

WOMEN REPRESENTATION AS THE MARGINALIZED IN *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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Abstract—this research analyses the issue of marginalized women related to the matter of class and gender. Using Gayatri Spivak’s theory of Subaltern, this paper also uses Deconstruction as the method to analyse. By deconstructing Hosseini’s text, this paper will address these issues by seeing how each women character is represented, and analyze the relation between the women characters as well as with the male character in the story. This paper then will reveal the ideology associated with the problems of women in social class and more specifically on the role, burden and position of the "marginalized" women or “the Subaltern”. In the end the novel shows how the marginalized women in the story are being represented as those who will always be discriminated by gender and class, and are continually being ‘silenced’—the upperclass ideology.

Keywords: *Marginalized, Subaltern, Class, Gender, Spivak*

I. Introduction

Khaled Hosseini in his second novel entitled *A Thousand Splendid Suns* depicts the issue of women in Afganistan. In general, his novel that was published in 2007 tells the story of the strong bond of sisterhood that is formed between two women named Mariam and Laila in the midst of the

brutish experience that they encountered from their husband—Rashid.¹ In general a lot of *reviews* say that the novel pictures the theme of "sisterhood" very well because not

^{1 1} In a review for *A Thousand Splendid Suns* ini, Bloomsbury Publishing mentions: *It is a beautiful, heart-wrenching story of an unforgiving time, an unlikely bond between sisters as strong as the ties between mother and daughter and an indestructible love.*

only does it illustrate the strength of sisterhood among women and the struggle to survive, it also describes the misery experienced by Afghanistan women as a result of the patriarchal system and the Taliban conflicts happening in Afghanistan. *The New York Times* mentions *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as ... a tale of two women that is weighted equally with despair and grave hope. This novel tells the lives of two women who are the wives of a husband which are narrated equally. But behind the theme that seems to be the focus of attention, the novel can also be seen as an illustration of the difference in the fate of women in social classes. Behind the *sisterhood* theme that seems to homogenize the lot of women in this story, the fate of women who are "marginalized" should be examined closely.

II. Theory

The Concept of *Subaltern*

This analysis uses the concept of "*Subaltern*" as a definition of the "marginalized" that was first coined by Antonio Gramsci and later then by

Gayatri Spivak. Gramsci said that the *subalterns* are those subordinated by the dominant power structure, being excluded from all political representation. If—in the concept of Gramsci's Hegemony—the intellectuals have a role to negotiate changes in a power structure; the subaltern, that are marginalized outside the system are forced not to have that exact position.

In her essay Spivak criticized the voices of the marginalized women that are not being heard in terms of gender, race and social class. Spivak explained that in the historical development of gender, men would always dominate women. However the worst case is when the women come from the subaltern classes—lower class. Women in the lower classes hold a 'double burden' being marginalized by their gender and social status.

III. Analysis

3.1. The Marginalized as the Silenced Voice

The main character Mariam in the story can be seen as the *subaltern*—the marginalized. This character shows

how her position as someone who is seen inferiorly does not have any power to negotiate changes because her role and position is under the power of those who are in superior to her. Mariam is an illegitimate child of an affair between a man of a high status in society and a maid in his house. As a child that by society and culture known as ‘the bastard child’, Mariam holds a burden as the “marginalized” in her society. Her father—Jalil has three wives that he has married legally and ten children not including Mariam. This problem shows how in this culture a man may marry more than one woman that is not considered as ‘forbidden’ in society. Forbidden in this sense is related to having a social status that is inferior. The relationship that is considered as a disgrace in the family forced Jalil to take action in throwing out Mariam and her mother—Nana, by building a small hut in a remote village called Herat. The decision to move Mariam and her mother to that village happen without Mariam’s mother—Nana’s agreement, showing how the ‘marginalized’ does not have a right to

voice out and make her own decision...*The wives demanded that he throw her out.* (hlm. 6). Her right and voice seems to be silenced by those who are in power—the legal wives of Jalil.

Although Jalil has thrown out and made a hut for them to live... *"And so your father built us this rathole."* (P. 9), Jalil still visits them every week. This is done as his effort to overcome his guilt. In this story Hosseini depicts the characters of Jalil and Nana differently. Nana is actually a victim and can be seen as an "object" that is used by Jalil, described as a woman who likes to talk rudely, always grumpy, uncivilized, and considered to have relations with supernatural beings ... *Nana looked so mad that Mariam feared the "jinn" would enter her mother's body again.* (p. 4). On the other hand, Jalil at the beginning of the story is described as a man who has a lot of compassion towards his daughter, speaks gently and politely. Nana’s character in this story can be seen as an attempt to provide an overview of women who has been

abused, and harbored a lot of weight and her voice is then silenced. Nana's negative characters can be seen as her way of expressing the injustice that she experienced. *"You know what he told his wives by way of defense? That I forced myself in him. That it was my fault. Didi? You see? This is what it means to be a woman in this world"* (p. 6). The statement of 'what it means to be a female in this world' does not mean women in general, but more specifically women like herself who are under the power of those who marginalizes her.

