

Depiction of Female Characters in Two Contemporary Novels the French Lover and a Thousand Splendid Suns

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Abstract:

Taslina Nasrin and Khalid Hosseini being significant writers put their experiences, observation and views regarding societal norms and practices. According to both of them, violence against women is an age old practice and Afghan and Bangladeshi women are an integral part of it. Since the position of Afghan and Bangladeshi society are vulnerable, women have endured a tough existence as they came to grips with a double subjugation in the form of patriarchal authority and the oppression emanating from the persistent conditions of the conflict. This present paper studies the vital subject of Afghan and Bangladeshi women's experience as narrated in two contemporary novels of Khalid Hosseini and Taslima Nasrin. This paper in the light of their two contemporary novels attempts to argue, how the patriarchal subjugation, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, exploitation, marginalization and persistent conditions of conflict have multiplied the oppression on women in both the societies under study.

Keywords: Powerlessness Patriarchy, Oppression, , Subordinate, Marginalization

Handling of various themes regarding women's life and status in male-dominated society is studied deeply in this paper. Through various themes novelists have tried to project various images of women. The novelists are best known for their powerful feminist voices in the contemporary era. Khalid Hosseini and Taslima Nasrin are celebrated internationally as a symbol of intellectual liberty and champion of free speech, and the reputed feminist voice in this present day world to advance women's causes or to speak out loudly against patriarchy, religion, political conflicts, traditions etc to show how oppression and suffering on women have been multiplied in Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The focus out of writing novels is to raise voice vociferously against the patriarchal subjugation and marginalization, injustice done to women and the need to love for saving humanity to bring a change in the world. This study is an attempt to examine the portrayal of women in two contemporary novels..

There are five types of oppression as Irish Young has explained in her article; they are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Those types of oppression might happen to any kind of people category, one of the category is women. Young added, "As a group

women are subject to gender-based exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence.” (Young, 1992:64) It has been observed is a common thread in both the writers Taslima Nasreen and Khalid Hosseini that they have highlighted all the five types of oppression explained in one of the articles by a famous writer Irish Young.

1. Exploitation

The first type of oppression to be described is exploitation. Exploitation is the act of using people's labour to earn profit without fairly compensating them. Exploitation has been identified as the major theme in all the novels of Khalid Hosseini and Taslima Nasrin and the female characters like Mariam, Jamila, Laila, Nila Wahdati and Nilanjana, her mother, Jhumur, Kironmoyee etc are the ones that have witnessed exploitation to a large extent. Mariam in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Nilanjana in *French Lover* experience exploitation from their husbands, Rasheed and Kishanlal. Mariam as the wife has done her duties in the household without wishing any wage but a comfort and happy marriage. But Rasheed does not compensate her fairly, he does not give Mariam a comfort, a happy marriage, even, he treats Mariam badly by always pointing her faults, “he was more apt to these days, to fault her cooking, to complain about clutter around the yard or point out even minor uncleanliness in the house,” (Hosseini *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 100). In addition to this, Rasheed, offends Mariam by speaking rudely towards her. He easily judges Mariam's innocence as a stupidity. What he does, pointing Mariam's fault, is like the employer who is not satisfied with the slave's work, and indirectly he wants Mariam to do better and command her to avoid her fault in the other times. Rasheed's fault-finding does not end, it goes on. He makes a judgment on Mariam's cooking, as if Mariam cooks improperly. As he keeps trying to find Mariam's fault, he comes closer to the term exploitation. The form of exploitation in this novel is not like the exploitation in the colonialism era, the thing to be emphasized here is how Rasheed compensates Mariam. These evidences are taken to explain how wicked Rasheed, Kishanlal, Haroon and other husbands and lovers are in compensating their wives' work. Hosseini writes in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, “What's the matter?” he mewled, mimicking at her. “What's the matter is that you've done it again.” “But I boiled it five minutes more than usual.” “That's a bold lie . . . I swear....” (Hosseini 102)

He shook the rice angrily from his fingers and pushed the plate away, spilling sauce and rice on the sofah. Mariam watched as he stormed out of the living room, then out of the house, slamming the door in his way out. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 109-110) Furthermore, she always becomes the object of Rasheed's fault finding and humiliating. Both fault finding and humiliating are the same as bad compensation or low wage amount in the work place. Rasheed benefits from Mariam the meals every day, the clean house, the clean clothes, and nights of coupling, just like the employer who benefits from the good work of the slave. It is his turn to pay Mariam back with compliments, comfort, and happiness like the employer who pay the slave with the fair amount of wage.

