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**GENDER SUBALTERNITY IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S A
*THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS***

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Abstract

This research explores the depiction of Gender Subalternity of selected female characters in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through thematic analysis. These two women are analysed using 'The Subaltern Theory' (1985) proposed by Gayathri Chakravorthy Spivak. A mechanism of the process and reasons contributing to Gender Subalternity derived from 'The Subaltern Theory' (1985) is used to analyse the lives of the two Afghan women. This study finds out that Gender Subalternity prevails in the lives of these women due to the failure of interpersonal communication. This scenario occurs when the message being conveyed by the speaker fails to reach the listener. The existence of noises such as patriarchy and the atrocious Taliban prevents the listener from getting the message. These noises lead to the failure of interpretation which prevents the voice of the subalterns from being heard. As a result, these women, the subalterns cannot speak. It is hoped that readers will get a new insight on the sufferings of the Afghan women as well as be able to identify the occurrences of Gender Subalternity in their own lives.

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1. Introduction

Afghan women have been subject to the cruelty of patriarchy since the pre-monarch period and the Taliban regime in recent times. Ethnic group sentiments during the pre-monarchy period were high and this resulted in power plays between the tribes and inter-tribal patriarchal control where women's position was jeopardized (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Women were forced to stay well within the domestic sphere for fear of causing dishonour to their families, tribes, and nation.

The modern monarchy period was during the rule of Abdur Rahman Khan and Amir Habibullah Khan liberalized Afghan women. Changes were made to the law pertaining to women, the age of marriage was raised, and unveiling was observed. Habibullah was seen as interfering in customs and traditions of these tribes and was assassinated in 1919. Rapid changes done by Amanullah, the successor of the throne resulted in conflict between modernists and traditionalists in Afghanistan. The liberalization of Afghan women continued during the presence of Soviet Union in the late 1950s.

Towards the 1980s, Afghanistan witnessed war. 'Freedom fighters' known as the Mujahideen were bred with the help from external forces such as the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China. They aimed to chase the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan and to reverse the liberalization of Afghan women (Ibrahim & Mussarat, 2014). The barbarism towards Afghan women started with the Mujahideen. Stories of rape, amputations, and killings by the Mujahideen were widespread and instilled fear among Afghan women.

In 1996, the external forces which supported the Mujahideen supported the Taliban to manage the brutalities brought about by the Mujahideen. The Taliban began to monitor and control women's behaviour. Afghan women were denied basic human rights under the watchful eyes of Taliban. The brutalities did not end even when the Northern Alliance which consisted of the Mujahideen defeated the Taliban and took over Afghanistan.

According to Telesetsky (2013), the Taliban put their own twist on the Koran and claimed to restore the Islamic balance that was initially disturbed by Western influence through their restrictive measures. Women were excluded from public spheres and made to stay within their private spheres. They were banned from the work force and the education system. Women were expected to follow the mandatory dress and behaviour conduct introduced by the Taliban. Basic human rights were denied to women. Cleanliness and personal hygiene became unattainable. Women were banned from entering public bath facilities resulting in poor hygiene among poor women.

The ban of women from the work force had resulted in women begging in the streets and starving. This is due to the reason that women were breadwinners for families with their male figures having gone off to fight in wars or being killed in wars. According to Amnesty International (2013), the women who disobeyed the Taliban rules had to face cruel punishments. An attempt to study resulted in them being beaten cruelly and showing skin resulted in them being flogged. Besides these harsh punishments, women were also raped and subjected to violence at all times under the Taliban rule (as cited in Amnesty International 1976).

Today, the participation of Afghan women in the politics, economy, and social domain of Afghanistan has increased under President Ashraf Ghani. However, there are many concerns and problems associated with the empowerment of women in Afghanistan. According to the Human Rights Watch (2016),

the new Ghani administration has failed to successfully enforce the Elimination of Violence against Women Law (EVAW) (as cited in Human Rights Watch (Organization), (1990).

This study aims to explore the depiction of the loss of voice of Afghan women during the Taliban regime using 'The Subaltern Theory' proposed by Gayatri Spivak. Many women in this world who are living in great countries and seemingly modern communities unfortunately are still facing cruelties in the name of rapes, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and various restrictions in decision-making. These women are also being silenced through noises that exist in their spheres as the Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's novel.

Spivak (1985) in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' explained that the women, who are the subalterns in this context, cannot speak due to the inexistence of space. She further explained that this condition exists due to the reason that the voice and the agency of the subaltern women in her study are lost in Hindu Patriarchal codes of moral conduct and the representation of subaltern women as victims of the Hindu morality by the British. The existences of these two elements have made it impossible for the voice of the subaltern women to be recovered.

