

## A SAGA OF REDEMPTION AND RESURRECTION: SAGACIOUS SANGUINITY IN HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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### **Abstract:**

*Dilemmas arise in the universe when a person deem himself superior to his fellow beings. Khaled Hosseini's second novel, A Thousand Splendid Suns, offers a poignant portrayal of the women in Afganistan. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the subaltern women are more at risk of tyranny and pressure than subaltern men because they are the second sex fated to remain hushed. It is a protest against male hegemony over female subalternity. The present paper titled "A Saga of Redemption and Resurrection: Sagacious Sanguinity in Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns" investigates how Hosseini has thrown light on the way in which the bona fide equation of power overturns the destiny of the victimizers and the victims. With stunning heroism, the subalterns come out victorious - one could witness a narrative of salvation and renaissance with reference to Afghanistan, though many paid their lives in the heinous attacks of the war.*

**Keywords:** *Subaltern, Afghanistan, patriarchy, subjugation, women, power.*

Most of the societies in the world are unbreakably bound to many rigidly formed norms and traditions. All constraints associated with such tenets are strongly affixed to the female community, thereby fastening them to the hardest part of life. Simone de Beauvoir expresses her state in *The Second Sex* - "A free and autonomous creature like all others, a woman finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the 'other' and reduce her to the status of the 'second sex'" (391). They become the worst sufferers as the social norms and moral codes are disadvantageous to them in particular. Their minds often and always grapple with trauma and psychic conflicts. However, they are persuaded to live in complete darkness, enchained to the brutally powerful triad, father-husband-son, throughout their lives.

Bell Hooks in the article entitled, "Understanding Patriarchy," define patriarchy as, "a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence" (18). It is an accepted norm in the society to dominate women in every way.

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher and politician, employed the term 'subaltern' (which was applied to lower ranks in military, around 18<sup>th</sup> century) to denote those which are socially, politically and geographically outside the hegemonies of power. From him, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian scholar, literary theorist, and feminist critic, has borrowed the term. By "subaltern", Spivak means the unrepresented and underprivileged subjects or more generally those "of inferior rank" (Spivak 283). She came to the forefront of literary circle with her celebrated essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she proposes a theory of subalternity. But here, Spivak does not negate the attempts to speak of and about the subaltern. Instead she invites the conscious self-reflexivity of those intending to raise their voice for the subalterns. Also, she prompts the subalterns to voice their protests against their condition of being subalterns. In stating that the subaltern cannot speak what Spivak meant is that "if the subaltern were able to make herself heard - as has happened when certain subaltern emerged, in Antonio Gramsci's terms, as

organic intellectuals and be spokespeople for their communities - her status as a subaltern would be changed utterly; she would cease to be subaltern” (Landry and Maclean 5-6).

“The essence of repression lies simply in turning something away and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious” (Freud 147). The condition of the female subaltern is the most dreadful of all oppressive states. They own a lack of awareness about their rights as individuals and often submit submissively to being victims of the superior authority and lead a life of subjugated service “Learn this now and learn this well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman” (7). These are the words of the mother character terribly concerned about the future life of her daughter, in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Khaled Hosseini was born on March 4, 1965 in Kabul, Afghanistan and moved to the United States in 1980. Though he earned a bachelor's degree in medicine, he retired from his job to write full-time. His works include the best sellers like *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and *And The Mountains Echoed* (2013). Having set his novels in Afghanistan, Hosseini's devotion to his homeland extends beyond his writings. His thought for a better Afghanistan discussed in his works is proof of his love for the country. Hosseini is accomplished as a story teller who could portray events like aggression, discontent and agony that may seem unbearable yet explicable and readable. His descriptive style and the redemptive sense he develops towards the end make the whole narrative, for all its tragic incidents, slip down rather easily. Hosseini never challenges the typical western view of Afghanistan, but he often enhances it; he attaches greater awareness and understanding to it, and makes the Afghans come alive as affectionate and emotional individuals.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* is set in Afghanistan from the 1960s to the 1990s, spanning from Soviet occupation to the Taliban control. It draws crystal clear pictures of the fretful conditions of women in all phases of their lives as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. In the book which consists of four parts, Hosseini demonstrates the interior lives of anonymous women who lack identity of any kind. He blends the experiences of the central characters of the novel -Mariam and Laila- with the religious, cultural and political ambiances that detrimentally affect an Afghan family life. Born a generation apart, both Mariam and Laila are brought up by their families with entirely different notions regarding the life of a woman in a patriarchal society.

Mariam is the illegitimate seed implanted in the womb of a meager housemaid by the rich householder, Jalil. The *harami* child Mariam, through her narrator voice explains her predicament as “an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home and acceptance” (4). Whatever the condition that exists, she is contented with the love and affection her father showers upon her which her mother, Nana mocks as “rich lies” (5). As far as Nana is concerned, education is a forbidden fruit for women; and in her own words, “there is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school . . . Only one skill. And it's this: *tahamul*. Endure. . . It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have” (18).

