

## CRITIQUING THE INTERSECTIONAL EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN A *THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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### ABSTRACT

*Intersectionality is a theoretical tool that primarily studies the interconnections of structures of domination and oppression, the interactions between these structures, and how these interconnections and interactions influence the lives of those who cross-identify between these structures. This theory was propounded by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her brilliant essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” (1989). The present paper seeks to offer an understanding of the intersections between various forms or systems of domination and oppression, and social inequality and discrimination faced by the female characters of the novel, A Thousand Splendid Suns. It examines different viewpoints through the framework of intersectionality, which asserts that social identity is a feature of various, interlinked factors like gender, race, or ethnicity, and the linkage of such aspects of social identity with broader social power systems, thereby becoming the way of demonstrating the miserable predicament of female characters in the present text. A Thousand Splendid Suns written by one of the popular writers, Khaled Hosseini depicts the social positions of the female characters, more so Mariam and Laila, based on the social identities of their gender, class, and ethnicity. Thus, this paper seeks to analyse the interactions and intersections affecting the livelihoods of the female protagonists of the novel within the theoretical framework of intersectionality.*

**KEYWORDS:** Intersectionality, Social location, Gender, Class, Discrimination, Oppression

### INTRODUCTION

The theory of Intersectionality, originally developed by Kimberle Crenshaw in her insightful article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” (1989), addresses the interaction between gender, class, race and other social categories of differences which might determine and strengthen marginalisation of individuals. Crenshaw, interestingly, explained the idea of intersectionality in terms of a collision:

Intersectionality simply came from the idea that if you’re standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both. These women [women of colour] are injured, but when the race ambulance and the gender ambulance arrive at the scene, they see these women of colour lying in the intersection and they say, ‘Well, we can’t figure out if this was just race or just sex discrimination. And unless they can show us which one it was, we can’t help them.’ (Harris 2010: 3)

The initial factor assessed by Crenshaw as determining women's socio-cultural injustice and oppression focused on race. In her study of intersectionality, Crenshaw intended to highlight the importance of the struggles women encounter in everyday life, where gender differences are most prominent. Crenshaw's proposal of a holistic approach by taking "both gender and race on board" aimed at demonstrating how their intersection consolidates women's inequality and shapes their various experiences. Intersectionality is characterised with scrutinizing all the domains in which women's lives and experiences are formed not simply by gender, but also by sexuality, race, ethnicity, disability and any other potential structures of domination. Thus, the intersectional theory revisits the long-standing discussions about women's oppression and proposes that their exclusion is reinforced by different axes of diversity.

The portrayal of social, political, and religious restrictions throughout the novel makes the theory of intersectionality useful to be applied to examine their effect on women's marginalization. Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* spans thirty years of political unrest, insurgency, anti-Soviet jihad, and Taliban dictatorship understood from the standpoints of Afghani women, producing a realistic representation of despotism where women suffer from the constant threats and hazards around them, in their homes and even in the boulevards of Kabul. The novel decodes a set of intersectional sources of disempowerment: the gender, class, and religious marginalisation experienced by the female characters; Mariam, Laila, and Nana. Mariam and Laila, born a generation apart and with very different outlook on love and family, are two women drawn together by abuses and injustices inflicted upon them by society's patriarchal structure. The following sections of the research paper will pertain to reveal how such an entanglement of social inequality and oppression leads to these women's breakdown.

Firstly, the oppression of Nana can be outlined on the account of her inferior social status. Nana was subjected to violent and brutal treatment by her employer Jalil and his family on the one side, and humiliation and banishment from her home by her father on the other, since she gave birth to Mariam, a 'harami' (an illicit child). Nana had been mistreated her entire life. Jalil deserted her and kicked her out of his house while she was pregnant with his child; he refused to acknowledge the child as his own. He felt embarrassed and ashamed to give his name to the illegitimate child, so in order to hide his fault from his family, he sent her away. When Miriam grew up, Nana expressed all that she felt and experienced because of men. She used to warn Miriam that men always put the blame on women for redeeming and rescuing themselves when she said: "Like a compass needle that always points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always, you remember that, Mariam 'and believe me' Nana said 'it was a relief to your father having me out of sight'" (Hosseini 7). After Nana's death, Mariam also suffered from ill-treatment and subjugation at the hands of her father, Jalil. He forced her to marry Rasheed, a shoemaker from Kabul who was thirty years elder to her, partly because of the societal pressure and partly because being an illegitimate child, she became the reason of tarnishing his name. Post Mariam's marriage, Rasheed began to physically and sexually abuse her. Sexual relations were forced upon her, "For her all these months later, their coupling was still an exercise in tolerating pain. His appetite...was fierce sometimes bordering on the violent" (Hosseini 82). These abuses continued until the end of her life.

Further, the influence of religion in marginalizing the women in Afghan is also evident in the novel. Religion, as a pretext to substantiate and justify the ways of society and means of controlling the women, is misinterpreted and misrepresented. As a result of the war, oppression of women owing to the negative effect of religion has been rampant in Afghanistan since the Taliban's establishment in 1996, and the overpowering pressure of social norms has been enormous. Henceforth, religion played a critical role in defining women's rights and equality since political and social components are

entirely dependent on religious interpretations. The Taliban had incorrect knowledge and comprehension of Islam. They combined the right and the wrong, interpreting religion in a way that suited their ambitions and met their needs. When Mariam was punished by Talibanis, the executor tells her, "I wonder, God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. Western doctors and their science have proven this. This is why we require only one male witness but two female ones." (Hosseini324). He justifies that men and women are unequal by quoting religion and science, despite of their hatred towards westerners. Though there have been cases of women from higher social strata in Kabul being allowed to adopt modern dress code of their choice, women from lower social strata, such as Mariam, have had to adhere to strict dress regulations (Hosseini74). Numerous instances of strict dress codes appear in the novel, like Rasheed, despite his flawed and disrespectful ways as a husband, makes sure that his wives, Mariam and Laila wear a burqa when they leave their home; (Hosseini71) and the Taliban's insistence on obliging the women, as a law, dress up in a burqa even at the time of delivery, for which they were severely beaten if they violated this law (Hosseini271). The rules for women are as follows:

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.

