

Feminist Politics of Representation: Portrayal of Afghan Women in Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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ABSTRACT

Much of the available literature on the representation of Afghan women speaks to the fact that they have been depicted, in the Western fiction and media alike, as passive victims of war, domestic violence and political repression. There is a remarkable consensus over and reinforcement of the popular images in these two forms of representations. The purpose of this paper, firstly, was to analyze Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* for the representations of Afghan women and to provide a feminist critique of those representations. Secondly, efforts have been made to answer the question whether Hosseini's representations conformed to the popular depictions of Afghan women or not. The findings reveal that Hosseini used his Privileged Location to his purpose but ended up under-representing Afghan women. Instead of challenging the stereotypes dominant in the Western media regarding Afghan women, his novel reinforced them. Moreover, his emphasis on the inevitable role of the US involvement in the liberation of Afghan women is rather too much. And as such, he has contributed to the Oriental discourse.

KEYWORDS: *feminism, representation, stereotyping, Afghan women, popular fiction, Western media*

INTRODUCTION

Apart from the Western media which represents Afghan women to readers, there is another, very vivid and influential, source of representation: the popular fictional narratives. Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is one such fictional narrative that focuses on the life and sufferings of Afghan women. The paper discusses the ways in which Hosseini portrays his female characters, especially Mariam and Laila who have come from two different backgrounds, in the broadest orientalist strokes. The purpose of this paper, firstly, is to analyze the novel for the representations of Afghan women and to know the response of feminism towards these representations. Secondly, it deals with the question that how far Hosseini has been successful in challenging or reinforcing the stereotypical representations of Afghan women that are dominant in the Western media. We will situate our arguments in feminist literary theory, with special reference to Spivak (1988 & 1999), Lorde (1984), Alcoff (1995) and Kaplan, (1997).

The main objective of feminist criticism "has always been political: it seeks to expose, not to perpetuate, patriarchal practices" [22]. In light of this statement, feminist theorists and practitioners become agents who act for reasons and their acts are intentional but yet directed, approved, restricted or censured by a socio-political structure that is complex in nature. The complexity of its nature is evident from the debates within feminist epistemology. Take, for example, the politics of representation which is the focal point of many debates in feminist theory and it poses problematic issues for feminist researchers and theorists. Feminist epistemology has effectively criticized and theorized about the politics of representation which is a two dimensional process, namely speaking *for* someone and speaking *of* someone but these two categories are sometimes under-represented, over-represented or mis-represented or often revisited and recovered as a ground for feminist efficacy. Thus, the practice of speaking *about* others and speaking *for* others is problematic.

A question arises here that how feminist theorists legitimize the practices of representation. Practices of representations should have 'political effectivity', which, according to Alcoff, must enable the empowerment of the oppressed [2]. But Alcoff's argument slips into a presupposition that one might have unmediated knowledge of who are the oppressed people and what is best in their interest. Unmediated knowledge of others is an impossibility. Hosseini uses political effectivity as a justification for representing Afghan women, for whom the oppression is presupposed, ignoring the impossibility of unmediated knowledge which undermines his claim.

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This sort of argument builds convenient and monolithic classifications of identity, for example ‘The Third World Women’, where oppression is presupposed. Therefore, a strategy of representation cannot be sustained on an unclear notion of political effectivity, which pursues to empower the oppressed because Hosseini has no transparent way of knowing who the oppressed people are and what is best or desirable for empowering them. Alcoff considers that the location of the author has an impact on political effectivity but it seems that she is arguing that using the ‘master’s tools’ is a legitimate way to destroy the ‘master’s house’ [19]. So, location is an important factor in the production of knowledge. But being an expatriate does not give a license to any Afghan diasporic writer of defining emancipation and deciding what values are more emancipatory for Afghan women than others.

Even political affectivity fails to provide solution to the dilemmas of ethical representation as it is linked with how feminist epistemologies rely on binaries such as ‘western/non-western’. Feminist epistemologies are, thus, caught up in legitimizing who cannot and who can employ representational practices for resistance purposes. Feminist critiques of representation potentially reproduce the divisions of ‘western-white’ and ‘non-western-non-white’. Feminist representational practices must, therefore, not assume to know, or have unmediated access to knowledge of ‘others’, for Spivak believes that full or complete knowledge of ‘others’ is an impossibility [33]. According to Spivak, while seeking ethical practices of representation, feminists need to keep in place the ‘(im)possible perspective of the native informant’ so that they might not get caught in some “identity forever” [33]. Using native informants and their confessionals tales in fiction are less problematic strategies of representations. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has not used these strategies. Instead, it relies on popular imaginings of Afghanistan and on the images of Afghan women which are dominant in the Western media.

