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The Plight of Orphans in the Novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

This research paper is an attempt to throw light on the pathetic condition of the orphans as revealed in the novel *A thousand splendid suns* by Afghan American writer Khaled Hosseini. Khaled Hosseini is an international author of several books and *A thousand splendid suns* is his second novel which received acceptance worldwide. It is a story about two female orphans who are treated like dirt. Orphans are children without parents and the society is harsh and cruel towards them. These children face difficulties throughout their lives as there's no one to love and support them. This research paper aims to show such children from the novel who have lost their parents as result of war and poverty. It will focus specifically on Mariam and Laila, the protagonist of the novel. Mariam lost her mother in the beginning of the novel and Laila became orphan as the novel proceeds. There is portrayal of or an orphanage in which Laila's daughter Aziza was forced to put due to destitution. The paper would also highlight how these orphans became their heroes and also helped others who are

in the same condition. Mariam sacrificed her life for Laila and Laila becomes a teacher in an orphanage so that orphans like She gets a better and brighter future. The paper attempts to tell what these orphans require and that the government of Kabul portrayed a ray of hope by establishing such orphanages.

Keywords: orphan, orphanage, heroes, shelter, violence, literature

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini is a prominent writer known for his works based on Afghanistan's culture, traditions and customs. He is known worldwide for his writing. He was born in Kabul in 1965 and currently lives in America. He wrote his first novel *The Kite Runner* in the year 2001 which received several awards and was made into a movie. His second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, written in 2007, is about two females who suffer at the hands of this cruel society basically because they are orphans. *And the Mountains Echoed* is his third novel which is a collection of certain short stories based on familial themes. It received the Goodreads Choice Award for Fiction 2013. His 2008 novel *Sea Prayers* is an illustrated short story. *A Thousand splendid suns* is a novel about Mariam, an illegitimate teenager who was born in Afghanistan in the 1950s and Laila who was born in the late 1970s. Though there was no blood relation between them, fate brought them together and despite being co-wives a mother-daughter relationship was formed between them. Rasheed, their husband was a widowed shoemaker. Laila and Tariq, Laila's childhood friends, love each other but certain

circumstances lead to their departure. Laila married Rasheed to give birth to Tariq's child, Aziza. There are several themes in the novel such as female relations, rights of women, love and loyalty etc. The title of the novel is derived from a 17th-century poem that is an ode to the city of Kabul.

This research paper aims to show that orphans are vulnerable and they represent a significant population worldwide. Mariam and Laila in *A thousand splendid suns* are orphans and their orphanhood made them vulnerable. The paper examines the other famous orphan characters who paved their way and dealt with challenging situations. Orphanages provide shelter to the needy and there is a need for more orphanages that can support such children. In the end, Laila started to teach in an orphanage which is an indication of a glimmer of hope for the country.

The research paper *Courageous women: A study of resilience of women in Khaled Hosseini's novel A thousand splendid suns* talks about women's plight as depicted in the novel. The research highlighted that Mariam and Nana don't resist violence but are courageous enough to live their life. On the other hand, Laila is the one who resisted and also motivated others to rebel against the patriarchal system. The paper focused on the female characters of the novel and also analysed the concept in which females are made subalterns.

Voices of gender discrimination a feministic analysis of Khaled Hosseini's A thousand splendid Suns is a research paper which emphasized the lives of Nana, Mariam and Laila. It also focused on the theme of marriage which is a persistent theme in the novel. Marriage is considered a very important pillar in society and Nana was unmarried, so life became hell for her. Marriage played a very significant role in Mariam's and Laila's life as well. Rasheed

treated them badly but they freed themselves from his trap. The research paper talks about the discrimination faced by females in the novel.

The research paper *Endurance of subaltern: A study of thousand splendid suns by Khaled Hosseini* explored the Afghan women who are made subaltern with special reference to the females in the novel *A thousand splendid Suns*. The researchers used the theory of subaltern as propounded by Spivak. The research stresses that women need to be strong enough to fight against exploitation, Mariam and Laila supported each other and so there is a need for female bonding so that females can encourage each other to fight for their rights. The research paper highlighted how females face struggles and are the victims of exploitation. It also opened the door for further research on women's education and work as depicted in the novel.

On the miserable female's fate from A thousand splendid Suns research paper talks about the miserable fate of Afghan women. The family background of Mariam and Laila is discussed in detail by the researcher. Mariam is an illegitimate child of Jalil and Nana and Laila, born a generation later is the daughter of Hakim, a school teacher. The strict patriarchal system and the tradition and customs of Afghanistan are also examined by the researcher. The women in the novel are deprived of basic rights and are the representation of misery. The research also opens gates for further research.