From Spivak's argument, this study recognizes that the selected characters from the selected novels of Khaled Hosseini suffer from gender subalternity due to the patriarchal nature of the Afghanistan society. The loss of their space and the inability to speak has resulted in them being the subaltern in their homeland by their own community.

2. Problem Statement

The women in Afghanistan deserve a life free from cruelties and sufferings. The history of Afghanistan as has been discussed in the earlier section of this chapter clearly shows that there were periods when women were free to choose the life they desired. There was a time when women were not condemned for being outside of their private sphere. In fact, in recent years before all the war began women in Kabul dressed as they wished and involved themselves in the work sector as well as having a rich social life. This situation was also described in detail in the novels being explored in this study. The women in Kabul were more liberal than the women from other parts of Afghanistan. This liberal state of being is necessary for women to contribute to the growth of the nation and to enjoy a life which socially uplifts them and gives them a purpose. It is crucial for women in Afghanistan to feel liberal once more not only in the way they dress, the way they live, but also the way they are treated by their counterparts. The male perception on the existence of women needs a paradigm shift to ensure women in Afghanistan can once more walk down the street in dignity and with a sense of freedom.

Unfortunately, this vision will remain a vision if the current situation of the Afghan women and the sufferings they faced in the past during the Taliban regime is not explored and understood to gain an insight on how much things have shifted in Afghanistan. This vision will also remain a vision if the global citizens are not educated on the situations of the women in Afghanistan. The awareness of the pain of the Afghan women even in the 21st century is hoped to bring in all the contributions that will be needed to dignify the Afghan women once again. The next section will depict the brutalities that had to be faced by the Afghan women in Afghanistan due to patriarchy and the Taliban.

The Taliban emerged to end the brutalities of the Mujahideen. On the contrary, they amplified the atrocities towards the Afghan women. The Taliban ideology was based on the influence from tribalism and Islam. They introduced strict codes of conduct in the social sphere especially for marriage and divorce. The Islamic laws on inheritance were ignored and women were denied their right to property and the consent to marriage. The Taliban were fueled by the patriarchal nature of their tribes.

Women were mandated to wear the burqa which fully covers the body except a lace opening for the eyes. Women's freedom to move was also restricted by the Taliban. Women were not allowed to travel in the same bus as men and they were also banned from leaving their house without a male chaperone. Talking to men who are not blood related is also considered going against the Taliban rules. Women faced gynecological infections, scabies, and uterine infections after childbirth (Telesetsky, 2013).

According to Amnesty International (2013), the women who disobeyed the Taliban rules had to face cruel punishments. An attempt to study resulted in them being beaten cruelly, being found guilty of adultery resulted in them being stoned to death and showing skin resulted in them being flogged. Besides these harsh punishments, women were also raped and subjected to violence at all times under the Taliban rule (as cited in Amnesty International 1976).

It is hoped that with the layout of the problem that is preventing the greater vision for Afghan women from materializing, the road towards the liberalization of Afghan women could be achieved.

3. Research Questions

I. How is Gender Subalternity of the Afghan women depicted in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study dwells into the patriarchal nature of the Afghan society which had caused the women in Afghanistan to lead a fearful life filled with brutality especially during the Taliban regime. This study is hoped to significantly reveal the state of Afghan women to the eyes of the world. Despite there being many women Afghan writers who make the plights of Afghan women as the central theme of their story, there are very few male writers who were ready to capture the plights of Afghan women in their writings. Khaled Hosseini had captured the very essence of subalternity and patriarchy through the characters in his stories. This study will bring the plights of Afghan women from a man's perspective. This will reach a wider range of readers who then will be educated on the sufferings of Afghan women. A realization on the condition of the Afghan women is crucial to garner attention from bodies who will be able to contribute significantly to the empowerment of Afghan women. These portrayals of the plights of Afghan women would then garner attention from all around the world under the tag of humanity.

Secondly, this study could encourage more subalterns to voice out by using literary works as their guide. Subalternity is the result of the need for upholding honour and tradition. Many women are not able to voice their predicament for fear of tarnishing the honour of their families and challenging the tradition. Literary works are hoped to be a platform where these women can identify with each other and find the courage to find their voice through the stories of others. Many women around the world are being subjected to accept a life they do not like in order to uphold the honour and tradition of their families and the society.

These women are in need of the knowledge on how gender Subalternity works and how it influences female disempowerment. These women need to be educated that family honour and tradition are voices that silence them.

