Endurance, Endurance and Emancipation: Women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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A Thousand Splendid Suns is set against the backdrop of a conflict-ridden Afghanistan where women like Mariam and Laila are struggling to survive. The novel's plot unfolds alongside Afghanistan's resistance to Soviet occupation, the excesses of the Mujahideen, and the fanaticism of the Taliban. The political tension percolates down to every family and individual as Afghanistan battles hostile forces within and without. Mariam is reminded of her being a harami, a bastard child, almost every waking moment of her life and is told by her mother to endure all things in life. Laila grows up in a liberal family but she suffers the same fate as Mariam at the hands of her abusive husband. Both Mariam and Laila are forced to marry early, to the same man, Rasheed. At the time of marriage, Mariam is thirty years Rasheed's junior and Laila, his second wife, is forty six years his junior. Conflict comes to take centre stage in their lives and these "battered women"[i] have no peace either inside or outside the home. This paper seeks to address the representation of women in a conflict-ridden Afghanistan where women like Mariam are taught to endure early in life and women like Laila are made to endure. It seeks to understand the vicissitudes of the conflict that assaults them at every level- emotional, psychological, physical, political, both in the public and private spheres. It seeks to understand the situation of these women, their response and resistance to conflict, their endurance and their attempt at emancipation from conflict.

Mariam is the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy Jalil Khan who does not acknowledge her as his daughter openly. He comes to the *kolba*[ii] he had built for them with gifts and stories and Mariam is too naïve to understand that she is not to fall for them. She was, according to her mother, only a harami, a bastard child :

> Later, when she was older, Mariam did understand. It was the way Nana uttered the word-not so much saying it as spitting it at her-that made Mariam feel the full sting of it. She understood then what Nana meant,

that a harami was an unwanted thing; that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance (4).

Her mother tells Mariam that he had built them their kolba, a "rathole" (9), by way of penance for his sins. He had not had the *dil*, the heart, to own up to his misdeed but had blamed her instead, claiming she had forced herself on him. She tells Mariam she is to accept the bitter fact of life that a woman would always be blamed no matter what :

Nana said, "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" (7).

When Mariam wants to go to school, Nana flatly refuses and says all she need to learn is:"Only one skill. And it's this: *tahamul*. Endure" (17).

When Mariam goes to Heart to visit Jalil Khan against Nana's pleas, she realizes she is indeed unwanted. She is made to spend the night outside his house and is told her father is out. Next morning, she catches a glimpse of Jalil Khan and is utterly dismayed. She goes back to her mother but it is already too late:

A gust of wind blew and parted the drooping branches of the weeping willow like a curtain, and Mariam caught a glimpse of what was beneath the tree: the straight-backed chair, overturned. The rope dropping from a high branch. Nana dangling at the end of it (34).

Mariam is married off to Rasheed who treats her well initially. One day he comes home and lectures her on morality and gives her a *burqa* (veil) saying: "Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand?"(63).

Leila Ahmed discusses the veil in her essay "The Discourse of the Veil" as a ploy used by the colonial project to portray Islam as innately oppressive to women :

Veiling-to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies- became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies (322).

According to Ahmed, the veil is attacked as a weakness of Islamic societies and given a negative connotation by the West. In Mariam's case, she finds comfort in the anonymity the veil provides her and she is relieved to know nobody would question or look at her with an intrusive curiosity. Though Rasheed's purpose in making his wives veil themselves is clearly to shield them from the public gaze and to demarcate them as his possessions, the veil ironically provides comfort in concealment. The veil later becomes one more instrument of the Taliban

to control women- it does more harm than good, especially in the case of the lady doctor who has to operate on her patients with her veil on.

John Berger in his book Ways of *Seeing*, writes thus of the male gaze:

> Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relations of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight (47).

