

GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND THE WRETCHED CONDITION OF WOMEN IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* AND KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) are considered as masterpieces so far as the portrayal of gender discrimination is concerned. Through these novels, the authors have given an authentic insight to the people of the world about the plight of women in clear terms. In her novel, Arundhati Roy focuses on the troubles of women in India. It portrays how the breach of social norms by women brings about its disaster in Indian Patriarchal society. On the other hand, Hosseini traces the dark phase in the history of Afghanistan when women of the country suffered the most. The Taliban government observed the miserable conditions of the women with mystified curiosity. The dreadful conditions of the women as portrayed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was, in fact, the harsh truth in Afghanistan during the reign of the Taliban government. The Taliban could easily intrude in the affairs of the people of the country irrespective of sex during that period. In such a social set up mercy seemed to be a distant thought. The Taliban Government banned higher education for women and made *burqa* compulsory for them in public. To make the disgraceful conditions of the people of Afghanistan more palpable especially the women as portrayed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the writer has compared the status of women before and during the reign of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The pitiful conditions of the women arrest the attention of the authors greatly and the above mentioned novels are the result of that influence.

Keyword: Taliban, Indian Patriarchal society, social set up, *burqa*, higher education.

Introduction: *The God of Small Things* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* written by Arundhati Roy and Khaled Hosseini respectively are, in fact, magnum opus so far as the representation of gender discrimination is concerned. Readers are made aware about the degraded plight of women in black and white. While, Arundhati Roy focuses on how the breach of social norms by women brings about its disaster in Indian Patriarchal society, Hosseini traces the dark phase in the history of Afghanistan when women of the country suffered the most. The Taliban government observed the wretched conditions of the women with mystified inquisitiveness. The dreadful conditions of the women as portrayed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was, in fact, the harsh reality in Afghanistan during the reign of the Taliban government. The Taliban could easily intrude in the affairs of the people of the country irrespective of sex during that period. In such a social set up mercy seemed to be a distant thought. The Taliban Government banned higher education for women and made *burqa* compulsory for them in public. To make the disgraceful conditions of the people of Afghanistan more palpable especially the women as portrayed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the writer has

compared the status of women before and during the reign of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The pitiful conditions of the women arrest the attention of the authors greatly and the above mentioned novels are the outcome of the same. This paper discusses the portrayal of social evils like gender discrimination with reference to these highly acclaimed works of Arundhati Roy and Khaled Hossaini.

Arundhati Roy is best known for her debut novel *The God of Small Things*. This novel won the Booker Prize in 1997. This novel became so popular that Express Entertainment, one of the Pakistani TV channels aired the serial 'Talkhiyan' based on it. The story of the novel revolves around the childhood experiences of fraternal twins Rahel and Esthappen. It is a narrative that explains how the behaviour and lives of the people are affected by little things in life. The story begins in a town named Ayemenem. Currently it's a part of Kottayam district in Kerala, India. In the novel *The God of Small Things* Roy explores the socio-political set up of India during the years from 1969, when Rahel and Esthappen were seven years old to 1993, when the twins were reunited at age of 31. Malayalam words are abundantly used in combination with English. Different aspects of life of

the people of Kerala like caste system, the Keralite Syrian Christian way of life and communism are captured by the novel.

The major concern of *The God of Small Things* is to unveil the prevalent patriarchal dominance in Indian society. Roy tries to show the cruel hands of patriarchy from various angles through a number of incidents in the novel. For instance Ammu Ipe is one such victim who suffers the injustice done to her by her husband. She marries a man who assists managing a tea estate found to be an alcoholic after she got married to him. So she could not but repent at the mistake done by getting married with such a person:

She was twenty-seven that year, and in the pit of her stomach she carried the cold knowledge that her life had been lived. She had had one chance. She made a mistake. She married the wrong man (Roy 38).

Moreover, Ammu's husband physically abuses her and tries to pimp her to his boss to keep his job secured. Though she had two daughters Rahel and Estha, Ammu Ipe leaves her husband and returns to live with her father, mother and brother, Chacko, in Ayemenem. It is the result of torment that she suffered in the hands of her husband. In this context Ms. Nidhi Mehta has aptly said that, "The chauvinism of men does not allow women to break the archetype of femininity, which regards women as a meek, subservient, and docile individual who neither challenges males' authority nor conventions and rules of society" (Mehta, 255). However, Roy has also shown through some of the characters like Ammu, Baby Kochamma and Rahel in the novels, who readily come forward in order to confront with the adverse situations. These characters try to convey message to the supporters of patriarchal society that they (representing the women) are no longer ready to abide by the dictations of patriarchal authority.

Another victim of Patriarchal dominance is Pappachi's sister, Baby Kochamma, whose given name is Navomi Ipe belongs to the same place that is Ayemenem. She fell in love with Father Mulligan, a youthful Irish priest who had come to Ayemenem to study Hindu scriptures. Though her father protested her not to change her religion, Baby Kochamma had converted to Roman Catholicism and joined a convent. After a couple of months she realised that her decision was wrong. She felt lonely in the convent. Baby Kochamma's realisation, though late, that her vows does not brought her closer to the man

she loved, compelled her to give a serious thought to the matter concerned. In the mean time her father comes to know about the despicable condition of her daughter and rescued her from the convent. In order to make Baby Kochamma's life meaningful and worth living, she had been sent to America for an education. She successfully obtained a diploma in ornamental gardening and came back to India. However, due to her unreciprocated love with Father Mulligan, Baby Kochamma decided not to marry again and that's how she spent rest of her life.