The "negative" attitude of Nana again strongly shows in how she always tries to internalize an understanding to her daughter about the state of Mariam as an "illegitimate child":

Mariam was five years old the first time she heard the word *Harami* ...

At that time, Mariam did not understand. She did not know what this word meant ... *Harami* -bastard-Mariam did surmise, by the way Nana said the word, that it was an ugly, loathsome thing to be a *Harami*, like an insect ...

Jalil never called Mariam this name. Jalil said she was his little flower ... The truth was that around Jalil, Mariam did not feel at all like a *Harami*. (hlm.3-4)

The two different opposing characters are seen through Mariam's perspective who is confused in whether to believe her mother or father. Through Mariam's perspective it can be seen that Nana is an imperfect mother figure according to certain cultural values. She believed her father more until an event that later on happened. Mariam ran away from home to look for her father's house. When she arrived it turns out that her father did not let her in and told her to go back home. Mariam with a huge sense of disappointment found that her father did not fully accept and feels that she is as "the other" finally goes back home.

However, when she got home she found her mother, who had previously warned her not to go, had committed suicide. This issue can be seen how the figure depicted negatively turns out to be a character who reveals truth. *And*

she was ashamed of how she had dismissed her mother's stricken looks, her puffy eyes. Nana, who had warned her, who had been right all along. (p. 33). Although Nana was always rude and reveal the ugliness of her father, it turns out she was someone who had been telling the truth. This illustrates how people who are always considered as "the other" with all the negative stereotypes attached to them, should actually be heard because "their voice" may contain truth.

Social class status plays an important role in marginalizing groups that are considered inferior, and being put as the "marginalized". In this case it can be seen how the legitimate wives of Jalil having the higher status are in power in the decision making process related to the fate of Nana and Mariam—the marginalized. The relation between Nana-Mariam and Jalil's wives can be seen as a binary opposition that puts one group as superior (wives Jalil). The superior group makes various discriminating efforts in order to maintain their position as those that are in the higher

position and in power. This suppression act can be seen by how Jalil's wives made plans to marry off Mariam with a man thirty years older only because they don't want Mariam living in their house. "The marginalized" is described as a burden that had to be kept away and silenced. Women like the characters Mariam and Nana can be seen as the *subaltern* whose voices are silenced and could not be heard because they do not have a place, and that their voices are being represented by people who have power over them.

3.2. The Double Burden and Certain Values Constructed

Gayatri Spivak also uses the term *subaltern* to refer to indigenous women and widows in India that hold a double burden as a result of colonial powers and subordinated by colonial and indigenous men. Women in these circumstances cannot articulate themselves as a person because there is no place and people who would listen. This situation can be seen together with the circumstances experienced by Mariam although not in the context of

western colonialism. It means that in this context it can be seen that women also holds a double burden due to the male power (the father-husband) in the order of the patriarchal system as well as among women that are considered superior in their social class. The issue of *subaltern* can again be seen in the relationship between the main character Mariam and another character Laila, how the heavier load of double burden should be experienced by women who are "marginalized" as a result of the patriarchy system and women in class.

Patriarchy is the term to define a system of political and economic social order and power that gives priority to men and thus directly or indirectly, to oppresses or subordinates women. Patriarchy system become an important aspect in this story, especially in relation to the violence experienced by two female characters Mariam and Laila, The government that took place, legitimize patriarchy itself. This can be seen in a part when the two women were trying to escape and meet with the authorities, they

unfortunately did not get help that they should've got because the authorities felt that what a husband did to his wife is considered a personal problem and the "right" of the husband ... *As a matter of policy, we do not interfere with private family matters ... what a man does in his home is his business ...* (p. 238). In this case the patriarchal system can be seen as the foundation that seems to "allow" the acts of violence and injustice done by a husband to his wives.

Most of the plot illustrates the misery experienced by Mariam and Laila having to accept all forms of violence, both physically and mentally from their husband-Rasheed. This story also described how they tried to escape, but failed until finally their husband is killed. Seeing this picture it seems that the two women-Mariam and Laila are in the same position that are subordinated by the husband (male) who have a superior position in the household and society. But the differences between the two women in connection with their husbands are further clearly shown by how the two

women actually have different position in social classes.

Physically the two women-Mariam and Laila are described differently by Hosseini. Mariam who comes from a poor family, an illegitimate child from a forbidden affair, and an uneducated is described as physically unattractive. This can be seen in the following quote:

... The archless, unshapely eyebrows, the flat hair, the eyes, mirthless green and set so closely together that one might mistake her for being crossed-eyed. Her skin was coarse and had a dull, spotty appearance. She thought her brow too wide, the chin too narrow, the lips too thin. The overall impression was of a long face, a triangular face, a bit houndlike. (p. 49)

Mariam's physical depiction can be seen in contrast to Laila who is described as an attractive woman according to the standard of beauty constructed in their culture *thick blond curls eye-lashed, turquoise green eyes, her cheeks dimple, her high cheekbones, and the pout of her*

lower lip, ... she was a "pari", a stunner ... (p. 98). Both women-Mariam and Laila are told coming from two different races which marks the differences in their physical appearance. This shows one more example of how the views and values that are constructed within the culture play an important role in marginalizing a certain group or race. The figure of women who are marginalized in this story-Mariam is described as not physically "as beautiful as" the group of women positioned as superior in the society and culture. This raises another burden being faced by Mariam. In this situation a man may give different treatment towards women based on this categorization of 'beauty'. In more detail, the quote below illustrates how Rasheed differentiates his two wives based on these factors.

