

Exploitation of Women in Patriarchal Society: A Study of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

This article observes that the exploitation of women in the patriarchal society has always been a significant issue in gender and feminist studies. The patriarchal culture inflicts violence upon women; however, women's acceptance of the patriarchal norms further aggravates their situation. The study argues that the lack of individuality in women makes them bear oppression. The acceptance of myths of male superiority convinces women of their inferior position and they start acting in a feminine way. The study finds that the female characters in Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* validate and contribute to violence by being submissive and lacking individuality. Additionally, the study uses Simone De Beauvoir's perspective in *The Second Sex* (1949) to explain the possible factors responsible for women's submissive attitude and lack of individuality. The study proposes that the sense of lack of individuality is so deeply rooted in a woman's mind that no amount of resilience can change her status.

Keywords: Simone De Beauvoir, Feminism, Individuality, Submissiveness, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Introduction

Considering men superior to women is a collectively shared notion in a male-oriented society wherein men define the social, political, and economic structure, women face exclusion, excision and are restricted to the domestic sphere.¹ A staunch patriarchal society teaches women to be submissive. In response, women tend to accept their position as inferior and try to meet society's expectations of a perfect woman.² For this, they tend to accept the myths of men's inherent superiority and contribute to violence by being submissive and lacking individuality. As states, "No matter how bad man's commands are, women keep being submissive towards them. Women internalize the myths of their inferior position in society."³ Through these myths; a woman is considered a sister-woman, a mother-woman, and a child-woman. In all the situations, women are willing to renounce their individuality and remain submissive to men, thereby causing their own downfall.

Many novelists have come to the fore to make their work a medium to highlight the plight of women. Amongst these writers, Khaled Hosseini is the one who has aptly described the tough survival of women in the Afghan society in his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which is an emotional and gripping story of female characters Mariam, Nana, and Laila. These characters become a victim of abuse within and outside the domestic sphere. Resultantly, for the sake of survival, they renounce their autonomy and submit to the whims of the patriarchal culture.

In the light of Hosseini's novel, the study investigates and explains the possible causes of women's submissiveness that force these characters to give up their individuality. The study attempts to investigate whether the lack of individuality makes the female characters endure the torment of male oppression. The issue of the lack of individuality is

analyzed from Simon De Beauvoir's existential feminist perspective. The research proposes that the lack of individuality overpowers the resistance shown by few female characters in the novel.

Literature Review

Hosseini has presented the transitional phase of Afghanistan, where people tend to protect their cultural values and break the stereotypes. Believes that if there are misogynist characters like Rasheed, the character like Babi is a breath of fresh air in the novel.⁴ Despite having strict restrictions on female education, he leaves no stone unturned to educate her daughter. Stuhr argues that by portraying some resilient characters like Babi and Laila, Hosseini has successfully shattered western stereotypes and portrayed a positive image of Afghanistan.

The research study says that the repressive structures (law courts, government etc) and ideological structures (religion, family etc) are to be held responsible for increased violence against women in the domestic and public sphere. He asserts that in the novel, the misogyny in the repressive and ideological institutions encourages men to be violent against women and forces the female characters to be submissive.⁵

Accuses Hosseini of wrongly portraying Afghan culture. He argues that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is in complete alignment with the western academia that portrays Asian and South Asian countries as intolerant towards women. He believes that Hosseini has shattered the reputation of South Asian countries by portraying men as advocates of domestic abuse.⁶ The authors in this work hold unending wars accountable for promulgating violence against women in the novel. Laila and Mariam are doubly marginalized. The repressive attitude of the state creates an ideology that sees women as inferior to men,

thereby normalizing violence against women and causing them to act like subordinates.⁷

The collective belief in men's superiority and dominance engenders an imbalanced relationship of domination and subordination between men and women. Explores how the female characters like Mariam and Laila are the perfect representation of "the other" and the male characters like Rasheed and Jalil are the apt portrayal of "the self." The female characters lack identity and are recognized through the male characters who are privileged to have their own identities.⁸

Research outline explores how domestic abuse takes a toll on the female characters in the novel. Mariam and Laila suffer immensely at the hands of Rasheed. The unbearable violence affects their mental health and renders them powerless. Resultantly, they lack self-reliance and depend greatly on their abusive husband.⁹ According to the Social Learning Theory, factors, including the social norms, repressed emotions, poverty, and criminal history in the family and precarious brought up are some reasons for violence on women. According to in Rasheed's case, the patriarchal norms and his repressed emotions are the reasons for his violent behavior. Due to the patriarchal norms, he considers women the weaker sex and releases his aggression on them.¹⁰

