

VOICES FROM THE SUBALTERN: CHALLENGES OF RECONSTRUCTING WOMEN IDENTITY IN ORHAN PAMUK'S SNOW AND KHALED HOSSEINI'S A THOUSAND SPENDID SUNS

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to focus on the identity of women in general and Muslim women in particular who have come forward to challenge the inequality of power structures within society with reference to Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* (2002; English translation 2004) and Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). These two writers from Turkey and Afghanistan respectively have shown how the women characters in their novels claim their rights with loud protest/raised voice. In *Snow*, Pamuk has dealt with the contemporary scenario of Turkey vividly with a special attention towards headscarf controversy that led to the political turmoil in Turkey. Khaled Hosseini, on the other hand has been praised for his story telling techniques. The writer's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays powerfully the actual day-to-day lives of the people of Afghanistan. Like that of Pamuk's *Snow*, the novel of Hosseini too deals with the women who are struggling to free themselves from the injustice they suffer in the society for being what they are along with the other serious issues like the political, social and economic changes of contemporary Afghanistan and depicts the communist upheaval, the Soviet attack and the Bush-led American war against the Taliban.

Keywords: Inequality, Power Structure, Contemporary Turkey, Afghanistan, Turmoil, Political, Social and Economic.

Introduction: In this study the primary focus is given on the identity of the women in general and women from the Muslim community in particular. The issue of the women identity, which is of great concern today, is not all in all a new issue but it has its root in the past. It has turned out to be a familiar aspect of debate among people throughout Europe in the early 1960s. Marilyn Monroe and Sylvia Plath are considered as the popular icons of femininity of that time. The two contemporary novelists Orhan Pamuk and Khaled Hosseini from Turkey and Afghanistan have tried to depict how the women are suppressed in the society even at the age when the feminist movement is at its peak in their novels *Snow* (2002; English translation 2004) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) respectively. At the same time these writers have shown how some of the women characters in their novels raised their voices against the injustice they suffer in their day-to-day lives in the society. The reactions of the female characters towards the dominance of the patriarchal society in the aforesaid fictional works clearly reflect that they are no longer at the periphery or margin. Contrarily, it is apparent from the protest of those characters that they are equal to their male counterparts and they should not be deprived of their rights.

Orhan Pamuk has depicted the contemporary situation of Turkey with special emphasis towards the women who have been deprived from their rights especially through veil controversy in his only political novel *Snow*. Like a number of other writers of postmodern era, Pamuk too took interest and meditated over the issue which not only denied the Muslim women of their rights in Turkey, but also in some other countries of the world. As the main concern of this paper is to focus on the marginalized identity of women in the society, special attention is being paid to the same as depicted by the author in his novel. The author has successfully portrayed the women characters as victims of the male

dominant society who in turn reacted vibrantly and claimed their rights with loud protest/raised voice. For instance, in *Snow*, Pamuk has shown the involvement of the secular republican government of Turkey in banning of the headscarves in the educational institutions and the reactions of the Muslim girl students simultaneously. In fact, the government has deprived those girl students by banning veil in two ways: as women and Muslim women. The government did not hesitate to take such a harsh decision may be because of the marginalized identity of the women and hardly expected any protest from them. But it is in vain. Contrarily, though the Muslims did not encourage the suicide which is a great sin and thus forbidden in Islam, they did not refrain themselves as well from protesting the ban on veils which is obligatory for Muslim women to wear when in public. Some of the brave girls from the institutions where the ban was imposed have come forward and defied it. Moreover, there was a huge protest from the followers of Islam towards the ban. They have put forward their valid reasons behind their protest. Firstly, "Veiling is not necessarily a sign of oppression or passivity or backwardness" (Mallouhi, 85). Moreover, it is the practice in Islam that women should wear headscarves and any interference to it is beyond their expectations. That's why the Muslim women in particular and the Muslim community in general always disapprove the ban on veil whether in France where "two sisters (Alma and Lila Levy) were kicked out of school for having refused to take off their hijab" (Khalil, 2003) or any part of the globe and condemn it as discrimination to them.

