

UNDERSTANDING **SOCIAL PROBLEMS**



EDITORS

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**ASSAM COLLEGE TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION
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Deciphering the Dialectic of the Hijab:

Reading Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns from Third World Feminism Perspective

Kakoli Bonya Gogoi

In the recent times, the *hijab* which is related to Islamic proper dressing has become an exhortation in contemporary literary and cultural discourses resulting in heightened forms of debates and discussions. The literal meaning of *hijab* is to veil, to cover or to screen. The religion of Islam directs its women to dress modestly and to wear the hijab in public and in the presence of men who are not close relatives. Recently, the hijab which is related to Islamic proper dressing has become an exhortation in contemporary literary and cultural discourses resulting in heightened forms of debates and discussions. Feminist standpoint theory suggests that although powerful discourses attempt to define women on the 'margins' of society, women's cultural positions provide them with heightened understandings of the contradictions between their experiences and the ways the dominant groups define them. Thus while many Westerners believe that the hijab functions to oppress women, veiled women probably possess alternative understandings; they perceive the veil as a means of exerting personal control and forcing others to deal with the person without the complication of her physical form. They choose the veil as part of a search for increased dignity and status, as a coping strategy to gain or maintain social esteem, and as a form of self-expression.

They inscribe hijab with meanings shaped by their unique cultural standpoints.

Historically, Afghanistan has been enlisted as one of the world's most dangerous countries because of almost thirty years of prolonged war. Officially known as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, this South Central Asian country has been experiencing political instability, infrastructure collapse and restrictive political regimes, a period when the lives of the common public and especially women became full of unbearable hardships. However reports state that before the Soviet occupation in 1979, women contributed considerably in the cultural and public spheres of the nation. Since the 1950s, women made up around 50 percent of university students, 40 percent of doctors, 70 percent of teachers, and 30 percent of civil servants in Afghanistan. A small number of women even held important political posts and most Afghan women did not wear burqa. Since 1994 women enjoyed the basic rights such as universal suffrage and equal pay. In the early 1990s, a large number of Afghan women participated in the workforce and public life. Most women did not wear the burqa. Even many devout Muslim workers wore headscarves and long dresses but not the burqa.

In 1992, in Afghanistan, an unstable government called the Mujahideen Government of the Islamic State of Afghanistan emerged as coalition of seven mujahideen parties. It suspended the Constitution and issued religious decrees that prevented women from holding government jobs or jobs in broadcasting, and required them to wear a veil. Under the Mujahideens, women's rights were severely curtailed and the meagre rights that remained were rapidly denied when the Taliban came to power in 1996. The Taliban implemented four central policies regarding women. First, women were forbidden to hold jobs. Second, they could not attend schools until the Taliban had come up with a curriculum appropriate for their primary role of bringing up the next generation of Muslims. Third, women were forced to wear burqas, while men had to wear *shalwar kameez*

long tunic and pants), maintain beards and were not permitted to style their hair. Finally, women were denied freedom of movement. They could only leave their homes if escorted by male relatives and had to avoid contact with male strangers. If these rules were transgressed, the religious police would mete out punishments like public beatings and sometimes even death.

Born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1965, Khaled Hosseini was still a child when his family was forced out of the country by the Soviets. His family moved to France and then sought political asylum in the United States. It was only in 2003 when Hosseini returned to Afghanistan, at the age of 38, an experience that he describes as feeling like a stranger in one's own country. He has published three novels: his debut *The Kite Runner* (2003) has a record of spending 101 weeks in the bestsellers list. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, his second novel, takes a feminine perspective, unlike his first which was devoid of any major female character. However, apart from his connection with Afghanistan by birth, another important facet of the truth is that Hosseini is in fact an Afghan immigrant whose perceptions of the world are shaped by American political and cultural contexts. Hence, the accuracy of his narrative - whether it represents what actually happens in Afghanistan has been doubted by different scholars.

The story of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* begins in 1974 as Mariam, an illegitimate child of a wealthy businessman from Herat, Jalil and his housekeeper Nana, is growing up. Her father, who had three legitimate wives and nine children, did not have the courage to marry her mother after dishonouring her. Under pressure from his family, Jalil marries off the 15-year-old Mariam to Rasheed, a 45 year old brutish shoe-maker from Kabul. In her marriage Mariam suffers as many as seven miscarriages which smashed Rasheed's hopes of fathering a son, and he subjects Mariam to severe mental and physical torture. The second part of the story begins in the spring of 1987 and is centered on Laila, the daughter of Hakim, a teacher, and his wife Fariba.

Unlike Mariam, Laila's childhood is full of bliss; her father encourages her education and she has the chance to attend a company of her childhood sweetheart Tariq. However, after the Soviet withdrawal, Tariq leaves for Pakistan and the two young lovers leave taking between the two young lovers the cultural differences and love making. To avoid social disgrace and in search of protection, Laila too marries Rasheed but soon loses her heart in his affections when she gives birth to a daughter. In search of a son. At first, Mariam was contemptuous towards her husband, but slowly a friendship develops between them. In the end, two women. They make common cause and in search of degradation, starvation and brutality at the hands of their husband until they are forced to overcome the most daunting obstacles with startling heroism.

