

## WOMEN'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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### ABSTRACT

This research is a feminism analysis which aims to reveal the kinds of gender discrimination faced by women, and the attitudes of women towards gender discrimination in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. This study is a qualitative research employing content analysis method. Data analysis was conducted through six steps: organizing and preparing the data, reading and re-reading the data, coding the data, sorting the data, interrelating the description, and interpreting the meaning of description. The findings related to the first objective show that women in the novel experience four kinds of gender discrimination. They are (1) violence: sexual, psychological, and physical violence; (2) subordination: women are alienated in a remote place, sons are preferred from girls, women are forced to get married, women's ways of dressing are restricted, women's mobility is limited, and women are treated unfairly in polygamy; (3) stereotype: women are foolish and submissive; and (4) marginalization: from health facility and education. The second result is related to women's attitudes towards discrimination. Being influenced by many factors, three female characters show different attitudes. Nana shows her acceptance by having no resistance toward Jalil the oppressor, wreaking her anger on Jalil's children, and becoming self-destructive. Meanwhile, Mariam and Laila show their struggles by working in sisterhood to escape from Kabul, fighting Rasheed the oppressor, and using education to end discrimination.

**Keywords:** gender discrimination, women's attitudes, feminist literary criticism, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

### INTRODUCTION

Gender discrimination is a term to describe an unequal treatment which is based on gender. Even though nowadays in most parts of the world gender equality has been achieved, numerous issues of gender discrimination still exist in all aspects of life, ranging from cultural, political to economic fields. Gender discrimination can be in verbal abuse,

violence, threats, humiliation, or intimidating behavior or conduct.

Gender discrimination is widespread in many countries, one of them is Afghanistan. A 2011 survey by the Thomson Reuters Foundation (in Khan, 2012:1-2) found that Afghanistan is the most dangerous place for women. Women face many limitations, violence, and even

humiliation; about 87% of women face abuse and violence.

Despite the fact that gender discrimination obviously has a wide-ranging negative impact to everybody, the ways people behave towards it are different. Some women accept the discrimination and some others struggle against it. Women's attitudes towards the discrimination they face are important because it will change their lives forever.

Concerning gender discrimination, since decades ago, many people have created literature about women's lives. Through literature, they broaden people's knowledge about gender discrimination so that people can have a deeper level of thought and more concern about it. Moreover, it can inspire the discriminated women to challenge gender discrimination.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini is one of those literary works about women's lives in a patriarchal society. It tells about Afghan women named Nana, Mariam, and Laila who face gender discrimination along with the way they behave towards it.

It is interesting to scrutinize women's lives in Hosseini's novel because it is read by many people around the world. The researcher aims to analyze what kinds of gender discrimination which are faced by women in the novel and what are their attitudes towards it.

To analyze the problem about gender, feminist literary criticism is employed. Cuddon (1999:315) describes feminist literary criticism as an attempt to evaluate women's lives and experiences which are portrayed in any kind of literature, such as novel, drama and poetry.

Women can challenge literary works by reading as women, re-reading men's images of women, resisting the narrative point of view which is mostly masculine, and replotting female destiny which is usually portrayed to be the passive acceptance (Morris, 1999:13-33).

A theory about gender discrimination is proposed by Fakih. He (2012:12-13) divides gender discrimination into five kinds, namely marginalization, subordination, stereotype, violence and work load.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study is a descriptive qualitative method research, employing content analysis method, since the multiple data sources of this research are words (Creswell, 2007:38). The data were taken from Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* which was published in 2008 by Bloombury. The novel consists of 432 pages which are divided into four parts and fifty one chapters.

To gain the data, the researcher read the novel, took some notes related to the research's objectives, interpret the data that has been gathered, and categorizing the data based on the categories related to the kinds of gender discrimination and women's attitudes towards it.