Berger's book on the ways of seeing and the influencing factors like class-based power and gender inequality suggests that the gaze is not simply an innocent visual exercise. Berger suggests that women start to look at themselves with men's eyes, assuming that the male estimation of them is superior to their estimation of themselves. There is an unequal power relationship between men and women. The male gaze divorces the woman from her own self, because she internalizes the male gaze. The woman turns herself into an object because the male gaze is so powerful that it displaces her own gaze with that of the man.

Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" discusses the various ways in which women are subjected to the male gaze and used for visual pleasure in cinematic representations:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (4).

Mulvey refers to Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) where he 'associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze' (3) and suggests how scopophilia is typical of cinema. This kind of scopophilia is also typical of Rasheed's appetite for his magazines with nude women.

Mariam is caught in a loveless marriage where she has to bear with Rasheed and his violent sexual appetite. She is stunned to find his pornographic magazines and tries to figure out why someone who wanted to cover up his women could look at pictures of other women like that:

> Slowly, an explanation presented itself. He was a man, after all, living alone for years before she had moved in. His needs differed from hers. For her, all these months later, their coupling was still an exercise in tolerating pain. His appetite, on the other hand, was fierce, sometimes bordering on the violent. The way he pinned her down,

his hard squeezes at her breasts, how furiously his hips worked. He was a man. All those years without a woman. Could she fault him for being the way God had created him? (75).

In her book *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze*, E. Ann Kaplan contends that the male gaze and the imperial gaze within western patriarchal cultures could not be separated. She uses the word gaze to mean a 'one-way subjective vision' (xvi) and says that the gaze, for her, connotes an 'active subject versus a passive object' (xviii). Mariam is the passive subject of Rasheed's gaze who tries to figure out things from his point of view. She internalizes the male gaze and looks on herself as unworthy of a voice. Mariam makes excuses for Rasheed because she feels her being a harami disqualifies her from pronouncing any judgements. As Mariam hears accounts of men belonging to Daoud Khan's regime[iii] being tortured, eyes gouged out, and genitals electrocuted in the Pol-e-Charkhi Prison, she herself is not exempt from abuse inside her home. She is forced to chew pebbles when Rasheed finds the rice is undercooked :

"CHEW!" he bellowed. A gust of his smoky breath slammed against her face.
Mariam chewed. Something in the back of her mouth cracked.
"Good," Rasheed said. His cheeks were quivering. "Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing else."
Then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars (94).

It is interesting how violence outside the home coincides with the increasing intensity of violence inside the home. Later, when the Taliban assume power, Rasheed actually feels happy about their methods! He goes to the Ghazi stadium with a bottle of Pepsi to watch the public executions and describes to Laila the severing of hands, beatings and lashings he sees there with a sense of exhileration. He feels a peculiar kinship with the Taliban and thinks of the Taliban as an erratic cousin: " Rasheed 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" (251).

Michel Focault's ideas on the Panopticon in his *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* is an instance of an all-seeing stance effectively discusses the power of the gaze. Borrowing Jeremy Bentham's term 'Panopticon', one Bentham used to describe a prison where all the prisoners would be kept in individual cells encircling a tower at the centre which would have visual access to all these cells, Focault states how the Panopticon would be an effective tool in discipline and punishment because the prisoners would know that they were under continuous surveillance. The knowledge that they are being watched, makes the disciplinary measure even more effective because they internalize the surveillance system making it part of themselves and there is no escape from the system simply because there is no escape from the self:

> Bentham's Panopticon is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible (200).

Continuous surveillance and consciousness of being surveyed thus becomes a tool that imparts power to the surveillance system, the purpose of which is:

> to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers (201).

The Taliban come to take on the role of the Panopticon as they scrutinize all citizens. The fear and consciousness of being watched all the time makes life terrible for Mariam and Laila. But for Rasheed, he seems to be drawing inspiration from the Talibs whose oppressive measures outside the home seem to validate his own, inside his home. Mariam and Laila however, refuse to internalize the ways of the Talibs and they ultimately find a way of resisting them.

