

## WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN: A STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE NOVELS OF KHALED HOSSEINI

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**Abstract:** Taliban's rule in Afghanistan is well known for patriarchal dominance where women were suppressed in many ways. Khaled Hosseini's novels *The Kite Runner* (2003) *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and, *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) have given an authentic insight to the people of the world about the Taliban in particular and the customs and traditions of the people of Afghanistan in general. During that dark phase in the history of Afghanistan while the people of the country, especially the women suffered the most, the Taliban government observed the miserable conditions of the former with mystified curiosity. The awful conditions of the women as depicted in *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and, *And the Mountains Echoed* were, in fact, the stark reality in Afghanistan during the regime of the Taliban government. To the surprise of the readers, the Taliban could easily encroach in the affairs of the people of the country irrespective of sex during that period. The women were debarred from higher education and compelled them to wear *burqa* in public. If we go back to the history of Afghanistan, we will find that the Taliban Government did not treat the women equally with the men in the field of education that has become a trend since then. To bring a revolutionary change the struggling women of Afghanistan should fight against the injustice done to them and come out of such adverse situations. To do that they may seek the helping hands from the neighbouring nations should not be disappointed by the latter.

**Key Word:** Taliban, Afghanistan, women, education, custom, *burqa*, nation.

**Introduction:** The Afghan writer Khaled Hosseini has great contribution in bringing/highlighting the much concerned issue of women's education in Afghanistan to the people of the entire world through his fictions. To begin with, the writer has written *The Kite Runner* (2003), where he has narrated the tragic plight of Afghan women in general and how they were deprived of education in particular during the reign of Taliban government. In his second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), the writer has given special attention to the various issues related to the women vividly and women education is one of the major themes. The third and final novel *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) so far is not exceptional. Along with the various themes, the writer has also talked about the issues related to the women and their education in this novel. The writer has categorically revealed his intentions of focusing such issues in his fictions in an interview saying, "I don't want to sound self-important, but this is a vital issue for the future of Afghanistan. If we eliminate half the population from the process of rebuilding the country, it doesn't stand a chance. Women were traditionally the backbone of the education system. Now we have a country where 80 per cent of women are illiterate (Interview with Khaled Hosseini, The London Times 2008)."

A large numbers of research findings have revealed that people should get education in order to develop a nation in all aspects for example sound economy. It is also found that one of the primary reasons behind the restlessness in the minds of people and chaos in a country is due to the lack of education in people in

general and the women in particular. Afghanistan is one burning example of such nations. Now, certain questions may arise in the minds of people: Why women's education should be emphasised? How can we grow peace in a nation like Afghanistan? To get suitable answers of such questions we should peep into the history of such countries. If we go back to the history of Afghanistan, we will find that the Taliban Government did not treat the women equally with the men in the field of education that has become a trend since then. To bring a revolutionary change the struggling women of Afghanistan should fight against the injustice done to them and come out of such adverse situations. To do that they may seek the helping hands from the neighbouring nations should not be disappointed by the latter.

In fact, the literacy rates of both men and women are very low in Afghanistan. Contrarily, the illiteracy rates are very high: more than 50% for men and 80% for women. Poor economic condition of the country leads to the extreme poverty which ultimately becomes the barrier for the children even to get a high school diploma. So, many pupils of Afghanistan, mainly women, become the victim and do not receive education. Moreover, the much needed women's education is not monitored by the government properly. They are trapped in the patriarchal society where they have lost their freedom of speech and right to education. As a result of an uneducated population, Afghanistan struggles to move forward. Amidst several issues like religion, ethnic clash, gender inequality and history, Khaled Hosseini has emphasised the issue of education in general and

women's education in Afghanistan in particular in his first two novels explicitly. *The Kite Runner* depicts how the Taliban got hold of Herat in 1994 and then Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, on September 27, 1996 and their deeds till September 11, 2001. During the tenure of the Taliban government the total scenario of Afghanistan in general and education system in particular were at stake. Amir is the protagonist-cum-narrator of the story of *The Kite Runner*. The readers come to know about the Taliban government's attitude towards the people of Afghanistan and several incidents that took place under its regime through Amir's conversation with Rahim Khan, his father's 'old business partner' and friend, presently living in Peshawar in Pakistan and some minor characters like Omar Faisal, Dr. Rasul, Farid and Zaman.