More works believe that the repeated act of violence and the constant threat of being alienated and ostracized force women to be submissive. Men, on the other hand, get away with their crimes by blaming it all on women. In the novel, Jalil excommunicates Nana when he finds out that Nana is expecting his illegitimate child. He disowns his child and sends Nana away. Nana becomes vulnerable and agrees to live a life of aloofness. Laila, despite being so resilient, knows that her survival is impossible without a male guardian, so she agrees to marry abusive

Rasheed. Similarly, Mariam keeps on giving in to his abusive husband's whims just to have a shelter to live in.¹¹ Further concludes that these female characters' submissive attitude is because of the patriarchal norms, which are inevitable to follow for the sake of their survival.¹²

There are several possible reasons for aggression and frustration, including hidden desires, unsuccessful motives, the inability to accept others' prosperity. The frustration is usually released on the weaker ones through physical violence. In the novel, female characters become the victim of Rasheed, who has the compulsive desire to control his wives.¹³ There is a significant difference between the feminist issues of first-world countries and third-world states. Women in first-world countries strive for equal opportunities, equal wages, and equal rights. On the other hand, women in third-world countries strive to fulfill their fundamental needs. Mariam and Laila belong to a third-world country. Contrary to the struggles of women of first-world countries, they are deprived of all opportunities, depend on their husbands for basic financial needs, and have no rights in the patriarchal society.¹⁴ Several recent research projects have considered the issue of domestic abuse in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Most studies evaluate the novel from a political, psychological, and cultural perspective. These researchers hold the external factors responsible for women's submission; however, the present study attempts to analyze how women – by accepting the stereotypes coined by society, religion, and culture – lose the sense of individuality and cause their own downfall.

Research Method and Theoretical Perspective

The study is interpretative and explanatory in nature. It uses the qualitative method for analysis. The study aims to explore the issue of lack of individuality in female characters as portrayed in Khaled Hosseini's *A*

Thousand Splendid Suns. The novel is interpreted and analyzed from the perspective of Simone De Beauvoir's concept of Existential feminism as presented in her seminal work *The Second Sex*. In the analysis of the novel, the researcher primarily focuses on how women become responsible for the oppression inflicted upon them by conforming to the patriarchal norms of the society. Being an existentialist, De Beauvoir refuses to accept femininity as an essence. She asserts, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society". A woman is the product of history and civilization that define her as inferior to man and make her lose individuality. Secondly, for each woman, her personal history determines her as a woman and inculcates in her feminine ideals.

The journey of becoming a submissive woman, according to Simone De Beauvoir, takes place in three formative stages where childhood plays the most crucial role in divesting women of their individuality. Young girls are conditioned into accepting passivity, dependence, inwardness, and submissiveness. "There is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self...she must try to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy". From an early age, elders, mothers create discrimination and maintain the tradition by forcing a girl child to associate herself with the passive objects and be more conscious of society's whims by giving up her individuality. When a girl enters adulthood with the same resigned attitude, she becomes a perfect representation of a woman society demands her to be. Her individuality is overshadowed by men's individuality, and she has no liberty to exercise her fundamental rights. She is willing to have no access to all the creative work and agrees to be reduced to the status of a wife, a mother, and an entertainer. As Beauvoir says, "and many of those who

decided to marry – because it is the thing to do, because of pressure put on them... because they want normal existence as wife and mother”. Eventually, at the third formative stage of old age, she loses her autonomy to the extent that she further forces other women to renounce individuality, and she starts perceiving herself through men’s eyes.

Women are made inferior through constant oppression validated by history, civilization, and society. Resultantly, women start existing in a way society tells them. Even if a woman manages to regain her self-consciousness, the ingrained feminine ideals halt her from embracing it to the fullest. A woman “does not seek to transcend the natural and social order... she is content to display her revolt within the bounds of a world the frontiers and laws of which are preserved (1953, p.381). Her self-consciousness fails to reciprocate the claims made by the ‘Other’ self-consciousness, and she is reluctant to revolt against the patriarchal norms. If she revolts, she is not comfortable with her regained individuality because of the deeply etched lessons of forbearance. Resultantly, she chooses complicity over resistance. By putting *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in the centre and reading it in sequence based on Simone De Beauvoir's idea about existential feminism as presented in her work *The Second Sex*, the study explores the issue of the lack of individuality that causes women to submit to unsettling circumstances.

