

GENDER APARTHEID AS AN EXTENSION OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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ABSTRACT

Talibans' fundamentalist regime in Afghanistan had erected a system of gender apartheid based on female subjugation. They had introduced a new type of extremism which had no concern with Islamic values and it also does not abide by the humanitarian laws. The present research is the study of Afghan females' subjugation which has deeply imbibed into their social milieu. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, depicts how Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan try to impose their laws to ensure and prolong their ruling position in that society. Backed by religion as an imperialist force, they create a system that backs up oppression of the *others* in every walk of life by considering themselves superior to the *others*. The research is purely qualitative in nature and it has used contextual analysis of the relevant excerpts as its mode. It is based on the theory of Iris Marion Young's *Five Faces of Oppression* to execute the subjected forms of Afghan females. The paper concludes that major female characters are the victims of gender apartheid and they suffer a lot in the effort to avert the unjustified implications of Talibans.

Keywords: Gender Apartheid, Islamic Fundamentalism, subjection, oppression, cultural imperialism

INTRODUCTION

A Thousand Splendid Suns was published in 2007, adapted by Stephen Marshall as theatrical drama in 2017, in which Hosseini has focused on the tragic experiences of women in pre-war Afghanistan. It deals with man's inhumanity to man, systematic victimization of women by patriarchal institutions, spousal abuse, resistance to victimization, power of education, female education, corrupting influence of absolute power i.e., colonial rule over Afghanistan. Hosseini's novel is an unforgettable portrait of a wounded country and a deeply moving story of family and friendship. The pain of exile,

humanitarian approach, redemption and hope is the key to Hosseini's style.

This paper examines the deplorable condition of Hosseini's female characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The researcher has used feminist lens to interpret the contextual setting of Afghanistan during Taliban's regime. In Hosseini's novel, women are subjected in all the possible ways i.e. social, emotional, physical and psychological. Their tragic flaw arises from their muteness over the wrong deeds and unjust treatment by their men. They quietly accept every order given by the males, considering it

their fate. They face exploitation especially gender exploitation at the hands of men without making any complaint in domestic affairs. This is so because in early 1990s, Taliban came into power in Afghanistan and heralded an era of oppression of women. Taliban used gender apartheid for eradicating and subjugating women of their own country. Ann Russo quotes FMF¹'s description to explicate the historical context of Afghanistan:

On September 27, 1996, the extremist Taliban militia seized control of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, and violently plunged Afghanistan into a brutal state of gender apartheid in which women and girls have been stripped of their most basic human rights. (Russo 566)

Taliban were against modernism and had no interest in socio-economic development of their countries. To justify their inhumane treatment, they had presented their ideology through Islamic laws (Shari'a). "The dominant group reinforces its position by bringing the other groups under the measure of its dominant norms. Consequently, the difference of women from men...becomes reconstructed largely as deviance and inferiority" (Young 59). So, Afghan women were exploited in two ways: by their countrymen (Talibans as Islamic fundamentalists) and by their own male relations (patriarchy) who designed ruthless gender apartheid system to erase them from public view. During their regime, women had faced "a resurgence of religious fundamentalism that threatens their limited but hard-earned rights" (Afkhami² N.p.). In this context where religion is used as a shield or force to perpetuate superiority and dominance of one group over the other it is the weaker ones i.e. women who suffer the most.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the researchers have attempted to explicate the concept of gender apartheid and Islamic

fundamentalism as the two aspects of cultural imperialism. Young classifies *Five Faces of Oppression* as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. Hence, this study is limited to the fourth face of oppression that is used to unveil the imperialistic rule of Taliban. Young defines Cultural Imperialism as "the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" (59). Throughout the era of Taliban, females were ousted from the public life and pushed to the peripheral roles decided by the patriarchy. This research employs contextual analysis to explore the marginalized status of females while interpreting the cultural setting of Afghanistan. According to Stephen C. Behrendt (2008), "A contextual analysis is simply an analysis of a text that helps us to assess that text within the context of its historical and cultural setting" (Behrendt n.p). In this sense, contextual analyst has access to those contextual factors of the society which are invisible to others; they may be historical, social, political or economic as well. This analysis is an amalgamation of both social context and case studies which provide critical insight to the analyst with the aim of finding out the socio-economic factors responsible for female oppression in the selected text. The story of the female characters runs parallel to the story of Afghanistan as the novel stretches over four decades. To examine the issue of gender apartheid as an extended patriarchal system implemented through Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan, special attention has been paid to the female characters like Mariam, Laila, Naghma and Aziza.

