

Book Review

Review Article

A Comparative Study of A Thousand Splendid Suns and Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Life – Exploring Women’s Role Through History

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Introduction

Women are predominant beings of our society. Women’s ethical and societal roles have varied throughout history and within each culture. In some cultures, women were granted equal rights, the same as men and in some, no rights at all. Many people talk about ‘women’ and continue to talk about this subject ever since its inception. But I would like to discuss emphatically, how many times people have spoken about women and then gone on to fight with people or for that matter, with the world to give women their equal place in a kingdom, otherwise dominated by men. Going a step further, I would like to also discuss if, by these efforts, women have benefitted in some way or not benefitted at all. One can see that women’s rights were very finite and they were not authorized to exhibit much of their autonomy. Women were in their subjugated role and they were not able to break free from societal pressure.

The novel *A thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini published in 2007, talks about Kabul, and Afghanistan and the dreadful atmosphere associated with them, the suppression of women and terrorism are the main themes around which the novel revolves. The primary feeling in the book is terror, again, mostly experienced by women living there. The main character of the novel is Mariam who goes through great hardships and persecutions in life and of how she finally overcomes her fear of the man in her life: her husband. The other novel in contrast is *Kamala: The Story of Hindu Life* written by Krupabai Satthianadhan in 1894 which mainly talks about the child marriage of a high caste Hindu girl and her experiences as she crosses the threshold of womanhood and about married life as a young child and dealing with in-laws.

This article endeavours to compare the plight of women in different ages, cultures and regions and then goes a step further and explores their action and reaction to this plight. Both the novels deal with a main character, who is a woman, the story of her life, marriage, and suffering caused by her husband and her in-laws and then both the novels go on to conclude beautifully with the same weak women characters;- the heroines of the novels emerging as independent confident beings, ready to take on life all alone. Analysing women's situation in these times and their suffering, not much has changed or undergone any major differences today. Establishing a self-identity, after a great deal of struggle and facing many hardships in their life and their strong will power and determination, which helps them to hold on to their self-esteem are the common features of both novels.

The situation remains the same but resistance and a will to fight has been seen in the current era. Women have suffered and continue to suffer whether educated or illiterate, high caste or low caste; the difference is just that some decide to fight back while others bear the pain in silence and still others find peace in salvation.

“A women's ultimate duty is to follow her husband's commands!” This is what the genesis story symbolizes, where Eve appears as if drawn from Adam's “supernumerary” bone, in Bossuet's words. Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to him; she is not considered an autonomous being. “Woman, the relative being,” writes Michelet. Thus Monsieur Benda declares in *Le rapport d'Uriel* (Uriel's Report): “A man's body has meaning by itself, disregarding the body of the woman, whereas the woman's body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the male. Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man.” And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called “the sex,” meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the ‘Other’.¹

Discussion

As we see further in these novels, the main protagonist of the novel *Kamala* is a child bride and the same goes with Mariam. These girls were married off at a young age. Both were separated from their fathers and the reason was: marriage, both were very fond of their fathers but in the end are disappointed by them as they gave in to societal pressure and made their precious daughters marry at a very young age.

The place where the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is set contributes a lot to its theme; how characters of the story are shaped and their reaction to the people around them. In the beginning of the novel, Mariam and her mother live in Kolba which was a lonely but happy place for Mariam. Later, Mariam goes to Herat and then to Kabul, in Afghanistan where the situation keeps getting worse and a fully-fledged, war-torn Afghanistan starts eating its own people. The same goes with Kamala, she is at peace in her house surrounded by mountains and a temple to look up to everyday. But after getting married to Ganesh, and shifting to the city full of hustle, there is a huge change in her life. In fact, both the protagonist's attitude, feelings and emotions undergo a drastic change after their marriage and subsequent shift to another city. The geographical location also contributes to feelings and emotions of people. When Kamala was at her own place she seemed to enjoy her life with her father; this fondness is clearly portrayed when Kamala waits for her father: "At last a sigh is heard, and the girl murmurs: "Father is nowhere to be seen. Oh! when will he come home?"²²

And when her father finally comes back: He took her up and put her on his shoulders, and lovingly she slipped her hands round his head and said with a tremulous voice: "Three days, father, three days I have waited for you and you never came, and it grew dark and the idol stared at me, the owls hooted and I was alone."²³

All the above examples show how the main protagonist is close to her father and the author states girl's fondness in following lines: "The little girl Kamala, was an only child and she was devotedly fond of her father."²⁴

We see the same thing happening with Mariam who has a father but who does not stay with him since her father has another wife and she, herself is considered as his illegitimate child in English. (The Author has used a special word for her: *Harami*! This word was used the first time in the novel by her mother.) They used to live on the outskirts of the city and Mariam would wait eagerly for the day when her father would come to meet her. After waiting for such long periods of time, when she finally got to see her father, she is filled with joy:

The anxiety set in on Tuesday nights. Mariam would sleep poorly, fretting that some business entanglement would prevent Jalil from coming on Thursdays that she would have to wait a whole other week to see him.