This research paper would talk about his second novel *A thousand splendid suns* which is about the bond between two females, Mariam and Laila. Both of them are orphans and there is nobody to love and support them. Orphans are children whose parents have died, or lost. According to UNICEF, there are about 153 million children worldwide who are orphans, of which 2 million alone are from Afghanistan. Khaled Hosseini's novel talks about Mariam and Laila who are orphans and the behavior of society towards them is harsh. Mariam is an illegitimate child, born out of the wedlock of Jalil and Nana. Jalil one of Herat's

wealthiest men visits Mariam only on Thursdays when she lives with her mother Nana. Once Mariam ran away to meet Jalil when Nana got to know this, she committed suicide. Mariam is now an orphan, Jalil did not accept her and forced her to marry Rasheed who is thrice her age. Mariam's stepmother said "Actually your father has already given Rasheed his answer"(Khaled,2007,p.49) "Nikah will be tomorrow morning then there is a bus leaving for Kabul at noon"(Khaled, p.49). When Mariam was married she was just fourteen years old, and after her marriage, Jalil never visited her. Rasheed proved to be a very atrocious husband as Mariam fails to bear a child, he wanted an heir which Mariam could not bear and so he treated her badly. The only reason Mariam tolerated all this was that she had nowhere to go. Though Jalil loves Mariam he is afraid to accept her as she is an illegitimate child, he wants to keep his good name and so he never bothered about her. Mariam was forced to live with Rasheed as she had no other place where she could go and live her life peacefully. Rasheed always knew that she has no one who would support her and take her back if he is violent towards her. Once Rasheed told Laila, "she grew up in a kolba made of mud outside the village. Her father put her there. Have you told her Mariam, have you told her that you are a *harami*?" (Khaled, 2007, p.225). Mariam is repeatedly called *Harami*, an illegitimate child, by Rasheed and at the beginning of the novel by her mother, Nana. Mariam also knew that all she has is Rasheed, a cruel husband and she has to spend her life with him irrespective of his cruelty.

On the other hand, Laila, born a generation later was a very intelligent girl. Laila's parents were educated and tried their best to inculcate the same in her. Tariq and Laila were best friends and loved each other. When the condition in Afghanistan worsened due to war, Tariq's family moved to Pakistan, and Laila and her parents also decided to move to Pakistan. On the day they were packing their belongings a sudden bomb destroyed everything Laila

was the only one left after the incident and she too was very injured. Rasheed saved her, he told her , “Lucky for you, I mean, I dug you out with my own hands” (Khaled , 2007 ,p.194).

Laila was left an orphan with no one to care for her. At last, she married Rasheed as there was no other option left for her, she married him to have a shelter on her head and to give birth to Tariq's child in a protective environment. If Laila would not have been an orphan, her parents would have married her to a well-educated guy like Tariq but being an orphan, Laila was helpless. Rasheed treated both his wives cruelly as they were orphans and helpless. Orphans are vulnerable, they need help and support. At the age when Laila and Mariam were married, they should be provided with proper education as compulsory and free education is the basic right of every child. A child needs the affection, love and support of elders but orphans are deprived of the same. They are exploited and oppressed at every stage of their life. In the book *psychology of orphans*, the author says “Children deprived of parental care are more inclined to vagrancy and danger to become victims of violence and crime” (Lyudmila, 2008, p.28).

Orphans are vulnerable, and the government of the particular country should open orphanages for them. The government should be supportive and provide them with basic facilities like food, shelter and education. It is the basic right of every child to be protected against exploitation. The government should make sure that they should be provided with proper guidance, teaching and advice for a better tomorrow. Children with guardians or parents are always protected and guided, but the ones without parents can have a certain psychological illness. As Lyudmila (2008) in her book mentions that “ The most dramatic implication of orphan hood is the direct threat to the physical health as well as psychological and social development of a child who is left without parental care" (p.20). Mariam, Laila, Aziza and all the other children in the novel lack basic rights. With the course of the novel they pave their own ways and became their own heroes. As we have noted many protagonists

in literature are orphans and suffer a lot. They face difficulties, people treat them badly and they initially failed at every stage of their lives but as the story proceeds they bravely get out of their problems and find ways to solve their issues. An orphan has to make his/her place in this world full of wicked people.