ANALYSIS

Islamic Fundamentalism is a term used to refer 'a diverse set of competing political opinions held within the Muslim community' (Ehteshami 179). In *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan presents the vivid picture of extremists' system of state which uses 'violence' as 'a direct product of Islamic fundamentalism.'

is the founder and president of Women's Learning Partnership (WLP) and former Minister for Women's Affairs in Iran.

¹ Feminist Majority Foundation describes the contextual background of Afghanistan in *Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan* (2005).

² Mahnaz Afkhami is a well-known women rights activist especially in Muslim majority societies. She

Since Islamic fundamentalists target the Islamization of the State rather than the reform of individuals, their only plan of action is in the very first instance to launch themselves on a collision course with the rulers who hold sway over the institution of the State. In this way, their movement takes the path of violence from day one. Then all the other evils creep in which are the direct or indirect result of violence, for instance, mutual hatred and disruption of the peace, waste of precious resources, and so on. (Khan 22-23)

The present paper uses *Islamic Fundamentalism* as a kind of political power that is enforced by a dominant group. It is normally practiced in the name of religion and specifically designed to control the marginalized groups of society. To impose religious terms, Taliban used violence as a tool to subjugate the weaker group - women. They controlled people forcefully in the name of Islamization of the state, so that, they could easily achieve and maintain their imperialistic rule. The term *Gender Apartheid* means the social system through which a dominant group tries to suppress the minor group through its social norms and religious values. Marginalized class is most often provided separate facilities and pushed to the edge of the society. According to Afkhami, gender apartheid is "the infringement of women's rights [which] is usually exercised in the name of tradition, religion, social cohesion, morality, or some complex of transcendent values. Always, it is justified in the name of culture" (n.p). In this sense, Afghan women are the victims of gender apartheid who bear extreme punishments like honor killing, forced veiling, sex-segregation, suspected adultery, polygamy, sexual slavery and domestic abuse. Most of the time they are given to restore the so-called pride of their family and also experience stoning, beating and forced marriages in order to retain the prestige of males who caught in any criminal activities (elopement and

adultery). Thus, Gender Apartheid is an extended form of Islamic fundamentalism which is ruthlessly designed by Taliban to gain political power in Afghanistan.

Cultural Imperialism in A Thousand Splendid Suns

"Cultural Imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" (Young 59). *A Thousand Splendid Suns* presents the vivid picture of Afghanistan as a patriarchal society that has been shaped in its present crude form as the fundamental rights of a vulnerable group were diminished. The miserable life of Mariam and Laila represents their subjection to physical and emotional brutality that was allowed, enabled and endorsed and at times even facilitated by patriarchy. They lived in Afghanistan during its tumultuous thirty-year transition from Soviet occupation to Taliban control and post-Taliban rebuilding. With regard to Islamic Fundamentalism, Dr. Massouda Jalal³ commented on the nature of Taliban's extremism that it is perpetuated through gender apartheid and resulted in the subordination of the weaker sex.

For Afghan women, it is particularly disastrous. The combined impacts of cultural, religious and gender prejudices have reduced their status into worthless human beings, without rights, exploited and oppressed - especially by family members who are supposed to be their sources of strength and protection. (Jalal N.p.)

Taliban's regime was designed as an Islamic revolutionary state where 'Muslim' men had all the power to manipulate the text of the Holy Quran. Their *Shari'a* was based on the subjective readings and interpretations of the Islamic laws. By using these metanarratives, they had ordered to restrict females from schooling and other outdoor activities, in case of violation, they had to suffer barbarous beatings by Taliban force.