Thirdly, this study will ultimately reveal Gender Subalternity of other women around the world. Subalternity is embedded in the lives of many women and is being accepted as a way of life. The plights of Afghan women are also experienced by other women from other parts of the world. Through the revelation of the Gender Subalternity of Afghan women and the impact it has on women disempowerment through Spivak's 'Theory of Subaltern' (1985) and the mechanism it presents, it is hoped that other women will be able to identify the presence of subalternity in their lives, no matter how subtle it is and consequently, how subalternity can contribute to their disempowerment. These women will need to discover the means of empowering themselves in order to empower many other women in their circle.

5. Research Methods

This study analyses *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini. This study is based on Gayathri Chakravorthy Spivak's 'The Subaltern Theory' (1985) and uses thematic analysis to explore Gender Subalternity among Afghan Women. This study analyses how Gender Subalternity of Afghan women is depicted in the novel through the female characters named Mariam and Laila. Spivak's 'The Subaltern Theory' (1985) theorizes on the reasons and process that result in Gender Subalternity. This study analyses how these reasons and the process result in Gender Subalternity and make the characters sexed subalterns leading to her concluding that 'The Subalterns Cannot Speak'.

Thematic analysis is deemed suitable for this research since it makes use of an existing theory to formulate and answer questions, the theme of the research is explored in depth, and contributes towards the better understanding of the representation of the social tenet being studied. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to explore the theme of this study, Gender Subalternity based on Spivak's 'The Subaltern Theory' (1985) of the female characters in the novels (Boyatzis, 1998, Marks & Yardley, 2004, Joffe & Haarhoff, 2002).

Textual analysis is used for data collection from the novel. Textual analysis is done by taking extracts from the novel being studied to analyse the issue of Gender Subalternity of the sexed subalterns through the usage of words, phrases, and actions from all the characters in the novel. Spivak's 'The Subaltern Theory' (1985), is used as the framework to analyse the theme of this study: Gender Subalternity. The reasons and process that causes Gender Subalternity among Afghan women are examined using the theory proposed by Gayathri Chakravorthy Spivak.

The framework of the analysis of the two women characters in this novel begins with the usage of Spivak's 'The Subaltern Theory' (1985) to highlight the presence of Gender Subalternity in the lives of the Afghan women. This is explained through the mechanism of Gender Subalternity which contains elements of interpersonal communication, noise, failure of interpretation, loss of voice, and finally the condition of the subaltern not being able to speak.

Overall, Gender Subalternity begins when the interpersonal communication fails to achieve its objective. This is due to the presence of the element of noise in the shape of social, cultural and socio-economic factors. The distortion of communication by noise results in the failure of interpretation of the

message that is being conveyed by the speaker. Ultimately, the sexed subalterns lose their voice and cannot speak.

In the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam is troubled with various noises in the form of her mother's rigid, suffocating love to her father's inconsistent presence in her life. She then is thrown into forced marriage at a tender age of fifteen despite her refusal. Her marriage landed her into years and years of living in a patriarchal household. Her husband's presence as the noise in her life ripped Mariam off her rights to live her own life.

On the other hand, Laila was raised in a liberal household where the education of a woman was considered very important. Her father made sure she continued learning despite the schools being shut down due to the war that was taking place in Afghanistan. The occupation of Taliban led her into the household of Mariam where she had to endure the patriarchy she has never faced in her life before. This is where both the women Mariam and Laila suffered and lost their voices.

6. Findings

Mariam is an illicit child born to Jalil and Nana. Jalil, being one of the wealthiest men in Herat could not be seen accepting Nana as his legal wife since Nana was a servant in his house. Mariam had to be content with weekly visits from Jalil despite loving him so much. One day, when Mariam visited Jalil in Herat, she was ignored by Jalil and had to go back without meeting him. Upon the death of her mother, Mariam had no choice but to go live with Jalil whom she hates now. She is then married hurriedly to Rasheed who treats her badly throughout her married life.

An instance that depicted Gender Subalternity was when Mariam was ordered by her new husband, Rasheed to wear a burqa before taking her around Kabul. Rasheed presented a burqa to Mariam and expected her to wear it. Rasheed elaborately explained how as a shoemaker he often deals with women who look him in the eye and talk to him uncovered. Rasheed strongly believes that a woman should be covered up and act under the control of her husband. Rasheed proclaims himself as a traditional man and that the face of a woman should only be seen by the husband. The discomfort Mariam felt while wearing the burqa was immense as she kept stepping on the hem, lost her peripheral vision and felt suffocated. All these were dismissed by Rasheed with:

"You'll get used to it," Rasheed said. "With time, I bet you'll even like it."

