

THE PLIGHT OF AFGHAN WOMEN DURING THE REIGN OF TALIBAN GOVERNMENT IN SELECT NOVELS OF KHALED HOSSEINI

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Abstract: Khaled Hosseini's novels *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) are considered as masterpieces so far as the depiction of Taliban's rule in Afghanistan is concerned. Through these novels, the author has given an authentic insight to the people of the world about the Taliban in particular and the customs and traditions of the people of Afghanistan in general. During that dark phase in the history of Afghanistan while the people of the country, especially the women suffered the most, the Taliban government observed the miserable conditions of the former with mystified curiosity. The awful conditions of the women as depicted in *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* were, in fact, the stark reality in Afghanistan during the regime of the Taliban government. To the surprise of the readers, the Taliban could easily encroach 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 women were debarred from higher education and compelled them to wear burqa in public. The wretched conditions of the women captured the attention of the author greatly and the two novels are the outcome of that influence. To better understand the pitiful conditions of the people of Afghanistan especially the women as depicted in *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the writer has compared the status of women before and during the reign of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Keyword: Afghanistan, Taliban, custom, social set up, burqa, wretched, reign.

Introduction: Khaled Hosseini is best known for his debut novel *The Kite Runner*. His second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, though not as popular as the first one but has successfully depicted the uncertain fate of the women of Afghanistan in general and their wretched condition during the reign of the Taliban government in particular. Amidst several issues like religion, ethnic clash, and history, the author has emphasised the issue of gender inequality in both the novels. However, unlike these two novels where the author has dealt with stories of 'fatherhood' and 'motherhood', his latest novel *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) focuses on 'brothers' and 'sisters', and their ways of life that suit the postmodern era.

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. The past history enables Khaled Hosseini to depict the degree of injustice done to women before and during the regime of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

In the novel *The Kite Runner* Hosseini explores the socio-political set up of Afghanistan during the years from the late 1970s to the Taliban government of the 1990s until its fall in the wake of the incident of the World Trade Centre that took place in September 11, 2001. While depicting the socio-political set up of the country, he has categorically mentioned the tragic fate of women of Afghanistan as occurred during the time of the Taliban government. With the Taliban

government's rule in the country from 1996 onwards, the plight of women had started worsening gradually. To narrate the story of *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini has adopted first person as narrator. Amir, the protagonist-cum-narrator of the novel is the only child of a wealthy merchant in Kabul whose mother died immediately after giving him birth. Amir is now thirty-eight years old and lives in San Francisco. The novel opens in 2001 and the action of the narrative proceeds with a flashback to Ali's experiences during his boyhood in Kabul. He remembers the sweet and bitter experiences of his life in the company of his boyhood friend and servant, Hassan. The readers come to know about the Taliban government's attitude towards the people of Afghanistan and several incidents that took place under its regime through Amir's conversation with Rahim Khan, his father's "old business partner" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 167) and friend, presently living in Peshawar in Pakistan and some minor characters like Farid, Dr. Rasul, Zaman and Omar Faisal.

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. In *The Kite Runner*, the gender inequality especially the wretched condition of women 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).

Likewise, Khaled Hosseini has depicted the helplessness and wretched condition of Afghan women more extensively 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 *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. If the readers trace the history, they will come to know that unlike the Najibullah led communist government, the law and order of the Taliban government was quite different so far as the distinctiveness of Muslim women is concerned. The government imposed twenty-nine laws based on Islamic Shari'ah on women out of which some had restricted their freedom of free movement:

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, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 278)

The free movement of women without valid reasons was discouraged even in their burqas during the reign of the Taliban government. 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 debarred 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).

Another sole mission of the Taliban government was to discard the popular and fashionable culture (widely practised in the West) allowed during the reign of the Najibullah-led communist government. To do so effectively, the Taliban had framed the following laws:

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. (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 278)

Unlike the communist government that encouraged the women to get their higher education and subsequently allowed them to opt for their free will "that they worked in office buildings" (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 75), the Taliban government had shown its indifference attitude towards the same. Contrarily, the government 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)

To ensure that the people of Afghanistan are abided by the laws of the country during their regime, the Taliban had established the 'Department of Vice and Virtue' because "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.

The dominance of men over the women is upheld both by the political order and the social culture of Afghanistan. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam's mother Nana says anxiously about "our lot in life", the destiny of deprived, uneducated "woman in this world" (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 7) has to undergo the hardship of everyday life, the torment of male associates, and the hatred of the community. Afterwards, Mariam realises it for the first time in black and white while standing facing the judges at the court during the time of her trial. Mariam was bound to listen with amazement what the "youngest" of the three judges told her about the prerequisite of eyewitnesses:

God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. Western doctors and their science have proven this. This is why we require only one male witness but two female ones. (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 365)

The patriarchal set-up in Afghanistan during the reign of the Taliban is also evident as reflected through Laila, the second wife of Rasheed. On the one hand Laila suffered the torture of her husband due to the latter's partial nature regarding the opposite sex. On the other hand she had experienced and endured the punishment of the Taliban like the other people of Afghanistan. The Taliban keeps on watching eagerly if the common people of the country in general and women in particular are following the laws. While walking alone on the street,

the women had to answer several questions asked by the Taliban. Laila too suffered such torment for several times. One day, on her way to the orphanage where her daughter Aziza resides, Laila, though in her burqa had faced one such embarrassing circumstance. The Taliban on duty asked her lots of questions: "What is your name? Where are you going? Why are you alone? Where is your mahram?" (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 320) What she could do at that moment was nothing but to wait for their mercy if she would be given physical punishment or escape without any penalty: "If she was lucky, she was given a tongue-lashing or a single kick to the rear, a shove in the back. Other times, she met with assortments of wooden clubs, fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps, often fists" (320-21). The purpose behind Laila's visit to the orphanage is valid as she goes there to meet her daughter Aziza. Despite such suitable reason behind her outing, Laila had to face humility:

Sometimes she was caught, questioned, scolded—two, three, even four times in a single day. Then the whips came down and the antennas sliced through the air, and she trudged home, bloodied, without so much as a glimpse of Aziza. (Hosseini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 321)

Even after the Taliban Era, the condition of women in Afghanistan is pitiable. 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).

At the end, a series of questions may arise in the minds of the readers who do not have much knowledge about Islam that: Is Islam a religion of peace in reality? What is the place of women in Islam? Why is the Taliban Government criticized for ruling the country based on Islamic Shari'ah? Does the government really follow Islamic Shari'ah while framing the laws? The answer of the first question is 'yes' – Islam is the religion of peace. To get apt justification of this answer and the answers of the rest of the questions, readers have to go through the Islamic Shari'ah and the laws framed by the Taliban government simultaneously. It will help the readers to remove ambiguity from their minds and come to know to what extent the Taliban government is justified in framing laws in the name of Islamic Shari'ah.

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