One of the most famous orphan characters in literature is Tom Sawyer in the novel *The adventure of Tom sawyers* written in 1876 by Mark Twain, it is about a boy who lives with his aunt Polly and half brother Sid on the Mississippi River and goes through a lot of change as his character moves from childhood to adulthood. At the beginning, he was an immature boy but with the progress of the novel he became a brave hero who help others. Another most lovable hero who was an orphan is Harry Potter. J.K. Rowling made Harry an orphan who was abused by his uncle Vermon and aunt Petunia. He faced a lot of problems in his life as his parents were killed when he was just a young child. He became the commander in chief of the battle of Hogwarts and defeat Voldemort. He represents all the good qualities such as courage and loyalty. Though he was an orphan and lack the support of his parents , he became his own hero and also saved the others and inspired them to be the people they want to be. Jane Eyre in Charlotte Bronte's novel is a young orphan who lives with her cruel aunt Mrs Reed. Jane faces struggles throughout her life, she is portrayed as a person who needs charity from the society because of her being orphan. Jane emerges as an independent adult who showed the society that orphans can also be leaders. Jane Eyre is one of the greatest heroine in literature who possess qualities such as determination and will power. Just like the other Orphan characters, Mariam and Laila also possess leadership qualities. Mariam was betrayed by two very close people in life, her father and her husband. Despite all the difficulties, at the end of the story Mariam rescued Laila from the trap of Rasheed. He killed Rasheed in order to save Laila's life.

In the beginning of the novel Mariam was depicted as a timid girl but by the end of the novel she became a valiant and a fearless woman. She fearlessly admit to what she did to extricate Laila. Mariam accepted her crime in front of the judge and was stoned to death as a punishment for murdering Rasheed. "I admit to what I did brother" (Khaled, 2007, p.355). Mariam said "but if I hadn't, he would have killed her. He was strangling her" (Khaled, 2007,p.356). To the contrary, Laila was bright and talented since her childhood, her father, Babi, used to focus too much on her education. He himself was a well educated teacher who holds profound views on women's rights. After Mariam's death Laila married Tariq and moved to Pakistan, but she always wanted to do something for Afghanistan as her father once said that Afghanistan will need her as much as it will need it's men. So at the close of the novel, she moved back to Afghanistan and started to teach in an orphanage situated in Kabul. Laila was back at the place she was meant to be, "Laila passes beneath the sign and enters the classroom. The children are taking their seats, flipping notebooks open, chattering" (Khaled , 2007, p.401).

Orphanages are a symbol of hope in Afghanistan as they are lending a helping hand to the orphans. These orphanages provide them with basic facilities such as shelter, food and education. Laila was forced to put her daughter Aziza in an orphanage as it was getting difficult to feed all the family members. Rasheed's income was low and all the money ran out. When things became worse Laila put Aziza to an orphanage and told her that she'll get good food there unlike their home where from last few days they were just having raw turnips with salt sprinkled on it, limp leaves of lettuce and blackened bananas. With passing days they started to skip their meals. One day Mariam heard of a neighbour who mixed rat poison with dried bread and gave it to seven of her children. All these horrible circumstances compel Laila to send Aziza to the orphanage. She felt that Aziza will remain safe and happy there and it was true as when Laila used to visit Aziza in the orphanage she tells her about the

things they teach them every day such as reading and writing, history, geography and science. Orphanages are a kind of strongbox in which these children who are valuable treasures of society are kept. Children who live in orphanages and have lost their families in war generally have a negative impact on their minds as they have seen devastation and violence and so these orphanages provide them with a safe shelter. These children are often at risk of having numerous health-related issues and mental disorders, they require humanitarian support. Orphans must be provided with monetary assistance, compulsory school education and basic health services. Orphanages in Afghanistan are a ray of hope for a brighter tomorrow.

Conclusion

The research paper highlighted the issues faced by the orphans with special reference to Mariam and Laila from *A thousand splendid suns*. Both the females found their ways and became their own heroes. The paper emphasized the role of orphanages in making these orphans stand up for themselves. It also examined how these orphans are subjected to violence and how these children are different from the others. The responsibility of orphanages is also highlighted in the paper. Orphanages play a vital role in the lives of such children, they can equip them with the necessities of life. The government of the country should open more and more orphanages to help and support orphans. Laila, the protagonist of the novel proved to be a determining force for such children. At the end of the novel, she started to teach in an orphanage situated in Kabul. Her father, Babi played an important role in Laila's education. He once told Laila that marriage can wait but education cannot and so she has to be an independent and educated girl as Afghanistan will need her. Mariam also proved to be a determining woman when she saved Laila from Rasheed and also accepted her crime. Both the females were strong enough to fight for themselves.

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