The Taliban government has replaced the secular law of the country by Islamic Shari'ah law after which the gender inequality becomes the order of the day. Though the Taliban claimed that they made laws based on Islamic Shari'ah, but some of their activities are contrary to the Islamic Shari'ah law. So it needs to be scrutinized in the light of Islam for proper justification. The wretched condition of women is evident from Hassan's letter to Amir in which the former had clearly mentioned it. Hassan wrote:

The other day, I accompanied Farzana jan to the bazaar to buy some potatoes and *naan*. She asked the vendor how much the potatoes cost, but he did not hear her, I think he had a deaf ear. So she asked louder and suddenly a young Talib ran over and hit her on the thighs with his wooden stick. He struck her so hard she fell down. He was screaming at her and cursing and saying the Ministry of Vice and Virtue does not allow women to speak loudly (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 190).

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini has portrayed the deplorable conditions of Afghan women during the regime of the Mujahedeen and Taliban governments. The fundamentalist governments were biased in nature and patriarchy was the order of the time. The patriarchal bend of minds of the Taliban government is evident from the two sets of laws – one meant for men and the other one is for women. The former set of laws is liberal in nature than the latter. It will be crystal clear to the readers if they compare the fate of the two protagonists Mariam and Leila with the other male characters in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The plot of the novel revolves around the two female protagonists – one is Mariam, an illegitimate child and the other one is Leila, who is born to a moderate family. Both of them had to face the difficulties in their day to day lives. In the very first chapter of the novel, the writer has revealed the agony and pain of Afghan women through Mariam's mother Nana.

While warning her daughter Mariam about the bias attitude of the patriarchal society, Nana also warns the other women of Afghanistan to become aware of the same. Nana has told Mariam, "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam (Hussaini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 7)." Nana herself is the victim of patriarchal society. She has to pay for her affair with Jalil. She is not only abandoned by her fiancé but also renounced by her father. The irony lies in the fact that Nana being maid has to shoulder the entire responsibility while Jalil, faultlessly, cherish every moment of his life along with his wives. Nana tells Mariam, "You know what he (Jalil) told his wives by way of defense? That I forced myself on him. That it was my fault... You see? This is what it means to be a woman in this world (Hussaini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 7)."

In a patriarchal dominant society radical rules were prevalent. The Taliban government has made wearing *burqa* compulsory for women. In fact, it is a sign of male domination. Such instances were also evident before the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Pre-Taliban period is considered as more progressive than the rule of Taliban. Even during that time the practice of wearing *burqa* was prevalent. It is evident through Rashid, who made wearing *burqa* compulsory for his wife to maintain "honour and pride" (Hussaini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 75)." Afterwards, Rashid joined with the Taliban. Unlike women, men had to grow a beard and go to the mosque for prayer. After the declaration of Afghanistan as the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, the Taliban played their message through loud speaker:

"Attention women: You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home. You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with *burqa* when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten. Cosmetics are forbidden. Jewellery is forbidden. You will not wear charming clothes. You will not speak unless spoken to. You will not make eye contact with men. You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten. You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger. Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately. Women are forbidden from working. If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death. Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar (Hussaini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 296-97)."