The trustworthiness of the data was gained by providing rich, thick description; reading and re-reading the data; and conducting triangulation. The researcher consulted this study with two advisors and had discussions with peer-reviewers.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### A. Kinds of Gender Discrimination in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

#### 1. Violence

There are three types of violence namely physical violence, psychological, and sexual violence (Annisa, 2010:10-11).

##### a. Sexual Violence

In the novel, Nana is raped by Jalil her employer. Other female characters, namely Mariam and Laila experience marital rape by her husband, Rasheed.

##### b. Psychological Violence

Throughout Laila's and Mariam's marriage, their husband, Rasheed, often insults, mocks, and threatens them.

#### c. Physical Violence

Rasheed is a violent husband of Mariam and Laila. He will arbitrarily beat, kick, slap, choke his wives if they do not please him or simply if he is in bad mood.

Violence is used as a punishment if women do some mistakes. In addition, men may believe that violence is an acceptable method of maintaining control, resolving conflicts, and expressing anger.

## 2. Subordination

For centuries, women's subordination has become the war women fight for. Patriarchal system, which refers to the concept of male domination, has placed women in the inferior position.

### a. Women are alienated in a remote place

In a patriarchal society, men, including Jalil, emphasize the importance of their reputations. They will do anything in order to protect their names in order to meet their own ideas of social expectations. When Jalil knows that Nana is pregnant because of him, he is afraid of being judged by the society. Hence, he alienates Nana and her child into a clearing, far from Herat. He builds her a hut which Nana calls a rat hole. It implies that the place does not resemble a house.

**b. Women are forced to get married**

Mariam and Laila are two of many Afghan women who are set into a forceful marriage with the unwanted suitor named Rasheed. When Mariam is fifteen, she is forced to marry Rasheed by the family of Jalil, her illegitimate father. Differently, Laila is forced to marry because she is an orphan and pregnant.

The forceful marriage is really full of disgust for both Mariam and Laila because they have to spend their entire lives with a man they do not love. It is a portrayal of women's subordination where women have no control over their lives because the powerful men do.

**c. Sons are preferred from girls**

Son preference among society emerges due to the belief that sons are considered to be blessings and pride of the parents while girls are more likely to be burden to the family. When Mariam and Laila are pregnant, their husband, Rasheed, really hope the baby will be a boy. When Mariam suffers from miscarriage and when Laila gives birth to a daughter named Aziza, he becomes cruel and rude to them.

When Laila's second child, Zalmai, is born, Rasheed obviously shows different treatment for Zalmai and Aziza. He buys Zalmai toys, new clothes and many things

even when he is in bankruptcy. This preference for sons continues to devalue women and prohibit the view of women as equals throughout society.

**d. Women's ways of dressing are restricted**

In a patriarchal system, men manage every detail of women's lives including the way women dress up. In order to keep their honor and pride, Afghan women should not wear makeup, jewelry, and nail polish. Furthermore, they should wear *burqa*, a garment that covers whole body including face, every time they go out.

The *burqa* becomes a symbol of women's oppression because it gives women discomfort. When Laila and Mariam wear it, they feel hard to eat, cannot see things clearly and feel unfomfortable to walk. It is heavy and unnerving.

**e. Women's mobility is limited**

Women cannot go around the places they want because they are forbidden to travel unless they have male's guardianship or *mahram*. And if the Taliban see women travel alone, they will beat them severely and send them home.

Living condition becomes so hard for women with no male relatives around them, such as widows or wives, whose husbands are sick and are unable to travel

anywhere. They will be really prisoned at home. This rule is a form of women's subordination where men can control them.

**f. Women are treated unfairly in polygamy**

Afghanistan allows its people to do polygamy with up to four wives in the condition that a husband has to be able to deal justly with their wives (Saboor, 2005:20). Yet, polygamy becomes a form of gender discrimination when the husband treat his wives unfairly. In the novel, Rasheed treat Mariam and Laila differently.

The fact that Laila is younger and more beautiful than Mariam makes Mariam's position as Rasheed's first wife is shifted. He makes Mariam become Laila's servant.