Another problem is that any feminist theory which involves either ‘subject construction’ or ‘object formation’ (terms used by Spivak) cannot be separated from power inequalities as it involves representation [2]. According to Alcoff, engaging in such construction on the basis of the claim for producing knowledge is also problematic and she refers to it as the crisis of representation. The crisis of representation is further heightened by the fact that debates about representation are themselves productive of representation. The reason is that practices and meanings are not transparent and agreed upon and often tend to disguise the messy and complicated aspects of representation. Spivak has identified two types of representations; *darstellen* (to represent in the aesthetic sense) and *vertreten* (to represent or to speak for politically). She argues that in order to move ‘beyond representation’ and its problematic aspects, there is an inclination in feminist identity politics to blend these two sorts of representations [33]. Hosseini has conflated these two types of representations and the charge from Spivak directly concerns him. He should have questioned how his work is producing the representation of ‘others’.

Thesis Statement

The representations and the images of Afghan women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* correspond exactly to the popular images of Afghan women in the Western media and film. Thus, the novel contributes to the Orientalist discourse. Hosseini would have rather challenged the stereotypical images of Afghan women prevalent in the Western media and film but he failed to shed them and ended up under-representing Afghan women. Moreover, he has used political effectivity, privileged location and imagining as representational strategies which are not devoid of their politics and tend to Orientalize Afghan women.

Rationale of the Study

Scholars like Ansari, 2008 [3]; Khan, 2001 [15] and Klaus & Kassel, 2005 [17] agree with media scholars Stabile and Kumar (2005) that Afghan women are portrayed in the Western media as oppressed and passive targets of terrorists who are in dire need of protection. This portrayal served as a vehicle for legitimizing the US military invasion and it is called protection scenario: a term used to foreground the argument for invasion [34]. The Protection scenario serves as one of the grounds on which the US government sought to legalize the war in the eyes of the masses. Now, after that more than one and half decade has passed to the US invasion of Afghanistan, interrogation of those popular fictional narratives is needed that claim to produce knowledge about Afghanistan and also claim to use the produced knowledge for the empowerment and emancipation of the oppressed. So, the novel was analyzed to unveil the truth behind such claims.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to investigate the second objective of this paper, which is to find out whether Hosseini has shed and challenged or produced and reinforced the dominant Western media images of Afghan women, review of media images is inevitable. For this purpose, film and media representations are being analyzed for pointing to us out the popular images of Afghan women.

The question is that how representations are constructed and applied in films. The same question was in the mind of Nushin Arbabzada who had an opportunity to be the cultural adviser to a Hollywood film on Afghanistan. Her experience during this project made her disillusioned with the practices of representation in films. Until then, she was unable to understand that how the stereotypical images of Afghan women are being created and presented on media. Instead of correcting the crude inaccuracies of the film, she ended up as a burqa-clad extra. According to her, the storyline of the film was based on, "an unimaginative take on an outdated Orientalist fantasy at best and crude political propaganda at worst" [26], the familiar tale of an Afghan girl who is forced to marry against her will. Moreover, the Chinese female director added Chinese morality to the film's Arab dress code and Iranian accent, leaving little that could have been called Afghan.

The irony of the situation was on its highest when the cultural adviser was asked to wear a burqa and become an extra. She was not ready to get credit for this farce with cultural authenticity by being a cultural adviser to such a film. She concludes: "a realization dawned on me: so this is how it happens, the misrepresentation of Afghan women. Then I heard the word "Action!" and the camera began to roll, filming a crowd of self-righteous female Western extras dressed in fake Afghan burqas." [26] Below is a review of some films and media representations which have been searched for their common traits.

The first characteristic is that images during the Cold War are in contrast to those showed after the 9/11. *The Beast* is a movie based on the play *NANAWATAII* by William Mastrosimone [29]. The movie shows the local resistance against the Russian invasion. It is a story of a village near Kandahar which has been sacked by the Russian forces through the help of tanks. It is this Tank the locals call *BALAA* (The Beast) and are after to destroy. Symbolically, the tank represents the Soviet Union, its power and technological advancement, which the locals were able to destroy at the end. They are shown as freedom fighters and *Mujahidin* because they were then playing their parts in the American Cold War. Now, the same people who are resisting American invasion are termed as terrorists.