Then nana would call:

And there he is, your father in all his glory. Mariam would leap to her feet when she spotted him hopping stones across the stream, all smiles

and hearty waves. Mariam knew that nana was watching her, gauging her reaction, and it always took effort to stay in the doorway, to wait, to watch him slowly make his way to her, to not run to him.⁵

May be a happy place leads to happiness in the lives of people; both the girls were happy in their own homes, happy places, but then they were married. Kamala was married off and after Mariam's mother died and she was moved to Jalil's place, all his wives sat and decided that now Mariam should be married off. Mariam's father did nothing about it just like Kamala's father didn't. Everything was set up and Mariam was prepared for a marriage with a shoe maker named Rasheed who owned a shop in Kabul.

They were happy and Rasheed was calm at first but Mariam was not able to adjust herself with an old man who was her husband now. Rasheed, too, supported her at first but later on he started to sleep with her in spite of the age difference. Soon, Mariam was expecting her first child but she suffered a series of miscarriages and after that 6 more cycles of hope raised and then cruelly dashed, each loss, each collapse, each trip to the doctor killing Mariam from the inside. Rasheed was not happy about the incident and he grew more remote and resentful as he had lost a son once and he was not ready for this. Most of the time both were upset. Rasheed had already started misbehaving with Mariam on a regular basis: his scorn, his insults, his ridicule, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat and then the marriage was more of a prison for Mariam.

But after four years of marriage, Mariam could clearly see 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, kicks, slaps and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not.⁶

Rasheed was now not impressed with Mariam in anything. The food she made was not edible according to him; he used to spit it out and on one instance:

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.

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.⁷

He did this thing just to show her how the rice tasted that she made. After he left, Mariam spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars.

The same thing happened with Kamala; she was tortured, though not physically harmed, by her husband and in laws. However, women with Kamala in the novel were used to receiving very harsh treatment at the hands of their in-laws and husbands. And their reaction to these abominations was like they are used to receiving the ill treatment and were already prepared for it, as their mothers had taught them to bear this torture before getting married even: "But we have all to go through it, and you must not be frightened. It is a women's lot," added Rumba, the Shashti's daughter.⁸

The Comparison

Analysing women's plight in both the ages shows that there is no difference in women's condition in any era, irrespective of which place they belonged to, or to which caste they belonged and how educated they were, women always suffered at the hands of males. And marital violence is so common that women are on the verge of getting used to it like a daily dose of medicine that they can't survive without, almost like their functioning won't be possible without this daily dose of perfunctory violence from the male in the relationship.

There is universality of the institutions in society, patriarchy; males occupy the overwhelming numbers of upper hierarchical positions, male attainment; the association of high status roles and male dominance; the association of dominance in male-female encounters and relationships with the males, and the cause for this universality is due to the neuro-endocrinological differences between men and women.⁹

Patriarchy is often defined as a system of male dominance. This definition does not illuminate, but rather obscures, the complex set of factors that function together in the patriarchal system. Patriarchy is a system of male dominance, rooted in the ethos of war which legitimates violence, sanctified by religious symbols, in which men dominate women through the control of female sexuality, with the intent of passing property to their male heirs.

From a feminist perspective, domestic violence is seen as a result of this form of a patriarchal society and the unequal distribution of power that has historically oppressed women. It is primarily about the misuse of power by men, who believe they have the right to control women through emotional and physical violence. In Australia, the National Committee on Violence against Women (1992) described domestic violence as a means to control women which

can result in physical, sexual and/or psychological harm, enforced social isolation, economic deprivation and/or intimidation, and ultimately causes women to live in fear.¹⁰

Feminist Theory and Domestic Violence: The feminist theory of domestic violence emphasizes gender and power inequality in opposite-sex relationships. It focuses on the societal messages that sanction a male's use of violence and aggression throughout life, and the prescribed gender roles that dictate how men and women should behave in their intimate relationships (Pence & Palmar, 1993).¹¹

It sees the root causes of intimate partner violence as the outcome of living in a society that condones aggressive behaviour perpetrated by men, while labelling socializing women to be non-violent.