**3. Stereotype**

**a. Women are Foolish**

A patriarchal society believes that men are superior with all capacity they have. It then emerges a stereotype that women are foolish. This stereotype pervades people's thinking, especially men, so that no matter how smart a woman is, she is still seen foolish. In addition, it also hampers women from getting education and it limits them to develop thier academic potential.

**b. Women are submissive**

Through stereotype, the society keeps shaping women to be submissive and obey what men say and ask. Traditional gender roles are socially constructed to elevate men's power and domination. In other hands, women have been socially constructed to rely on men and obeying their commands.

This stereotype strongly affects women to behave like what have been perceived even though it gives them disadvantages. In other words, no matter how bad men's commands are, women keep being submissive towards them. Unconsciously, this stereotype has taken women's freedom to live their lives on their own will.

**4. Marginalization**

**a. Marginalization from health facility**

Being sick is a big problem to women in Afghanistan because they are excluded from health facilities such as hospital and clinics. When Laila is about to give birth, they cannot get health service because the hospitals are meant only for men. Hence, Laila should go through operation without anesthetic because the only hospital available for women has nothing to give to patient. It is lack of staff and medicine.

This condition shows hypocrisy of the society where women should bear severe

pain during any operation and illness while men get health service that they need.

**b. Marginalization from education**

Education is not really forbidden for girls from the beginning of the story. Yet not all girls go to school to pursue their education. Mariam is one of the girls who never know how it feels to sit in a classroom. It is because Nana does not allow her to go to school.

Some years later, when the Taliban takes control over Kabul, girls cannot really go to school and cannot even study at homes. The Taliban destroy all things related to education, such as books, statues, poems, paintings, televisions, and museums. They leave nothing but the story that education has ever existed long time ago before their occupation.

If women insist to study, they have to do it quietly in their own houses because if the Taliban know that the girls are studying, they will beat them and burn all books that they have. The decay of education in Afghanistan occurs until the end of the Taliban's regime, in 2001.

**B. Women's Attitudes towards Gender Discrimination**

**1. Nana's acceptance towards Gender discrimination**

**a. Influencing Factors**

Nana's acceptance towards the discrimination she faces is influenced by many factors, namely, experiencing educational deprivation, becoming the object of patriarchal ideology, and believing in women's powerlessness.

Being raised by a lowly stone carver, she never gets education and then becomes a housekeeper in Jalil's house. The limitation of the knowledge that Nana gets makes her know nothing about her rights as a woman as well as how to claim it. Due to her lack of knowledge, she is easily influenced or shaped by the patriarchal ideology. What society believes will be her belief as well. Thus, when she is discriminated, she does not know how she should behave.

Patriarchal society always tries to implant their ideology to women. Women become the objects, who are taught to obey men and accept whatever happens to them as their fates. Nana's point of view about life becomes the representation of Afghan women, who are discriminated in their everyday life. Being uneducated makes Nana easily influenced by patriarchal thought. First, it is about schooling. Nana

sees school as an unimportant thing for women. Second, Nana emphasizes that women should endure sufferings in every condition.

One more thing that influences Nana to accept the discrimination is her belief that women are powerless. Patriarchal society believes that men are powerful and they have rights to control women. As the impact, women, including Nana, consider themselves powerless and incapable of fighting men because they are not as strong as men. Thus, when Nana is discriminated, she is unable to struggle, for she has no courage to do so.

#### **b. Forms of acceptance**

Nana's acceptance towards gender discrimination she faces can be seen when she faces Jalil; she has no resistance to Jalil. She also wreaks her anger on Jalil's innocent children and becomes self-destructive.

Even though Nana is the victim of Jalil's rape, but she has no resistance towards him because she always shows her politeness in front of him. Meanwhile, when Jalil is not around, she hates and curses him. The shift of Nana's attitude when Jalil is around shows how powerless a woman in front of her oppressor is. In spite of Nana's hatred towards Jalil, she changes to be a very different person in front of him. Nana's submission towards

Jalil is influenced by patriarchal society, which has placed men in a higher position than women.

