

Review

Subjugation: A study of the women characters in Khalid Hosseini's and Arundhati Roy's novels

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This paper is a serious attempt to portray the exploitation and discrimination of women in the patriarchal social systems of the Afghan society and the Indian subcontinent as delineated in the novels of Khalid Hosseini and Arundhati Roy. In both the novels: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The God of Small Things*, the women share the common plight of suffering, where the male folk treat them as mere objects and subject them to extreme oppression. The novelists rightfully depict the story of these women, who show signs of resistance and try to thwart the male order but their struggle is overwhelmed by the ideology of the male-dominated social systems.

Key words: Exploitation, women, patriarchal resistance.

INTRODUCTION

The term *subaltern*, derives from the Latin word *sub* (below, under) plus *alter* (other) or *alternus* (alternate), which result in *subalternus* (subordinate). It means a lower-ranking or an inferior individual. It is in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, under the influence of Marxism, nationalism, post colonialist theory, and feminism, that *subaltern* has come to be used broadly to represent subordination in social, political, religious, and economic hierarchies. The synonym of *subaltern* is subordination or subjugation. According to Spivak, sub-altern women are subjected to oppression more than the *subaltern* men. They do not have proper representation, and therefore are not able to voice their opinions or share their stories. No one is aware of the daily struggles they face (Spivak 2010).

This paper is an in-depth study of the female characters that share the common bond of subjugation and miserably struggle for their survival. They hail from different countries and religion. The women characters in (Hosseini 2007) *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are Muslims placed in a traditional Islamic society in Afghanistan while Roy's characters are the Syrian Christians, from the small Indian community in Kerala.

"Syrian Christians, who believed that they were descendants of the one hundred Brahmins whom Saint Thomas the Apostle converted to Christianity when he travelled east after the Resurrection" (Roy p.66).

The French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir while explaining the hierarchy of sexes has expressed that: "This has always been a man's world", (Beauvoir, 1997, p.93) and has claimed the fact that woman is considered weak and of inferior productive capacity because she has remained in bondage to life's mysterious processes and so man has failed to recognize in her a being like himself. Beauvoir observes: "One is not born a woman but becomes one". (Beauvoir, 1997, p.301) and with this, she tried to emphasize that sex and gender are two different things. While sex is determined biologically as early as the time of conception, it is the gender that serves as the fore-ground for various interacting phenomenon.

In order to understand the gender dynamics and the manner it is determined by the historical and socio-economic factors of the respective country, it is necessary to study the women in the works of the two novelists: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* spans two decades

of Afghan history, from the Soviet rule in the 1970s to the Taliban's rise to power in the 1990s, as seen through the eyes of the two women. The novel describes the struggle of the women to escape insubordination imposed upon them by the society and culture of Afghanistan. It shows how these women are caught in the net of different political factions and cultural standards and how the clashes between them have devastating effects on their lives. In *God of Small Things*, the temporal setting shifts back and forth between 1969 to 1993 and it presents women characters caught up in a complex web of actions that take place in their lives and affect each other in one way or the other. This paper portrays women of the post-colonial milieu in India and Afghanistan who aspire for freedom and equality and in some form or other and try to resist the repressive social structures. Though these characters in both the novels do not succeed in bringing about any tangible change in the society, still they struggle and search for their identities either through acts of transgression like Ammu or of transcendence like Mariam and Laila.

THE SUPPRESSED WORLD

The specific lives of Nana, Mariam and Laila give an insight into the various forms of suppression which these women are subjected to, at the mercy of their male counterparts. The novel begins with the word "*Haram*" which means 'bastard' and this word encompasses the stigmatic existence of the lives of the two female characters, Mariam and Laila. Mariam is delineated as an outcast who is a source of disappointment and shame to her mother whom she renders as a social outcast. Mariam's mother addressed as the guilty is excluded from society and spatially marginalized. Rejection, abandonment, unhappiness, spite, frustrations fill her life with morbidity and moments of depression. All havoc breaks loose on her when was disowned by her own poor father, Nana is thrown off the periphery of normal living to deliver the child all alone and she quietly accepts the accusations made at her, She often blurts out:

"He betrayed us, your beloved father. He cast us out. He cast us out of his big fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily" (p.5).