Proponents of feminist theory acknowledge that women can also be violent in their relationships with men; however, they simply do not see the issue of women abusing men as a serious social problem, and therefore, it does not deserve the same amount of attention or support as violence against women (Kurz, 1997).¹²

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the only equality between a male and female is seen in the character of Khala Rangmaal whose real name was Shanzai. She did not cover herself with a *Burkha* and forbade the female students from doing the same. She said: "Women and men were equal in every way and there were no reasons why women should cover if men didn't".

Along with Mariam, the novel also talks about another female character caught in the war of Kabul, named Laila, daughter of Babi, who always encouraged Laila to study and stressed the importance of education and how it would help her in the near future. He would say: "Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they are probably freer now, under the communists, and have more rights than before."

Why do women have to suffer hardships everywhere? It seems like women are the targets and 'target', not in a positive way but they are targeted in a subjugated role in this society, underestimated for every little thing. The novel even talks about how women must be accompanied by a male when walking out of her house and should wear a *Burkha*. (According to one of the characters in the novel, Rasheed)

Masculinity is deemed as a quality or an attribute associated with being strong and powerful and able to protect someone weak from all harm or something. And femininity is a quality always associated with the essence of

being tender and sensitive and always needing protection from everything and everyone around, according to the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1968). Although they knew themselves as subjects capable of transcending their immediate experiences through reason and will, they treated Woman as their ‘Other’ – mystery, complement, object of desire, creature of body and change. De Beauvoir’s path-breaking book *The Second Sex* defended women’s claims to full personhood or a complete entity on their own and undercut men’s pretensions to fulfil their own ideals. “It is clear that in dreaming of himself as donor, liberator, redeemer, man still desires the subjection of women,” she writes (p. 172). She attacks the myths of masculine superiority and confirms masculine dualities that elevate mind over body by insisting that men, too, are being of bodily and sexual infirmity rather than disembodied minds: “Indeed no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility” (p. xxv).¹³

In a current version of this critique, Rosi Braidotti (2002) alleges that “the price men pay for representing the universal is disembodiment, or loss of gendered specificity into the abstraction of phallic masculinity,” and she suggests that men need “to get real” by recognizing their embodiment (p. 355).¹⁴

Exactly what this means and how both men and women, including those with physical and sensory disabilities, experience their embodiment is a fruitful topic in current feminist and masculinity studies (Hall, 2002). Twentieth century liberal feminism continued the tradition of seeking for women the privileges already enjoyed by men.¹⁵

Betty Friedan (1963) and the National Organization for Women (founded in 1966) believed that changing laws and educating people against erroneous prejudices would remedy gender discrimination, giving women equal opportunities with men to exercise individual choices in life. They sought gender equality through changes in law and childhood socialization. In all these endeavours, their critics alleged, they merely sought women’s inclusion in current, male-dominated institutions, accepting a restrictively narrow model of equality without questioning the masculine norms that valorised abstract reason and law over the bodies and emotions they ruled.¹⁶

Throughout their life women in the novel *Mariam, Kamala and Laila* lived a life of humiliation and disgrace at the hands of their husbands or family. But every hero has his own way of fighting or going against the “system”. Kamala after knowing about her husband’s fling with Sai and after his suffering from cholera and subsequent death, chooses not to marry again, though Ramchander

proposes marriage. She chooses to live a life of salvation and peace and even leaves all her money for widows and children.

But the case with Mariam and Laila was different; they were suffering in their own house as Rasheed used to beat them up and torture them. Laila was reunited with her long lost lover Tariq, whom she had lost after Rasheed misled her by making one person come home and paid him to give the wrong news of Tariq being dead in Pakistan a long time ago. Mariam and Laila both met Tariq in their house but unfortunately, Laila's son told Rasheed about the other man in the house that afternoon. Mariam and Laila were also caught running away from home. Rasheed was then adamant about killing them both and soon the day came when he started beating them badly.

But this time Mariam showed courage and she went to the tool-shed and grabbed a shovel, as Rasheed was on Laila choking her neck, his eyes wild and crazy and Laila was about to give up breathing; Mariam saw she was no longer struggling and Mariam realised that he really meant to kill Laila. And then she thought to herself: "He'd taken so much from me in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too."

Mariam hit Rasheed with the shovel in his temple once and knocked him out, she thought maybe she has knocked some understanding into his head finally but no she hit him again and this was the very first time that she was deciding the course of her own life.