"When men are oppressed, it's a tragedy. When women are oppressed, it's tradition" (Pogrebin⁴). By

³ Dr. Massouda Jalal is a political activist, former Minister of Women in Afghanistan, and founding President of Jalal Foundation, an NGO that brings together 50 women's councils and organizations to promote

women's advancement through advocacy, service delivery, capacity building and ground breaking projects.

⁴ Jewish Feminist

projecting “their own experience as representative of humanity” (Young 59), the dominant group always tries to subjugate the other group of the society. In this sense, Talibans had used their dominant norms as gender apartheid and Afghan females were deprived of their basic rights. They had used certain ‘cultural products’ to express their perspective on Islamic teachings and interpretations of the Shari’a. They had created certain differences through which women are treated as *others*. “Culturally oppressed groups are often socially segregated and occupy specific positions in the social division of labor ... As a group women are subject to gender-based exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence” (Young 60,64). In this regard, Talibans’ cultural imperialism is noticeable through the following ways: forced veiling, expulsion from employment activities, female exploitation, endorsement of domestic violence, acceptance of sexual abuse, controlled sexuality and mobility, powerlessness of Afghan females, limited access to health and educational facilities.

I. Compulsion of *Burqa*⁵

“*You will not speak unless spoken to*” (Hosseini 248). Females were completely deprived of raising their voice and turned into mute objects. Even, a woman had no right “*to laugh in public*” beating was the reward of noncompliance. Talibans had used *burqa* as a dress code for Afghan females.

In many Islamic majority societies, the veil exists as a dichotomy (e.g., in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia women are forced to wear hijab against their will), whereas in other countries, wearing the hijab is not mandatory but encouraged and worn at will ... hijab is viewed as a product of the patriarchal nature of Islam, while still others view hijab as a symbol of their identity and a way to counter cultural imperialism. (Galloway 85)

The use of *burqa* as a dichotomy aims to push women to the edge of the society. Further, it leads to

the absence of Afghan women’s rights and their reduction as a sexual object. Fadela Amara states, “The veil is the visible symbol of the subjugation of women” (George⁶ n.p.). Talibans did not allow female members to expose their face, hands and feet to non-relative males. “*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*” (Hosseini 248). *Burqa*, thus, became a trademark token to recognize an Afghan woman from the rest. Taliban used forced veiling to practice their gender apartheid. Shanzai, Khala Raghmalala, was Laila’s school teacher who was once an active supporter of gender equity, but now she had also worn *burqa* in order to save herself from the beatings of Talibans. It shows that they had used it as a tool of oppression to control females’ mobility.

Afghani women suspected of breaking the Taliban’s strict code of conduct have been publicly flogged, beaten or stoned to death; women have been killed by cars because their *burqas* restrict their vision; females are not permitted to wear white socks and their shoes cannot make noise when they walk; and homes with women in them must have their windows painted with opaque paint. (Wali⁷ N.p.)

Rasheed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was also a spokesman of Talibans’ ideology as he demanded his wives to cover themselves whenever they had to go outside. He explained it as a matter of prestige and *nang o namoos* [pride and honor] for a husband to protect his wives from ‘unfortunate choices’ (Hosseini 200). He considered that women were prone to mistakes and in case of even meager violations, husband had the right to do whatever he’d like. To both wives, he gave *burqa* as a dress code, right after the marriage, and also told the importance of using this protective shield, because for him “a woman’s face is her husband’s business only” (Hosseini 63).

⁵ Veiling of a Muslim woman used to cover the entire body.

⁶ See Rose George’s *Ghetto Warrior*

⁷ See D. Lyn Hunter’s *Gender Apartheid under Afghanistan’s Taliban*. Hunter refers to Sima Wali’s (refugee and Women’s rights advocate) views about the abuses of gender apartheid in Afghanistan.

