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KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS* –AN INSIGHT INTO AFGHAN WOMEN BEHIND SOCIO-CULTURAL BARS

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Literature is the mirror of life. Literature has the power to bring anything to foreground through its impact. One of the main issues prevailing in our society from ancient times is gender inequality. Gender inequality is the idea and situation that women and men are not equal. Gender inequality refers to unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals wholly or partly due to their gender. It arises from differences in gender roles. The marginalization of women takes place in the form of male domination in the society; the general attitude of male towards female, the exploitation and discrimination faced by females. The condition of women in society, in general, got expression through the situation faced by fictional female characters and their responses to these situations.

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-born American novelist and physician. All his three novels became bestsellers. His novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was a Times Best Seller. This book features the ideas of author about women and their miseries in a patriarchal society. In the novel, the author connects the story of two women, their love, emotions and sacrifices, how both of them struggle in their lives and how by fate they meet and build a great and unbreakable bond with each other.

Through this novel one could find out the traditions of Afghan community and the stereotypical notions of a patriarchal society. This book also depicts the state of Afghan women before and after Civil War. Before the Civil War, Afghan women enjoyed quite a liberal and good time. They were allowed to get education and to work as a professional to serve their country. But after the empowerment of Taliban, things went upside down not only for women but for the entire nation. Women suffered at large as they had no choices, no feelings and no rights as a human being. They were treated like a rotten thing to be used and to be thrown away like a peel. This novel will proclaim to the society the real face of a real men. Men who can be true heroes and kings of the world. It goes to prove that the real king or hero is not the one who brutalizes woman but one who treats a woman with generosity and kindness. This philosophy which motivates men to show kindness to the weak is the bedrock of all cultures and the quality that is vanishing day by day, unfortunately, on account of selfishness.

The author in the novel has used two major female characters Mariam and Laila as his mouthpiece to raise his opinion about marginalization of women in Afghan community. Dorothy Richardson, Simon –de-Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf pronounce that 'gender is a construct of society, designed basically to honour males for smooth functioning of society. This gender inequality is neither a biological phenomena nor a divine construct. These writers noticed that women in this culture by all means are rated as "The Second Sex" in this man-made male-dominated society. This statement of these writers could be witnessed from the start of the novel through the life of Nana, the mother of Mariam, one of the victims of this society. Her weakness being compared to superstition has ruined her entire life. It drove away all her suitors and showed her as a rejected creature who at last becomes the prey to a man's lust. It also gave her the title '*harami*': "Then a week before

the wedding date, a jinn had entered Nana's body. . . when the news reached shindand, the parakeet seller's family called off the wedding . . . after that, there were no more suitors"(10).

When Nana was found pregnant, the whole community blamed her for her state. Even though the root cause for her suffering was Jalil, his status in society and his gender saved him from his guilt and shame. Whereas Nana and her child, because of their state and gender are deserted by the community. This experience made Nana a vulnerable one and made her to caution her daughter about the community and men each and every moment. These powerful lines explain the reality of society that Mariam lived: "Nanu 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 woman'"(7).

Mariam was considered a *harami*, an illegal child and was grabbed off all her birth rights. Even though she desired to go to school she was not allowed. From her mother's speech one could understand that the women of low status are deserted of their rights and their only duty is to endure this society and not to follow their own will. Only because of this state, after Nana's death, Mariam was made to marry a man who was much older than her without her concern: "It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have . . . besides, they'll laugh at you in school. They will. They'll call you *harami*" (18).

Rasheed is the cruel old customed husband of Mariam. He believed that men went out to earn their living as per this society's norm. On the other hand it is the duty of the women to satisfy their husbands by doing their household chores. It is the proper way to behave as a wife: "Well, then, as of tomorrow morning I expect you to start behaving like a wife" (63). The society's bias against a female child could be seen in the below line. Even Rasheed desires for a male child. When Mariam shares her desire for a girl child he is not interested in it: "Boy is better, Mariam jan, they carry the family name" (66).

The old norms and customs have trapped people, and if an individual uses his or her liberty then he or she is considered a criminal. The free spirit attained through education was considered as a crime in this society. Men like Hakim who give freedom to his wife were considered as one who lost his control over his wife. They were a threat to society and culture. They were looked as men who were least bothered about their pride and honor. But according to Rasheed women are bound to cover their body with *burqa* as a form of custom when they went out. They should not appear before men while they visit their house:

"I have customers, . . . who bring their wives to my shop. The women come uncovered, they talk to me directly, look me in the eye without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their knees. Sometimes they put their feet in front of me, . . . for measurements, and their husbands stand there and watch. They think they're being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education, they don't see that they are spoiling their honor and pride" (69).

One could experience how much the male dominance can affect women to the core. Mariam could not bear a son to Rasheed, due to which he brutally tortures her physically and emotionally: "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 . . . now you know what you've given me in this marriage" (102-103).

Laila is another protagonist in the novel who is the third child of Hakim and Fariba. She is a bright girl who is not taken proper care by her mother due to the loss of her brothers in the war. Her father and her beloved stood as a support in her life. But her life with Rasheed was not a happy one. She was tortured physically for her resistance in the hands of her husband. The laws for women became worse when Taliban took over Afghanistan. They were denied of basic rights and this paved the way to extreme dominance over their spirits: "attention women: . . . you will stay inside homes at all times. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative . . . if you found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death" (271).

Patriarchy in Afghanistan affected the women and country in general. It ruined their physical and psychological qualities. Women were just like cows, they nodded their heads to follow their masters blindly. Patriarchy is the biggest social phenomenon of Afghan society. Rachel, for instance, is a journalist who spent four months in Afghanistan to discover the Afghan lifestyle which was already described by Hosseini at the same year. She said that: "Hosseini writes accurate views of what did happened in Afghanistan, and how do the Afghan women endure their sufferings from the awful situation in their country". This proves that Khaled

Hosseini has successfully explained the Afghan situation and he narrated in details and handled the women issue who lived through a very rough time of women's rights in Afghanistan, illustrating it by Mariam and Laila's sufferance, who were seized by the government, treated as animals, forbidden from participating in the society, and being part of it or marginalized in all domains. So, it is true when Simon –de- Beauvoir (1997:241) says : "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman – it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" . Only when gender equality and identity comes through culture and society, a country could pave its way towards progression.

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