In *Snow*, the reactions of the women in particular and people of Turkey in general after the ban on veil is conveyed to the readers through Ka, the protagonist of the novel. Ka had gone to the city named Kars, situated in the isolated place of Turkey as a journalist to write a report on the "municipality election" (*Snow*, 8). Ban on

veil not only deprived the Muslim women of their rights but also it is one among some other reasons behind “an extraordinary number of girls in Kars had succumbed to a suicide epidemic” (Snow, 8). During the time of his stay in Kars especially while interviewing with the parents of the victims, Ka had come to know as many as six such incidences. The suicidal death of Teslime, who is one among a number of familiar “headscarf girls”, occurred “when the authorities had outlawed the wearing of headscarves in educational institutions across the country...” (Snow, 16). Like Teslime, there were “many women and girls refused to comply. The rebels at the Institute of Education in Kars had been barred first from the classrooms and then, following an edict from Ankara, from the entire Institute” (Snow, 16). So far as Teslime is concerned, she could not accept the ban on veils in the educational institution, particularly in which she was studying. It is true that she used to wear headscarf like that of her mother but without any restriction or pressure from the family. A drastic change is observed in the attitude of Teslime after the ban on headscarves. According to Ka’s interview with Teslime’s father:

... the real pressure had come from her school friends who were running the campaign against the banishment of covered women from the institute. . . . So, despite her parents’ expressed wish that she remove her headscarf, the girl refused, thus ensuring that she would frequently be removed by the police from the halls of the institute (Snow, 16-17).

This occurrence is similar to the incident that took place in the school at Creil, in Paris in 1989. Here, in *Snow*, too, the police humiliated Taslime by forcing her to leave the classroom for wearing veil. Despite her hard effort she fails to adjust herself with the circumstances. Teslime’s father says to Ka:

When she saw some of her friends giving up and uncovering their heads, and others forgoing their headscarves to wear wigs instead, the girl began to tell her father that life had no meaning and that she no longer wanted to live. She also discussed her feelings with her friends (Snow, 17).

Now, it’s quite clear to the readers that the cause behind Taslime’s suicide is the ban on veils in the educational institutions, which led to much confusion among the people in Turkey. The confrontation between the followers of political Islam and the secular government of Turkey is also the outcome of the same. According to the assassin of the Director of the Education Institute the ban on veil was an act of injustice done to the Muslim women and remarks to the latter that, “The girls are still refusing to take off their headscarves and the state is still barring them from classroom...” (Snow, 41). Moreover, supporting the wearing of veils by the Muslim women, the assassin adds: “Headscarves protect women from harassment rape and degradation. It is the headscarf that gives women respect and comfortable place in society” (Snow, 46).

In *Snow*, Kadife, the leader of the “headscarf Movement”, who protested the ban on headscarf, had to burn her own headscarf on the stage at the National Theatre at Kars under an unavoidable circumstance. In fact, it is Sunay, an actor as well as the mouthpiece of the secular government of Turkey, who trapped Kadife to perform that role in the play within the play “My Fatherland or My Headscarf” in order to maintain the steps taken by the Government of Turkey regarding the issue. As a result of the burning of the headscarves on the stage there was a loud protest from the audience:

The neatly bearded, prayer-bead-clutching, religious fanatics outraged by this show of independence, turn violently, but just then . . . the brave young soldiers of the republic burst on to the scene to save her (Snow, 150).

Is it not an injustice done to women? Then, again Sunay, made Kadife, agree to play the role of the Spanish lady in “A Tragedy in Kars” which is the edited version of the *The Spanish Tragedy*. The main focus of this play was also on the same issue that is whether Kadife would be “baring her head” and commit suicide on stage or not. Sunay did all his efforts with a purpose to give opportunity to the women of Turkey to become as free as the women of the European countries. This is what he tried to convince Kadife throughout and ultimately it won latter’s heart. Being influenced she agreed to remove the scarf from over her head and accordingly, she “pulled off her scarf” (Snow, 412).