We are city people, you and I, but she is *dehati*. A village girl. Not even a village girl. No. She grew up in a *kolba* made of mud *outside* the village. Her father put her there. Have you told her, Mariam, have you told her that you are a *Harami*? Well,

she is ... If she were a car, she would be a Volga. "...
"You," Rasheed said to the girl, "You, on the other hand, would be a Benz. A brand-new, first class, shiny Benz. One must take certain ... cares ... with a Benz. As a matter of respect for its beauty ... (p. 199).

The quotation shows that Rasheed makes an example of different types of cars as an object to illustrate the differences between his two wives. Mentioning the background of Mariam who was an "illegitimate child", from the village, and "dumped" by her father also clarifies the discriminating treatment against the marginalized women—who are not considered to have self-value. This problem is also the reason for Rasheed to treat Mariam inhumanly instructing her to chew rocks as punishment, locking in a dark room, never communicating, etc.

The story illustrates how Mariam is being treated more inhumanly than Laila and being tortured heavier because of the circumstances that are considered less valuable. Besides social background and physical

characteristics, the condition that Mariam is unable to bear children, and is older causes her to be in a lower position than Laila as Rasheed's wife. This problem shows how women are "marginalized"--Mariam is burdened because of all the qualities that are considered negative that are constructed socially and culturally. The story tells how the two women character eventually build a strong relationship, but the difference in Rasheed's treatment to both his wives strongly shows how women who are "marginalized" can be suppressed by other women who are considered to have the better quality although indirectly. As an example it can be seen in a conversation between Rasheed and Laila ... *You are not allowed to go out ... Anything you need done you can send Mariam and she will go out and get it for you ...* (p. 200). Although for Laila her house may seem like a prison because she is not allowed to get out of the house, she is still having the better position compared to Mariam in this case.

The story further shows how behind the problem of "*sisterhood*" the novel illustrates clearly about the state and the burden experienced by women who are "marginalized". Women who are "marginalized" -Mariam have a double burden as being oppressed by her husband or men in the patriarchal system and by women who are considered to have more positive qualities by the standards constructed in the system or culture. In this circumstance it clearly shows how Mariam or the marginalized women does not have the power to fight for her right because of the values constructed and legitimized within the culture.

IV. Conclusion

The Upper-class Ideology

The climax in the story can be seen in the part where Rasheed who was torturing Laila. Mariam then who intended to help her made an extreme decision in killing their husband—Rasheed. Mariam is pictured that she had killed her husband intentionally because she wanted to end her long misery. Although by killing the

character—Rasheed appear to be a good resolution to end the brutality done by men, this situation still shows how women who are in an inferior position has to sacrifice herself for the sake of other women who are considered superior to her. In the end of the story Laila was told to have met her long lost lover and got married, where on the other hand Mariam gave herself up to the authorities, confessed, and was given a death penalty.

Behind the depiction of Mariam's 'heroic' actions, it emphasizes how marginalized women in culture and social environment are unable to obtain the same opportunities as women who are considered to have a higher position in society. Throughout her life Mariam is portrayed as always suffering, oppressed, silenced, and has to continually make sacrifices for the sake of those that are more powerful. The ending described for Laila's character can be seen as a distinction that reinforces or clarifies the picture of the "marginalized" women in culture and social environments. Laila has an ending that appears to be more

promising. Laila who is described as someone who has more positive self-qualities get the opportunity to determine her life with many options available for her. Laila in the end works as a teacher and a social worker in an orphanage.

In the end by seeing how the female characters in this novel are represented show clearly the ideology contained in this novel. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is seen as a story that presents the theme of women, but at the same time this novel still appear to show some certain discrimination against women specifically who are marginalized in culture and social classes. Analyzing the binary opposition between the two main characters Laila and Mariam clearly shows how this novel does not seem to give a decent "place" for the marginalized. Although women who are "marginalized" in this story are described with such affection and various images of the double burden that they must endure, it does not give significant impact because in the end the picture that can be viewed through this novel is that women who are

marginalized in society will always be marginalized-having death as the only way out of the situation.

The character Mariam ironically is described as having to forcefully accept the situation as being marginalized because of all the qualities attached to her that cannot be accepted by the culture and society, in other words there is no solution towards the unfair fate she endures. In the end this novel shows a contradiction between an intention to present the theme of sisterhood and the oppression of women, especially women "marginalized". Borrowing Spivak's phrase "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*", this story clearly presents an idea that the subaltern in this case women who are marginalized by society do not and will never be able to 'voice out'.

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