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TAHAMUL OR TOLERANCE? NATIONAL IDENTITY IMAGINED AS WOMAN'S
IDENTITY, AN AGENCY OF TRANSFORMATION IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

Imaginings of nationalism construct discourses of national identity as masculine while tend to feminize everything that is passive and domesticated, celebrating the rhetoric of gender inequality. Afghan women in Afghanistan manifest Afghan nationalism's conservative attitude, whereas men, on the other hand, symbolize progressive agents of national modernity. The present research paper would investigate Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the intersectional interactions between nationalism and gender with major focus on the concept of 'Tahamul' as propagated in Islamic Sharia and the negative social and domestic impact the term exercises over women, especially, as a result of its transformation into 'tolerance', the point where women, human beings after all, fails to endure interminable pain and hardship on the grounds of domestic violence, gender bias, and forced marriages. Women in Afghanistan represent nation and their Tahamul is nations Tahamul transformed into tolerance of foreign hegemonic military intervention.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Afghan women, Tahamul /endurance, Tolerance, Intersectional interaction, Nationalism, Islamism, Gender politics.

Introduction

What's the sense schooling a girl like you?
It's like shining a spittoon. And you'll learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school. Look at me.... Only one skill. And it's this: *tahamul*.
Endure.

(Hosseini2013, 18)

The highlight, according to the investigation done for the present research question, of the whole system of socio-political and religious interpretation being analyzed in terms of the consequences experienced by Afghanistan as a nation after many generations of alien infiltration into their social, political and religious

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functioning is the term *tahamul*. *Tahamul* endurance, which the whole nation accepted as the only fate destined for them, similarly, awakens one to the question of how the Afghan women faced the similar brunt of the term. However, the term has particular religious as well as social connotations which are equally important to shed light on before making a journey into the analysis of Hosseini's text, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Although, the above quote is most likely directed at a woman by the society through social constructionist¹ phenomenon where a particular community or a group is targeted and made to follow certain rules in order to claim authority over their lives. This interpretation, as pointed out by the mother, Nana, to her daughter, Mariam, is in complete contrast to the Qur'anic interpretation of the term, *tahamul* or endurance, more closely associated with the spiritual bond a human being has with the Almighty. The fact that most of the women folk in the Muslim majority Afghanistan have imbibed this stereotypical ideology of the patriarchs, the misconception of the term *tahamul* has resulted in their negligence of their identities leading to their subjugation and intimidation to the extent that the male subject of the Afghan household has taken the place of God. In Surah Aali-Imran 3: 200, Allah says,

O you who believe! Endure, outdo all others in endurance, be ready, and observe your duty to Allah, in order that ye may succeed. (Eliasin.d., 200)

The understanding of this ayah clearly shows the devotion of the verse directed towards the believers, which, due to the patriarchal interpretation of the verse has displaced the meaning by carving the specific connotations to meet the expectations of the political and social hierarchy of men over women deemed helpless and much vulnerable. Sponsoring and generating the fear among poor women, fear for Almighty and duty towards Him has been replaced by the fear for men, and hence, tormenting the physical and psychological conditions of women through rigorous torture by beating and casting them in terms of objects ready to be replaced any moment if they fail to subscribe to the demands of their so-called guardians. *Tahamul* can also be translated as *sabr* which is patience in its English equivalent and takes three forms according to the Islamic law: patience with duties, patience against sins, and patience in distress. Where all these forms are important for the followers of Islam to adhere to, women seem to have more experience in the field of *patience in distress*, specifically, when Afghan women are taken into consideration in the context of the novel. They suffer incessant

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intimidation under patriarchal social structure through consecutive regimes: Soviet Union, the Civil War, American intervention, and the Taliban rule that destroyed the normal social fabric of the society especially in the rural areas. Whereas schools, colleges, and universities were flooded with students throughout the country making women education compulsory in various institutes, the invasion of foreign policies, in the state of ‘political Islam’², disrupted this rapid flow in the reverse direction, on the other hand, Taliban rubbed more salt to their wounds.