Similarly, in the novel *French Lover* Nila gets same treatment from her lover Benoir Dupont who spits and finds faults at her who tells Nila that she is nothing but a truckload of shit in her head and a piece of dead wood. Taslima writes in the novel, “A storm raged inside the room. Nila gazed at it in silence. Then Benoir grabbed her by the throat, ‘you miserable creature, I'll kill you.’ Nila could

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hardly breathe. She used all her strength to unclasp his fingers. Benoir pushed her down on the floor. She fell face-down and he kicked her with his hard boots” (Taslima *French Lover* 290-291)

2. Marginalization

Iris Young states that marginalization or alienation oppresses people by expelling them from the useful participations in the social life (Young, 1992: 50). Some categories of people are marginalized in the social life because of their differences which reduce their abilities and power. They are the people who live in lack of equality and dubbed as dependent people. Marginalization in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* happens to both Mariam and Laila. Mariam is born as a harami, “a harami was an unwanted thing; that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance” (Hosseini *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 4). The harami status which is attached to her has reduced her ability to move freely and be important as the other people in the society. It is not physical ability which is reduced by her harami status, but her rights to have love, family, home, and acceptance. Mariam is totally normal physically and mentally, but she is marginalized for the reason of her harami status. She is expelled by her father from his family by marrying her to Rasheed. But the marginalization does not end here; it goes on in her marriage. For years, he had eaten without looking up, without speaking as though some judgments were being passed, then broken only by an accusatory grunt, a disapproving cluck of his tongue, a one-word command for more bread, more water. (Hosseini *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 224)

Rasheed treats Mariam like someone who is unworth of respect. The way he eats, without looking up, without speaking to her, and commanding for more bread or water, explains clearly how much Mariam is loathsome to him, who is worthless of anything, even not to be spoken to. It happens because Mariam cannot give him a son, and moreover, she is a harami. But it is never being true to marginalize anyone because they can neither bear a son nor because they are illegitimate person, still they are human being like the other people who deserve respect and equality.

It has a replica in the novels of Taslima Nasreen where female characters suffer for having no fault of theirs. Although grounds are different, they too suffer from alienation and other causes. Nila of *French Lover* too is loathsome to her husband as well as to her lover. She finds herself deprived of employment and access to essential services. It is said that woman normally live behind the shadow of her father. This does not prove true in the life of Nila. She wants to stay in Calcutta with her parents and render her service to them but her father didn't accept this unexpected behaviour from Nila saying: “After marriage your husband's house is your home. There lie all your rights. Girls come to their father's house for a short while, not to stay.” (Taslima *French Lover* 154-155)

3. Powerlessness

Iris Young states, the powerless people are those who lack authority or power (Young, 1992: 52). This type of oppression consists of people who are powerless as they do not even talk about their oppression. This type of oppression happens to Mariam, Laila, Jamila, Pari in Hosseini's novels and Maya, Kironmoyee, Nila, Jhumur, Kalyani in Taslima's novels. Mariam represents the oppression and sufferings of all these female characters. Taking Mariam an example once again, the powerlessness which is experienced by Mariam goes on after almost four years of her marriage;

Rasheed shows her that he is the man who cannot tolerate anyone disappointing him. Since Mariam's pregnancies fails him seven times, as none of the pregnancies cannot give him a son, even not a baby, Rasheed brings Mariam to an understanding that she is disappointing him by easily pouncing on mistakes she does. But Mariam is not strong enough to build her self defence against Rasheed's accusation, Mariam is still in powerlessness. She cannot feel anything but a fear, a dread, a fright of Rasheed's coming in the evening. Together with Mariam and her little Aziza, Laila plans to escape and flee to Pakistan. On the day when they run away, they manage to reach bus station, but finally they are caught and returned home by police. It infuriates Rasheed. In the following extract, Rasheed tortures them by punching and locking them in different places, without food, water, and light, and it lasts for several days. The powerlessness takes a role as Mariam and Laila cannot unlock the door to get out. They do not have power or authority to make Rasheed undo his action, "Azan rang out a second time and still Rasheed had not given them any food, and worse, no water. That day, a thick, suffocating heat fell on them. The room turned into a pressure cooker." (Hosseini *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 288).

Thus, the way male characters behave with female ones highlight how powerful and dominant they are. It all brings home a great lesson to us that how powerless and unable women characters of both the writers dare not to fight against male counterpart.