Laila's childhood is a very healthy one, until of course, she turns fourteen and her family is bombed. Her father is an ardent supporter of womens' education. Laila's mother is, however, given to bouts of depression after both her sons are killed while fighthing the jihad.[iv] Her mother doesn't seem to be thankful for the one surviving daughter. Laila's friend Giti dies terribly and the grief she feels is even more intense that what she had felt for her brothers:

> One day that same month of June, Giti was walking home from school with two classmates. Only three blocks from Giti's house, a stray rocket struck the girls. Later that terrible day, Laila learned that Nila, Giti's mother, had run up and down the street where Giti was killed, collecting

pieces of her daughter's flesh in an apron, screeching hysterically. Giti's decomposing right foot, still in its nylon sock and purple sneaker, would be found on a rooftop two weeks later (160-61).

It is only when a bullet misses Laila by inches that Mammy comes to her senses and the family decides to leave but it still is too late. While they are packing, the family gets bombed:

> Then Laila struck the wall. Crashed to the ground. On her face and arms, a shower of dirt and pebbles and glass. The last thing she was aware of was seeing something thud to the ground nearby. A bloody chunk of something. On it, the tip of a red bridge poking through thick fog (174).

The bloody chunk Laila sees before passing out is her father's dismembered torso. Laila's life falls into complete disarray as she is orphaned and taken in by Rasheed. Mariam and Rasheed tend to her as she recovers slowly, but the trauma she suffers from would take a lot of time to heal :

> The girl was extraordinarily lucky, Mariam thought, to escape with relatively minor injuries, considering the rocket had turned her house into smoking rubble. And so, slowly, the girl got better. She began to eat more, began to brush her own hair. She took baths on her own. She began taking her meals downstairs, with Mariam and Rasheed. But then some memory would rise, unbidden, and there would be stony silences or spells of churlishness. Withdrawals and collapses. Wan looks. Nightmares and sudden attacks of grief. Retching. And sometimes regrets (181).

Trauma comes to characterize Mariam and Laila's lives which becomes "a drama of survival"[v] . In her introduction to *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* Cathy Caruth (1995) contends that trauma goes beyond pathology. Trauma, to quote Caruth :

> "seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4).

The trauma represented in the novel seems to speak with great intensity to the readers as they try to grasp the reality of these women living out their lives under extremely stressful situations. The text itself becomes a site of resistance as it tells this story of trauma, of hope and of survival. It injects hope and courage into women all around the globe fighting trauma and negotiating conflict.

Rasheed announces his intention to marry Laila making a show about guarding their reputations. Mariam pleads with him to save her this disgrace but Rasheed's mind is made up. As Mariam and Laila become friends over time, they try to run away but are caught. After the policemen escort them home Rasheed beats both of them mercilessly:

> Laila didn't see the punch coming. One moment she was talking and the next she was on all fours, wide-eyed and red-faced, trying to draw a

> breath. It was as if a car had hit her at full speed, in the tender place between the lower tip of the breastbone and the belly button. She realized she had dropped Aziza, that Aziza was screaming. She tried to breathe again and could only make a husky, choking sound. Dribble hung from her mouth (239).

Mariam is so accustomed to Rasheed's beatings, she doesn't even put up a fight as he beats her :

> Downstairs, the beating began. To Laila, the sounds she heard were those of a methodical, familiar proceeding. There was no cursing, no screaming, no pleading, no surprised yelps, only the systematic business of beating and being beaten, the thump, thump of something solid repeatedly striking flesh, something, someone, hitting a wall with a thud, cloth ripping. Now and then, Laila heard running footsteps, a wordless chase, furniture turning over, glass shattering, then the thumping once more (240).

Matters become worse when the Taliban arrive and proclaim their dictates. Women are not allowed to walk alone on the streets, unescorted by a man. They are not to speak unless spoken to, they are to cover themselves with the burqa, cosmetics, jewellery, adornment of any sort is forbidden. They are not to laugh in public or make eye contact with men. They are not to go to school or to work.

