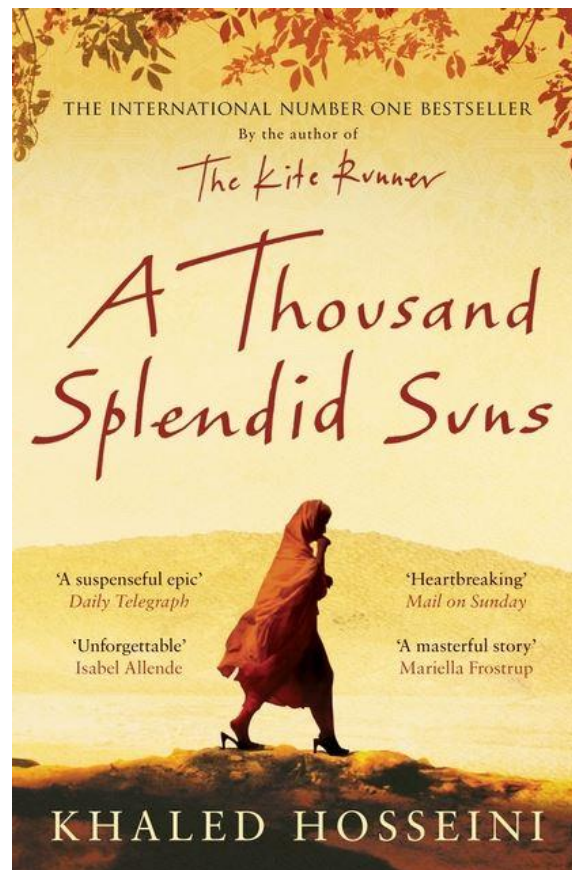

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Masculinity: A Gamut in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini

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Abstract

Khaled Hosseini is a renowned Afghan American writer; his writings have brought the Afghan society to the spot light. One of his important works is *A Thousand Splendid Suns* which deals with the Afghan society from the pre-Soviet era to the present times. Though the novel

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predominantly focuses on the two main female characters, there are quite a number of male characters. This paper intends to analyze the variety of masculinity, and the struggle to maintain the pride akin to the societal expectation, based on the male characters in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, a war narrative.

Key words: Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, masculinity, across biological difference, Afghan society, war narrative.

Masculinity

The word *masculinity* refers to the gender of an individual rather than their biological orientation, it refers to the characteristics of an individual, and the individual can be a male or female. The society that Khaled Hosseini portrays in his novel is a patriarchal society. Though there happens to be a general idea that patriarchal society is male dominated, unequal society. The inequality and domination mushrooms in the society mainly because of the misconception of the gender identity by the individual.

Khaled Hosseini



Khaled Hosseini

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khaled_Hosseini

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American writer, his writing has sowed seed for Afghan writing in English. His works has opened a window, presenting to the global view, the Afghan society as such. His works focuses on a span of eras, beginning with the pre-Soviet era and to the hope for a better future. His writings reflect the nostalgia, then the present traumatic war

situations, displacements and a hope for the serenity and a better future (which are empirical in his novels).

Though the author currently lives in America, he visits Afghanistan quite often. He has been named as US Goodwill envoy to the United Nations Refugee Agency, through which he reaches out to uplift the war-stricken Afghan society. The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is an outcome of one such visits, where he had seen women accompanied by their children, on the streets, struggling to survive, as their men had become victims of war either dead or alive. This novel portrays the struggle of two such women named ‘Mariam’ and ‘Laila’.

Focus of This Paper

This paper intends to comprehend the gamut of masculinity in the war stricken Afghan society based on the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, surpassing the biological difference. Though the novel focuses on the female characters the author has also portrayed a spectrum of male characters, who have acquired a varied perception of masculinity. This varied perception unfolds through their ways of living their life, surviving in the war-ravaged Afghan society. Apart from the male characters, the prominent female characters in the novel too display their masculinities which has also been analyzed.

Gender Behaviour

Masculinity according to Ian Buchanan is that, “In particular it has overturned the idea of biological determinism which holds that gender behavior is a function of physiology . . . and shown very clearly that masculinity is culturally defined” (311). Masculinity study is an offset of the feminism and cultural studies. Though in the early stages it included only men and their stress to confront to the social expectation, now, the idea has broadened blurring the boundaries.

There are certain theorists like Judith Halberstam who discuss about the blurring of the boundaries assigned as masculine and feminine, and the diminishing of the binaries as heterogeneity in based on both biological orientation and gender is becoming prominent. She has also written a work entitled *Female Masculinity*. So, the study of Masculinity has now broadened not only including men but also women and other heterogeneous gender. There are several facets

in masculinity and this paper discusses four facets. One is hegemonic masculinity, caring masculinity, masculinity reconstructed, and female masculinity.

“The concept of hegemonic masculinity can be seen as a cultural norm that continuously connects men to power and economic achievements. . . . but also brings disadvantages and costs men” (eige.europa.eu). One of the prominent male character who can be classed under hegemonic masculinity is Rasheed. He has been portrayed as an embodiment of the hegemonic masculinity, who tries to retain his ‘nang’ which means ‘pride’ by trying hard to keep up to the Afghan societal cultural masculine standard (‘real man’ expectancy).

