

**Women Plight under the Taliban in Khaled Hosseini's Novel,
*A Thousand Splendid Suns***

Benson Kabui Wang'odu
Laikipia University, Kenya

Abstract

*This paper focuses on the plight of women under the radical Islamic terrorist regime of the Taliban, through a literary journey of Khaled Hosseini's novel **A Thousand Splendid Suns**. The novel is written by an Afghanistan born American writer and details women plight under the Taliban regime. The paper, in particular, brings into perspective the message Hosseini delivers to society through the events in the novel; the struggle and women plight under the Taliban regime. The main objective of this paper is to highlight women plight under the Taliban regime as presented in Khaled Hosseini's **A Thousand Splendid Suns**. The paper is informed by reader response theory and employs qualitative research design that is based on textual content analysis as its methodology. The paper discusses the horrendous experiences that Afghanistan women had to go through under the Taliban regime with their peculiar sharia jurisprudence as presented in Khaled Hosseini's **A Thousand Splendid Suns**. The paper gives useful contribution by bringing to the fore the role literature plays in exposing the plight of those marginalized in society under radical Islamic regimes like the Taliban.*

Keywords: *Burqa* (veil), marginalization, oppression, sharia, Taliban, women plight.

Introduction

Literary writers have continued to play a key role in bringing into perspective the issues affecting society and especially those faced by the marginalized members of the society. Khaled Hosseini has succeeded in highlighting some of the issues that Afghanistan had to deal with during the Taliban's regime, and women plight is one of them. Hosseini, a novelist and physician, was born in Afghanistan on March 4, 1965 and later migrated to America. He is well known for his vivid depiction of the history of Afghanistan and the social disintegration of Afghanistan society most notably in his first novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) which first brought into the fore the destruction of Afghanistan progressive society by the Taliban. Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) was inspired by his observation of women wearing *burgas* (veils) during a 2003 visit to Afghanistan. His third novel, *And the Mountain Echoed* (2014) also focuses on post-Taliban Afghanistan and highlights how Taliban leaders benefited from the chaos and lawlessness in the country and their opium trade. Sturhr (2009) notes that Hosseini's personal knowledge of and experience with Afghanistan during his childhood and from his return visit in 2003 informs much of everything he has written about; that is to say, of something he saw or heard. However, some of the things he saw were so heinous as to defy comprehension that he was unable to write about. This being the case, therefore, I am convinced that the magnitude of the horrendous experiences the people and in particular women had during the Taliban regime were devastating.

Sturhr (2009) observes that Hosseini was interested in writing and storytelling from a young age and that he being an indigenous writer gives his work authenticity. Further, Sturhr (2009) quotes Hosseini in an interview as saying that he does his best to represent a view that is culturally accurate and historically legitimate; and that Hosseini feels comfortable writing about what he knows and acknowledges; that it is quite a burden for a writer to feel a responsibility to represent his or her own culture, the social challenges his or her society is facing and most importantly, educate others about it.

Hosseini touches on the role and plight of women in his three novels but has made it the main theme in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. This can be highly attributed to the fact that Hosseini was raised at a time in Afghanistan when women were free to attend schools and seek professional employment (Sturhr, 2009). The focus of this paper is *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which depicts the radical shift in the social and political climate of Afghanistan. The novel tells the story of two women, Miriam and Laila, and also very importantly tells the story of Afghanistan, a country which had social, cultural and economic diversity and was socially progressive until mid-1980s before experiencing destructive political upheavals in the early 1990s. A reading of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* reveals that Afghan women throughout the period of the Taliban regime suffered greatly. The tale of Miriam and Laila recounts life in Afghanistan from the soviet invasion to the reign of the Taliban and uncovers the social fragmentation through the lives of the two women main characters. Further, the novel apart from narrating the history of Afghanistan and its people, also details how war and violence damages society and more so, the lives of women and children (Coleman, 2012). The novel thus greatly explores women plight under the crippling Taliban rule.

A Thousand Splendid Suns illustrate the upheavals in the history of Afghanistan that have affected the country and its people through Mariam and Laila's respective experiences and the unfortunate events that brought them together. Indeed, war and violence play a large and damaging role in destabilizing a society and Hosseini through the novel shows the harmful effects of these negative elements of instability on a nation ravaged by political aggression and violent pursuit of power where women, especially, face the greatest of challenges and oppression. Nana, Mariam's mother instilled in Mariam at the very first chapter of the novel that 'like a compass needle that points to the north, a man accusing finger always finds a woman, always' (Hosseini, 2007). This statement is proved truthful over and over again throughout the novel.

