

**BIASED TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN AFGHAN CULTURE: KHALID
HOSSEINI'S 'THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS' AND 'AND THE MOUNTAIN
ECHOED'**

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BIO NOTES

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ABSTRACT

'A thousand splendid suns' and 'And the mountain echoed' tells the story of women suffering and her way to come out from all these. The role of a woman and how they are undermined and abused brutally by men in Afghani culture. Their fundamental human rights violated but they also suffered from gender-based abuse.

Hosseini has undertaken the chance of making women more self-conscious. The women in Afghan society endure all hardships for a better tomorrow. The new Afganistan where every girl child is given a chance to study, everyone will get a right to vote and women can walk freely outside without any male heir is the dream for Hosseini as he has said earlier in different interviews. Through his fiction, he has shown not only the dark side of women but also some of the splendid virtues of women. Hosseini succeeded in portraying the women suffering and their emancipation.

Khalid Hosseini is an Afghan-born American novelist who resides in Northern California. By far he has established three novels namely '**The kite runner**' (published in 2003) **A thousand splendid suns** (published in 2007) and the most recently published edition '**And the mountains echoed**' (published in 2013) with more than 38 million copies of his books sold in seventy countries he has earned immense international reputé so that the kite runner was chosen by the The Times, Daily Telegraph and Guardian as a book of the decade.

"Hosseini most assured and emotionally gripping story yet...Hosseini's narrative gifts have deepened over the years ...(And the mountain echoed grapples with many of the

same themes that crisscross his early novels: the relationship between parents and children, and the ways past can haunt the present. And it shares a similar penchant for mapping terrain midway between the boldly colored world of fable and the more shadowy, shaded world of realism...(w)e finish this novel with an intimate understanding of who his characters are and how they have made between duty and freedom, familial responsibilities and independence loyalty to home and exile abroad..a deeply affecting choral work...a testament both to his intimate knowledge of their inner lives and to his power as an old fashioned storyteller.'

Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times.

Hosseini could also be credited for sketching so beautifully the relationship in all his three books- in the kite runner to the mountains echoed there is a tremendous discussion of father/son relationship, mother/daughter relationship and the relationship of siblings.

“There were a number of really good storytellers from my childhood, but my grandmother was the most consistent one.”

Khalid Hosseini

Hosseini has received responses to his books from both Afghan and non-Afghan readers. He has received positive responses from both Afghan readers who feel “a slice of their story has been told by one of their own”(Sethna 2003). He has also heard from those who think that his writing is divisive. He is quoted in many interviews, including that of Sadat, as saying that those who found the book

divisive objected to his bringing up issues of discrimination, racism, and ethnic inequality. But Hosseini responded to them by saying that he believes these issues are important and should not be taboo. It is the role of the fiction to take on these difficult subjects and open them up for debate (Sadat 2001:166). He added in his interview with Sethna “If this book generates any sort of dialogue among Afghans then I think it will have done a service to the community”(2003). Non-Afghan readers responded to the themes of friendship betrayal guilt and redemption found in Western literary fiction. Hosseini wants readers to respond to his work as literature and storytelling; he also hopes that “the novel has provided western readers with a fresh perspective” he laments the fact that stories from Afghanistan “centers around the various wars on terrorism. Precious little is said about the Afghan people themselves, their culture, their traditions how they lived in their country and how they manage abroad as exiles. (Azad 2004)”. (**Rebecca Stuhr:2009**)

During his 2009 visit, Hosseini met two sisters in a remote village outside Kabul. The older one around 6 years old, acted as another figure to the younger girl. Their bond formed the relationship between Abdullah and Pari in the novel.

“ Slowly the family began to take shape in my mind- not unlike the many I had visited- one living in a remote village, forced to make a painful choice that most of us would find unbearable. At the heart of this family, I pictured a young brother and sister, who become the unwitting victims of their family’s despair. The novel begins then, with this single act of desperation, of sacrifice an act that raptures the family and ultimately becomes the tree trunk from which the novel’s many branches spread out.”

Khalid Hosseini

“And the mountain echoed” included several generations and moves between Afghanistan and the western country. Hosseini said that the title was inspired by William Blake’s poem “Nurse song: Innocence”, which refers to hills echoing with the sound of Children’s voices. The novel opens with a father reciting a bedtime story to his children, Abdullah, and Pari as they take an overnight trip from Shadbagh village to Kabul city across a desert in Afghanistan. Unable to make his

growing family ends meet, he has set up a deal with his brother-in-law, Nabi to sell his daughter Pari off to a wealthy couple in Kabul. The siblings are separated from each other –Abdullah returns to the village with his father felling as if he’s left behind a part of him back in Kabul.