Another difference observed in the films belonging to this category is the treatment of women and their representations. None of them are wearing burqa, though burqa was present well before Taliban, and they have been shown as strong, decisive and walking shoulder to shoulder with men, fighting against a common enemy who gave the final blow in the destruction of The Beast and in the killing of the commander. This portrayal of Afghan women served the American agenda of Cold War then and the present stereotyping, burqa-clad women, is serving the agenda of 'War on Terror' now.

Second feature of these films is that figures of resistance and strong women characters are ignored. *Osama*, a Persian film by Sadique Barmak, starts from presenting a mob of burqa-clad women protesting and chanting slogans: "we are non-political"... "give us work, we are hungry" [4]. The protest is crushed down and dispersed by water spray from Taliban. A doctor and her unnamed child, *Dukhter* (daughter), are hindered by the protest on their way to the hospital to claim her salary for the services she has rendered in the hospital. The suffering of this small family of three women (mother, daughter and grandmother) is the story line of this film. It is a story of how a twelve years old girl adopts the attire of a boy, Osama, to become the bread earner or 'the Man in the house' for her family. Osama was then forced to attend *Madrasa* (religious seminary) and become a *Talib*. But her secret is revealed to the *Mullah* who despite having three wives marries this underage girl.

The film is full of stereotypes and popular images like burqa-clad women, stoning of an adulteress in public, polygamy, child and forced marriages etc. It is said that Taliban forbade the practice of female doctors in Afghanistan but it is also a fact that an agency of women, of course limited in number, was present during the Taliban rule who were able to negotiate with moderate mullahs to continue working in hospitals. Example of a surgeon Suhaila Sadiq can be given in this regard who worked in a military hospital, treating both male and female patients. There, she also organized courses for female practitioners [12]. Same is the case of education. Despite the ban on girls' education, Taliban government ignored the many ghost schools in people's houses. Taliban agreed during the latter part of their rule to open formal schools for girls in the capital and Mullah Umar's native city, Kandahar. As for as jobs are concerned, the World Food Programme (WFP) persuaded Taliban to sanction Afghan women home run bakeries, giving them employment, from where they provided cheap bread to the people of the country [31]. This agency of women, limited in number though, during the Taliban rule and after the fall of it, has not been appreciated by their self-proclaimed and the so called feminist champions.

The powerful side of Afghan women is missing from most of the Western media representations but these representations also surprisingly miss the US involvement in the deteriorated situation of Afghanistan and put all the blame for the women's worse condition on Taliban. If we look at the process of empowering Afghan women, we would be able to know that five scores years ago Amir Abdur Rehman Khan in a decree declared that women shall receive the rights granted to them in Islam. This decree also outlawed child and forced marriages. It aimed to protect women's rights by giving them right to inheritance, second marriage and divorce. Women have been given equal rights with men by the Constitution of Afghanistan since 1923. In 1964 Afghan women got the right to vote.

The US media has forgotten the fact that Afghan women has experienced this patriarchal control, of which the US army is trying to liberate them, started when Kabul was taken over by the US-backed mujahidin. In the rescue operation the US Army, in just one month dropped more than half a million tons of bombs which is approximately 20 kg per Afghan citizen including women and children. But these bombings never liberated Afghan women, just made them flee their country to become refugees, adding to already high number of refugee camps. During the turbulence with Soviet Union and the civil war, 343 refugee camps were established across NWFP (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and Baluchistan only, with an approximate 3.5 million population by 1992 [16]. The displacements resulting from the ongoing war on terror are unimaginable.

Another category is of those movies which are based on journalistic attempts of knowing and re-locating Afghanistan. At the beginning of the conflict/war in Afghanistan the coalition forces were accused of cutting-off the fingers of their kills for luck but these charges have never been proven. In order to investigate the mystery around the tale, a journalist (Nick Stahl as Luke Benning) who has visited Afghanistan seven times representing three different newspapers, is once more on the soil. In fact, he has seen this Canadian sniper cutting off the finger of his kill, but the editor will not run the story because of no photographic evidence. He came to the conclusion that in Afghanistan things are not as they look, everything is so deceiving, the people the culture and even the landscape; a pure oriental view reaffirmed. During the course of this investigation he came across a terrorist firing at him, in order to escape death, he also shot at him several times and was convinced that he had killed the person but the viewers know that he is mistaken. He concludes: "I wanted to find the finger. I wanted the place to make sense. I wanted the truth...but there is no sense to it, I just killed a man. You come here; you got to play by Afghan rules" [6].