The story in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* begins around the year 1972 when women in Afghanistan experienced significant rights and freedom which were guaranteed in the country's constitution. Women during this time taught in the universities and pursued careers of their choice and faced no restrictions based on their gender. Miriam who has just been married to Rasheed observes:

But it was the women who drew Miriam's eyes the most...these women were all swinging handbags and rustling skirts. Miriam even spotted one smoking behind the wheels of a car. Their nails were long polished pink or orange, their lips red as tulips; they walked in high heels.... She imagined all had university degrees that they worked in office building behind desks of their own... (Hosseini, 2007: 68).

However, this progressive and peaceful state of affairs did not last long as it was undermined during the Soviet occupation which started after the 1978 Soviet coup and the subsequent horrors of the *mujahedeen* government of the Islamic state of Afghanistan who ordered that several restrictions on women be imposed. The restrictions to mention but a few included: that women were neither to be perfumed nor wear clothes similar to those of their male counterparts; that they would be no wearing of make-ups and no western hairstyle. Women were supposed to be completely covered and were to be educated only at home by their fathers, brothers or other relatives and only learn the basics of Islam. Ellis (2000) observes that during this period, women were positioned into the role of the chaste women whose mobility and sexuality were strictly controlled. Nevertheless, even those who remained pure were often victims of rape and other forms of violence at the hands of the *mujahedeen*. Ellis

further observes that there existed no security for women as their homes were invaded where they would be captured and their bodies used as rewards for victorious soldiers and even those in custody were raped and sexually assaulted.

With the state of affairs in Afghanistan being so, social sanity had to be restored and eventually in 1996, the Taliban who felt outraged at the behaviour of the *mujahedeen* decided to take action and put an end to what they saw as corrupt and immoral practices that Islam could not tolerate. Therefore, drawing on Islamic religious principles as their justification for their intervention, the Taliban took control of the country. Farhoumand (2007) observes that it is during this period of the coup that the violation of women rights in Afghanistan started. Farhoumand (2007) further observes that women rights went from bad to worse when the Taliban seized control of the nation in 1996 and immediately imposed their peculiar *Sharia* rules which were abusive and oppressive to women.

The Taliban Ascension to Power in Afghanistan

A reading of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* under the lens of reader response theory and employing textual analysis as a methodology reveals that the *Mujahedeen* had made living in Afghanistan unbearable and their defeat was a welcome relief by many if not all in Afghanistan. For this reason, Hosseini in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* vividly details through the observation of his character Miriam, the events of the morning of September 27th 1996 when the Taliban seized power. ‘Miriam awoke on the morning of September 27 to the sound of shouting and whistling, firecrackers and music. She ran to the living room found Laila already at the window... Laila turned and smiled “the Taliban are here” she said’ (Hosseini, 2007: 244). This illustration clearly indicates that women were happy and optimistic with the coming of the Taliban whom they thought would restore order, and that women would finally regain the freedom they used to joyfully experience.

Hosseini details the rise of the Taliban through Rasheed who is explaining to his two wives Miriam and Laila who the Taliban were and how they came into being:

...they were a guerrilla force...made up of young Pashtuns men whose families had fled to Pakistan during the war against the soviet. Most of them had been raised, some even born in refugee camps along the Pakistan border and in Pakistan madrasas where they were schooled in *sharia* by Mullah. Their leader was a mysterious, illiterate, one eyed recluse named Mullah Omar who Rasheed said with some amusement, called himself, *Ameer-ul-mumineen*, leader of the faithful (Hosseini, 2007: 244).

Due to the unpleasant experience under the pro soviet Mujahedeen regime, the people of Afghanistan including women were thus very optimistic with the coming to power of the Taliban regime and welcomed its intervention. Rasheed comments, ‘...At least the Taliban are pure and incorruptible, at least they are decent Muslim boys... when they come they will clean up this place, they’ll bring peace and order...’ (Hosseini, 2007: 245). Be that as it may, as soon as the Taliban take over control, they immediately embark on imposing strict *sharia* rules that would greatly disadvantage women. Hosseini details the event where a Talib goes round and announces the following:

Attention women, you will stay inside your homes at all times, it is not proper for women to wonder aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a *mahran*, a male relative. If you are caught alone in the street, you will be beaten and sent home. You will not under any circumstances show your face, you will cover with *burga* 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 schools, 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 (Hosseini, 2007: 249).