“Whereas the kite runner focused on the dynamic between father and sons and splendid suns on that between mothers and daughters, this novel tells its story through the prism of sibling relationships-a theme refracted through the lives of several pairs of brothers and sisters.”

Michiko Kakutani of The New York Times.

It doesn’t take much time for four-year-old Pari to settle into her new home and soon begins the story of her adoptive parents-the reserved Suleiman Wahdati and the outgoing Nila. A year later Suleiman suffers a heart attack and is left invalid and the unkind Nila wastes no time in packaging her bags and fleeing to France with Pari. Sulaeiman is left with Nabi, the cooks’ mercy and care.

Khalid hosseini considers the separation of two siblings Abdullah and Pari is the heart of the book. Pari is informed later that she was adopted and that she has a brother Abdullah.

She met him in the U.S, suffering from Alzheimer's disease and has forgotten her. Hosseini stated 'the question is raised number of times that safeguards in all the things that are dear to you-or are memory a curse-something that makes you relieve the most painful parts of your life, the toil, the struggle, the sorrows.'" thus these events make 'The mountains echoed' a kind of fairytale turned on its head."

"I think at the core, all three of books have been love stories- and they haven't been traditional love stories in the sense that a romantic love story between a man and a woman you know, they've been stories of love between characters where you did not expect love to be found. So it was always these intense relationships that form under unexpected circumstances.

Two of the most important female characters Roshi and Thalia suffer the most physically and emotionally. Their lives are ruined by the facial disfigurement they receive. In creating the character of Nila Wahdati, Hosseini was inspired by

century's a long ongoing struggle of female poets. Now they are holding a special place in Afghan literature. Hosseini describes as arising from the parties in the Kabul of the '70s

"There would be really striking women in short skirts.Beautiful, very outspoken, temperamental, endlessly- in my young mind-interesting, drinking freely, and smoking. Nila is a creation from my memory of that kind of woman from that time and that place."

Fear of loneliness or solitude is central to the book. Even the most powerful characters Nila Wahdati exhibits this fear when she is conversing with her foster daughter Pari, '*fill these holes inside of me Pari.*'"In the context of Nila, it related to an incident that happened on her trip to India when she was nearly 19, she was to be operated for her curable illness she had been injected with incurable loss of fraternity under the instruction of her father.This loss had grown inside her a sense of insecurity, a fear of being lonely. Hosseini explained that to make the character of Nila Wahdati, he was unconcerned with making Nila likeable-'*I just wanted her to be really full of anger and ambition and insight, and frailty and narcissism.*'"

The character of Nila Wahdati the stylish talented French Afghan housewife who writes poetry about love sex desire and loss in 1950's Kabul. She marries a wealthy man and later adopts Pari. Through her poetry, she faces the scorn of the people of one section of native Afghanistan and the upper section praises and admires her. In creating Nila's character Hosseini got inspiration from age long struggle of Afghanistan female poets. Her high

heels, sleeveless pastel mini dresses, and white framed sunglasses show the flamboyancy of that particular place and time in Afghanistan. Her outward expression in poetry even in the progressive period of Kabul was not acceptable by many people. Her in-laws don't approve of their marriage and she becomes a topic of concern and discussion.

He said it was well known in Kabul that she had no nang and namoos, no honor and that she was only twenty, she had already been "ridden all over town" like Mr. Wahdati's car. Worst of all, he said, not only had she did not attempt to deny these allegations, she wrote poems about them. A murmur of disapproval spread through the room when he said this. One of the men remarked that in his village they would have slit her throat by now.

Later in life, Nila bitterly remembers her Afghan father's reaction to her poetry:

"No one in Kabul considered me a pioneer of anything but bad taste, debauchery, and immoral character. Not least of all, my father. He said my writings were the ramblings of a whore. ... He said I'd damaged his family name beyond repair."

On the other hand, the character of Masooma and Parwana introduced in chapter-3 the two are twin sisters, Parwana being introduced as tyrant and Masooma as an 'angle'. Since Masooma is prettier than Parwana so there is an atmosphere of natural jealousy between the two. She deserts her sister in a remote place where the echoes of her cries could never be heard. Generally, the evilness of her nature subsides our goodness and makes us the slaves of our wants.