Scholars have the opinion that Hosseini's novel became a widely successful literary work of the last decade because it responded to a fervent eagerness of the West to know about the East. The Western media and especially the US media did not cover the issue of the critical condition of women in Afghanistan until the terrorists attack on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon. After the attack a series of what the president George Bush called the 'women of cover' feature in the cover pages of popular magazines like New York Times, Business Week, Newsweek, Time, etc. In exploring the representations of Afghan women in the Western mass media, many scholars agree that Afghan women are most frequently mentioned with regards to the veil. The veiled women are perceived as dejected victims of war who could be rescued only by US military intervention. This in turn serves as justification for the US aggression in Afghanistan. As a consequence, the Afghan women are rendered passive without any agency to struggle and gain empowerment in their own culture.

Apart from the media, fictional narratives too play an important role in feeding images of Afghan women to the Western public. Popular fictional narratives represent Afghan women to the Western readers who rely on these channels

as the firsthand source of information, and the question remains whether this sort of mass media device reproduces what the Western news media represents or whether it depicts Afghan women differently. To address this issue, Khaled Hosseini's novel is chosen to examine and uncover the images of Afghan women. This study attempts to critically examine the portrayals of Afghan women, with respect to the hijab, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and to understand how these images represented in the novel corresponds with what portrayed in the Western news media.

The nature of the hijab as a signifier of women's inferiority and oppression is not a new topic. A great deal of scholarship has been devoted to this area. For many Western readers, images of veiled women serve as universal signifiers of religious, familial, and cultural oppression. So we have Hosseini's protagonist Mariam being forced to wear a burqa by her husband Rasheed. He declares, "Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only", while he himself keeps stacks of pornographic magazines in his room. For Mariam, who had never worn a burqa before that, the experience is quite uncomfortable:

The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen. She practised walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth.

However, on that very first day when she went out wearing a burqa, she learned to her surprise, that the burqa was also "comforting".

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, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past.

In the case of Laila, a girl who had education and ambitions, who ultimately meets with the inescapable fate of marrying Rasheed 45 years senior to her, the burqa was a mixed experience:

Her eyes were still adjusting to the limited, gridlike view of the burqa, her feet still stumbling over the hem. She stepped into a pothole. Still, she found some comfort in anonymity that the burqa provided. She wouldn't recognize this way if she ran into an old acquaintance or the pity or the glee, at how far she had fallen, at how lofty aspirations had been crushed.

Hosseini does not challenge the western view of Afghanistan, of the veil as a symbol of familial or cultural oppression. So he portrays Rasheed imposing the burqa on both his wives, be it the ignorant and reclusive Mariam, the intelligent and ambitious Laila. Nevertheless, he does not succumb to what Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her book 'Under Western Eyes' calls the "production of the 'Third Woman' as a singular monolithic subject". The story is told from two different perspectives, where the readers get to know both Mariam and Laila from outside as well as from inside. Instantaneously, the reader recognizes that behind the silent burqa in Afghanistan, there is an individual with a hidden story.

Another image of the Afghan women popularized by Western media is that of burqa clad women who are passive and dejected victims of war without any agency in decision making. This image disregards the courage and struggles they made risking their lives to set up schools to publish underground magazines under the very noses of the Taliban. Surveys point out that many prominent women chose to stay in Afghanistan and worked either openly or clandestinely towards empowering other women. When the Taliban came to power and closed the institution, the women continued their underground activities in their homes. Doctors in the Rabia Balkhi Women's Hospital in Kabul had all educated. Setting up the hospital in Kabul had the advantage of allowing these women to perform surgery in accordance to this, Hosseini, in his novel, draws two types of characters engaged in professional jobs—first, that of the

school teacher Shanzai, whom the students playfully called Khala Rangmaal. "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". The second is that of the doctor who operated Laila during her second childbirth. Mariam observed the doctor intensely, "Here was a woman, she thought, who had understood that she was lucky to even be working", although she lamented about the pathetic condition of the women's hospital devoid of X-ray, suction, oxygen, and even simple antibiotics. Even Laila undergoes caesarean operation without anaesthetics. On top of it, the Taliban ordered the female doctors to even operate wearing a burqa.

Regarding the role of women in the political and social fields, Rosemarie Skaine, in her book *The Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban* (2002), remarks that women participated in organized struggles such as abduction, assassination, and bombing of the enemy position. In Kandahar, women hid the weapons under their burqas to replace them. Thus the veil which on the surface level signifies oppression and strangulation, has quite the opposite connotations too—it may become a vehicle of preserving one's choice and attaining liberty. Even in the novel we see that in their attempt to flee from Rasheed's home, both Mariam and Laila use the burqa to hide themselves from familiar eyes. Later when Rasheed ran out of money and hunger began to cast a pall over their lives, Laila had to succumb to Rasheed's proposal to send Aziza, her daughter, to an orphanage. She could not muster up courage to tell her daughter the truth and at the moment when she was about to leave her in the orphanage, "She was glad for the burqa, glad that Aziza couldn't see how she was falling apart inside it". Soon after, when Laila wanted to visit Aziza in the orphanage and Rasheed refused to accompany her, she met with "assortments of wooden clubs, fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps, often fists" from the Taliban because it was an offence to be seen on the street without a male companion. To defend herself against all these, "Soon Laila took to