These peculiar harsh edicts of the *Sharia* as imposed by the Taliban, subjected women to a restraining environment and their participation in public life was greatly threatened. The *Sharia* rules would also herald many injustices and problems for women in Afghanistan as they were gender discriminating and biased towards women. Hosseini brings out the devastating effects the harsh *Sharia* edicts had on women through the lives of Miriam and Laila.

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that as the Taliban were re-establishing a state of lawfulness in Afghanistan, they did so by implementing their unique version of *sharia*, one shared by nobody else before but which had a vision of a state run by Islamic religious officials; that is to say, they wanted to establish a caliphate. That kind of arrangement disadvantaged women greatly due to its biasness on women. Ellis (2000) observes that the Taliban started as a small group in Kandahar which was made up of young Pashtuns. The word 'Taliban' means students of Islamic religious studies. They were educated in madras, religious schools in Pakistan. Ellis further observes that their studies were limited to learning the *Qur'an* and it was notable that they had limited exposure to girls and women as they were growing up. Even further, Ellis notes 'they were raised and taught by men who had total disregard for women' (Ellis, 2000). It is thus safe to say that perhaps the Taliban horrendous treatment of women and their imposition of the harsh *Sharia* that was restrictive towards women could be attributed to the young Taliban upbringing.

Plight of Women under the Taliban

As a result of the implementation of the harsh *sharia* laws, the situation of women became worse. Those that had been once teachers, nurses and other professionals could no longer engage in their practices. Further, it is also notable that women were denied proper healthcare. Hosseini points this out when he narrates how Laila and Miriam are referred to a hospital with no basic facilities after visiting a hospital that was previously a women's hospital. 'This hospital no longer treats women... but this is a woman's hospital... "Not anymore" the Talib said' (Hosseini, 2007: 250). They are then referred to a hospital where basic facilities like water, oxygen and medication are not available. 'What are we supposed to do? "Go to Rabia Balkhi" the guard said. A young woman pushed forward, said she had already been there. They had no clean water, she said, no oxygen, no medication, no electricity. "There is nothing there" that is where you go, the guard said' (Hosseini, 2007: 255). This dialogue reveals how the Taliban looked down on women to the extent of denying them basic facilities in the hospitals they assigned to women after taking a well-equipped women hospital and turning it into men only hospital.

Hosseini goes further to narrate the hardships women went through in the only hospital they were assigned to seek treatment in Kabul. From reading of the novel, one learns that the hospital had few doctors, was dirty and lacked basic facilities. This is seen as Laila details the ordeal she went through when she goes to delivers her second child. The gravity of the situation is seen when the doctor having been accused by the women of not doing enough to save the situation defends herself. 'You think I want it this way?' she said, 'what do you

want me to do? They won't give me what I need; I have no x-ray either, no suction, no oxygen, not even simple antibiotics. When NGOs offer money, the Taliban turn them away or they funnel the money to the places that cater for men' (Hosseini, 2007: 259). From this conversation, the woman doctor is heard venting her frustrations as she is unable to perform her duties effectively due to lack of the basic provisions in the hospital. However, it is notable that it is the Taliban who were frustrating women doctors and sabotaging women hospitals operations. Even further, working conditions are torturing since they are made to perform their duties with their heads covered with a *burga*; 'They want us to operate in *burga*, the doctor explained motioning with her head to the nurse at the door. She keeps watch' (Hosseini, 2007: 259).

Under the Taliban regime, we find that women's rights were constantly being eroded; 'There was always something, something else that they could take away' (Hosseini, 2007: 260). Hosseini's presentation through characters' dialogue elaborately details the conditions women and their women doctors were subjected to in the hospitals set aside for women. Using reader response theory tenets where the reader is integral to the text, one critically sees through the narrative, the situation women were in under the Taliban regime.