Discussion and Analysis

Women are generally expected to act submissively in relation to men. The patriarchal society forces women not to value their existence and consider themselves as ‘Other’ whose service is to cater the needs and desires of men. Because of the immense pressure from society, women are stuck between maintaining their individuality and becoming a product of history and civilization. Similarly, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays the deprived lifestyle of Mariam, Nana, and Laila, who expose the oppression

of Afghan society and exemplify the truth of the tradition and the misogynist culture through their inferior position in society.¹⁵ These female characters are only deemed good for serving the male household members, who take them for granted and subject them to oppression. These female characters are denied subjectivity to their male correlatives. The novel introduces specific roles for both genders, where Mariam, Laila, and Nana take up the inferior role, and the superior role is awarded to male characters. The Afghan society expects them to accept the discrimination by believing in the inherent superiority of the male household members. The social expectations of a woman and the construction of the feminine identity make these characters vulnerable to internalizing guilt.¹⁶ The lives of these female characters are the perfect illustration of the suppression women endure. As Nana tells Mariam, "It is our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have" (ATSS, 2007, p.18). For the sake of their survival, Mariam, Laila, and Nana ponder submitting to the patriarchal norms and choose not to react to the injustice against them. Resultantly, Mariam, Laila, and Nana start losing their autonomy.

Factors Responsible for Submissiveness and Lack of Individuality

Passivity is one of the main factors in the novel responsible for the submissive attitude of the female characters. The resigned attitude is peculiar to them and becomes one of the main reasons they renounce their individuality. The idea of submissiveness and docility is so frequently attached to them that they become accustomed to being timid and hesitant. Talking about the female characters, Soraya says, "in the community that still holds the traditional understanding, women are on the weaker side. They always accept injustice and oppression. These women do not acquire their rights, both in community and in the family" (2015, p.82). Mariam, Nana, and Laila have a generation gap, but they all

are equally passive and share the same fate and do not react to society's accusations against them. The passive attitude is evident from Nana's words when she tells Mariam, "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. These words become a refrain for Mariam as she gets older, and she accepts the patriarchal customs passively. In fact, it becomes hard to argue with the logic considering the hardships Mariam has to face at the hands of a male-oriented society, the misogynist tradition and culture that make it inevitable for her to give up her individuality for the sake of her survival.

Apart from the cultural and historical factors responsible for causing women to renounce individuality, the lack of unity between these female characters is another significant factor responsible for their passive demeanor. The hostility begins with Jalil's wives, who inflict violence on Nana and subject her to emotional abuse. They accuse her of trapping Jalil and forcing him to commit adultery. Nana recalls bitterly, "how Jalil's wives had called her an ugly, lowly stone carver's daughter. How they'd made her wash laundry outside until her face went numb". Jalil's wives become an accomplice to the patriarchal society by helping Jalil conceal his crime and blaming it all on a woman. Due to their behavior, Nana is left with no other option than to settle in a secluded area and live in isolation with her daughter.

Later on, because of her bitter encounter with other women, she is unable to form a friendly relation with Mariam. She abuses Mariam for her illegitimate status by calling her a *harami*. In return, Mariam also becomes hostile to Nana and thinks that she lies about Jalil's negligence, as the writer says, "around the time she turned ten, Mariam no longer believed this story of her birth. She believed Jalil's version". The lack of unity between Mariam and Nana is why they meet the same unfortunate end

when Nana takes her own life and Mariam is left alone. After Nana's death, she has no other option than to submit to Rasheed for her survival. Elders' manipulation is the main factor responsible for Mariam and Laila's lack of individuality. As Shameem examines, "In the novel, women appear to share their part in the male hegemony. They internalize and essentialize the views of the differences in human beings as embedded in the patriarchy-dominated culture. Nana's various utterances seem to underline this essentialist view" (2014, p.64). In their third formative stage, Jalil's wives, lose their sense of individuality and become an accomplice to the patriarchal system, which glorifies female oppression and validates their suppression. They become a perfect representative of the patriarchal society that aims to divest women of their individuality. They further contribute to the patriarchal norms by forcing Mariam to maintain the patriarchal tradition. The idea of womanhood associated with fragility is so deeply ingrained that every woman who is not like them is a monster to them. Therefore, they force Mariam to accept submissiveness by losing individuality to marriage. In the novel, they can be seen forcing Mariam to give up her individuality. They validate the misogynist norms by marrying her off to an old man, saying, "I've seen nine years old girls given to men twenty years older than your suitor, Mariam... what are you. Fifteen? That's a good solid marrying age for a girl... he has a home and a job. That's all that really matters" (2007, p. 48). These women force Mariam to adopt submissiveness by accepting financial dependence and passiveness.