Likewise, Afghan writer Khaled Hosseini dealt with the deplorable conditions of women in both of his first and second novels *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* respectively. However, the major focus will be on the second one. Hossaini has successfully represented the unpredictable destiny of Afghan women in general and their miserable condition during the regime of the Taliban government in particular. Apart from other issues like history, ethnic clash, and religion, the author has emphasised the issue of gender discrimination in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Moreover, unlike the two novels mentioned above where the author has dealt with stories of 'fatherhood' and 'motherhood', the author's latest novel *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) focuses on 'brothers' and 'sisters', and their ways of life that suit the postmodern age.

In order to depict the miserable conditions of the women of Afghanistan before and during the Taliban regime authentically, Khaled Hosseini has taken help from the history of his country. The two hundred years old Afghan monarchy that ended with King Zahir Shah being overthrown in 1973, the communist coup and the Soviet invasion of December 1979 and the subsequent exit of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989 constitute the major part of the country's history before the Taliban came to power. It enables him to depict the degree of injustice done to women of Afghanistan. The Taliban government has brought a drastic change in law and order of Afghanistan. Secular law of the country is replaced by Islamic Shari'ah law. The government does so in order to show way to Enlightenment the West claims to stand for, which is contrary to Islamic Shari'ah law. Khaled Hosseini has portrayed the wretched condition of the women of Afghanistan more comprehensively in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* than *The Kite Runner*. They were deprived of their rights as reflected through the sufferings of some of the

characters in the novel. Unlike the Najibullah led communist government, the law and order of the Taliban government was quite different so far as the uniqueness of Muslim women is concerned. There were as many as twenty-nine laws based on Islamic Shari'ah imposed on women in Afghanistan. Even some laws had restricted the freedom of free movement of women:

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, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 278)

The women were instructed to cover themselves properly before they leave their homes: *"You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten"* (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 278). Even the lady doctors were not restricted from doing the same while treating the patients. Pointing towards the Taliban, one of the doctors said, *"They want us to operate in burqa"* (291).

The Taliban government also discouraged the popular culture (extensively practised in the West) which was acceptable during the reign of the Najibullah-led communist government. The Taliban categorically warned the Afghan women so that they might abide by the following laws or suffers the penalty:

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. (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 278)

Furthermore, the Taliban government had banned women education and instructed them to be good house wives and take care of their children at home. And thus: *"Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately. Women are forbidden from working"* (278). There was the 'Department of Vice and Virtue' to make sure that *"these are the laws that we will enforce and you will obey"* (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 277). The duty of this department was the proper supervision of the Shari'ah based laws and treats those with strong hands who would dare violate the laws.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the dominance of men over the women is clearly reflected through Mariam's mother Nana. She says anxiously about "our lot in

life", the destiny of deprived, uneducated "woman in this world" (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 7). Nana has to bear the adversity of daily life, the torture of male members, and the detestation of the community. According to the Taliban "God has made us differently, you women and us men" and are proud to assume that "Our brains are different" (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 365).

Laila, the second wife of Rasheed is also a victim of the patriarchal set-up in Afghanistan during the reign of the Taliban. Laila not only suffered the torture of her husband due to the latter's partial nature regarding the opposite sex but also she had experienced and endured the punishment of the Taliban like the other people of Afghanistan. One day, on her way to the orphanage where her daughter Aziza resides, Laila, though in her *burqa* had to face an embarrassing situation when a number of questions like: *"What is your name? Where are you going? Why are you alone? Where is your mahram?"* (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 320) were asked to her by the Taliban officers.

Even after the Taliban regime, there was hardly any progress so far as the condition of women in Afghanistan is concerned. The constant effort of the Afghan women to come out of the crisis and enjoy freedom as the men do in the society after the Taliban rule is in vain as the conservative MPs block law meant to protect women. "Conservative religious lawmakers in Afghanistan blocked a law ... that aims to protect women's freedoms The failure highlights how tenuous women's rights remain a dozen years after the ouster of the hard-line Taliban regime, whose strict interpretation of Islam kept Afghanistan women virtual prisoners in their homes" ("Afghan Women Lose Fight for Freedom" 15).

Like that of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the gender inequality especially the wretched condition of women is also depicted in *The Kite Runner* through various incidents. One such incident is evident from Hassan's letter to Amir in which the former had clearly mentioned it. Hassan wrote:

The other day, I accompanied Farzana jan to the bazaar to buy some potatoes and *naan*. She asked the vendor how much the potatoes cost, but he did not hear her, I think he had a deaf ear. So she asked louder and suddenly a young Talib ran over and hit her on the thighs with his wooden stick. He struck her so hard she fell down. He was screaming at her and cursing and saying the Ministry of Vice and

Virtue does not allow women to speak loudly. She had a large purple bruise on her leg for days but what could I do except stand and watch my wife get beaten? If I fought, that dog would have surely put a bullet in me, and gladly! Then what would happen to my Sohrab? ... I thank Allah that I am alive, not because I fear death, but because my wife has a husband and my son is not an orphan (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 190).

In a nutshell, the above mentioned novels of Arundhati Roy and Khaled Hosseini have raised a

series of serious questions regarding the safeguard of women in patriarchal society. At the same time, the authors have given partial solution to the problem through the women characters in the novels who hinted at a drastic change through their protest to bring a revolutionary change in the society. This is how both Roy and Hosseini brought into light the gender inequality in the society as reflected in *The God of Small Things* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* respectively.

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