II. Ban on Female Education

Talibans' ordered to shut down all the schools for girls. "*Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately*" (Hosseini 249). They had destroyed all the institutions; burnt the literary material and collection of art. According to them, females have no right to get education, except that of the Koran. Still, Laila had tried hard to admit Aziza in an orphanage, the only school which aimed to provide female education, Due to Taliban's inspection, a girl child was in a continuous fear of loss and they were using alternative secretly to survive. Knitting was used to replace the books and also "pull[ing] the curtains, so the Taliban don't see us" (Hosseini 286), says Aziza to describe the ways women adopted to sustain themselves and to save their daughters from the tyranny of men.

III. Insufficient Healthcare facilities for women

In 1990s, women were deprived of health facilities, because Talibans had closed all the hospitals to treat women any more. Rabia Balkhi hospital was the only ray of hope to Afghan women in need of healthcare as there was a shortage of female doctors and paramedical staff. Talibans had strictly ordered the female staff to cover themselves with *burqa*, even in operation theatre they could not work without properly covering themselves up. This hospital had insufficient health facilities, there was 'no X-ray, no suction, no oxygen, [and] not even simple antibiotics' (Hosseini 258). Even the pharmacy had no updated medicines except for seasonal diseases. A number of women were dying due to the shortage of drugs needed for childbearing mothers. "Afghan women ... are committing suicide or dying because they cannot be treated by male doctors. Women are no longer permitted to practice medicine" (Wali N.p.). This situation presents the brutality of the laws of Taliban where there was no value of precious human life.

IV. Controlled Sexuality

As far as sexuality is concerned, women were not allowed to display it. Hence any kind of adornment that enhances their femininity or sexual appeal such as jewelry, cosmetics, attractive clothes, was forbidden. To Talibans, women had to avoid these items to adorn themselves as these embellishments and accessories could be the source of seduction.

Severe punishments were announced for the violations of these rules. Painting of nails was disallowed to them, otherwise, they had to 'lose a finger'.

Similarly, they had no right to choose their life partner; rather they had to bow before the decision made by the elders in their 'favor'. Then, stoning to death was the sole punishment destined for adulterous women. Mariam's marriage to Rasheed was a life-time contract and she had left her father's home forever. Like other Afghan women, she had no right to choose her life partner and even sold to men thrice to their age. Rasheed was forty-five years old while she was fifteen only. She had lost her status as a wife when she was declared barren due to nine miscarriages. Laila also had the same experience, Rasheed married to her when she was a helpless girl of fourteen and he was an old man of sixties. Talibans had no law to stop such marriages where partners had no compatibility in their relations. Men, like Rasheed, were given the license to control their wives by cruel beatings and unfair means to own them as properties.

Naghma, whom Mariam met in the jail was also forced by her father to marry a man she disliked. To avoid her forced marriage, she ended up in the jail for her 'sin' of running away from home. As soon as the couple was arrested, Naghma being an exponent of the weaker group, was put behind bars as she "had seduced him with her feminine charms" (Hosseini 323). On the other hand, the young man she eloped with was permitted to go to learn Koran and was exempted from punishment as he was the son of a Mullah.

V. Controlled Mobility

Taliban had imposed severe implications on the mobility and freedom of Afghan women. To control females, they had ordered them "*to stay inside your homes all the time*" (Hosseini 248), because they termed it inappropriate for women "*to wander aimlessly about the streets*" (ibid). Moreover, they must be accompanied by a male relative whenever they go outside. When Laila and Mariam tried to run away to save their lives and were caught and investigated by Taliban office. Laila asked the officer about the maltreatment of Rasheed, but he had no concern with their pathetic lives and sent them to the hell of Rasheed. At home, another beating episode made them realized that they had violated the rules

of Imperialist power. "The fear of violence is a permanent constraint on the mobility of women and limits their access to resources and basic activities" (Jha⁸ 37). Above all, men were exempted from any investigation because Taliban ordered women to stay at homes and to obey the orders of their husband. "What a man does in his home is his business. As a matter of policy, we do not interfere with private family matters" (Hosseini 238). Taliban used burqa to keep women away from labor market and pushed them back to the kitchen to perform daily household activities.