The Afghan women faced severe consequences as a result of the gratuitously unjustified intrusion. Not only are they facing the challenges posed by the new laws of the nation under the Taliban regime, women in the text are shown strengthening their hearts in the face of the tough times by resolving themselves to show resilience against biased social and domestic structural pattern in the similar fashion as Quran mentions “to strengthen your hearts” while remembering the Battle of Badr in Surah al Anfaal 8:11. The women of Afghanistan in the text, particularly, perform this throughout the story by the act of sisterhood³ among suffering women who share the same experiences of domestic abuse and gender hatred in a space which is no less than a battle field.

At the climax of the story, it is this bond that matures between Mariam and Laila, the two protagonists of the text, who, after decades of abuse under their common tyrant, Rasheed, come out of their cocoon into the free world where they recognize themselves as individuals equally competent and responsible for the development of their nation, nation that suffered abuse at the hands of the alien intruders, ready to launch itself in the space of the modern contemporary world where all humans are considered having individual existence and enjoying the equal rights, although a distant dream here. The ending of the novel is especially interesting by virtue of the fact that Laila decides to come back to Afghanistan as she remembers her doting father, Babi, telling her how important she can be in the nation building exercise and how women can act as the true agents in the process of transformation. Therefore, alongside *tahamul*, women are shown experiencing resilience as an attribute denouncing the prejudiced social norms which, instead of liberating them, only confine their existence to feed the ego of their men. Women in Afghanistan, therefore, represent nation, and their *tahamul* is nations *tahamul* transformed into tolerance of foreign hegemonic military intervention, gradually, leading to resilience through retaliation on the part of the women as well as the holistic move by the nation.

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Women Predicament: Understanding Tahamul Transformed into Tolerance

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini draws a heartbreaking portrait of social and political structural pattern that bolsters the depreciation and corruption as persisted by the women characters, hence, exploring the predicament of two women, Mariam and Laila. Hosseini describes Afghanistan through two different generations delivering on the lives of Nana and her daughter Mariam, Laila and her daughter Aziza, three times oppressed by patriarchy, military occupation, and religious fundamentalism. The two prominent characters of the novel, Mariam and Laila, although born and brought up in two different generations, experience the same excruciating power of the authorial intervention of various forces including the violent behavior of their husband, Rasheed.

The cruelty at the hands of Rasheed helped both the women find solace in each other's pain and brought them together through woman bond resulting in Mariam's caring nature for Laila as her daughter and Aziza as her granddaughter. In her article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"⁴, Gayatri Spivak, specifically, points out to the subaltern women unable to speak against the authority that suppress the voice of these women by silencing them. These marginalized and economically disenfranchised women, Spivak says, are

automatically associated with the concept of subaltern. Along similar lines, Afghan women too encounter the unabashed attacks, physical and psychological control by the successive dominations of external political forces, and at the domestic level, they are subordinated by men. What distinguishes this text is the women voice that speaks for them against the unjust behavior of the society. First, the invasion of Soviet Union into the Afghan territory, followed by the civil unrest in the country among different groups like Najibullah, Mujahidin and Taliban, and finally, under the indestructible grip of the United States of America.

It would not be incorrect to use the idea of *panopticism*⁵ for the kind of surveillance the people of Afghanistan continuously felt themselves to be under, be it the internal surveillance or the external. In both the cases, what the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, discusses in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* about the concept of panopticism is something that indicates the kind of internal surveillance where the watcher ceases to be the external gaze, rather he becomes internalized in his actions to the extent that the watched becomes his own guard. It should be noted that the above discussion is imperative in the sense that it throws much light on the caged-like situation of the whole Afghan nation being watched by internal and

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external gaze against every political move it makes, hence collapsing its free and unhindered movement. The incidences that describe the impact of *burqa*/veil wearing by the women clearly locates these internal as well as external gazes when the Islamic indoctrination so penetrates into their ideology that they deeply internalize societal ethos without questioning it. Indistinguishably, what appears more brutal is the plight that a woman brings in with her the moment she is given birth into such a space. The external foreign affairs of the nation with the outside world that invited the uninvited policies for the people who not only belong to the different geographical location but also to the different race, ethnicity, and culture, coupled with the religious fundamentalism that solely desired to experience their control over the whole region through Islamic Sharia interpreted in accordance to meet the needs that would authorize their control over the masses, especially, over womenfolk.