Her loneliness makes her so obsessed with motherhood that she grows extremely possessive about her daughter who is her sole link to the world of living beings. "*You're all I have. I won't lose you to them...*" (p.18). Wronged by a powerful man in a land where there is no hope for justice Nana doesn't want her daughter to experience a similar rejection which she has experienced:

"This is what it means to be woman in this world...Learn it. Now and learn it well...a man's accusing finger always

finds a woman".

Further she reflects:

"It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have" (p.18).

Being ignored throughout her life and bearing the burden of false indictments without any protest, Mariam's mother fails to leave any mark on the world. She dies in seclusion under emotional breakdown and gets buried somewhere near the boundary of a cemetery. Her sufferings reflect upon a society which has no sympathies for an abandoned woman and leaves her all alone in life as well as in death. This makes the relationship between the daughter and the mother more embittered and tense. When her mother commits suicide, Mariam feels stigmatized once again: she cannot aspire either to be accepted by her father's family, or to be given a place in their society. Her only choice is to be hastily married off as far as possible and to be forgotten. Mariam is confined to the cottage and is exposed to minimal social interaction. She is also denied the opportunity to get as Nana claims that "*there is only one skill a woman like you and me need in life, and they don't teach it in school... And it's this: tahamul. Endure.*" (p.17). Mariam's only joy in life is the weekly visit from her father. She focuses her affections on him only to be disillusioned when she discovers that he lacks courage to fully recognize her as his daughter. After her mother's suicide, the dejected Mariam leaves Herat to be married, without so much as a wave of goodbye to her father. In Kabul, Mariam encounters a different life, both socially and culturally. She speaks a different dialect of the Farsi language, so at first she finds it difficult to understand her husband and other people. Kabul is also much bigger than Herat and less traditional. However, Rasheed, Mariam's bitter husband, demands that she wear a *burqa*, claiming that "*where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only.*" (p.63). Mariam ends up being even less free in her new life than in her old one. She fails to bear a child and is gradually reduced to the status of a servant in Rasheed's household, a source of disappointment to him and to herself: an outcast once again. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that Jalil, Mariam's father had deeply regretted the loss of his daughter and had been trying to make amends. However, he was not brave enough to withstand domestic and social pressures which condemned Mariam for being a '*harami*'.

Mariam, we observe is an extension of her mother because she is also an adept at making compromises with situations begotten by destiny. Right from the beginning, we see that Mariam keeps her thoughts and words to herself, afraid that if she would articulate them, then she might hurt her own mother. For example, when Nana tries to dissuade her from falling for Jalil's false promises then Mariam thinks: "*You're afraid that I might*

find the happiness you never had. And you don't want me to be happy. You don't want a good life for me. You are the one with the wretched heart" (p.27).

Tolerant like her mother Mariam accepts the ways of the world when it tosses her life upside down, right after the death of her mother. She finds herself responsible for Nana's death and this guilt hangs around her neck like an albatross throughout her life. Mariam is forced into marriage with a widower far too old for her and this teaches her to suffer in silence the pains without any complaint. As a wife, Mariam is very docile and accepts to be veiled by a *burqa* for her husband's satisfaction who is as *"imposing and immovable as the Safid-Koh Mountains"*. Rasheed, her husband an extremely orthodox Muslim warns her: *"But I am a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only"* (p.63). Mariam accepts his orders without any resistance and seeks solace under the *Burqa* which becomes a veil for to protect herself from the outside world. *"It was like a one-way window. Inside it she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew...all the shameful secrets of her past"* (p.66).

Mariam's agonies see no bounds as she suffers multiple miscarriages only to realize that nature has deprived her of the pleasures of motherhood, which in turn she relates it to the fateful incident of her own mother's suicide and a consequence of her callousness towards Nana. One of the most striking resemblances in the female characters of Hosseini's is that they are internally circumscribed in a vicious circle of guilt which they try to bridge by punishing themselves. It seems that due to such a feeling of guilt Mariam silently endures all the harsh beatings, accusations and accepts her infertility as a curse of her mother. She suffers from a strange belief that her sufferings have been incurred due to her own actions in the past. It is only towards the end of the book that we come to know about her inner thoughts regarding Rasheed and their marriage:

"Had she been a deceitful wife? A complacent wife? A dishonorable woman? Discreditable? Vulgar? What harmful things had she done to this man to warrant his malice, his continual assaults, the relish with which he tormented her? Had she not given this man her youth? Had she ever justly deserved his meanness?" (p.309)

Mariam had never learnt to question her fate or challenge her destiny. She has been subjugated in all ways: emotionally, socially, physically and psychologically. She succumbs to her sufferings by accepting them as God's will and turns mute. Nana, Mariam, Laila, Aziza (Laila's daughter) are all victims of a male chauvinist society where it is desirable for a woman to be pretty, fair, beautiful and elegant because the less beautiful ones are

looked down upon by men for not being able to please their senses. It gives a legitimate excuse for them to remarry as many as four wives at the same time. Nowhere in the novel we ever see a hint of low confidence in Rasheed who though resembles a grizzly bear for his huge obese structure and coarse hair has guts to say: *"Half the women in this city would kill to have a husband like me"* (p.276).