Apart from some common laws, the Taliban government has passed two different sets of laws for

men and women to be followed by them respectively. However, there are hardly any laws meant for higher education. Contrarily, the government has imposed ban on women education resulting almost three fourth of the total population remained illiterate even today. Patriarchal set up in Afghanistan was so rigid during the reign of the Taliban that women were deprived of their basic right of education. Instead, the women from their very childhood were made aware of the fact that they were born to carry out their responsibility as wives and mothers and to conceive. It is evident from Leila's friends Giti and Hasina who told her, "By the time we're twenty, Giti and I we'll have pushed out four, five kids each. But you, Leila, you'll make us two dummies proud. You're going to be somebody. I know one day I'll pick up a newspaper and find your picture on the front page (Hussaini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 176)." Similar attitude is observed in Rashid, who was delighted by the fact that Mariam is going to give birth a child-a boy and not a girl. He doesn't have any inclination to have a girl child. That attitude of Rahim is further reflected through his negligence to name his second wife Leila's girl child and kept on calling her 'That thing'. For giving birth to a girl child, Leila too was ill-treated by her husband.

So, far as education is concerned Leila is ahead of Mariam. Leila, who was born into a middle class family in Kabul, was educated. She went to school. Unlike majority of the men in Afghanistan Leila's father was keen in educating the girl child too. He recognized the talent of Leila and doesn't want that to go waste. So, he persuaded her to get educated telling her,

"I know you're still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now.... Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very, very bright girl. Truly, you are. You can be anything you want, Leila. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, 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, Leila. No chance (Hussaini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 123)."

Leila's father doesn't stop in encouraging her daughter to get higher education. He has also made her aware about the then situation of Afghanistan. Keeping in mind the pitiable condition of women in Afghanistan, he has made her aware about the women's right. Leila's father rightly said to her,

"Women have always had it hard in this country, Leila, but they're probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before... it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that... women's freedom... is also one of the reasons people

out there took up arms in the first place (Hussaini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 144)."

On the other hand as a child, Mariam over hears that her step sisters went to school. "Since then, thoughts of classrooms and teachers had rattled around Mariam's head, images of notebooks with lined pages, columns of numbers, and pens that made dark, heavy marks. She pictured herself in a classroom with other girls her age. Mariam longed to place a ruler on a page and draw important lines" (Hussaini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 19). Mariam once tried to seek permission from her mother to go to school through her Qur'an tutor but it was in vain. Her mother cautioned her about the consequence of such decision saying, "There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school... And it's this: tahamul. Endurance (Hussaini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 20)."

The attempt to educate the girl children in schools secretly is evident in the novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Zaman, the orphanage director where Leila's daughter Aziza is being admitted at the time of famine in Kabul, takes an initiative to give education to the girls in the orphanage:

"Aziza said Kaka Zaman made it a point to teach them something every day, reading and writing most days, sometimes geography, a bit of science, something about plants, animals. But we have to pull the curtains," Aziza said, "So the Taliban don't see us." "Kaka Zaman had knitting and balls yarn ready, she said, in case of a Taliban inspection. We put the books away and pretend to knit (Hussaini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 314)."

However, the hope of the people of Afghanistan revived once again with the declaration of war on Taliban by the US. The glimpse of happiness is seen on the face of children irrespective of boys and girls with the re-open of schools. New schools were built. Women regained the right to go back to work. Leila tells Tariq, "This isn't home. Kabul is, and back there so much is happening, a lot of it good. I want to be a part of it all. I want to do something. I want to contribute." (Hussaini, *Thousand Splendid Suns* 416)" Leila kept her words as she along with Tariq has mended an orphanage where Laila becomes a teacher. The long wait of children for education is over now. It is reflected through Zalmai and Aziza, who are going back to schools in Kabul.

Khaled Hosseini in his latest novel *And the Mountains Echoed* shows the victory of women who struggled in the patriarchal society for a number of decades. Unlike the previous two novels where the women are struggling for getting higher education, *And the Mountains Echoed* portrays how the women are expressing their thoughts and feelings through their writings. Female character such as Nila Wahdati, voices out feminism and how women are

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exploited in the Afghan society. Though her poems are controversial representing romantic love and lust, she defies all norms to show her rebellion against the society, which strike as “polemical, as angry

indictments of Afghan gender roles” (Hosseini *Mountains Echoed* 212). The novel also depicts how the women are mingling with the modern society and the role they involve themselves in the society.

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