Hence, women of Afghanistan can be recognized in terms of the nation both undergoing the same torment and subjugation at the command of the higher powers. Just like the common masses of Afghanistan fought their fight against the illegal occupation and the internal strife between different ethnic groups, the women in Afghanistan too became active agents in initiating a change in their disabled lives

through resilience they determined to show in the face of terror and terrorism proliferated by the Taliban. The present research scrutinizes Hosseini's novel to locate the Afghan women as the real agents of change ready to sacrifice their lives for the development of the country, hence, helping them sculpt their lost identity for the betterment of the future generation. This is mostly dramatized in the characters of Mariam and Laila who pull out all the stops and spare no effort to struggle against the different regimes by their steadfast demeanor and their armored resolution. All their efforts and convictions resonate in the idea of nation building process after adventuring into close extermination on the face of the earth. The development of Afghanistan as a nation is seen in consonance with the improvement in the lives of Afghan women in various fields of education, profession, and rationality.

How is national identity defined for a woman? Cynthia Enloe, a feminist scholar, while discussing the nationalist stance of Algeria, the ante colonial men nationalists of Algeria symbolically represented women as passive onlookers to bring to notice their masculine national identities, denying the active role of women in the progressive status of nation-building. Her investigation throws light on the complex interrelationship between gender and the nation. Afghanistan as a nation has undergone a rollercoaster spin for many

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years under varying dictatorial forces in the similar manner as the women for generations have endured the patriarchal approach of the society's agents like father, brother, and then the husband, forcing women subjugation and automatic denial of their basic human rights. Both, the nation and the women of Afghanistan experience the unending close surveillance by the external forces demanding complete subordination before the authority that claims the control over these bodies. It is only lately that Afghanistan has struck back at these dominant powers resulting in the freedom of nation from the clutches of the foreign scheming. Women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* too have risen from the ashes like the phoenix chiseling their lives in the direction that gives them the autonomy over their bodies after suffering under one attribute, *tahamul*, and the freedom to cast their destinies reflecting the bright future of the nation that tolerated the unyielding ruthless reigns.

In the context of Hosseini's novel, it would not be erroneous to differentiate between the two extreme forms of Islam, that is, the political Islam and the Islam which is perpetrated through various characters of the book. There are major chunks in the text that capture the failed efforts of western academia which tend to generalize the symbol of Islam and interpret Islam and Muslims in a negative light presenting

the religion in a more ambiguous manner. In the text, Hosseini contends through his character, Mullah Faizullah, the importance of the Quranic lessons that Mullah Faizullah gives to his student, Mariam, and he also is seen preparing her for the worst.

Since Mullah Faizullah has known her mother, Nana, for a very long time, he tells Mariam of Nana's "troubled and unhappy" (Hosseini 2013, 43) life she has had to live throughout her life. Yet there are men like Jalil Khan who with his façade of a peculiar demeanor, convinces Mariam of such façade and makes Nana, in the eyes of Mariam, a woman who has never been happy in her life and does not want her daughter to feel the bliss of life. The disappointment from her mother's failed exhibition of the happiness Jalil paraded before Mariam, alongside the inability of buying Nana's hatred towards Jalil, makes Mariam run away from Nana to Herat, Jalil's place, and an eventual suicide of her mother. Mariam would say,

You're afraid, Nana...that I might find the happiness you never had. And you don't want me to be happy. You don't want a good life for me. You're the one with the wretched heart. (Hosseini 2013,28)

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Mariam thought Nana twiddling with the truth her father, Jalil, had been telling her and hence presenting her as another reason for her grievances Nana has had throughout her distraught life. Her mother, Nana, could not bear the separation of her daughter who was her only lifeline for continuing with the unhappy life. The only solution she could reason was to enter into the world of silence forever. Soon, Mariam's expectations are shattered as soon as she arrives at Jalil's house and sees the unacceptance of her presence in the family. The envious attitude Mariam once had felt towards the birds that could freely move in the sky to Herat and land on Jalil's house without any barrier had transformed into the burden of guilt she hoards inside herself of her mother's death after encountering the true color of Jalil, his family and "the dark in their underbelly" (Hosseini 2013,29). She had realized herself being a source of shame to her father. The cowardice nature of her father demonstrates before her eyes once Khadija tells Mariam about a forty-five-year-old suitor, a moochi, who, according to Afsoon *is a little older than Mariam* (emphasis mine). When she fixes her eyes on Jalil in the hopes of him speaking in her defense, the silence of Jalil, she realized, sealed the fate of Mariam with an elderly man, Rasheed.

