



DECONSTRUCTION OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY: SUBORDINATION AND THE SUBSEQUENT RISE OF WOMEN IN KHALED HUSSEIN'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*, MONICA ALI'S *BRICK LANE*

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ABSTRACT



Patriarchy is one of the most widespread forms of inequality prevailing in human history. Being a woman in society is to have more challenges. They are more likely to suffer physical, verbal, psychological and sexual violence. This article reflects on the violence against women in the two narratives *in Khaled Hussein's A Thousand Splendid Suns and Monica Ali's Brick Lane* in the familial spaces by their men and other men outside their family. The female characters in both the novels experience alienation, rejection, violence, sexual exploitation and so on. They join hands against their husbands. Out of their self empowerment they rise against their men and finally become independent and empowered.

Keywords: *Patriarchy, Marriage, Alienation, Sexual Violence, Self-Empowerment.*



Power is “the ability or right to control people or events” and “the ability to influence people or give them strong feelings” (Longman 1356). Humans are the object of ‘power’. The ‘power’ determines individual attributes, behaviours and the like. The social role of a man and woman in relation to each other is based on the cultural norms of the society. This in turn leads to gender systems. The gender system in a particular society is the basis of social patterns namely the separation of sexes and the domination of one particular sex on the other and so on. There is a general view that being a woman is to have more challenges. The woman in the society also feels the same. This study analyses the experiences of women characters under patriarchal set up in the novels: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Brick Lane*. It is done in the light of physical violence, mental violence, double standards of patriarchy and sexual exploitation of women in the home country and in the diasporic location.

The novel *Brick Lane* has the woman protagonist Nazneen Ahmed. She is born and brought up in Bangladesh. She is married at 18, to Chanu Ahmed. Because of the job opportunity, they migrate to London. From the beginning of the novel, Nazneen Ahmed feels alienated in a new environment. She feels like a caged bird within her home. Her husband, Chanu Ahmed does not care about her emotions. Instead he continues to boss her in the same conservative way. He seems to follow the typically Bangladeshi ideology of keeping the woman marginalized under the power of men

Nazneen is not allowed to go out and she suffers from isolation and alienation. She has been denied the right to learn English. Her husband tells her that “You’re going to be a mother.....will that keep you busy enough? And you can’t take a baby to college... it’s not as simple as that, just to go to college, like that” (BL 57).

She is bored at home due to repetitive household chores. Whenever she expresses her idea to take up an employment, she is snubbed by her male chauvinist Husband. She remains always inside her purdah, which is a symbol of slavery in Islam. She keeps her head bowed down, covers her hair and even walks a step behind her husband. When Chanu loses his job, he adopts different strategies to be still

powerful within the house. He subordinates his daughters and shouts at them to maintain a dominant position in the house. Later on, when she begins to earn independently by working, Karim enters into her life and she finds that her life takes a twist. Due to this aspect of self reliance and her friendship with Razia, she is able to reject Karim’s proposal of marriage and Chanu’s wish to return to Bangladesh. Chanu leaves for Bangladesh by leaving his family back in London.

Razia Iqbal, another woman like Nazneen, also faces gender based discrimination in London. Her husband does not allow her to have a career. It is only after her husband’s death, she gets an opportunity of employment to support her family. In fact, Razia feels free from the clutches of her husband. It further proves that majority of the immigrant Bangladeshi women suffer from oppression because of gender based discrimination.

Nazneen regularly receives letters from her sister, Haseena from Bangladesh. In those letters, one can find the depiction of Physical violence against women. The letters tell the experiences of the women in Bangladesh under the patriarchal society. Hasina herself is a victim of physical domestic violence. She expresses that men beat their wives when they do not hold their tongue. Women also bear the beating in silence. The man does not feel that he only performs the offensive action but as a helpless husband, he has been forced to chastise the woman. Even another woman Mrs.Kashem feels that such a situation is acceptable. According to her, this violence should be overlooked by women like Hasina. To her, leaving the abusive husband and running away is not a good decision. In subsequent incidents, Hasina suffers physical, mental, sexual violence.

Like other women characters in the novel, Monju suffers more than Haseena. She is married at the age of thirteen to a man involved in child trafficking. Her husband wants to sell her baby which is seven days old. When Monju does not allow that, her husband throws acid on the baby. The poor mother now starts saving money to cure her child. Later Monju’s husband throws acid on her too for the crime of refusing to give him the money that she has saved for her son’s operation. Now she lies abandoned and alone in Dhaka Medical College



Hospital on the verge of death. This shows the callous nature and the cruelty of her husband. Motherhood and its responsibilities are so dominant in women that even on her death bed, Monju can only think of her son's well-being. Finally there is no money for Monju's medicines either but still the cruel husband and his family does not help her. She finally dies one day. Thus for Monju too only death can relieve her of her suffering. This portrayal of physical violence showcases the prevailing patriarchal setup in the society. This system dominates women not only in the home country but also in the diasporic location.

Sexual violence is the most evil of all forms of violence. Hasina has been raped by Mr. Chowdhury who deceives her and makes use of her. Mr. Chowdhury says "you are my daughter; I like to bring you to my house. But what people will say? We are not related. I have no wife... 'if a girl comes to a man's house as servant there is no trouble. She must come as servant. Or as wife, then all is well' (BL 163). Hasina too feels ashamed of her sexual exploitation. According to the codes of patriarchy, when a man takes advantage of a woman sexually, the disgrace goes only to the female. It is not the man's conduct that is dishonourable but only the woman's reputation.