"At last she makes her choice, She turns around, drops her head and walks toward a horizon she cannot see. After that, she does not look back anymore. She knows that if she does, she will weaken. She will lose what resolve she has because she will see an old bicycle speeding down a hill, bouncing on rock and gravel, the metal pounding both their rears, clouds of dust kicked up with each sudden ski. She sits on the frame and Masooma is one on the saddle, she is the one who takes the hair pins turns at full speed, dropping the bike into a deep lean. But Parwana is not afraid. She knows that her sister will not send her flying over the handle bars, that she will not hurt her. The world melts into a whirligig blur of excitement and the wind whooshes in their ears and Parwana looks over her shoulder at her sister and her sister looks back, and they laugh together as stray dogs give chase.

Parwana keeps marching toward her new life. She keeps walking, the darkness around her like a mother's womb and when it lifts, when she looks up in the down haze and catches a band of pale light from the east striking the side of a boulder, it feels like being born. (Hosseini 2013)

Throughout her life Pari has felt “the absence of something, or someone, fundamental to her own existence” other times it felt so clear this absence, so intimately close it made her heart lurch.” She becomes a mathematician, marries a drama teacher and has three children. She suspects about her adoption and travels back to Afghanistan to find out her own identity. On the other hand, Abdullah runs a restaurant called Abe’s Kabob House”. He named his only child Pari, after his long lost sister. After his wife dies he suffers from Dementia. Pari decides to stay back at home and takes care of her father, Abdullah.

Terrorism holds the most significant place in Afghan literature. Through the writer’s creation and instinct the outside world can see the present scenario of Afghan society. No doubt the local people are the worst sufferers in Afghanistan. The pain and agony of the local inhabitants are really very pathetic. The condition of every nook and corner of the world is afflicted by terrorism nowadays.

After the years of killing in Afghanistan which has completely shattered the country. The Taliban have enforced their rules on families whose only bread winners are women. They are not allowed under any circumstances to work outside or participate in any social affairs. The banning of girls from being educated is also a violation of basic human rights. In spite of the changes made now in Afghanistan especially in the status of women, there exist many problems. The problems such as child marriage, polygamy, dowry, and even forced marriage are of such kind. From time to time many NGOs are raising their voices against such tyranny.

“women were denied education, the right to work, the right to work freely, access to adequate health care, etc, yet I want to distance myself from the notion, popular in some circles, that the west can and should exert pressure on these countries to grant women equal rights...This approach either directly or indirectly dismisses the complexities and nuances of the target society as dictated by its culture, traditions, customs, political system, social structure, and overriding faith.

Hosseini has received criticism for having portrayed women who were and come to terms with the burqa. Hosseini states that he wishes “every single woman in

Afghanistan could lift the burqa and walk the streets freely.”(Rebecca Stuhr:2009)

In Islamic countries and non-Islamic societies, the hijab (veil) has come to symbolize a cultural and religious identity and women have chosen to cover themselves according to

their own wishes. It's not a matter of anyone to force such things. In the fiction Rasheed forces both her wives to cover themselves while going out as it was instructed by the Taliban. Both Miriam and Laila faces, in the beginning, some difficulties in wearing the burqa. Forcible things don't last long they end sooner or later. When the oppressors become extremists the commoner rise and fights for their freedom in the way Mariam and Laila do in 'Thousand Splendid Suns'.

In his fiction, Hosseini shows and crafted the lives, struggles of women in Afghanistan and how they behave towards it. What is more ironical is that Hosseini himself inspiring the female to know more about their rights and duties who is a male. He stands on the woman's side and curses man's behavioral tendency in treating women unfairly. This fiction is a good example to convince women about their abilities to overcome difficulties. Although women have gained independence throughout the world the low status, discrimination, exploitation, and biases still exist in society. Those who succeed to work outside experience very bitter treatment of biasness and discrimination in society. Different problems which woman faces are promotions based on gender, sexual harassment and opportunities in job and training. At home also they have to work double in accommodating domestic duties after coming back from work.