4. Cultural imperialism

Cultural imperialism is what Young called as universalization of dominant group experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm (Young, 1992: 59). It constructs a difference that shows the other people's lack and finally it becomes oppressive since it results the feeling of deviance and inferiority. There were many forms of cultural imperialism, it depended on in what society it existed. The form of cultural imperialism in this context was a patriarchy, in which husbands had the dominant power in the household.

The novel *French Lover* tells us the story of the patriarchal control over Molina by her husband Anirban, over Chaitali by her husband Sunilda, and over protagonist Nilanjana by her husband Kishanlal, by her father Anirban, and the domination of her friends and lover especially Benoir. *French Lover* is her medium to convey her views on various sociological, political issues that encompass not only the fate of any nation but also that of women everywhere. The analysis focuses on the failure of marriage in the case of various individuals, especially that of protagonist Nila. Taslima through her novel *French Lover* brings out the sufferings of women characters under the name of religious, traditions, codes, and cultural practice of the society. She discusses elaborately the patriarchal institutions and customs of Bangladeshi society. While talking about her mother Molina, Taslima tells us about her father's patriarchal control over her in the family: "It was always Anirban who decided where the sofa or the beds would be and even what was to be cooked that day in the kitchen. Molina was there only to execute his wishes. Anirban made it amply clear that the house was not Molina's and he was the lord and master. That is how it was until Nila left the country and Molina this world." (Taslima *French Lover* 215)

Taslima Nasrin in her writing especially in novels presents marriage as exploitative that unavoidably ends in divorce, preceded by husband's polygamous marriage. It is through the perspective of oppressed and displaced women that the institutions and practices of marriage and divorce are

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examined. She uses daily events and happenings as evidence for the conclusion that subordination and economic exploitation of women are embedded in patriarchal marital relationship. This type of oppression happens to both Mariam and Laila in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* where Rasheed's cruelty has hurt and disappointed both Mariam and Laila.

Patriarchal system basically is designed to protect women and their rights and their equality in the family, but some men have misunderstood the essence of patriarchy by considering men have more power in the family or in the household, and they treat women as the inferior, the subordinated beings.

5. Violence

According to Iris Young, a systematic violence occurs when members of a group learn to live with fear of attacks with no intention but damaging, humiliating or destroying the person (Young, 1992: 61). This kind of oppression is practiced to intimidate certain group of people. In this context, Mariam, Laila, Jamila, Pari, Nila, Jhumur, Maya are the group of people in their works that are oppressed in a systematic violence which is committed by their husbands and other male counterparts.

In the following extract, it can be seen how Rasheed eventually shows his real personality to Mariam by speaking rudely to her, punching her, slapping her, and kicking her which were not aimed but damaging her. It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat. But after four years of marriage, Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid. And Mariam was afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 104-105) Rasheed is easily annoyed by Mariam's fault, even her minor fault, as if every single thing which Mariam does always infuriated him. He always makes to find Mariam's fault, even though Mariam has tried to avoid mistake, but he always has excuse to blame her, even worse. In the following extract, Rasheed humiliates Mariam by forcing her to chew pebbles as he is very angry just because he thinks that the rice is not boiled properly. Then she heard the front door opening, and Rasheed was back in the living room.

"Get up," he said. "Come here. Get up."

He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it.

"Put these in your mouth."

"What?"

"Put these in your mouth."

"Stop it, Rasheed, I'm"

His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in, his upper lip curled in a sneer. “Now chew,” he said.

Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes. “CHEW!” he bellowed. A gust of his smoky breath slammed against her face. Mariam chewed. Something in the back of her mouth cracked. “Good,” Rasheed said. His cheeks were quivering. “Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you’ve given me in this marriage. Bad food and nothing else. Then he went away, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragment of two broken molars. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 110-111) The way Rasheed tortures Mariam and Laila using violence is aimed to damage and destroy them, as violence results physical wounds to the victim, even, in a certain level, violence might carry a death to the victim. From those types of oppression which experienced by them, violence is the most dangerous and harmful. Nevertheless, all of the oppression experienced by Mariam and Laila cause them to act in response. In the next subchapter, there will be discussion about the way Mariam and Laila dealing with oppressions that they encountered in their life.

Thus, to conclude we can say that Khalid Hosseini and Taslima Nasreen both as a contemporary novelist and a writer deal with the depiction of women’s genuine problems in their respective works.

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