at par with all other social structures. Indeed, I would say, it is education which eradicates all evils, wild instincts in human being and it is the solution of everything.

Footnotes

1. The novel taken into consideration to trace its characteristic features with the central characters of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, otherwise *Wife* has no significant contribution in the paper.
2. The play taken into consideration to trace its characteristic features with the central characters of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, otherwise *Medea* has no significant contribution in the paper.

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