VI. Ejection from Employment

Women were "*forbidden from working*" (Hosseini 249), even if the husband or fathers fail to provide for them, they were not allowed to work and earn for themselves and their family. Imprisoned behind the four walls in the name of male honor, they were suffering from starvation or dying due to the hunger. Laila was badly beaten, many times whenever she went out in search of work without *mahram*⁹. Her husband was jobless and she had decided to support her family, but she was discouraged for her effort to find a good job. She had tried hard to find out some work. But every time, she was badly beaten by a Talib with a radio antenna as she violated the law of men. These *wahshis*¹⁰ didn't allow women to go outside and to 'make a living'. It was quite hard for those women who were single parents and they had to provide food and shelter to their children. Having no man to care for them they had to work by themselves to survive and to provide for their families. The men who imposed restrictions on women and their mobility did not provide any funds or solutions to such women. In this way, the law made in the name of so called protection of women in fact led to their destruction as it had "expelled [them] from useful participation in social life" (Young 53).

VII. Transfer of Productivity and Reproductively Powers to Men

To Young, "Women's oppression consists partly in systematic and unreciprocated transfer of powers from women to men... [i.e.] transfer of the fruits of material labor to men and transfer of nurturing and

sexual energies to men" (Young 50). In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, females experience the same exploitation within paid and unpaid work. By excluding women from the economical setup, Taliban had controlled their capacities. They were banned to participate at the work places, if they got a chance their wages are the mean ones. On the other hand, Afghan females experience unpaid exploitation mainly at homes. Their husbands use their household labour to exploit them. Men are always considered the protectors of their females. This classification of societal roles make women completely powerless as they dependent on their fathers and husbands.

Patriarchal structure exploits women at two levels, within the domestic labour, where "Housewives are the producing class, while husbands are the expropriating class" (Walby 21). Secondly, they are exploited within the economical level, because their work is not considered equal to men. "A complex of forms of patriarchal closure within waged labour exclude women from the better forms of work and segregate them into the worse jobs which are deemed to be less skilled" (Walby 21). Forced marriages also show the inferior status of Afghan females. Mariam is the protagonist of the novel who suffers exploitation within the four walls. She is a priceless worker who never demand anything. To Rasheed, "she was sturdy, for one thing, a good worker, and without pretensions" (Hosseini 199). In response, Rasheed bestows her with daily beatings and rudely behave like unhappy boss. Mostly, he tries to find fault in "her cooking, to complain about clutter around the yard or point out even minor uncleanliness in the house" (Hosseini 85). Their relationship was like a master-slave relation where Mariam seemed busy in cooking, washing and cleaning of the house while Rasheed was relished through her unpaid work. Her submission to female exploitation started when she had seen other Afghan women complaining against patriarchal structure.

Never a moment's rest! ... Husbands who doted on their mothers and wouldn't spend a rupiah on them; the wives. Mariam wondered how so many

⁸ Dr. Rajendra Prasad is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Memorial Girls Degree College, Lucknow

⁹ Male relative

¹⁰ Savages, brutal

women could suffer the same miserable luck, to have married, all of them, such dreadful men. Or was this a wifely game that she did not know about, a daily ritual, like soaking rice or making dough? (Hosseini 59-60)

The social status of an Afghan female is also connected with her ability to produce a male child. It becomes worse when they miscarry a child. In fact, Mariam's powerlessness started when she was forcefully wedded to Rasheed, but it was harsh when she was failed to conceive a male child. To Young, marginalization "involves the deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction" (55).