Her protestations against the match were of no use as it was unanimously

discussed and agreed upon even before she was called for. Her innocence that had been replete with the imaginings Jalil had induced in her mind as a child was in complete contrast to what she sees around, hence, enhancing her character to elevate her to the higher understanding of the "wifely game she did not know about" (Hosseini 2013,65). Picturing herself in beautiful flashes of future moments with Jalil, Mariam's realizable vision gets smashed to smithereens as soon as she meets herself with the reality that definitely was not accomplishable and that is why was kept from her by Jalil Khan. Her mother, Nana, had always spoken the truth to her about being a shame to her father's name and family back in Herat. Albeit, displeasing to the ears of Mariam with her vicious and scathing comments, Nana never kept Mariam in dark and wanted her see through Jalil's dual character. Mariam does not understand her mother's sincere pleadings and the painstaking efforts she takes in order to let her find some space in the world, world that is defined by the wretched heart of the men who would never stretch their bellies to make room for her (Hosseini 2013, 72).

In contrast to Mariam's childhood, Laila was born in a much privileged family where girls education was thought equally important and progressive. From her young age, Laila was informed about the

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importance of her schooling when Babi says:

Marriage can wait, education cannot... You can be anything you want, Laila. Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance. (Hosseini 2013, 114)

Hosseini portrays a character in Babi who has a vision for Afghanistan's future but not without its women. He has indubitable comprehension of how beneficial the women's education in Afghanistan is. Consequently, he has a great regard for his daughter, Laila, who is given the *awal numera* certificate every year in each grade. Unlike the other men recorded in the text, Babi is seen cherishing the heritage of Afghanistan. He wants his children not just see the nations heritage but learn the facts of their rich past through his understandings and some facts through the books they read in schools. Through Babi's character, Hosseini reminds his readers of the rich past of the country, the copiousness of their culture that has a lot to contribute to the world; not just the 'political Islam' that the west or the Islamic fundamentalists have painted for the world to look at where women are gauged through the lens of the political interpretation of Islam. There is

also an interesting conversation which strikes between Laila and her mother, Mammy.

Hosseini makes this mother-daughter conversation thought-provoking in the sense that it sheds light on the desperate efforts of Laila to mark a lasting impression on Mammy of her existence as well, but the past traumatic implications left Mammy neglecting her daughters impact on her life. Laila represents the period in the history of Afghanistan where women had much freedom, were part of the nation-building process by being into different professions that highlighted the progressive state of Afghanistan as a nation. Hakim, in the text, rightly says, "women had always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they are more free now, under the communists and have more rights than ever had before...It's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan" (Hosseini 2013, 18). With such a family background that Laila had been opened to from the beginning, helped Laila fight against the illogical patronizing rationale of the Rasheed household and her eventual freedom from his tyrannical inclination into the space where she could breathe freely without anybody's premeditated impediments into her *modus vivendi*.

In spite of the highly educated backdrop, the life completely takes a horrific shape for Laila when her family is

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murdered in the explosion at the moment they all decide to leave Afghanistan and find a better life in Pakistan. Secondly, Tariq's absence in her life after she is convinced by Rasheed of his death leaves her with no other choice but marry Rasheed for the sake of her child by Tariq. After coming to live with Rasheed in his house, she witnesses Mariam being beaten frequently by Rasheed, and the hatred in Mariam's eyes for Laila. It is this dependence on men counterparts of women that forces women to take such rash decisions, as in, marrying the man much older than herself for the sake of security.

Although, Mariam was forced out of Jalil's house, Laila on the other hand, forced herself by choosing to live with Rasheed. However, the various incidents in the text brings in Hussein's focus on how the women with Laila's highly educated background do not simply accept the prescribed doom decided for them for being a woman and a dependent second class citizen, rather, she retaliates with much higher strength and determination that would even inspire women like Mariam, who still wishes to see blissful life one day even in the irreconcilable situation she finds herself in. With Laila's mesmerizing strength that fiercely looks into the eyes of unyielding Rasheed, transforms Mariam's outlook on herself and her plight. The unbearable pain that Laila proudly suffered during her caesarean marks a deep respect

for her in the eyes of Mariam. Women bond and support for each other helped them challenge the violent attacks of Rasheed.