Male Heir and Hegemonic Masculinity

According to Rasheed power was to have a male heir for which he marries thrice and only in the third marriage his expectation is completely fulfilled as Zalmai is born. Next idea is that to him if a wife was unable to satisfy his desire of a male heir he only tormented them. When it comes to Mariam he torments her as she is unable to bear him any child, and when his third wife Laila gives birth to a baby girl he torments her too.

Even when Rasheed loses his possessions to war, he still maintains his pride, though he is in a position, where he is unable to uphold his family financially, he sees to it that his action shouldn’t bring him down. At one point, he decides to send his daughter to an orphanage. Even then he makes his wives do the work, instead of him doing it.

The root of the hegemonic masculinity can be traced in Rasheed’s life in the way he brings up his son. He keeps encouraging his son Zalmai, when he talks back to his mother, thus sowing the seeds of dominance from his childhood. This in a way reveals how Rasheed must have been brought up in his childhood and how his perception of masculinity has been sculpted. As mentioned earlier, hegemonic masculinity only leads to the disadvantages and loss in both Rasheed’s and his son’s life, it leads to the death of Rasheed and for Zalmai, the loss of his identity, his father.

“The concept of caring masculinity is the opposite of hegemonic masculinity. It is based on men taking care-giving roles instead of provider roles” (eige.europa.eu). One of the important minor character who is an embodiment for caring masculinity is Hakim. Hakim is the father of the

protagonist Laila. His character is in total contrast to that of Rasheed that, Rasheed himself classifies Hakim as “soft men” (Hosseini 69).

Exceptions to the Rule

Though the culture thrived with the ideals of patriarchy, yet there were men like Hakim whose perception towards masculinity akin to his culture differed. He respected his wife and daughter very much that he considered their opinion and many a times adhered to it. Even during the crucial times of war, when all the neighbors were vacating the country, he chose to risk his family’s life because his wife didn’t want to leave the place.

When it came to the life of his daughter, he always believed that education could bring a change. Thus, he sent Laila to school even when bombs were being dropped in their places and when the schools were closed he chose to teach his daughter by himself. Though there were several restrictions to move from one place to another during war, still he chooses to take Laila and Tariq to visit the historical monuments, risking life.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Caring Masculinity

Next is the idea of masculinity reconstructed, though it is similar to caring masculinity there is quiet a difference. This is a balance between the hegemonic masculinity and caring masculinity wherein the idea of masculinity is altered in a positive way. Two of the characters that can be classed under this category is Zaman and Tariq.

Zaman is the character who runs a secret school in the Taliban ruled society in which education was not allowed and severe punishments were given to all those who trespassed the rules. Still Zaman had the courage to do the right thing amidst all the oppositions, by perceiving and maintaining the identity of Afghan culture-based masculinity. He also possessed a broader perception that the girl child should as well be educated.

Tariq is Laila’s husband, growing up in the shadow of Hakim, Tariq had also developed a broader perception of society, in a way that, he respects women, especially Laila. Knowing that she is married to Rasheed, he readily accepts her as his wife and as Rasheed dies, he makes it a point to be there for the children too. Even towards the end, once the war is over, he makes it a

point to take his family back to their native and altogether they involve in the uplifting of their society.

Widening and Blurring Boundaries

This reconstruction of masculinity gives way to either widening of the boundaries or the blurring as there arises heterogeneity in gender and one such offshoot is female masculinity. In this novel female masculinity is revealed in two main characters one is Nana and the other is Mariam.

Being doubly dominated by both Jalil and his wives, Nana strives to survive singly, not wanting either to be dependent or a burden to anyone, so she chooses to survive away from the society. Lifestyle of Nana reflects the female masculinity, as she lives all by herself on the hilltop until Mariam is born and she also gives birth to Mariam all alone without the assistance. Apart from this Nana's way of abusing Jalil's sons and her encouragement of Mariam when she imitates her, mirrors the way Rasheed grows his son Zalmai.

Female Masculinity

Mariam is an epitome of female masculinity this can be distinctly traced from the time Aziza is born and Laila becomes her companion. The companionship of Mariam and Laila strengthens their survival in the patriarchal war ravaged society. Though they are not allowed to go outside their house without being accompanied by a male companion, they daringly attempt to escape the clutches of Rasheed though in the end it becomes futile. They also stride to meet Aziza at the orphanage, amidst the consequence that they will be whipped on the street if they were unaccompanied by male (and Rasheed fails to accompany them almost all the time).

Apart from this Mariam's decision to save Laila sacrificing herself reveals the female masculinity. When Mariam hits Rasheed with a shovel in order to save Laila, she makes it a point to face him directly and hit him. This and also her popularity in jail and her final submission to be beheaded exposes the female masculinity in Mariam.

To Conclude

Therefore, masculinity is not a single identity but varies based on culture, era, and perceptions. So, it is never singular but always a plural identity, a gamut. The idea of masculinity has developed from hegemonic and caring to the reconstruction and later to the blurring of the binaries and the boundaries. Hosseini novel reveals a spectrum of masculinity based on the Afghan culture and society.

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