The percentage of literate women in Afghanistan is only 38.2 where as male is 52 percentages according to the 2016 Wikipedia report. The patriarchal model of families limits the existence of women in Afghan society and its visible clearly in Hosseini's fiction. They devote their lives to the proper nurturing of children and maintenance of the house. They are active in the private sphere rather than in public. The condition of women became worse in the Taliban regime. They are banned from walking alone without any male heir, forced them to wear burqa and are forbidden to work outside. Through polygamy law men exploit women. They treat their wives unequally. Violence is another important atrocity which is faced by women,

it is in the form of physical, sexual and psychological and we get a glimpse of that in thousand splendid suns. The way Rasheed beat his wife Mariam is very brutal and heart breaking. Her tolerance for bearing Rasheed's torture made her more painful. She lost her confidence to take decisions in her life. The psychological, as well as physical trauma given to the wives, is so common in Afghanistan.

It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat. 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 steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not (Hosseini, 97-98).

On one occasion Rashed is furious because according to him the food which Mariam cooked was not proper. He forced Mariam to chew Peebles because it tastes like rice. The incident which is described in the novel makes us realize how difficult it is to be a woman there. It seems it's a curse on being a female and tolerates the masculine dominance throughout life.

"Put. These. In your mouth." "Stop it, Rasheed, I'm--" His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into 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, his upper lip curled in a sneer. "Now chew," he said. Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes. "CHEW!" he bellowed. A gust of his smoky breath slammed against her face. 58 Mariam chewed. Something in the back of her mouth cracked. "Good," Rasheed said. His cheeks were quivering. "Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food and nothing else. "Then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars (Hosseini, 103).

The advice given to Mariam by her mother signifies age-long trauma and suffering which a girl child has to understand since the beginning. She has to make her mindset like that especially in a country like Afghanistan. Unfortunately, Nana's words came to be true for Mariam and she couldn't find peace and solitude throughout her life.

"Like a compass needle that always points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam."

With his second wife Laila, his behavior included threats, mocks and threatening. Just like Mariam's life he makes the life of Lila also intolerable for her.

Up close, his sneering face seemed impossibly large. Laila noticed how much puffier it was getting with age, how many more broken vessels charted tiny paths on his nose. Rasheed didn't say anything. And what could be said, what needed saying, when you'd shoved the barrel of your gun into your wife's mouth? (Hosseini, 293)

He regularly beats Lila to enforce his power on her. She suffers physical violence as well as psychological violence from her husband.

"Tectonic," Laila said. It hurt to talk. Her jaw was still sore, her back and neck ached. Her lip was swollen, and her tongue kept poking the empty pocket of the lower incisor Rasheed had knocked loose two days before. Before Mammy and Babi had died and her life turned upside down, Laila never would have believed that a human body could withstand this much beating, this viciously, this regularly, and keep functioning (Hosseini, 2008:234-235).

In this society, not only the husband and relatives of the woman but others also treat her as if she is just a puppet in their hands. The way a Talib behaved with Laila in the novel gives a glimpse of Afghanistan in the hands of the Taliban.

One day, a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna. When he was done, he gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said, "I see you again, I'll beat you until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones." (Hosseini, 313)

The Taliban's rule over woman's rights given in the novel where it seems that woman is not a human being but a commodity. The cruelty, harshness they imposed on women clearly reflects how brutal and lethal they are in their regime.

You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover it with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten. Cosmetics are forbidden. Jewelry is forbidden. You will not wear charming clothes. You will not speak unless spoken to. You will not make eye contact with men. You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten. You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger (Hosseni, 271).

Rashed also threatens Mariam and Laila not to go outside without him, since it was made mandatory for everyone to follow the instruction of the Taliban.

You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home (Hosseini, 271).

Lila's father Hakim wishes to educate his daughter instead of giving her in marriage just after puberty gives a glimpse of modern Afghanistan. It is reflected in passages of the novel when he talks to Laila about the education of women in Afghanistan.

"Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they're probably freer now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before...But it's true, it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that, Laila."

In almost all his three novels Hosseini has presented the real picture of the woman through his female protagonist. Laila, Mariam, Pari and Nila wahdati represent various strata of society. How they come forward after suffering and inspire others to live life with their terms and condition. *'The thousand splendid suns'* and *'And the mountain echoed'* translated in different languages and become bestsellers throughout the world, it shows the capacity to inspire others The

The mindset of people started changing and it lives a topic of discussion and debate in our modern society.

To struggle against such social odds women need tremendous courage and determination. Through education, they can know and claim their rights. If a woman is educated with an open mindset and broad thinking, she can inspire others. It's an art of Hosseini to shows women not as a crowd but their will to surpass everything Hosseini is not the only concern for Afghan people but also runs a nonprofit fund named Khalid Hosseini Foundation. It provides humanitarian support to the people who are tormented and suffered because of war and terrorism.