After the birth of Zalmai, the male heir, Rasheed started showing discrimination towards Aziza. Placing her in the orphanage and preventing Laila from visiting her daughter further marks an attempt at his cruel attitude he has towards the 'other' women in his house. The protestations and retaliation that Rasheed witnessed from Laila's behavior followed by Mariam taking her side, marks his sudden decline at being the whistleblower of his house. Laila's courage, strength and perseverance is demonstrated through denying her cruel husband's commands at not paying any visitations to Aziza, coupled with the forceful imposition of IEA's forbidden things that includes stepping outside of a woman without her mahram, any legitimate male companion.

Well aware of the consequences that would follow during the Taliban rule, Rasheed purposely avoided any chances of Laila meeting her daughter, Aziza. To add more pain to the troubled life of Laila, Rasheed banned her from moving outside his house which prompted Laila to take the journey alone even if that costed her life. She took beatings from breaking the laws but that also didn't intercept into her decisions. Mariam not only is awestruck at Laila's daring disposition but it stirs her

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silent conscience into action fashioning her into a woman transformed from being a woman from whom Rasheed took away everything into a woman who for the first time “was *deciding* the course of her own life” by killing Rasheed (Hosseini 2013, 341). Thus, the above critical analysis into the characters of Mariam and Laila, their hardships as wives, their voicing back at the authority, debunks Nana’s claim regarding endurance or *tahamul* as the only choice left with the women, rather highlights the metamorphosis of *tahamul* into tolerance when *tahamul* becomes unbearable.

Nations Transformation Parallels with Women’s Transformation: Women as The Real Agents of Change

Hosseini’s quintessential portrayal of the time of Afghan conflict alongside the disturbed domestic fabric deeply penetrated by the political aspect of different organizations through political Islam, coincides with the brutal treatment of women under the patriarchal men and their political reasoning, oppressed women’s realization of their intolerable levels of hardship like the Afghan citizens under various dictators, their final combat with the invincible authority, and their eventual release from this despotism/anarchy with the sole promise to reconstruct the ways of the society by making women part of it and their education as essential as any other skill. Hence, women’s transformation coincides with the transformation in

Afghan’s national infrastructure through challenging the authority.

However, this transformation does not come easily to either of them. Afghanistan, initially, being untouched and irrelevant to the outside world, suddenly becomes a region of interest for Russia and Britain in the nineteenth century. Later, the early twentieth century witnessed Afghanistan as an independent nation under the kingdom of Mohammad Zahir Shah whose reign took Afghanistan to the new heights into the modern arena in the 1960s pushing the cities and the urban dwellers into the modern politics, political rights, and women’s education. Afghanistan grew into a secular state than it was before. Things begin to dwindle into abnormally as soon as the USSR and the USA started showing their respective interests in Afghanistan already going through a civil war between the two rivals – the King himself and his cousin, Mohammad Daoud Khan, a hardcore Pashtun nationalist.

In 1973, Zahir Shah declared himself the President and the Prime Minister of the new Afghan Republic. Daoud Khan’s Pashtun nationalistic stance did not go down well with the other ethnic clans which irked Daoud Khan into taking some drastic measures by restricting civil liberties as punishment – resulting in the 1978 revolution eliminating Daoud Khan from the Communist People’s Democratic

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Party of Afghanistan. Taking the charge as the Prime Minister of Afghanistan, Hafizullah Amin pushed the country towards socialism, women's rights and equality through education, to the dismay and disappointment of the self-sufficient rural traditionalists whose rebellion forced Amin to order imprisonment and execution leading to the 1979 riots. Hafizullah Amin even got Noor Mohammad Taraki killed after discovering his plans of disempowering Amin and taking the Presidency position.

In order to bring peace and stability in the government and Amin's resolution against the rebellion, the General Secretary of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev, decided to take the responsibility on themselves of the situation which would not happen unless the uncontrollable Amin was removed from the throne. At the same time, Brezhnev was aware of the Iranian revolution and feared that might trigger the Islamic revolution in the Afghan region resulting in their utter loss of control. That being in mind, the Soviets started bombarding the regions incessantly triggering the commencement of Soviet-Afghan War in 1979. Amin was captured and executed by the Soviets replacing him with the more moderate Babrak Karmal, taking over the urban cities, roads and the communication lines. The forceful invasion into Afghanistan was not received well by the west and the Muslim countries of the

world, hence, international intervention was likely to erupt. This way, there started a Holy war called Jihad which put together all the Islamic warlords united to form the Afghan Mujahideen. In spite of receiving all the support Afghanistan needed from the USA and the Pan-Islamic support from Pakistan, the Soviets still held the upper hand.