Mothers play a crucial role in making their daughters renounce individuality. Once they reach a certain age, they lose their purpose in life and become staunch in their opinions regarding feminine identity and they start projecting their beliefs on their daughters. As De Beauvoir asserts, "in her daughter, the mother does not hail a member of the

superior caste; in her, she seeks a double. She projects upon her all the ambiguity of her relationship with herself" (1953, p.535). Mammy tries to turn Laila into a woman who lacks individuality. She intimidates Laila by exposing her to the bitter realities of life and convincing her to be submissive. She tells Laila, "the reputation of a girl, especially one as pretty as you, is a delicate thing, Laila. Like a mynah bird in your hand. Slacken your grip, and away it flies" (2007, p. 60). Being a typical mother, Mammy exhorts Laila to be conscious of her reputation. She tries to turn her into a fragile being. She inculcates in her mind that women lack the privilege of owning their bodies and they are not entitled to male privileges in society and must act submissively.

Because of the traumatic personal experiences in the past, the unending series of emotional abuse and society's prejudice towards her, Nana is quick to adopt submissiveness. Society accuses her of adultery, a crime Jalil is equally responsible for. However, because of his status as a man, he is not held accountable for the crime, whereas Nana is ostracized and considered an outcast. Resultantly, she becomes extremely bitter and spits venom against men. She tells Mariam, "You know what he told his wives by way of defense? That I forced myself on him. That it was my fault. Did I? You see? This is what it means to be a woman in this world" (2007, p.7). However, her disregard for men is also passive and she does not consider herself strong enough to resist. As Joiya points out, "Nana is a deprived generation who points out the follies of males before the females but does not resist" (2017, p.106). Because of the patriarchal norms so deeply entrenched in her mind, Nana fails to reciprocate the claims made by the male self-consciousness. She is unable to show resistance and accepts her position as inferior in the patriarchal society.

Mothers who embrace submissiveness perceive femininity as an absolute curse. They wish to see their reflection in their daughters and feel

regretful for bringing them into the world (TSS, 1953, P. 533). Similarly, after facing countless ordeals, when Nana enters old age with the same passive and resigned attitude, she becomes adherent to her idea of femininity and submissiveness to the extent that she abhors her daughter for not being passive as her and even regrets giving birth to her. Nana wishes to see her reflection in Mariam. By giving Mariam the lesson of inwardness, Nana wants to make her a true woman, as that it is the only way Mariam will be best accepted by society. She tells Mariam, "There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life... Look at me... only one skill. And it's this: tahamul. Endure" (2007, p. 89). Mariam becomes an object for Nana, to whom she conveys her feminine ideals and forces her to accept the patriarchal norms by being patient and tolerant towards the injustice against women.

Nana expresses her hatred towards Mariam for her independent existence. She even chides Mariam for causing her labor pain and for being born. She tells Mariam, "When the pain got bad, I'd bite on a pillow and scream into it...And you, Mariam, you were in no rush. Almost two days you made me lay on that cold, hard floor" (2007, p.11). The toxic masculinity affects Nana profoundly and she views herself and her capabilities in what is allowed to her. Over time, she loses her natural talent and becomes problematic during motherhood. She makes Mariam feel guilty for something not in her control and makes her feel unwanted and insignificant.

Mariam's upbringing and the traumatic events she encounters in her early formative stage are the main factors for her submissiveness and lack of individuality. The emotional and psychological abuse she has to go through at the hands of her mother in her childhood leaves indelible marks on her mind. Mariam starts to think of herself as a mere burden on her mother and apologizes to her, saying, "I am sorry Nana". Even though, "it did not occur to young Mariam to ponder the unfairness of

apologizing for the manner of her own birth" (2007, p.11). Mariam is conditioned into accepting dependence and passivity long before she enters the stage of self-consciousness, causing her to show the same pattern of behavior in her later formative stages of life.