When we come to analyze Laila, the third female character in the novel we find that she comes from a very different background. Her family is relatively liberal: her father, Hakim, is a university teacher, and although her mother Fariba is a housewife, her overall conduct is far from traditional. Unlike Mariam she is not submissive towards her husband; she wears only a *hijab*, a headscarf, instead of a *burqa*. From an early age, Laila is encouraged by her father to go to school and become an educated woman. The relationship between Laila and her father grows more affectionate when Laila's brothers join the Mujahedeen in a guerilla war against the Russian forces and the communist regime. Laila's mother loses her zest for life and languishes in bed with curtains drawn. She also seems to lose any interest in her daughter and so Laila turns to her father for help and support. He provides help and encouragement in matters of schooling, while Tariq and his family provide family love and warmth. Laila also enjoys hearing stories about her parents' courtship and marriage; her father openly admits that they married for love, which was rarely the case in their society. The loving relationship Laila has both with her own and with Tariq's family provide her with an emotional buttress against all the hardships awaiting her. Rasheed marries Laila on the pretext that his second wife, Mariam is neither attractive nor fertile.

Rasheed: "It's not your decision. It's hers and mine".

Mariam: "I am too old for you to do this to me".

Rasheed: "Don't be so dramatic. It's a common thing...your own father had three wives. Besides, what I am doing now most men I knew would have done long ago. You know it's true". (p.192)

Raised in an atmosphere of equality between the sexes, Laila finds Rasheed's traditional views and his abusive behavior repulsive. Rasheed woos Laila only as long as she doesn't become a mother, when her first born is a girl and moreover he starts suspecting the child's legitimacy. Rasheed's game of showering her with gifts and attention ends soon and he resumes his old habit of physically torturing Laila with sticks and kicks at the slightest of 'provocations'. Hosseini thus depicts a land where the law bestows men with privileges while the women are considered deserving of death penalty if found involved in adultery or disrespectful towards her husband. Women like Mariam and Laila, co-wives of Rasheed, though separated by an age-barrier of nearly twenty years are bound together by destiny in an abusive marriage and

have no source of escape. Seeking divorce is an impossible dream for both these women so the only option left, is running away from home to escape. But destiny has something else in store for them. They get caught by the police and are handed over to Rasheed once again. Despite all the atrocities experienced or witnessed, Laila's faith in goodness however remains uncorrupted and she decides to return to Afghanistan so that she could contribute in the rebuilding of Afghan society and culture. She remembers her father's words: "You can be anything you want, Laila, he says. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you" (p.345). Thus amidst the negativity in her life Laila has the strength and radiance of a positive soul.

The oppression as depicted by Hosseini is not peculiar to Afghanistan only, in fact it is commonplace across various nations and cultures although the most stringent form of subjugation of women folk is a norm in religion dominated countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. Books such as 'My Feudal Lord', 'The Pakistani Bride', (Sidhwa, 2008) 'The Swallows of Kabul' (Khadra, 2005). and 'In the Land of Invisible Women' (Ahmad, 2008) to name a few, help us explore the lives of women harrowed by religion, culture, tradition and men. All these novels are based upon real-life incidents where we see women subjected to verbal and physical torments. Nana and Mariam appear as the archetypes of sacrificing women who have learnt to live for others without ever making any demand for their selves. Mariam although childless finds contentment and pleasure in the comradeship of Laila and Aziza and transforms herself into a prototype of selfless motherhood who for the sake of love does not hesitate to execute the murder of her husband. She feels no remorse or contrition regarding her action except for the fact that her action had deprived Zalmi of his father's affection. These deprived and aggrieved women live a crippled life. Subservience and exploitation become a customary attribute of their existence which repudiate them of respect, dignity and solemnity. The stories of women like Nana and Mariam illustrate that merely accepting the subjugation without ever establishing a defense only reinforces the tyrants to uproot and defeat humanity and gratitude.