(Hosseini, 2008, p.71)

The instance where burqa was given special emphasis was when the Taliban took over Afghanistan and enforced cruel rules that mainly affected women. Their message which was known as the 'Voice of Shari'a' was spread throughout the country. One of the rules was on the wearing of burqa by women and the punishment that follows should they forget to wear the burqa.

"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."

(Hosseini, 2008, p.271)

The existence of interpersonal communication in this situation is subtle yet overpowering. The women being forced to wear burqa are once again the subaltern, and hence, the speakers. The listeners in this scenario are Rasheed and the Taliban. This interpersonal communication is being hindered by the element

of noise in the form of religion and patriarchy. Taliban uses the Shari'a to enforce such an extreme rule while the patriarchy that Rasheed practices denies women the option of saying 'No'. The power of the religion and patriarchy is too big for the women to say anything against them. So much so that women who do not wear burqa are beaten cruelly. This punishment prevents a two-way communication by instilling fear in the name of religion and patriarchy among women. The women are left with no choice but to wear the burqa. Mariam had no space to say no. She was not given the space from which she could have spoken. This proves that 'The Subaltern Cannot Speak' as advocated by Spivak (1985).

In another situation, Mariam pleads with Rasheed to not marry Laila. Laila is another female protagonist in this novel. Mariam who feels belittled and embarrassed of being treated disrespectfully gathers her courage and speaks to Rasheed to reconsider the marriage. Rasheed, with full authority makes it clear that his decision remains unchanged.

"I . . . I don't want this," Mariam said, numb with contempt and helplessness.

"It's not your decision. It's hers and mine."

"I'm too old."

"She's too young, you're too old. This is nonsense."

"I am too old. Too old for you to do this to me," Mariam said, balling up fistfuls of her dress so tightly her hands shook. "For you, after all these years, to make me an ambagh."

"Don't be so dramatic. It's a common thing and you know it. I have friends who have two, three, four wives. Your own father had three. Besides, what I'm doing now most men I know would have done long ago. You know it's true."

"I won't allow it."

At this, Rasheed smiled sadly.

(Hosseini, 2008, p. 208)

This exchange between Mariam and Rasheed clearly shows the helplessness of Mariam in convincing her husband. Mariam's pleas were not taken into consideration. It is indeed true that the problem is not in the failure of articulation but in the failure of interpretation (McLeod, 2010). In this scenario, the speaker and the listener are Mariam and Rasheed respectively. The involvement of two parties shows that there are chances for interpersonal communication to take place. A message is trying to be conveyed by the speaker to the listener. The message here is the disapproval of Mariam about the wedding between Laila and Rasheed. However, the message is failed to be delivered to the listener due to the hindrance caused by elements of noise. The patriarchal thoughts of Rasheed result in him justifying his act by saying that he is doing Laila a favour by marrying her. The patriarchal nature of the society that permits and encourages the marrying of several women by the same men is used by Rasheed as a justification as well. The act of marrying multiple wives is seen as something that is normal and hence, should not be questioned. Hence, in this case the patriarchy is the element of noise which hinders the failure of interpretation of Mariam's thoughts and opinions. This results in Mariam's loss of voice whereby her opinions and thoughts are dismissed as trivial. This reveals the Gender Subalternity faced by Mariam.

Laila, the other Afghan women in this novel had been raised by progressive-minded parents. The war had resulted in her being an orphan and her love affair with Tariq, who had moved to Pakistan, had resulted in

her being pregnant. Upon hearing the news of Tariq's death, she married Rasheed to protect her illicit unborn child. Her life as a wife to Rasheed was filled with torture.

Laila's struggle with Gender Subalternity started when she planned to run away from Rasheed to Pakistan. The rulings of the Mujahideen restrict women from going out without a male chaperone who is a family member. Being caught, the militia men showed no mercy and sent them back home. This resulted in Rasheed beating Mariam while locking Laila and Aziza in a dark room without food for days.

"Let us go, Officer . . ." She read the name on his lapel tag. "Officer Rahman. Honor the meaning of your name and show compassion. What does it matter to you to let a mere two women go? What's the harm in releasing us? We are not criminals."

"I can't."

"I beg you, please."

"It's a matter of qanoon, hamshira, a matter of law,"

(Hosseini, 2008, p.259)

The excerpt shows that the officer refuses to let them go due to religious laws.

"If you send us back," she said instead, slowly, "there is no saying what he will do to us."

She could see the effort it took him to keep his eyes from shifting. "What a man does in his home is his business."