The Mujahideen initiated a guerilla warfare with the Soviets under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud. From 1985, the vision of the Soviets began to disintegrate with the result Mikhail Gorbachev taking the position of the General Secretary announced his foreign policy and his anti-war sentiments. Mohammad Najibullah came into action after switching with Karmal and decided to transfer the fighting burden on Afghan army alone. In 1988, news came in from Gorbachev who finally gave an official word by signing on the Geneva Accords and agreed on the withdrawal of the USSR from Afghanistan along with the oath of never returning back to the soil in any form of foreign intervention. By 1989, the Red Army left Afghanistan ending the Soviet-Afghan War.

Soviet army's receding from Afghanistan, however, did not end the civil war as the Mujahideen continued to resist the Afghan government run by Najibullah who was well aided by the Soviet itself

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until 1991. By 1992, the Mujahideen had successfully captured the modern capital city of Afghanistan, Kabul. The warlords of Afghanistan reaching Kabul decided unanimously in an agreement on the creation of an Islamic coalition government except for Gulbuddin Hekmatyar who wanted to rule the country single handedly. So the war continued between the two, united warlords of Mujahideen headed by Massoud and the Pakistan-backed army of Hekmatyar. Massoud, eventually, outwitted Hekmatyar by the 1994 giving opportunity to another man by the name, Mohammad Mullah Omar who commanded his rally to continue the war against Massoud. It was this rally of independent Afghan warriors who later were called the Taliban. By 1996, Taliban had seized the control of almost whole of the country including Kabul deciding on the fate of the former President Najibullah by brutally hanging him in public and hailing themselves as the Islamic Emirate.

In the September of 2001, Massoud was assassinated by Taliban ending his allies' combat against the Taliban, the same year the world witnessed the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York by the Islamic organization, Al Qaeda headed by Osama Bin Laden who later sheltered himself in Taliban controlled Afghanistan. Since then, the US war on terror has been the limelight of the politics in Afghanistan where over forty years of gruesome

violence, political gimmicks and instability, and virtual anarchy cannot be ignored so easily. The inside politics and the international interference since the commencement of the war has cost millions of Afghan lives, millions have turned into refugees and an unfortunate burden on the countries who held them for so long as refugees. The current social and the political situation in Afghanistan has come down to some kind of normalcy but normalcy not without the past fact of fighting such wars that has, in the meantime, unraveled numerous other stories and motives behind the initiation of the war.

Keeping in mind the political background of Afghanistan, Khaled Hosseini created a masterpiece where he has highlighted the normal household situation turning into a battleground fought not with the weapons like machine guns but with the more dangerous machinery called ideology that creeps into the major section of the society creating a rift between the two major folks that favors one over the other on certain specific stereotypes. It is not that the change in the household atmosphere had begun with the advent of Taliban in Kabul, the situation never had been better before but the announcements known as the Voice of Shari'a with the list of lawful acts the people were supposed to subscribe to give credence to the barbarity inflicted upon women by their men, the

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written fliers tossed in the streets and the loudspeakers perched on the mosques and on the radio with the list of forbidden things for both genders.

One of the fliers that Mariam found in her yard and Laila did not seem to accept the fact that the whole population of Afghanistan would be locked inside their houses just because these laws are being displayed without the consent of the people. Where Laila's disbelief in these forbidden laws sets herself in the forefront of free women who held offices in the government, practiced law and medicine in Kabul, the free modern city, modern enough to accommodate women in these positions, Mariam, on the other hand, is the spokesperson of those women who knew how such vehement enforcement of laws has been into practice from the past decades treating women as indoor objects ready to be played on whenever and however ways the owner wishes. The grinning of Rasheed at Laila's analysis of the city like Kabul does not swerve Laila from refusing to believe the "real Afghanistan" that Rasheed tries to show her in order to defend what Taliban was trying to implement in the region.