Discarded by her suitor, humiliated as a temptress by her lover Jalil and his family and neglected by her father, Nana becomes a hard and resentful woman who wants her daughter to expect nothing but violence and mistreatment from men. She always warns Mariam,

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! (27)

Sooner, Mariam becomes conscious of this fact from the conduct of Jalil and the others upon her arrival at his home. Out of shame and humiliation, Nana commits suicide, leaving Mariam all alone in a

world of misfortune and hardships. As a matter of fact, Mariam becomes the sole responsibility of her father and Jalil wholeheartedly takes her home. But ever since Nana's death, Mariam “could hear so clearly now the insincerity that had always lurked beneath, the hollow false assurances [of Jalil]” (38).

In no time, to free off himself from the liabilities of a father, Jalil gives the 15 year old Mariam's hand in marriage to Rasheed, a shoemaker from Kabul aged 45, against all her pleas and protests. Though she represents all girl children who are exempted from demanding any right in an inconsiderate, dispiriting world, she could not help herself from expressing her feeling of disgust and abhorrence towards Jalil.

I used to worship you... On Thursdays I sat for hours waiting for you. I worried myself sick that you wouldn't show up... I thought about you all time. I used to pray that you'd live to be a hundred years old. I didn't know that you were ashamed of me... It ends here for you and me. Say your good-byes.  
(54-55)

This episode in Mariam's life highlights the fate of women of having no choice in marriage. They are like mere puppets destined to obey the verdict of the family.

Afterwards, she reluctantly enters into a new world with her husband. The sight of Kabul makes Mariam feels “uprooted [and] displaced, like an intruder on someone else's life” (62). Feeling completely lost in a ditch of darkness, she leads a life similar to that of a trapped animal, awaiting everything unwanted every moment. After a short break, she is forced to perform all the duties of a wife. Sooner, Rasheed creates in her mind the impression of a well-mannered and caring husband in every way. She is not allowed to mingle either with others, be it men or women; and as he thinks that “a woman's face is her husband's business only” (69), he gives her a *burqa* to wear whenever she leaves home, after much philosophizing about the shameful ways of modern men and women. Mariam considers herself privileged by his “protectiveness” (85). Though to her great disappointment Mariam realizes how addicted Rasheed is to pornographic pictures, she makes up her mind even to accept the truth that he is a man “all those years without a woman” (82).

Shockingly, happiness comes to a close and things become worse with the seven miscarriages she had. Mariam finds, “...each loss, each collapse, each trip to the doctor more crushing” as Rasheed too becomes “more remote and resentful” considering her “a burden” (98). In everything she does for him, he finds faults without pity, although she tried to execute his demands. The culmination of his brutality towards her can be seen when “he shoved two fingers in 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 her upper lip curled in a sneer” (102). Her mouth is filled with blood, pebbles and the fragments of two broken molars. Rasheed behaves as though he is licensed to inflict harm upon her in return for not giving him a son. According to him, in marriage, she has given him “bad food, and nothing else” (103). Even destiny plays its part as she could not become a mother.

Now, the storyline turns towards the second female protagonist, Laila, the only daughter of Hakim and Fariba, neighbours of Rasheed. She is a high-spirited young girl filled with a sense of purpose. Though her mother pays little or no attention to her, it is her father, whom she calls *Babi*, who often motivates her. He is a devout believer in the importance of education, especially that of women. He often reminds her that the most essential thing in his life after her safety and wellbeing is her learning. She always finds herself surprised when her friends' discussions carry over to the subject of marriage and suitors at this very young age. However she knows that they are pressured by their families to get married before they reach the age twenty. According to her Babi,

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, Afganistan is going to need you as much as its men, may be even more. Because a society has no chance at success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance". (114)

She considers herself fortunate enough to have Babi as her father who always inculcates into her mind several forward-thinking modern ideas.

Very close to her heart, Laila has a friend named Tariq, her next door neighbour and a few years older than her. Tariq lost a leg during a war, yet, he has a strong heart, and he stands up for Laila when she is tyrannized by anyone around. Laila is proud to have a friend like Tariq and in no time, they realise that they are passionately in love, though they do not reveal it to each other. Unfortunately for them all, conditions in Kabul become worse as the conflict turns to war there. Kabul is bombarded by rocket attacks leading to the fleeing of several natives to safer areas. Tariq's family also decides to leave the city and the touching parting between Laila and Tariq culminates with them consummating their love. Though Tariq pleads Laila to marry him and leave with them she refuses as she is quite aware that she could not marry Tariq and leave her father alone with her mother.

Soon afterwards, tragedy strikes Laila's family. She loses her parents in a bomb attack; and she barely survives. Rasheed and Mariam nurse the totally devastated Laila.