THE SYRIAN CHRISTIAN WORLD

After traversing the land of Afghanistan, as we come to India and view the world of the Syrian Christians in Kerala, the situation is not very different. Roy in *The God of Small Things* analyzes the gender oppression through the examination of the marital and inter-gender relations of Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel. All these female characters are resourceful, smart and belong to the affluent class but they are deprived in fully realizing their capabilities. They lack guts to openly defy

the social order and are torn between traditional norms and modern attitudes. In their attempt to challenge the customs, laws, values of social and cultural boundaries, they commit moral transgressions which ultimately lead them toward their demise and destruction.

"*Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinistic society*", rightly Ammu had observed (p.57). Through their trajectories of personal involvement in different issues, they interrogate the structures of caste, clan and gender in both implicit and explicit manner. Ammu, middle class bourgeois woman, a divorcee with two children, she is the female protagonist of the novel. Though she is educated and articulate, she is the victim of marriage that did not work out.

"*Her husband turned out to be not just a heavy drinker but a full blown alcoholic with all of an alcoholic's deviousness and tragic charm. There were things about him that Ammu never understood. Long after she left him, she never stopped wondering why he lied so outrageously when he didn't need to particularly when he didn't need to*" (p.40). Her alcoholic husband used to inflict beastly treatment on her to the extreme end of satisfying the carnal pleasures of his boss, so that his job remains secure. Situation becomes so painful and unbearable that Ammu is forced to divorce him: "*Drunken violence followed by post-drunken badgering*" and "*Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcome to her parents in Ayemenem*" (p.42).

Along with her dizygotic twins; Estha and Rahel, Ammu seeks refuge in her own home but her father's house turns out to be a horrid place for her and she is subject to humiliation, insults and mental blows by her own family members. Ammu as a lady has great self-confidence in herself and she often outwits her own oxford educated brother, Chacko, even though she was deprived of the opportunity to study and have an exposure like her brother. According to Chacko who is always bent on marginalizing his own sister "*Ammu had no Locusts stand I*" (p.57) and that "*Ammu and Estha and Rahel were millstones around his neck*" (p.85).

"*Ammu learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty... she did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them.*" (p.182). The repeated rejections of Ammu by her own kith and kin compels her to seek emotional refuge in Velultha - a low caste or 'untouchable' carpenter. A clandestine love affair develops between the two resulting in furtive sexual encounters which is in violation of the traditional norms of the Syrian Christian society. Because of her moral transgression the church also refused to bury Ammu. "*Rahel thought she looked like a roman senator. Et tu, Ammu! She thought and smiled, remembering Estha!*" (p.162). Thus "*Ammu died in a grimy room in the Bharat lodge in Alleppey... She died alone. She was thirty-one. Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age.*" (p.161). In the long run, Ammu is disowned by her society,

separated ruthlessly from her children and faces a lonely death.

The second woman character is Mammachi, who is both Ammu and Chacko's mother. She possesses adept business skills and starts a pickle factory all by herself, but her husband Pappachi *"would not help her with the pickle-making because he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a high ranking ex-govt. official"*. He beat her constantly for no apparent reason *"the beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place"* (p.47-48). After Pappachi's death Chacko, her son took over the factory from her and in losing her factory Mammachi was marginalized in terms of both clan and gender. She was made a sleeping partner. According to Chacko's philosophy *"what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine."* (p.57). Mammachi however does not resist her tyrannical son, she concedes to his *"Men's Needs"* as Chacko flirts with *"pretty women who worked in the factory"* forcing them to *"sit at table with him and drink tea"* (p.65) much to the dismay of his own mother. Mammachi is artistic and she has the skills of playing the violin. When her music teacher praises her exceptional talent before her husband, her music lessons are stopped abruptly because of the fear that his wife may surpass Pappachi. However, unlike Ammu, Mammachi never questions the conditions and accepts the reality passively and with a strange 'resilience' in her character. Her acquiescence is a defensive gesture of her story sense of 'endurance' to undergo the torture and trauma without speaking it out.