Whereas, Taliban and its laws endorsed the psychological capacities of people like Rasheed, Laila, with her Babi's education, showed concern for the future generation of both people in general and

Afghanistan in particular, in terms of education and other social sectors getting destroyed at such an enormous speed. The universities being shut, smashing of the pre-Islamic statues, the history of the country into rubble, paintings ripped off from the walls, television screens smashed, books burned in heaps and the stores closed down did nothing but led the country to enter into the shadow of distant times away from the hopeful rays of the modern time period. Laila, concerned about the anticipated dark future of Afghanistan, thanked her lord that Babi wasn't alive to see all this as "it would have crippled him" (Hosseini 2013, 273). The daughter of a learned man could not see the sight of burning books with poems of Khalili, Pajwak, Ansari, Haji Dehqan, Beytaab, Ashraqi, Hafez etc., she liked to read in her childhood, into flames.

The news that went around about the shutting down of Marco Polo restaurant and turning it into an interrogation centre, shutting down of cinema halls, Khabarat, the ancient music of Kabul silenced, musicians beaten and imprisoned, the grave of famous singer Ahmad Zahir, Tariq's favorite, bombarded with bullets as if it wasn't enough for them to see him lying there already silenced, bothered Laila the most while she discusses the whole situation with Mariam. Laila, in a way, does not seem to be able to grab the logic of the present situation created by the Taliban, because it directly contradicts her future

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vision and what she had thought of Afghanistan to become in the days to come. The vision, though, seen trampled upon by the Taliban, was still alive inside her in the form of her father's teachings about Afghanistan, what it has gone through and what can possibly rebuild its ways through education and equal participation of women in every sector of the society.

Keeping women away from all the outdoor activities and restricting their movements meant to silence the contribution of women in the development of the country which Laila was well aware about. What men had to do, as they seemed to have little to worry about, was to grow beard and visit the mosque which Rasheed proudly did to entertain the new laws. Rasheed had a win-win situation as he kept listening to the Voice of Shari'a every Wednesday, and "regarded the Taliban with a forgiving, affectionate kind of bemusement, as one might regard an erratic cousin prone to unpredictable acts of hilarity and scandal" (Hosseini 2013, 274). In other words, Rasheed saw his own reflection in the Taliban, the ego that hurts the people around without itself expecting getting hurt by the same people.

His choice of action, his pick of words when belittling his wives finds much acceptance in the actions played by the Taliban he admires the most. There comes a moment in Rasheed's unexpected turn of

events when he also starts fearing the Taliban while listening to the terror the Taliban has spread all over the region. The breaking in of Taliban into houses, forceful recruitment of young boys into their organization, killing their fathers and raping the women of the house compels Rasheed to pick his loaded gun many times a day just to keep away the unexpected group of men, as a way of protecting himself claims to have the courage to protect his women from the men capable of tarnishing their bodies. Least caring for what he has been doing all his life, torturing and beating his first wife, Mariam, until she loses the capacity to grow life inside her womb, harassing her second wife for not delivering a boy heir through her first pregnancy, despising Aziza for being a girl child in his household, Rasheed's claim to protect his women from the growing terror outside, ironically, neglects the fact that the inside terror at his hands has, no doubt, rendered the women voiceless in their attempt to confront the beast.

The realization is not far away from the women when they identify their common enemy, Rasheed, who becomes the reason for Mariam and Laila to define a bond for each other in the commonality of their stories that trapped them into marrying Rasheed unwillingly. Their close bond gets reflected from their common suffering and takes them as effortlessly close to each other as they start *wordless exchange* for

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their past lives buried deep inside their traumatic subconscious selves. It is this bond that helps them fight against the tyrannical despotic appetite of Rasheed that has infected the household and their eventual fight against the universal patriarchy experienced in the barbaric imperious influence of the Taliban poisoning the whole society.

The docile Mariam as represented by Hosseini throughout the text until chapter forty-five titled “Mariam” where she realizes her importance and turns to herself questioning if she has ever been deceitful wife or a complacent, if she has been *dishonorable* or *discreditable* ever in her marriage, if she has ever done harmful things to warrant the man’s malice, his assaults and torments. These questions make her ask why she deserved such meanness when she had given him her youth and always had been apologetic. What fool she had been making of herself, Mariam jostles marking the beginning of her elevated self, ready to confront Rasheed with all his ruthlessness. When Mariam saw Rasheed strangulating Laila, almost getting killed by Rasheed, Mariam, right away thought that she would not allow this to happen.