Jewelry 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. (Wahab, Youngerman, 2007, 248-249)

Young Talib physically assaulted Laila with a radio antenna on the pretext of religious policing to keep women

within the boundaries of their home. When he was done assaulting her, he gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said, "I see you again, I'll beat you until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones." (Hosseini 313)

In the novel, Mariam was forced to take Rasheed as her husband, who was thirty years elder to her, despite the fact that such compulsion is forbidden in Islam, yet she was obligated to follow. Despite of a legal marriage as per the law and religion, the sexual affairs between them was non-consensual, which has been portrayed in these lines: "Mariam began shivering. His hand crept lower still, lower, his fingernails catching in the cotton of her blouse. "I can't," she croaked, looking at his moonlit profile, his thick shoulders and broad chest, the tufts of gray hair protruding from his open collar" (Hosseini 69). Furthermore, she often tolerated his assaults and brutality when Rasheed did not like his rice and forced Mariam to eat rocks instead: "Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes" (Hosseini 104). Rasheed also started to physically and mentally abuse her after she had a miscarriage. However, Islam encourages husbands to treat their wives with kindness because males are advised to be good and nice to them: "O you who have believed, it is not lawful for you to inherit women by compulsion. And do not make difficulties for them in order to take [back] part of what you gave them unless they commit a clear immorality. And live with them in kindness. For if you dislike them - perhaps you dislike a thing and Allah makes therein much good." (Surat An-Nisa' [4:19])

Besides this, Laila, his second wife, witnessed his brutality as he beat his wives and her children to the core, he inflicted physical as well as psychological wounds on them:

After the fire, Rasheed was home almost every day. He slapped Aziza. He kicked Mariam. He threw things. He found fault with Laila, the way she smelled, the way she dressed, the way she combed her hair, her yellowing teeth. "What's happened to you?" he said. "I married a *pary*, and now I'm saddled with a hag. You're turning into Mariam." (271)

Thus, both Laila and Mariam were the victims of abuse living in the patriarchal society where they were forced under their husband Rasheed's rules. Rasheed not only abused them verbally but emotionally and sexually too.

Afghan men believed that women are their husbands' property, and they are free to do whatever they want with them and treat them in a way that reflects poorly and disregards their role as husbands in Islam; as if Islam supports and encourages inequality, cruel treatment, and dehumanisation. Women were not regarded actual beings and their only duty in life was merely to cook and clean. They were considered inferiors and maids, and the Taliban outlawed female education. Women were not permitted to study, work, or even go anywhere without a man or a relative. The Taliban mandated women to wear a burqa in order to conceal the entire body when they step out of their homes, including during childbirth. These regulations were customary in Afghan society, and they had to be observed and adhered.

Another oppressive social norm that was very prevalent in Afghanistan was about the obsession with male gender child. When their wives gave birth to a boy, men were happy and highly contented, and their wives were cherished and well treated; but, if they gave birth to a girl, they would be oppressed and denied of care, love, and respect by all members of the family. Rasheed displayed this by being outraged and angry with Laila after she gave birth to a girl. Despite the fact that she had no control over the situation, he punished her for giving birth to Aziza, who was not a son as he had hoped. Not only was this Rasheed's desire and aspiration for having a son, but all Afghan men prized boys over girls.

Finally, the role of politics next to religion and society in furthering the oppression of women is apparent in the novel. Politics is the domain in which the liberty of women can be granted in a greater proportion than the other domains like religion and society. Women were treated worse than at any other period or by any other civilization during the Taliban's authority. The Taliban professed to adhere to a pure, conservative Islamic doctrine, yet the tyranny they inflicted on women was not based on Islam. Women in Islam are permitted to earn and control their own money, as well as to participate in public life. After assuming power, the Taliban leadership effectively implemented a system of gender apartheid, effectively putting Afghan women under virtual house arrest. Women were denied all human rights during Taliban control, including the ability to work, visibility, education, a voice, healthcare, and movement.

Thus, Khaled Hosseini brilliantly depicts the interaction of intersections of gender, religion, class, and other categories of difference in the lives of Afghani women that oppress and marginalise them. He recounts and addresses the women's rights problem in Afghanistan, portraying it via the suffering of Nana, Mariam, and Laila, who were taken by the government, treated as animals, barred from participating in society and being a part of it, or side lined in all areas. The Taliban professed to follow a pure, conservative Islamic doctrine, while, the doctrine of Islam maintains that women have full rights to earn for their living and control their money besides freedom to participate in public life. In fact, Taliban's persecution they inflicted against women had no basis in Islam and upon seizing Afghanistan, the Taliban regime instituted a gender apartheid system which effectively which plunged the women of Afghanistan into a state of virtual incarceration. Women were deprived of basic human rights – their visibility, voice, opportunity for education, occupation, healthcare, and autonomy. Thus, by studying via the intersectional lens, it can be stated that all the Afghan women as a subject of oppression and conflict cannot be treated as one unit to be dealt rather, they encounter multiple forms of discrimination and consequently need different perspectives for understanding their plight and arriving towards its resolution.

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