In another novel of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), one can find the discrimination and exploitation of half the human population on the basis of gender. Mariam, one of the female characters is married to Rasheed, who is around forty or forty-five years old. His first wife dies during childbirth. Mariam does not like this marriage but is forced into marriage with this man, much older to her. The temporary imprisonment of Mariam before her wedding ceremony also becomes the starting point for her lifelong marital sentence. Marriage with the brutal Rasheed becomes a penalty for her. Rasheed is more like a tormentor rather than a husband. As days go by, he becomes more verbally and physically abusive to his wives and daughter. He compels Mariam to participate in sex with him. The repeated brutal battering, kicking, slapping and verbal insults make her life miserable. It does not occur to her that she too can question the norms laid down by her family and society around her. Her upbringing as a poor, illegitimate child has made her

feel low and inferior. She spends her entire life by obeying others who tell her what to do and what not to do in a male dominated society.

Laila, another female character is an educated girl. Laila's mother spends all her time grieving for her two male children, her sons, Ahmad and Noor, who have been taken away to war. After the news of their death, she mourns their death by remaining bed-ridden most of the time. Laila knows that her mother will not value her as much as her sons. In Islamic community, male heirs are prized offspring while the female children are considered a burden. Rasheed decides to marry Laila even though he is around sixty now and Laila hardly fourteen; it has been eighteen years since Rasheed married Mariam, and now he desires the beautiful and educated Laila as his bride. Fourteen year old Laila is Rasheed's third wife. She is still expected to be a virgin, to have an intact hymen. The emphasis on virginity is applicable only to women in a patriarchal society. Laila hides a knife beneath the mattress with which she cuts her finger causing it to leave blood on the matrimonial sheets so that Rasheed will think that she is a virgin. This act also symbolizes the false nature of the marriage between Rasheed and Laila. Though Laila and Tariq truly love each other they cannot marry due to the social construction of marriage. It further exemplifies that their marriage does not have any element of respect or partnership.

Although Mariam's marriage to Rasheed is a sort of constant violence of all kinds. Physical violence occurs when Laila and Mariam decide to run away to Peshawar in Pakistan to escape the violence of their common husband, Rasheed. The attempt to flee ends in failure as the two women cannot travel alone and the man that they trust betrays them and absconds with their money. They are arrested and sent back to their husband. This reality is evident in the lives of Mariam and Laila, they try to take their fate in their own hands but the men in their country will not allow this. The physical violence is described in detail when Laila and Mariam reach home in a police car guarded by a soldier. Laila tries to protect Mariam from Rasheed and Rasheed kicks and punches Laila and her little daughter, Aziza without any thought to her protests. Mariam's beating begins downstairs. There is no cursing, screaming and



pleading. This indicates that beatings and their sounds are a common happening in this house. Mariam is hardened to this in such a way that she does not beg for mercy or even scream in pain. Laila pleads Rasheed for mercy, for at least one glass of water for the dying baby, but it is ignored by Rasheed. Finally, on the third day, they are released from the trauma after warnings, threats and beatings. In this way, all the three females suffer brutal consequences at the hands of a man, Rasheed.

Since the theory of patriarchy is the dominant position of men within a society, Man takes the lead to control and make decisions in the society. As a result, the patriarchal system demands a certain kind of masculine behaviour from men. In other words, men are expected to live up to and symbolise a narrow idea of masculinity that values brutality, aggression and sexual prowess over the other gender. Women experience violence as wives and daughters. They accept their men's brutality in a societal phenomenon which promotes their inferior position. Rasheed's two wives have tried to challenge his power as a husband by trying to free themselves of his bondage. Rasheed, the symbol of male power believes that he has the right to manhandle the women at home which confirms the practice of patriarchy. The wife is dependent on the husband who controls her socially, culturally and financially. Rasheed's contempt for his two wives is made evident. He treats both with the same distrust, scorn, and disrespect. Mariam finally throws one final blow upon Rasheed with the shovel and kills him. Mariam is aware of the consequences of her action. She dies in order to save Laila and her family. Mariam makes the crucial sacrifice for Laila and the children. She takes the blame, and eventually suffer the ultimate punishment for Rasheed's death.

In this study of two novels, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Brick Lane*, the authors suggest the policy of self-empowerment of women through confluence and convergence. In *Brick Lane*, the female characters develop into self – empowered women by coming together and refusing to accept their destiny unreservedly. Nazneen goes from being a complacent daughter and wife to an independent woman who makes a difference in her own life and in the lives of others. Hasina, who is strongly opposed

to the philosophy of waiting and suffering, makes every effort to make a happy life for her. Razia also gets a job after her husband dies and unburdens herself of other cultural shackles. She then earns her British citizenship. By the end of the novel, Razia helps to empower her friends when she sets up a sewing business. Almost all the women in the novel seem to do better without the men in their lives. The power is within them and they simply find it.

Similarly, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the two female protagonists Mariam and Laila suffer great physical and mental hardship. They join hands against their husband. It is their teamwork that gives them ultimate success. Mariam becomes the symbol of all those women who suffer the violence of patriarchy in her country. The women in the novel create strong bonds despite the efforts of their husbands and their Afghan government to reduce women's power. Many manifestations of violence against women are caused by the social structure of a patriarchal society. Women in such a partial setup are deprived of society's benefits and seem to be more vulnerable to struggle and suffering. In all societies where patriarchal family structure prevails, women become victims of their men in the families and other men as the events depict in both the novels.

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