In a nutshell, Pamuk has shown in *Snow*, the marginalized status of the women through the ban of the veil by the republic of Turkey, which is one among the several issues, dealt with in the novel. In fact, such an issue is largely the replication of the scenario of the world that occurred during the last few decades.

Likewise, Khaled Hosseini has powerfully portrayed the major incidents of Afghanistan’s history that took place in the past for a period of thirty years, (from the communist upheaval to the Soviet attack to the Bush-led American war against the Taliban) with special emphasis on the plight of the women in his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The Taliban, who declared their government as “*the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*” (Hosseini, 277) brought a radical change in the constitution of the country, which affected the day today lives of the people in general and the women in particular to a great extent. The depiction of the pitiful condition of the women and the people in the novel was, in fact, the naked truth in Afghanistan during the regime of the Taliban government. Mohammad Asim Siddiqui has rightly said in this context that: “the act of writing becomes a means to preserve a past, rather to recreate a past...” (71) During the reign of the Taliban the women were subjected to more suppression than the men. The Taliban government enforced twenty-nine restrictions on women pitilessly. As a result of such laws the freedom of the women was restricted to a greater extent. The Taliban had put into effect the laws to

control the free movement of the women:

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, 278) Like that of Pamuk's *Snow*, Hosseini too deals with the headscarf controversy as one of the several issues to represent the wretched condition of the women in Afghanistan in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. But there is a contradiction so far as the ban on veil is concerned as represented in the fictional works of the two writers. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* the Taliban government made burqa compulsory for all the Muslim women in Afghanistan whereas in *Snow* the secular republican government had imposed ban on the headscarves in the educational institutions. However in either case the women were the victims of patriarchal dominance.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* a considerable number of female characters like Mariam, Nana (Mariam's mother), the three wives of Jalil—Khadija, Nargis and Afsoon and the women who frequently visited Jalil's house were seen in "hijabs" during the regime of the communist government before the ascendancy of the Taliban government in power. These women used to wear the burqa either out of their free choice or due to the family pressure. For instance, Nana "wore her best hijab for him (Jalil)" (Hosseini, 22); Mariam wore "a green hijab over her hair" (Hosseini, 29) before and during the time of her marriage, which she used as a weapon to shield herself from "all the shameful secrets of her life" (Hosseini, 73).

However, the women of Afghanistan could hardly cherish the pleasure of such freedom during the reign of the Taliban. It came to an end as soon as the Taliban passed a new set of rules for the women with an explicit

mention of burqa as the dress code of the Muslim women. The new laws imposed restrictions on the free movement of the women. They could hardly roam here and there on the streets without reason. In case of urgency, one must go out of her house along with a "mahram" (Hosseini, 278) that is a male member of the family. Moreover, all the women must wear a burqa and cannot show their face under any condition in public: "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, 278).

The whole situation of Afghanistan became very complex and the women were terrified to a great extent. Even the women who were secular minded dare not go outside without wearing burqa. The situation felt by Shanzai, a schoolteacher in the novel popularly known as Khala Rangmal can be cited as an example. During the regime of the Leftist government, "she did not cover and forbade the female students from doing it. She said women and men were equal in every way and there was no reason women should cover if men didn't" (Hosseini, 111). To the surprise of the readers that very lady could not but wear burqa and abided by the laws of the country at that time.

From the above discussion it is crystal clear that the fictional works of Pamuk and Khaled Hosseini under discussion reflected the wretched conditions of women in general and the Muslim women in particular in Turkey and Afghanistan respectively. In one way or the other the women were treated as marginalized by the governments of both the countries. But at the same time the two writers pointed out that the women are no longer ready to tolerate such discrimination in any society through the responses of some of the characters in the novels.

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