CONCLUSION

The no 1 author of 'The Kite Runner' and A Thousand splendid suns has written a new novel about how we love, how we take care of one another, and how the choices we make resonate through generations. In this tale revolving around not just parents and children but brothers and sisters, cousins and caretakers, Hosseini explores the many ways in which families nurture, would betray, honor and sacrifice for one another and how often we are surprised by the actions of those closest to us, at the times that matters most following its characters and its ramifications of their lives and their choices and love around the globe from Kabul to Paris, to San Francisco to the Greek island of Tinos the

story expands gradually outward becoming more emotionally complex and powerful with each turning page. (article published in New York times)

And the Mountains Echoed charges its readers for the emotional particles they are, giving them what they want with a narrative facility as great as any blockbusting author alive. Perhaps there is some hokey emotional chemistry at work here, but, in the process, Hosseini is communicating to millions of people a supple, conflicted and complex picture of his origin country, Afghanistan.

Just like his characters Hosseini, the sense of belonging to the closely knit Afghan community can be attributed to the Hosseini as well. He told Sadat that after 25 years in the United States” he considers himself to be assimilated into American culture. (Sadat 164). He married an American born Afghan woman, and he has raised his children to be bilingual. Hosseini told Terry Gross that maintaining the language is the most important way to preserve culture. And that food follows in importance. He and others in the Afghan community continue to practice traditional wedding celebration and the observation of Ramadan and its three days of the feast.”(**Rebecca Stuhr:2009**)

In drawing the complex character of Nila Wahdati, Hosseini sketches the struggles, strife, and bravery of century’s long female poets of Afghanistan. According to *Dupree* “*it wasn’t until young, female broadcasters on the nationwide radio station Radio Afghanistan in the 1950s and 1960’s that “the stigma attached to female voices being heard outside family circles” in parts of Afghanistan began to lessen.*

Because of the patriarchal society in Afghanistan, men are considered more powerful and dominant over females. The background of the story set in Afghanistan and the dominance of different rulers like the Taliban and Mujahideen who restricted women’s rights there. We get many examples of this by the characters, the way Pari was sold to Wahdati family instead of male child Abdullah. Daughters were always considered as a burden and less important than a male child. In the case of Nila Wahdati, her freedom of speech was always restricted by her father. She fights with her father over ‘*what I wore, where I went, what I said, how I said it, who I said it to*’ (Hosseini 208)

The other two strong characters of this novel are Pari Wahdati and Amra Ademovic who dedicated her life to war-torn patients in Afghanistan. She was commented as “*the hardest working woman in Kabul. You do not want to cross this girl. Also, she will drink you under the table.*” (Hosseini (145)

Through Pari and Amra, Hosseini describes the revolution of women in Afghan society. Mariam suffers a lot while Laila tries to raise her voice against Rasheed. At last in the

novel Mariam murders Rasheed and she meant like a thousand sparkling suns to Laila. The way Mariam has given a new life to Laila. At last, they both overcome their difficulties and lead a satisfactory life afterward. The complexities the Taliban rule made becomes more evident after reading this novel. Through his novel, Hoseini pictures the real Afghanistan.

“[S]he was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last.” (Hosseini 329)

Mariam faces execution by the Taliban for the killing of Rasheed. She became a true hero of the novel and leaves the world on her own terms and condition.

“Mariam is never very far. She is here, in these walls, they’ve repainted, in the trees they’ve planted, in the blankets that keep the children warm, in these pillows

and books and pencils. She is in the children’s laughter. She is in the verses Aziza recites and in the prayers, she mutters when she bows westward. But, mostly, Miriam is in Laila’s own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand splendid suns.”
(Hosseini 366)

In these lines, it’s very evident how Mariam has affected Laila’s life and even though she is no more she resides in the heart of Laila. Mariam’s sacrifice is instilled into Laila’s purpose and the reconstruction of the new Kabul.

I know you’re still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now,” he said. 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, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more because society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila, no chance.”

(Hosseini 103)

These are Hakim’s words to her daughter Laila. Hakim has a progressive mind and believes that women are as important as men in reshaping the lives of others and that without education woman’s life is nothing. In the end, Laila fulfills her father’s dream by supporting the cause to rebuild an orphanage in Kabul.

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