With the capture of Kabul in September 1996, the Taliban enjoyed unchallenged control of seventy percent of Afghanistan.[vi] The Taliban delimits women' s agency and autonomy but there is no mechanism of resistance. Hospitals are separated to cater to men and women exclusively. The womens' hospital is ill-equipped and Laila has to undergo a caesarean section without anesthesia. The female doctor is to operate in burqa! The Department for the Propagation of Virtue and Suppression of Vice deployed a religious police force to enforce the law with the help of severe corporal punishment.[vii]

The Taliban blast the Buddhas of Bumiyan and Laila is stunned into silence as she recalls the trip to Bumiyan with her father and Tariq :

> A month before that, Laila had learned that the Taliban had planted TNT in the crevices of the giant Buddhas in Bamiyan and blown them apart, calling them objects of idolatry and sin. There was an outcry around the world, from the U.S. to China. Governments, historians, and archaeologists from all over the globe had written letters, pleaded with the Taliban not to demolish the two greatest historical artifacts in Afghanistan. But the Taliban had gone ahead and detonated their explosives inside the two-thousand-year-old Buddhas. They had chanted Allah-u-akbar with each

> blast, cheered each time the statues lost an arm or a leg in a crumbling cloud of dust. Laila remembered standing atop the bigger of the two Buddhas with Babi and Tariq, back in 1987, a breeze blowing in their sunlit faces, watching a hawk gliding in circles over the sprawling valley below. But when she heard the news of the statues' demise, Laila was numb to it. It hardly seemed to matter. How could she care about statues when her own life was crumbling dust? (278-279).

The violence outside her home is akin to the violence inside her home. There is simply no escape. Laila hardly has the energy to commiserate with the rest of the world, battered as she is. She cannot make sense of the Taliban's ways but Rasheed tells her they are a welcome change after the Mujahideen[viii] who killed fifty thousand people in Kabul alone. The economic crisis that settles in forces Laila to take her daughter Aziza to the orphanage. Rasheed would buy toys for his son Zalmai but he would not allow for a girl child to live in the house. He even refuses to accompany Laila to the orphanage because of which she gets beaten by the Talibs every time she tries to venture out alone. Soon she starts to wear extra layers of clothing for padding against the beatings. She has to endure humiliation and beating at the hands of the Talibs just to see Aziza :

> It hurt to talk. Her jaw was still sore, her back and neck ached. Her lip was swollen, and her tongue kept poking the empty pocket of the lower incisor Rasheed had knocked loose two days before. Before Mammy and Babi had died and her life turned upside down, Laila never would have believed that a human body could withstand this much beating, this viciously, this regularly, and keep functioning (287).

Both Laila and Mariam are battered and scarred. It is only after years of endurance Mariam finds the courage to strike Rasheed when he starts to throttle Laila upon hearing that Tariq, Laila's childhood friend and love, had come back for her. Mariam cannot allow Rasheed to kill Laila and she decides to hit him, for the first time in her entire life:

> And so Mariam raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could, arching it so it touched the small of her back. She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life.
>
> And, with that, Mariam brought down the shovel. This time, she gave it everything she had (311).

Clifton P. Flynn's article "Relationship Violence by Women: Issues and Implications" deals with the analysis of violence of women on their intimate partners, and tries to map and understand the motives behind this kind of violence. Flynn agrees that acts of violence by women are a either a case of self-defense or a reaction to the violence of men. Mariam and

Laila take recourse to violence as a defense mechanism. They are thus victims provoked to get violent while Rasheed is the perpetrator of violence.

After the deed is done, an unusual calm descends on Mariam and she decides to stay back and let Laila, Tariq and the children leave. Despite Laila's pleas asking Mariam to come along with them, Mariam is determined to stay:

> "They chop off hands for stealing bread," Mariam said "What do you think they'll do when they find a dead husband and two missing wives?"
> "No one will know," Laila breathed. "No one will find us." "They will. Sooner or later. They're bloodhounds." Mariam's voice was low, cautioning; it made Laila's promises sound fantastical, trumped-up, foolish.
> "Mariam, please-" (318-319).