Habib (2005) observes that when employing reader response theory, some elements of the text are indeterminate and their meaning must be worked out by the reader. Therefore, it is correct to conclude that denying women the ability to cater for their children and subsequently leaving them with no choice but to abandon them is a painful experience to any woman. A textual analysis reveals that during the Taliban regime, women were unable to feed their children and in most cases, they were forced to take them to an orphanage and instruct them to say that they were orphans. Laila thus takes Aziza her daughter to the orphanage where they had food and thus she was sure her child would be fed. This was equivalent to abandoning one's own child; an act that was solely attributed to the Taliban incapacitation of women by denying them free movement and restricting them not to work and provide for their children. Laila is saddened by her action but she is comforted by the orphanage director; thus, 'It is not your fault... it's those savages those *wahshis*, who are to blame... we get mothers like you all the time - mothers who come here who can't feed their children because the Taliban won't let them go out and make a living...' (Hosseini, 2007: 285). For a mother to abandon her own child in an orphanage and make the child pretend to be an orphan while she, the mother is still alive was torturous to both women and children. Women also experienced difficulty in visiting their children in the orphanage since they had to be accompanied by men. Skaine (2002) observes that the imposition of such severe restrictions on women caused them many health problems.

Women's fear of being beaten in the streets deterred them from seeking health care. Further, Skaine (2002) notes that many women could not receive humanitarian assistance because the Taliban decreed that women could not pick up food or aid; a male relative had to pick up and deliver the aid to women. In the case of widows, this restriction was even worse because they did not have male chaperons to pick up the aid. Skaine however observes that reactions to the Taliban rule were not the same and largely depended on where people lived. Perhaps the people were desperately longing for stability and peace after many years of conflict and thus any price was worth paying. Nevertheless, as Johnson (1998) notes, city population like those in Kabul, and in particular women, found the Taliban rule abhorrent.

Iser (2001) contends that a literary text can only produce a response when it is read. A reading and conceptualization of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* reveals the difficult ordeal women had to go through when they needed to move around. At first Laila is accompanied by her husband Rasheed when she visits her daughter Aziza who makes it even more difficult for Laila for he constantly complains that he is not young anymore and restricts the time Laila would stay in the orphanage, '...he never spared them more than fifteen minutes, "a minute

late,” he said “and I start walking, I mean it’. (Hosseini, 2007: 284. Laila finally risks visiting her daughter in the orphanage unaccompanied by Rasheed who warns her to do as she wishes; ‘Do as you wish but you won’t get past the Taliban, don’t say I didn’t warn you’ (Hosseini, 2007: 285).

Nonetheless, Laila finds ways to see Aziza but Hosseini informs us that half the time she never made it to the orphanage and highlights the plight women had to go through under the Taliban.

Crossing the streets she was spotted by the Taliban and riddled with questions, what is your name? Where are you going? Why are you alone? Where is your Mahram (husband)? - Before she was sent home. If she was lucky, she was given a tongue lashing or a single kick to the rear or a shove in the back. Other times she met with assortment of wooden clubs, fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps and often fists... one day a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna when he was done, he gave her a final whack at 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, 2007: 285).

Under the Taliban regime, girls were denied right to education. We learn from the information Laila gets from Aziza in the orphanage after a successful visit that the Taliban do not allow girls to learn. ‘Aziza said Kaka Zaman made it a point to teach them something every day, reading and writing most days, sometimes geography, a bit of history or science, something about plants, animals but we have to pull the curtains so that the Taliban don’t see us...kaka Zaman had knitting needles and balls of yarn ready, in case of a Taliban inspection we put the books away and pretend to knit’ (Hosseini, 2007: 286).

Indeed, women greatly suffered under the Taliban, those that were earlier liberal and progressive had been reduced to a shadow of their former self. Laila sees a woman she knew earlier and we learn in shock what these women had been reduced to by the Taliban. Laila spots her former teacher and comments:

One day during the visit with Aziza, Laila saw a middle aged woman, her *burga* pushed back... Laila recognized the sharp face, the heavy eyebrows if not the sunken mouth and gray hair. She remembered the shawls, the black skirts, the curt voice, how she used to wear her jet black hair tied in a bun so that you could see the dark bristles on the back of her neck. Laila remembered this woman once forbidding the female students from covering, saying women and men were equal, that there was no reason women should cover if men didn’t (Hosseini, 2007: 287).

Under the Taliban version of the *Sharia* jurisprudence, women had no right of being heard. When Miriam kills Rasheed while defending Laila and is finally apprehended, the details of her imprisonment and execution show the horrific situation women went through when they broke the *sharia* laws. First, women prisons had no privacy as Hosseini reveals, ‘The windows had no glass, there were no curtains either, which meant the Taliban guards who roamed the country yard had an eyeful of the interior of the cells, some of the women complained that the guards smoked outside the window and leered on with their inflamed eyes and wolfish smiles, that they muttered indecent jokes to each other about them’ (Hosseini, 2007: 321).