Baby Kochamma is the sister of Pappachi who is another maltreated victim in the novel. She receives the shock of her life when her dream of marrying father Mulligan, an Irish priest gets shattered. To win him, she converts herself to Roman Catholic faith but ultimately she is a failure and starts living in isolation in the Ayemenem house. Baby Kochamma conspires with the inspector and puts Velultha behind the bars, where he is severely beaten to death. This attitude of negativism is perhaps due to the unjust treatment meted out to her in her life: *"the fear of being dispossessed"*. She felt that she had the *"fate of the wretched Man-less woman"*. Amitabh Roy in his analysis of Baby Kochamma's character opines *"It is a pity that she submits in the name of decency and honor to the very sexist, casteist and communal prejudices that have stood in her way and denied fulfillment to her"* (2005, p.62) Thus like Mammachi, Baby Kochamma also apparently submits to the patriarchal social norms without any hesitation but if closely examined she puts up a line of implicit resistance against the biased socio-political and economic order in the post-colonial India.

Rahel is the offspring of divorced parents, daughter of Ammu who is deprived of conventional parental love. She lives with the stigma of a mixed parent age, both religious (as her father was Hindu and Ammu, a Syrian Christian) and ethnic (as her father was a Bengali and Mother a

Keralite). She had a hard time in School and was expelled three times from the Nazareth convent and was refused to be co-opted by the school. She is disliked by her relatives-Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria and even Chacko. She considers Velultha to be a father figure with whom she plays. *"She knew his back. She'd been carried on it. More times than she could count"* (p.73). When Rahel discovers the sexual liaison of Ammu with Velultha, she locks herself in the bedroom. When Police arrests Velultha Rahel goes to the police station with her brother Estha to identify Velultha as a criminal. Being the victim of a dysfunctional family, she fails to connect with the people around her and lacks self-confidence. The most unnatural act of social transgression committed by Rahel is her incestuous love for her twin brother Estha - which is perhaps her implicit resistance towards the social order. *"Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child. A sister, a brother. A woman, a man. A twin, a twin"* (p.93). The only person with whom Rahel has harmony, an empathetic link is her own twin brother Estha, eighteen minutes her senior. Their personality's balance each other like the two halves of a circle; complementing each other.

She is a girl with an active imagination. For instance when she feels scared, she imagines that Pappachi's moth is crawling on her heart with icy legs. While attending Sophie's funeral, she imagines Sophie Mol turning over in her coffin. Like a lost soul, Rahel wanders in her life. She takes up architecture program in Delhi without any thought or interest, there she meets Larry McCaslin, the researcher, marries him and goes to the U.S.A. She drifts into marriage; *"Like a passenger drifts into an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge"* (p.18) but soon divorced she returns to Ayemenem, her birth place. The only person with whom, she has compatibility, a balancing harmony, is her brother Estha. Like Ammu, Rahel at a young age also learns to dream and imagine and like her she is ultimately disowned and rejected by the society. In a relationship with her brother Rahel transgresses the traditional boundaries of a defined and social relationship. While Ammu has an illicit relationship with Velultha, Rahel indulges in a sexual relationship with her own brother. Both in a way transgress the social norms of the traditional Ayemenem society - Their transgression is perhaps a deliberate act to defy and to challenge the society where in, they have to survive as the oppressed victims.

CONCLUSION

If we study the worlds of Hosseini and Roy, we observe that the female characters, though they hail from separate countries and separate religion are still intertwined by common link: and that is the bond of suffering and subjugation. The difference lies only in the degree of their suffering. Hosseini makes no attempt to conceal the

ordeal the female characters undergo and have to live with it. Ammu, Mariam, Laila, Mammachi and Rahel-all stand against the hegemonic forces of the male oriented society, its cruel tenets and tradition. In their endurance lies their moral strength. Whereas in Roy's *God of Small Things* the female characters of the first generation like Mammachi, Nana and Baby Kochamma silently resist the tyranny of the male supremacy, Ammu, Laila, Mariam and Rahel belonging to the second generation do not hesitate to openly defy the structured norms of the society: like Ammu having an incestuous affair with the lowly servant Velutha or Rahel having a sexual adventure with her twin brother and Laila going back to her old lover and boyfriend Tariq after her husband's death. These women are not like doormats, there are signs of protest clearly manifested through their actions which reflect their tenacity and strength. Mariam has the guts to kill her husband while Ammu and Rahel consciously defy the moral structures of the Ayemenem society in Kerala. Thus through the portrayal of the women characters both the novelists share a common view point that "a woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man. A woman is not the other. She is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of, through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation." (Ramamoorthy, 1991 115).

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