The film is somewhat critical of the policies regarding war on terror in Afghanistan because it puts a question in front of the viewers that why so well armed Tourists preferred Afghanistan. But the popular images can also be seen throughout the movie for example the depiction of the stupidity of locals and the disguise of Luke as a burqa-clad woman. The conclusion drawn by the investigating journalist corresponds to the stereotypical view that the orient, here Afghanistan, is mysterious (mysterious in the sense of deceiving because things are not like what they seem).

The above reviewed films missed the other side of the canvas, the positive and powerful side of Afghanistan, as well as, the negative side of the US led war on terror. *Afghanistan Unveiled* (2003) is a documentary shot by fourteen young female journalists who received training as video journalists for one year at the *Aina* Afghan Media and Culture Center in Kabul. These journalists were trying to give voice to the plights and sufferings Afghan women who continue to endure in the liberated Afghanistan. For this purpose, taking advantage of the little freedom available to them, these journalists visited Afghanistan from Bamian to Herat [18].

Until the Afghan women didn't prove to be politically relevant/useful to the United States, the miseries of Afghan women were mainly ignored by mass media. It was after the argument (that the war is going to liberate Afghan women) presented by the Bush administration that the main stream media suddenly took interest in burqa-clad women. They were represented as victims who needed US liberation and protection. This documentary challenges such constructions. In Bamian, the city which caught the attention of the world for the statues of Buddha destroyed by Taliban, the Hazara people, the world has forgotten about, tell their story. The hope and courage of these people is remarkable in the face of extreme deprivation.

In Herat no one is ready to talk to them because of the fear of the local warlord, Ismail Khan, who treats women with an iron hand. Finally, a young woman agreed to tell her story. She attributed her miserable condition to the US war and bombing. A cluster bomb landed near her house killing most of her family members. The narrator explains that for this woman "the priority is not to unveil her *chaddaur* (veil) which hides her worn clothes, but to find money to feed her family." [18] For these journalists, it was very shocking that outside Kabul, lives of women have little changed. They are still traumatized by the warlords. In Badakshan the story is the same, even though Karzai government has established the "Ministry of Women" there.

Iranian filmmaker Yassamin Maleknasr in her documentary *Afghanistan: the Lost Truth* (2003) tries to capture the lives of the professional and middle class people by a journey through Afghanistan and to show their desperate desire to present a picture of Afghanistan which is not all about war and poverty. Many of the interviewed women and girls wished to become doctors, engineers, teachers, lawyers and journalists. It is evident from their conversation that they have rejected the stereotypical expectations expected of them to become housewives or homemakers. Such expressions shattered the stereotypical images of Afghan women as docile victims with no political views or desire of their own. Sima Samar, the Minister for Women's Affairs, and Soheila Sedigh, the Minister of Health, were also interviewed. Both are doctors and have achieved success. Such interviews remind us of the time before the US invasion and the rising of Taliban, when women occupied many key positions in Afghanistan [20].

A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS: CONFORMING THE POPULAR IMAGES OF AFGHAN WOMEN

Veil/Burqa

Scholars agree that the women of Afghanistan have been mentioned in the Western media (texts and photographs alike), more often, with reference to the veil as a symbol of their oppression [8, 17 & 33]. After the fall of Taliban the same media was swamped with the photos of Afghan women removing their veils. And the images printed after that show Afghan women in less stereotypical roles; portraying them as more equal to their Western viewers.

In opposition to the popular view regarding burqa as a symbol of female oppression, Sheida Shirvani (2002) argues on the contrary that women in the Muslim countries see burqa as a vehicle of “exerting personal control and forcing others to deal with the person without the complication of [their] physical form” [36]. They opt burqa as part of a search for dignity and status in their societies, as a coping strategy to gain or maintain social esteem, and as a form of self-expression. So, in the context of Afghanistan, Shirvani (2002) maintains that during the Taliban regime, the veil worn by Afghan women was “an enforced symbol of their gendered social position, not of their sex”. [36] However, the case of burqa is not so simple. For example, in Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, both protagonists (Mariam and Laila) wear burqa but interestingly it gives them a sense of protection from the accusing fingers and male gaze of the society. Mariam, being an illegitimate, struggles to run away from the shameful secrets of her past and to get away from the looks of the people. On the other hand, Laila has a superb past that mocks her present but she has to bear her contemptible marriage with Rashid for the sake of her daughter. Both feel safe under the veil because they do not have to worry about the scrutinizing gaze of the society which seeks to dig and unveil their shameful present and disgraceful past, respectively.