She saw her own reflection in Laila’s struggle and the thought that Rasheed had taken much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage, was ready to not allow Rasheed take the same from

Laila. After the first blow she hurls at Rasheed with the shovel, Mariam goes into a long scrutinization seeing Rasheed in blood and the possible change that would spark in him the regret he has for his condescendingly violent behavior towards his wives. Unfortunately, his spiteful sneer narrated a different story to Mariam. She knew if she spared his life, Rasheed would find no time in picking his gun and killing both. Seeing this impending doom of death lingering on both the women, Mariam raised the shovel as high as she could, brought it down with much force killing the tyrant in *her* house. This way, Mariam, for the first time decides the course of her life and also for the better future she prophesies for both Laila and Aziza. The trial that Mariam had to go through did not look like a formal hearing, and within fifteen minutes, the trial ended. Mariam affirms to kill her husband; she spends ten days in prison not for a single moment does she regret her action. Her audacious disposition gets exemplified when she is taken to the Ghazi Stadium and without looking at people with disapproving, and charitably reproachful gaze, Mariam heads forward.

As she is commanded to walk towards the goalpost she does not feel regret at the final hours of her life, rather she senses an abundance of peace all over her body because at last she was to become free. She was proud of the love she had shared with her people; and the love she

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was given. In her final moments, Mariam kept herself steadied and walked without protest because all she could remember was she being the good companion Almighty had made her, a best friend, a guardian, a loving mother, “a person of consequence[s] at last” (Hosseini 2013, 361). Her remembrance of Laila and grown Aziza brings her immense joy, although, she would not live to see all this come to reality, her vision foresees the happy ending of Laila and Aziza’s lives in future Afghanistan.

Just like Afghanistan witnesses the high and low crests of her existence and the struggle to combat the alien attacks and the civil war fought between different political enthusiasts, the lives of these women too comes to a conclusion where the struggle finally takes a back seat, subsides for better future, but not without the sacrifice. Mariam sacrifices herself to see Laila and Aziza live, similarly, many innocent Afghans lost their lives and sacrificed for the sake of their beloved country, Afghanistan. Death of Mariam reveals the women participation in the struggle against patriarchy both at social and political levels because the Talib, the brittle-looking middle judge, did not despise Mariam of her action rather the show of his elegant gesture of gratitude towards her speaks in galore about Mariam, although held genuinely for the murder of Rasheed with the main objective of saving other lives.

Conclusion

Nations prosperity, although, shown in patriarchal arguments to have been aligned with the sacrifices that men do to bring the nation to some consequence, women’s participation is always blurred to the extent that they do not even count them into possible human beings. Hosseini challenges such reckless arguments through his portrayal of Laila, her teachings of Babi, and her decision to teach children in Afghanistan so that the earlier lost prosperity is brought back through education, especially of a girl child. The thought of crushing women under the feet of patriarchy coincides with crushing the nation, Afghanistan, and its image under the cruel rule of different cultural dictates. It is the Afghan women with peculiar experiences of violence against this common gender that awakens them of their right to speech and action, hence, making them the real agents of change. After a long battle this gender fought with the dictatorship at home, and various wars that Afghanistan witnesses with Soviets, America and other alien occupation, finally settles down with a future vision of remodeling the distorted forms of the woman gender and the nation that has opened its horizons to the wider specificities of the future that awaits them both.

Endnotes

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¹ Implies *social constructivism* as a sociological assumption whose approach tends to focus on social interactions as significant in the construction of social norms and convictions.

² The concept of ‘political Islam’ underscores the politicization of Islam that incorporates all the movements taken place in Islam, hence linking it with some political agenda.

³ Bell Hooks explanation of the term in the context of black feminism which in its unique interpretation finds consequences among the South Asian Muslim Afghan Women.

⁴ From the text, *Marxism and the Interpretations of Culture*.

⁵ Michel Foucault’s concept of panopticism to describe the internal surveillance. Here, in the above context, the term can be used in case of afghan women who find themselves being watched externally as well as internally by their psychic internalization of the stereotypes.

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