FOR THE FIRST WEEK, the girl did little but sleep, with help from the pink pills Rasheed paid for at the hospital. She murmured in her sleep. Sometimes she spoke gibberish, cried out, called out names Mariam did not recognize. She wept in her sleep, grew agitated, kicked the blankets off, and then Mariam had to hold her down. Sometimes she retched and retched, threw up everything Mariam fed her...Some days she was childlike, whipped her head side to side...but she submitted eventually...Long bouts of weeping followed surrender. (193-194)

Her life takes a new turn then on as she comes into the malevolent hands of Rasheed who entraps her by making her believe that she is left without any kith and kin in the whole world. He even weaves a false story about her beloved Tariq's death. All these heart breaking revelations freeze her body and mind. "She sat on the chair, hands limp in her lap, eyes staring at nothing" (204) and she lets her mind wander away to seek out safety and peacefulness.

Sooner, Mariam could easily recognize the willfully selfish eye her husband has on the fourteen year old Laila. Though Mariam tries to change his mind in her own way, he stands firm in his decision. He convinces Mariam, and Laila in no time is convinced about her helplessness. On realizing that she has got impregnated with the baby of her love, she is left with no other option other than accepting the lustful Rasheed's marriage proposal.

I knew you wouldn't take it well. I don't really blame you. But this is for the best. You'll see. Think of it this way, Mariam. I'm giving *you* help around the house and *her* a sanctuary. A home and a husband. These days, times being what they are, a woman needs a husband... Well, I'd say this is downright charitable of me... The way I see it, I deserve a medal.

LATER, in the dark, Mariam told the girl.

For a long time, the girl said nothing. "He wants an answer by this morning," Mariam said.

"He can have it now," the girl said. "My answer is yes." (209-210)

To save herself and her baby from the "gaze of vultures", Laila succumbs to Rasheed's will,

though she knows that her choice is “dishonourable, disingenuous, and shameful, and spectacularly unfair to Mariam” (213). Rasheed reveals to Laila that Mariam is a harami and equates her to a Volga. However, Rasheed associates Laila to a Benz that requires special attention. Rasheed tells Laila not to leave the house without him and to wear a burqa when she does leave with him. Every such comment angers Mariam and thus her relation with Laila gets much more shattered. The news about the baby in Laila's womb further worsened the state of Mariam that she could not tolerate “such cheerful cruelty” (222), as Rasheed's concern for the former has risen to an unexpected level. She reveals her thoughts without hesitation to Laila,

I won't be your servant... You can complain to him and he can slit my throat, but I won't take orders from you... I have no use for your company. I don't want it. What I want is to be alone... That's how we will get on. Those are the rules. (219-220)

But as Laila delivers her beautiful kid into the world, things turn upside down as it is a girl child and not a boy as Rasheed expected and wanted. Women are expected to give birth to boy children and if unable to do so, they are in every possible way mistreated. As a result, every single chuckle of the child Aziza, begins to irritate him in every way but Laila becomes all the more enthusiastic. Whatever be the adverse circumstances, Laila is delighted that she is blessed with Tariq's baby. She enjoys every gesture of Aziza.

Of all earthly pleasures, Laila's favourite was lying next to Aziza, her baby's face so close that she could watch her big pupils dilate and shrink. Laila loved running her finger over Aziza's pleasing, soft skin, over the dimpled knuckles, the folds of fat at her elbows. Sometimes she lay Aziza down on her chest and whispered into the soft crown of her head things about Tariq, the father who would always be a stranger to Aziza, whose face Aziza would never know. (239)

The presence of the child strengthens Laila that she is capable of opposing Rasheed and he takes it the result of the bad influence Mariam imposes upon his new wife. But years and years of knowledge have taught Mariam “to harden herself against his scorn and reproach, his ridiculing and reprimanding” (234). Problems reach its highpoint the night Laila defends Mariam from the sound thrashings he lets loose on her. “The girl lunged at him she grabbed his arm with both hands and tried to drag him down... She did succeed in slowing Rasheed's progress toward Mariam” (235). This results in an added stressed relationship between Rasheed and Laila that she and Aziza get thrown out of his room to lay on the floor on the top of a quilt. But, the same incident forms an emotional bond between the two women and they begin to enjoy each other's company. By the time, Laila sees in Mariam “a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotected, a destiny submitted to and endured” (243). Both dream to escape from the brutalities of their husband at the right time possible for “a new life” (250); though unfortunately, several of their attempts met with abject failures. This makes the two women further victimize Rasheed's hardhearted admonitions and assaults.