"What about the law, then, Officer Rahman?" Tears of rage stung her eyes. "Will you be there to maintain order?"

"As a matter of policy, we do not interfere with private family matters, hamshira."

"Of course you don't. When it benefits the man. And isn't this a 'private family matter,' as you say? Isn't it?"

(Hosseini, 2008, p.260)

The excerpt above shows that the officer conveniently separates the public sphere from private sphere. Women are not protected if they are abused at home since the private domain belongs to the man of the house.

Gender Subalternity is portrayed when the police officer refused to acknowledge the cruelty that might ensue in their house if he does not let them run away. In the interpersonal communication that happened in this scenario, Laila is the speaker while the officer is the listener. Laila's motives were not heard by the listener due to the presence of the element of noise. The element of noise that existed with the officer is the law as well as male dominance which prevents authorities from interfering in the crimes that happens in the private sphere. The presence of these elements of noise results in the failure of interpretation of the message being conveyed by the speaker. Despite Laila trying hard to explain the conditions of her abusive household, the listener turned deaf ears since the message was scrutinized under the influence of law and male dominance. The voice of Laila becomes unheard since there is no feedback from the listener to what she is trying to convey. This results in the loss of voice of Laila. Laila faces Gender Subalternity in this scenario when her predicaments are ignored just because she is a woman. The need to put male dominance over the welfare of the women has resulted in Gender Subalternity.

Another excerpt that captures the cruelties faced by Laila when she set out of her house without Rasheed can be seen below:

One day, a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna. When he was done, 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."

But, usually, Laila refused to cave in. She made as if she were going home, then took a different route down side streets. Sometimes she was caught, questioned, scolded - two, three, even four times in a single day. Then the whips came down and the antennas sliced through the air, and she trudged home, bloodied, without so much as a glimpse of Aziza.

(Hosseini, 2008, p.313)

The excerpts above portray the consequences faced by Laila for wanting to visit her daughter. The atrocities of the Taliban are limitless. In this case, once again the interpersonal communication is between Laila who represents Afghan women and the Taliban. The former is the speaker while the latter is the listener. The element of noise which hinders the transmission of the message from the speaker to the listener is the Taliban rules which advocate patriarchy and male dominance. The need to uphold the patriarchal nature of the society results in the failure of interpretation of the message. This results in the silencing of the subaltern women. This goes in accordance with Spivak's 'Theory of Subaltern' (1985). As depicted in this excerpt, Gender Subalternity is deeply embedded in the Afghan society. Among the Taliban rules which are commonly known as the Voice of Shari'a are as below:

All citizens must pray five times a day. If it is prayer time and you are caught doing something other, you will be beaten.

All men will grow their beards. The correct length is at least one clenched fist beneath the chin. If you do not abide by this, you will be beaten.

All boys will wear turbans. Boys in grade one through six will wear black turbans, higher grades will wear white.

All boys will wear Islamic clothes. Shirt collars will be buttoned.

Singing is forbidden.

Dancing is forbidden.

Playing cards, playing chess, gambling, and kite flying are forbidden.

Writing books, watching films, and painting pictures are forbidden.

If you keep parakeets, you will be beaten. Your birds will be killed.

If you steal, your hand will be cut off at the wrist. If you steal again, your foot will be cut off.

If you are not Muslim, do not worship where you can be seen by Muslims. If you do, you will be beaten and imprisoned. If you are caught trying to convert a Muslim to your faith, you will be executed.

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.

(Hosseini, 2008, p.270-271)

This excerpt shows the extent to which the Taliban controlled the lives of the Afghans, especially the Afghan women. All these are forceful orders given to women. The failure to abide by these rules will result in them being raped, beaten up without any mercy, and killed without any second thought. Women are being treated with the utmost contempt and are objectified when they are forced to abide by these laws under merciless threats. For instance, women cannot make eye contact with men and they are not allowed to laugh in public. The mere act of looking in the eyes and laughing are considered sins. Women are made to succumb to the lives that the Taliban think is right for them. Women's presence is deemed as the weaker version of men when they are violated just because they were born as women.

7. Conclusion

Overall, this study discusses the elements involved in the occurrences of Gender Subalternity and how all these elements are incorporated in the lives of Afghan women. The identification of the depiction of Gender Subalternity in the novel had to be based on the series of elements which resulted in the subaltern not being able to speak and follows Spivak's 'Theory of Subaltern' (1985).

A realization of the condition of the Afghan women is crucial to garner attention from bodies that will be able to contribute significantly to the empowerment of Afghan women. These portrayals of the plights of Afghan women would then garner attention from all around the world in the name of humanity.

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