Due to her fear towards Jalil, she cannot struggle to get her rights as a victim. She cannot even express her anger in front of him. Instead, she wreaks it on Jalil's innocent children. Jalil's two children always come once a month to her hut to bring her and Mariam rice and other things they need. When they come, Nana often insults them and even throws them with rocks. Nana also curses their mothers.

She may look better than other discriminated women in Afghanistan, who cannot even express their anger at all. Nana has successfully got her anger and frustration out of herself by insulting and throwing Jalil's boys with rocks. However, expressing anger to the wrong people cannot be said as struggle because struggling against discrimination means struggling to stop discrimination. Meanwhile, what Nana does is only an expression of disappointment towards Jalil and her own life.

The anger towards Jalil and frustration with her life are all she has to feel in her entire life. Since she is incapable of expressing her greatest anger towards Jalil, she turns it on herself. Even though sometimes she wreaks her anger on Jalil's children, but the greatest anger and frustration remains exist. As the

psychological consequences, she becomes self-destructive, i.e. she commits suicide.

## **2. Laila's and Mariam's Struggles against Gender Discrimination**

### **a. Influencing Factors**

Mariam's and Laila's attitudes to fight against patriarchy are influenced by their education, consciousness, and sisterhood.

Laila's education gives her insight and raises consciousness about equality between women and men. Education helps her to understand her rights and teach her how to claim them. Moreover, it also enables her to influence and encourage Mariam to get consciousness just like she does.

Being educated then makes Laila gain consciousness about her rights. She is also aware that women in a patriarchal society are subordinated, discriminated and even oppressed. Eventually, Mariam also gains the awareness of being discriminated after she learns many things from Laila.

As they live and share everything together in their house, they come to form a bond that makes them both sisters and mother-daughter to each other. Mariam and Laila learn a lot from each other. Mariam learns the truth behind the patriarchy from Laila and on the other hand, Laila learns so much about endurance from Mariam. Mariam gets the

awareness that she is subordinated and is discriminated by Jalil. Being together, they gain their strength to struggle against discrimination.

### **b. Forms of Struggle**

After getting aware of being discriminated and having courage to challenge patriarchy, Mariam and Laila then work together in sisterhood to escape from Kabul and run to Pakistan, use physical strength to fight Rasheed and use education to end patriarchy.

As Mariam and Laila are bonded in sisterhood, they empower each other in facing every problem in their lives. Being together, they gain the strength to struggle against discrimination from Rasheed. One day, they decide to escape from Kabul and run to Pakistan. They both pretend to be mother and daughter and ask a man to buy them tickets to Pakistan. Even though finally they fail to do that, but their effort has proven that sisterhood influences women's attitudes towards discrimination. Their sisterhood is so powerful that it can strengthen Laila and change Mariam to be a brave one.

Another form of struggle against discrimination is done through education. Laila becomes a teacher in a school. Becoming a teacher, Laila can teach anything to her students. She can give insight to them and wake them up from

patriarchal ideology. Even though education works invisibly, it is very crucial in ending discrimination; it can prevent men from discriminating women and make women aware of being discriminated. In long term, it can eliminate male's domination in a society.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Nana, Mariam, and Laila experience four kinds of gender discrimination throughout their lives: violence, subordination, stereotype, and marginalization. Related to violence, there are three types thereof, i.e. sexual, psychological, and physical violence. Women's subordination manifests itself in many forms: women are alienated in a remote place, sons are preferred from girls, women are forced to get married, women's ways of dressing are restricted, women's mobility is limited, and women are treated unfairly in polygamy. Meanwhile, there are two forms of women's stereotypes: women are foolish and submissive. Related to marginalization, there are marginalization from health facility and from education.

In addition, many factors influence their mindsets so that they show different attitudes towards the discrimination they face. Patriarchal ideology forces women, including Nana, to accept the discrimination. However, Mariam and

Laila have successfully freed themselves from patriarchal ideology by struggling against the discrimination.

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