[Laila] You try this again and I will find you. I swear on the Prophet's name that I will find you. And when I do there isn't a court in this godforsaken country that will hold me accountable for what I will do. To Mariam first, then to her, and you last. I'll make you watch. You understand me? *I'll make you watch.* (265)

The brutal subjugation of women is not only limited within the four walls of the house; instead it

gets further and further extended to the nook and corner of Afganistan. Several rules and regulations to be pursued by women are formulated by the Taliban government. They are forbidden from walking through the streets without the accompaniment of a male relative, from titivating themselves, from attending schools, from working and are not even supposed to talk or laugh. Without a pinch of humaneness, every single right is denied for them. Their only duty is to “Listen. Listen well. Obey” (271).

Rasheed's zealous desire for a son and the immense and never-ending love and affection he shower when he got one, whom he named Zalmai, clearly depict how he hates Aziza and how he devalues women. Though Zalmai loves his mother, he admires and respects more, his father. Both father and son “took turns poking each other on the chest, giggling, pelting each other with bread crumbs, whispering things the others couldn't hear” (289). Laila loves her children and realizes that it is Aziza who requires her protection more than Zalmai. Thus, she always stands firm in any issue that would affect Aziza. She even punches Rasheed on hearing his demand of sending Aziza for begging in the streets for extra money.

Nothing went well anywhere, making Rasheed mad with anger and “Death from starvation became a distinct possibility” (298). Out of extreme necessity, Laila agrees to send Aziza to an orphanage, though it was unthinkable for all except Rasheed. One or the other way Aziza accepts the situation however difficult it may be, more like Mariam.

A sudden unexpected twist happens when Laila discovers that Tariq is not dead as he shows up at her home. Though years have passed while they were apart, his return suggests that their genuine affection for each other has not faded. Tariq, being loyal and compassionate understands Laila's marital and child-bearing situations. The amount of forbearance and endurance they have for each other displays how unconditional their love is. But unfortunately for them, Zalmai tells his father about Tariq's visit, which infuriated Rasheed. He retaliates with his brutal attacks.

He caught her, threw her up against the wall, and struck her with the belt again and again, the buckle slamming against her chest, her shoulder, her raised arms, her fingers, drawing blood wherever it struck...his hands wrapped around Laila's neck...Laila's face was turning blue now, and her eyes had rolled back. (302)

Soon, Mariam realizes how dangerous the situation is. Fed up and terrified, she hits Rasheed with a shovel, killing him. As she is aware of the further happenings that would definitely tear both of them to pieces, Mariam forcefully sends Laila and her children along with Tariq.

Sooner, Mariam turns herself into authorities and gets imprisoned where she is looked upon with reverence by the fellow prisoners for her courageous crime. Each and every other woman is behind bars for eloping from homes. The plight of one such woman named Naghma shows the graveness of the circumstances. She did nothing but tried to escape with the man she loved when her father forced her to marry a tailor some thirty years older than her. Unfortunately they got caught and to her great awe she understood that her companion has deceived her putting all blames upon her head without regret.

Listening to Naghma, Mariam remembered the dim glimmer of gold stars and the stringy pink clouds streaking over the Safid-koh mountains that long-ago morning when Nana had said to her, *Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam.* (354)

The same accusing fingers of the patriarchal community again lay blame on Mariam for what she did to Rasheed, without even paying heed to the atrocious ways in which he treated his wives; and she is sentenced to death. However, she considers her own death as “a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings” (361).

By the time, Laila gets settled in Murree with her family. They lead a blessed and peaceful life in spite of the complexities encountered. When they come to know that conditions in Kabul are improving,

they return wholeheartedly. On the way back to their native, Laila visits Mariam's childhood mentor Mullah Faizullah's house where she met his son. From him she receives a box containing a letter, cash in American dollars and a copy of Pinocchio on video that Jalil left for Mariam. Laila realizes how remorseful Jalil was towards the end of his life, for sending away Mariam.

The novel ends on a happy note where Laila works as a teacher at an orphanage and Tariq for a non-governmental organization. Also, Laila is pregnant with her third child whom if a girl is to be named after Mariam, as a suitable tribute to her. Though at first men and culture have put the women characters into a subaltern state silencing their voice, they resurrect with the strong force that arises within them. Thereby, they strengthen themselves to articulate and even destroy the oppressor. The novel also implies that men do not always become the overriding group. Women should seek their own efforts to progress their lives, which was demoralized by the hegemony of the patriarchy.

Khaled Hosseini has not only depicted the sufferings, pain, physical and sexual violence against women but has also recovered women's voice in replicating alternative history by conflicting the multiple confrontations faced by them. He has delivered the shift in women's individuality. He points out that the 'second sex' is no longer ready to tolerate such discrimination in any society through the responses of some of the characters in the novels. Hosseini's female protagonists rise above their subjected self thereby laying the base of a commanding feminine consciousness. Thus, Hosseini carves up a common perspective that "a woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man. A woman is not the other. She is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of, through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation" (Ramamoorthy 115).

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