In the time frame of *Kamala* (1894) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) a lot has changed for a woman; Kamala being a woman in 1894 was subtler and used to the suffering at the hands of everyone and in the end, even when she gets to live a happy life with love and wealth, she refuses and becomes a saint and chooses a life with peace and *moksha*.

But between the lives of Kamala and Laila, time has changed; Laila gets another chance to be with Tariq and she grabs the opportunity and chooses to be happy and live a life of respect and love. And Mariam chooses and decides her own way of life by finally liberating herself and Laila from the terror of their husband Rasheed by killing him. She decides to fight back for all the bad things that has happened to her as a woman. Women generally don't choose violent ways of fighting domestic violence and tend to submit to it mutely, on most occasions, but here we see Mariam as an exception. She rises up against the persecution as her own knight in shining armour but with a shovel, and kills her nightmare in two strokes, finally finding the light in an otherwise very dark situation. This, later on changed her life forever, as she handed herself to Taliban and would most probably be hanged or imprisoned for life.

Life was mostly uncertain in Afghanistan and gaining some certainty in one's life was a new thing that Mariam was experiencing for the first time. The land of thousand splendid suns struggles to see the sunrise which will dawn freedom upon everyone. And like Mariam every woman in Afghanistan should have courage to stand against this evil. As Hosseini clearly intends us to know, behind every silent *Burkha* in Afghanistan is an individual with a hidden history.

Women were historically perceived as physically, emotionally and intellectually incapable of committing crimes.¹⁷ Female violence evokes contradictory social meanings and conflicting political and popular responses. On one hand, the depiction of women committing violent crimes seem to provide the most compelling images of crime and deviance, similar to reactions evoked by children committing violence. (This is in stark contrast to how male aggression is treated as common or routine, part and parcel of high spirits or healthy childhood development.) Popular opinion appears to associate a rise in women's crime rates with decay in social moral fiber. At the same time, statistical increases in female violence are applauded as a sign of women coming to power. Indeed, gender parity in criminal offending patterns seems to provide resounding support for feminism's assertion that women are really no different from men in terms of passion, rage, destruction or sadistic pleasure.¹⁸

Adler's 'Equality Theory' touched off a huge debate in feminist criminology. However, what is most notable is that this debate was merely one of many conversations occurring about women's crime and violence. Another popular and controversial theory that emerged to explain women's increasing violence focused on women's oppression and placed oppressive social forces, rather than empowerment or emancipation, as the primary determinant of women's criminal conduct.¹⁹ This theory rejects the proposition that women's aggression is a set of autonomous responses, or fully vocalized desires emancipated from oppressive patriarchal orders. Rather, women's conduct is commanded and determined by the very structures that the equality theory presumed extinct. This theory argues that women's emerging violence should be understood as responding to and coerced by poverty, neglect, sex and race discrimination, and most importantly, physical and sexual abuse. Ann Lloyd argues:

Women's violence comes from a place different from men's. A 'violent' woman is not the female equivalent of a violent man.... Most of the women I've met ended up in Special Hospitals, and they had had typically appalling lives, characterized by rejection, abuse, confusion, drugs, booze and a deep distrust of authority.²⁰

Being violent and committing a murder was always associated with males. But Mariam committed a murder and thus freeing herself from everyday self-destruction, mental anguish, pain, abuse, violence. And unlike Kamala, Mariam fights back as if the place Kabul has taken its control over Mariam and now Mariam is just like the mad, driven, Taliban people who go about killing and murdering people. This more or less seems to indicate that the place for sure has some or the other effect on a person's behaviour and their actions.

Along with being such an interesting character, Mariam as the heroine grows and develops through the novel as alone; she is enough to captivate the readers' attention. Soon the reader finds himself/herself in Mariam's shoes, experiencing all the bloodshed happening in Afghanistan and feeling pity for her when she is meted out abuse at the hands of Rasheed, her husband. Mariam goes through both physical and emotional abuse; so in the end she gives everything back twofold that she received from her husband. Her realisation that he understood only the language of physical abuse made her determined to give him back as good as she had gotten; a sample of the abuse he had been meting out to her until now. Hence her role in the book gives us an excellent example of a well balanced character which takes a full round turn throughout the narration.

Whereas, Kamala is the epitome of calmness from the beginning of the novel and remains the same strong and delightful creature throughout the novel, with all the sufferings as she went through a phase, more of emotional abuse rather than physical and then moving on towards living a peaceful life have resulted in giving up worldly pleasure and her qualities does not develop as a character giving us insight into what is called flat character. But Mariam's act of being harsh in killing Rasheed was also a kind act of saving herself and Laila.

Notes

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