Secondly, in the Taliban *sharia* jurisprudence, women had no avenue to be heard. Hosseini tells the story of a woman in prison who was jailed for five years after she tried to elope with a young man, Gardez, who she had fallen in love with, and was the son of a local

mullah. When they were caught, the young man was flogged before he repented and said that the girl, Naghma, had seduced him with her feminine charms. The young man was freed while the girl was sentenced to five years and her father swore to kill her when she would be released from prison. True to the words of Nana, Miriam's mother, that 'like a compass needle that points north, a man accusing finger always finds a woman' (Hosseini, 2007: 323).

Further, one learns through the trial of Miriam, that she had no legal counsel; there was no public hearing, no cross-examination of evidence and no avenue for appeal. The Taliban regarded women as inferior, a young Taliban who is part of the jury asserts during the trial; 'God has made us differently from you women and as 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' (Hosseini, 2007: 324). Miriam is then sentenced to death, however, the Taliban judge believes she is not so wicked, 'something tells me you are not a wicked woman...'. This is to say, if the *sharia* had room for women to be given a fair hearing, perhaps she would have had a fair sentence.

Significantly, Hosseini focuses on how the *burga* (veil) is both a symbol of repressive nature of patriarchy and the effects of submission (Marsden, 1998). Neither Miriam nor Laila had to wear the *burga* before the coming to power of the Taliban. Skaine (2002) notes that this was a representation of loss of identity and freedom women experienced before the Taliban seized control and imposed their version of *sharia* laws which were extremely oppressive to women. Women are literary suffocated by society through the *burga*. They are silenced, secluded and made submissive to their male counterparts.

Hosseini also makes an interesting observation; that while the *burga* is a symbol of oppression, it also provided women with a sense of privacy and freedom. When women appear in public with *burga*, they are able to look around without smiling or showing expression that they themselves do not feel. The *burga* thus, shields them from the harshness of reality; it protects them from stares of strangers and therefore, provides a sense of freedom for them to explore society without the knowledge of others. Hosseini details the experience Miriam has wearing the *burga*, '...And the *burga*, she learned to her surprise was also comforting, it was like one way window. Inside it, she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past (Hosseini, 2007: 66). Miriam also remembers what her mother, Nana, had told her; that the only thing she needed to learn was to 'endure' and correctly so, women of Afghanistan had to do. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* thus details the unforgiving period women had to endure during the Taliban reign in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussions, it is evident as presented in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* that women suffered a great magnitude of injustices during the Taliban regime. Their situation became worse after the Taliban imposition of their peculiar *sharia* law which treated women as inferior being compared to men. Skaine (2002) notes that during the reign of the Taliban, women's rights were completely eroded on the pretence of propagating virtues and prevention of vices. The Taliban reign in Afghanistan not only generated and increased abuse and denial of basic rights to women; it also threatened women's very existence in Afghanistan. Hosseini hopes that readers will develop a sense of empathy for Afghans and especially Afghan women on whom the effects of war and extremism have been most devastating. Hosseini thus contends that it is the role of fiction to take on these difficult subjects and open them up for debate (Sturhr, 2009). An analysis of Hosseini's text bring into perspective the dehumanization of women by denying them education, the right to work, the right to move freely, access adequate and quality health care and prevent them from physical abuse.

References

- Coleman K. (2012) *A thousand splendid suns, book analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Ellis, D. (2000) *Women of the Afghan war*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.
- Farhoumand, S. C. (2007) Unfulfilled promises: Women and peace in post-Taliban Afghanistan. *International Journal*, Vol. 62 (3) 643-663.
- Habib, M. A. R. (2005) *Modern literary criticism and history*. USA: Blackwell publishing.
- Hosseini, K. (2014) *And the mountains echoed*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hosseini, K. (2007) *A thousand splendid suns*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hosseini, K. (2003) *The kite runner*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Iser, W. (2001) *The range of interpretation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Johnson, C. (1998) *Afghanistan, a land of shadow*. UK: Oxford.
- Marsden, P. (1998) *The Taliban: War, religion and the new order in Afghanistan*. New York: Zed Books.
- Skaine, R. (2008) *Women of Afghanistan in the post-Taliban era*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.
- Skaine, R. (2002) *The women of Afghanistan under the Taliban*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.
- Sturhr, R. (2009) *Reading Khaled Hosseini*. London: Bloomsbury.