When Mariam grows up and enters the Adulthood stage, she becomes so fixated on her mother's views that escaping them becomes almost impossible. She starts viewing herself from her mother's perspective and thinks of herself as everything Nana would attribute to her, and she accepts her position as inferior. Being accustomed to the abusive behavior since her early formative stage, she responds passively to each act of violence and assumes that she deserves to be treated like that. After her marriage, she becomes the worst victim of psychological and physical abuse at Rasheed's hands, who treats her badly for not giving him a male heir. Instead of reacting, she recalls her mother's words, "each snowflake was a sigh heaved by an aggrieved woman somewhere in the world... as a reminder of how women like us suffer" (2007, p.97). She takes the blame and deems her infertility as her fault.

Mariam faces immense brutality at the hands of Rasheed in the patriarchal society mainly because she abandons her identity and individuality. The concept of self and self-consciousness is vague to her and she tries to find her reflection in man and accepts herself as the Other. The lessons of passivity and dependency rendered since childhood force Mariam to accept the abusive marriage out of the fear of abandonment. After "four years of marriage, Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when was afraid. And Mariam was afraid (2007, p.107). Therefore, she accepts Rasheed's commands without any hesitation. She agrees to step out of the domestic sphere only in the company of a male guardian. Such is the level of her lost sense of consciousness that the financial dependence, which proves to be one of the main reasons for abuse and suppression, does not bother her.

Resistance

The passive attitude of these female characters and Nana and Mammy's constant reminder of women's status in the patriarchal society causes Mariam and Laila to choose submission. However, after forming a congenial bond with one another, Mariam and Laila manage to regain their lost sense of individuality. Their strong bond can be equated with the idea of feminist sisterhood. They come to the realization that they are undergoing the same tragic fate, so they start sharing their strength of endurance (Sebastian, 2017, p 57). Eventually, after long forbearance, Mariam and Laila show resistance. After a series of violent behavior, Mariam gains her lost sense of consciousness back. She adopts the masculine weapon and kills Rasheed. "This time, she gave it everything she had" (2007, p. 341) and broke the years' long shackles of patriarchy. However, Mariam's resistance is short-termed. Soon after, she regrets her decision of killing Rasheed and depriving Zalmi of a father figure. She remorsefully says, "I have killed our husband. I've deprived your son of his father. It isn't right that I run... For me, it ends here. There's nothing more I want". Mariam fails to hold on to her resistant side due to the traumas of the past and the lessons of fragility she received from her mother. Despite being a victim of domestic abuse and being duped into thinking of herself as inferior, she still perceives herself as a criminal. She refuses to flee and surrenders to the state member who executes her for killing her oppressor.

Conclusion

Mariam and Laila suffer significantly because of the Afghan patriarchal society that supports men and discourages women from exercising their rights. Because of the society's constant support for men, Nana, Mariam, and Laila face severe conflicts in the male-oriented society. In response, these female characters fail to organize themselves in a way where a general women's consciousness could stand against the male consciousness. Therefore, they seem to accept their position as inferior beings. They think of men as "Self" and consider themselves the "Other". Because of the lack of general

women's consciousness, Nana is the first to show submission. The sense of dependence and lack of individuality do not bother her, and she conveys the same passiveness to Mariam and makes her feel inferior about her existence. After enduring oppression for long, Mariam finally resists and breaks the shackles of patriarchy; however, because of the traumas of the early formative stages, it becomes hard for her to retain her resistant side for a more extended period, and she eventually reverts to her submissive side. Complicity plays a significant role here in the case of these female characters. It is easy for these female characters to avoid the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence. When the male household members make these female characters the Other, they may expect her to manifest deep-seated tendencies towards complicity. In return, these female characters fail to lay claim to the status of the subject partly because they feel the need for the bond that ties them to men regardless of reciprocity, and it is one of the reasons why Mariam regrets killing Rasheed, as she feels the compulsive need to associate herself with the male counterpart. These female characters, especially Mariam, are often pleased with their role as Other. It is where the existentialism of De Beauvoir comes out and is manifested. These female characters had the choice. The choices may not be within the framework they would like to choose, but they are there. Of all the choices available, one choice is that of complicity. By choosing complicity, these female characters ratify the fundamental division between men and women as the Self and the Other, thereby choosing submissiveness over resistance and becoming the reason for their own downfall.

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