During her trial, the Talib who questions her cannot understand the nature of Mariam's crime:

> "I wonder," the young Talib said. "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" (324).

There is a great sense of misogyny in the Talib's statement but Mariam is above all that. She knows she has done her bit; she has freed Laila and her family, and also, her own soul:

> Mariam wished for so much in those final moments. Yet as she closed her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the harami child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Mariam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings (320).

Mariam dies with the knowledge that she had found herself, and her true worth, at long last. In Pakistan, as Laila and Tariq try to build a new life together, they are never free from the past. Laila remembers clearly the killings, the limbs of bombed children, neighbourhoods razed, her father's torso. She watches the Twin Towers fall on BBC and the violence and trauma becomes too much for her as she shouts at Tariq:

> "You wouldn't know," Laila says. She is aware that her voice is rising, that they are having their first fight as husband and wife. "You left when the Mujahideen began fighting, remember? I'm the one who stayed behind.

> Me. I know war. I lost my parents to war. My parents, Tariq. And now to hear you say that war is not so bad?" (342).

Despite the ravaged landscape of her home, Laila wants to go back and somehow make things right. Her father's dream of an Afghanistan where heritage and history would be respected and her mother's attachment to her nation inspire her to go back. But most of all, it is Mariam's memory that compels her to go back home:

> And then, most compellingly for Laila, there is Mariam. Did Mariam die for this? Laila asks herself. Did she sacrifice herself so she, Laila, could be a maid in a foreign land? Maybe it wouldn't matter to Mariam what Laila did as long as she and the children were safe and happy. But it matters to Laila. Suddenly, it matters very much.
>
> "I want to go back," she says (345).

Laila makes the redemptive return back home and starts to teach in the orphanage. She finds peace as she helps in the restoration and rehabilitation of her people. She is expecting a baby soon and she has already named her after Mariam if it is a girl. She comes to terms her losses and struggles, but she also learns to count her blessings in trying times. She is grateful for Mariam, like Mariam had been for her. Though the conflict these women face literally break their bodies, it does not break their spirit. Both Laila and Mariam endure and endure together, and together they emancipate themselves and their loved ones from the conflict that threatens to silence them forever.

Notes

i. The 'battered women's' movement of the 1970s grew out of the second-wave feminist movement. The UN's Decade for Women (1975-85) played a significant part in giving the movement an international platform by organizing conferences that dealt with violence against women. Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993) describes violence against women as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life'.

ii. Kolba: a small shack or hovel, in which Mariam and her mother live.

iii. Mohammad Daud Khan, (1909-1978), Afghan politician who overthrew the monarchy of Mohammad Zahir Shah in 1973 to establish Afghanistan as a republic. He served as the country's president from 1973 to 1978. He came to power through a coup he had staged. He was assassinated in a coup staged by People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in April, 1978.

iv. Jihad : Laila's brothers Ahmad and Noor had gone to join the Mujahideens in the Jihad or the holy war and fight Soviets in 1980. They die fighting and are considered as martyrs by Laila's mother.

v. In her article "Judith Herman and Contemporary Trauma Theory", Susan Rubin Suleiman calls trauma primarily a "drama of survival", rather than a past event. p. 280.

vi. See Shaista Wahab and Barry Youngerman, *A Brief History of Aghanistan*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007. p. 212.

vii. Ibid,. p. 217.

viii. Mujahideen: Islamist guerrilla fighters known as mujahideen (from Arabic muj?hid?n, "those engaged in jihad") battled the communist government of Afghanistan and the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the Mujahideen took over Kabul and declared Afghanistan an Islamic state. Ahmad Shah Massoud was the leader in Kabul until the Taliban captured it in 1996.

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