VIII. Endorsement of Domestic Violence

Violence is used against women all over the world though in different shapes and capacity. Women are often terrorized and targeted for no real reasons. "Violence, therefore, operates as a means to maintain and reinforce women's subordination" (WHO/WHd). Women in fact have started internalizing a few acts of 'minor' crimes committed against them in the name of their own rectification. There are a number of events in this text as well where the female characters are least bothered or show no resentment over the atrocity done to them. Iris Young has time and again vocally castigated such heinous incidents of violence committed against the fair-sex. Women "fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person" (Young 61). However, Sylvia Walby in *Theorizing Patriarchy* mourns the inactive role of the state in curbing events of violence against female members of society:

Male violence against women is systematically condoned and legitimated by the state's refusal to intervene against it except in exceptional instances, though the practices of rape, wife beating, sexual harassment, etc., are too decentralized in their practice to be part of the state itself. (Hosseini 21)

A Thousand Splendid Suns shows that patriarchy uses domestic violence to keep women under control. As for physical violence, a score of incidents in the

novel prove that physical violence is an integral part of the text. "Domestic violence is all about power relations and the abuse of power in a household. It is perpetrated by one member or members collectively on another to gain control" (Mishra 486). Talibans' Apartheid law is endorsed by the violent abuse of Rasheed. This law trained them to protect their wives and also to control them like slaves. Rasheed's inhumane treatment with Marian made her a woman without any pretensions. Once Marian had added salt twice in the food and Rasheed lost his temper. As a reward, he had ordered her to chew 'a handful of pebbles' (Hosseini 94), so that she could realize the taste of her food. The pebble eating resulted out into the 'fragments of two broken molars' (Hosseini 94). Similarly, he had beaten Laila when Tariq was back. "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. (Hosseini 309). It reflects how wife beating was a daily ritual for Afghan women; men were used to such barbaric attitude, because state has given them free hand to do whatever they like.

Domestic violence is another type of cruelty enacted against the female members of the text. In cases it also comes to light that almost all the female members internalize the act of beating and chastisement done to them by their male counterparts.

Some women may believe that they deserve the beatings because of some wrong action on their part. Other women refrain from speaking about the abuse because they fear that their partner will further harm them in reprisal for revealing "family secrets", or they may be ashamed of their situations. (WHO/WHd)

Mariam was a "cringing and crippled object of oppression" who "cannot conceive a child to carry on his name"(Marciniak 2). Her suffering started when she failed to give him a son. Eventually, she was accustomed of his authoritative nature, even she "had learned to harden herself against his scorn and reproach, his ridiculing and reprimanding" (Hosseini 215). Laila was also surprised why she didn't resist against his brutality.

To Laila, the sounds she heard were those of a methodical, familiar proceeding. There was no cursing, no pleading, no surprised yelps, only the systematic business of beating and being beaten, the *thump, thump* of something solid repeatedly striking flesh, something, someone, hitting a wall with a thud, cloth ripping. (Hosseini 240)

CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that Afghan females are overwhelmed by the prevailing gender apartheid. It is at its worse when such kind of social system is justified by an Islamic fundamentalist group known as Talibans. They had extended their brutal atrocities against women in the name of Islamization and fundamentalist extremism. Although, they claimed that their laws were mainly based on religious terms and regulations, but their practices were entirely male-oriented and allowed them to oppress their females. It is however pertinent to note that Islam has no connection with these baseless assumptions, rather it is a version concocted by traditionalist Muslims to suit their notions and to interpret Shari'a of their own choice. Mahnaz Afkhami rightly addresses to WLP:¹¹ *"Islam is not the problem. Rather it is the misuse of Islam by interpreting it to fit the needs of the patriarchal order – the powers that be – and the privileges that one gender has held over the other"* (N.p.). In Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Afghan women are marginalized due to such interpretations of Islamic laws. Female members of a society are oppressed by forced restrictions and sexual code, while men are taught to believe that they are superior to their females. Consequently, Talibans' cultural imperialism is the root cause of gender apartheid in Afghanistan which still persists with no end in view.

¹¹ In March 2005, Mahnaz Afkhami had addressed to the opening ceremony of International Symposium, entitled "Leading to Change: Eliminating Violence against

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