Veil or Purdah has been recurrently mentioned in the novel which has become a symbol of women oppression in the dominant Western media. But such images are used as justification for war in Afghanistan, though the problem of burqa and the symbolism attached to it are not so simple. After the 9/11 attacks, burqa became the prominent sign of an invisible enemy that threatened the whole Western civilization. As Laura Bush has put it in an address: “Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror—not only because our hearts break for the women and children of Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan, we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us.” [5] Such popular images were foregrounded by mainstream media and the Bush administration, making Taliban deserve only our wrath for their mistreatment of women.

After the Taliban fled from Kabul it was triumphantly noted by *New York Times* that now women can wear *burqas* “out of choice” rather than compulsion. But the following examples will sufficiently illustrate that choice has nothing to do with the wearing of veil. In 1994, French government denounced the decision of Muslim school girls to wear headscarves as injurious to the French public life and thus banned this practice from public schools. In the same fashion, more than 25000 women were stopped from attending Turkey’s colleges in two years, from 1998 to 2000, because they refused to uncover their heads. Similarly, hundreds of employees were either fired or transferred for this reason [23]. In all these cases the women pleaded that it was the expression of their personal faith to adopt veil. But such pleas went unheard.

One reason of such powerful response provoked by the matter of veil, even from the feminist sector, is its symbolism. Many French feminists supported the ban. As Elizabeth Badinter has put it: “The veil ... is the symbol of the oppression of a sex. Putting on torn jeans, wearing yellow, green, or blue hair, this is an act of freedom with regard to social conventions. Putting a veil on the head, this is an act of submission. It burdens a woman’s whole life.” [24] People opposed to the adoption of veil have frequently discussed its symbolic meaning. But the question is more complicated than suggested by Bandinter here. In the contemporary socio-political conflicts, veil has been given many meanings, so associating it with one singular meaning, say, ‘symbol of women oppression’, would be unconvincing. In Afghanistan the veil was forced on women on threat of violence but in France, Muslim girls had adopted it as a protest against the assimilated life styles of their parents. In Turkey in the 1920s women were forced to unveil, but now the practice of veiling has gained popularity as a protest against the rigid policies of the government who insist on dictating the ways of personal religious practices.

But even such voluntary adoption of veil by Muslim women is considered a part of patriarchal practices and is termed by feminists as false consciousness: an internalization of patriarchal values by women who live in the confines of asphyxiating traditional societies. So, a Muslim woman can either be veiled and thus captive and subordinate or uncovered, even then subordinate to some extent. But we need to think outside of this simple binary opposition of freedom and captivity. As in case of the Western life style, can its dresses be arranged so easily on the either side of this divide. No, it is not being looked at from the same logic of captivity and freedom elsewhere. So, it is required of those who oppose the adoption of veil to move with caution because to speak of the symbolic meanings in these contexts require a more analytical work on their part.

The Missing Side

The Western media and Hosseini both failed to show the other side of the picture; the strong side of Afghan women. Despite the patriarchal rule and the oppressed condition of Afghan women, they were not voiceless, faceless and powerless. As shown by many studies, Afghan women were able to fight for their survival and to launch political struggle (as documented by Rostami, 2003; Ellis, 2000; Moser, 1989 & Skaine, 2002) for the reclaiming of their rights and furthering their enhancement. Even after the decades of war and turbulence, Afghan women were able to develop gender survival strategies. They worked in different forms e. g. organizations, trusts, networks and communities and at individual level.

Unlike Mariam and Laila who are on the receiving end in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Rostami [30] has uncovered how bravely Afghan women have devised ways to cope with the requirements of life, even under the extreme kinds of oppression. They have devised ways to survive and formulate their objectives with restricted resources. When the Soviet Union took control, women showed much of the grass-root opposition to them. As illustrated by Ellis, women organized huge anti-government protests and demonstrations in Kabul. Female students also ran anti-government rallies all over Kabul which continued for days. Force was used to crush these protests; resulting in the death of thirty female and twenty male students, and thousands other were being arrested by the police [9].

However, women's activism was not limited to protests and rallies. They also participated in armed struggles against the enemy which included assassination, abduction and bombing the enemy [35]. Underground organizations of women had three sections: one group was assigned to investigate suspected people who cooperated with the enemy, the second group would follow them in order to confirm their connections and the last group would carry out assassinations. They often used their burqas to hide the weapons [9]. This was the story of the cities and in the rural areas, women prepared meals for the *Mujahidin* and delivered goods to them in the hills. In return, women paid a substantial price for such activities. Many of them were arrested, tortured and executed.

Women continued participation in politics actively during the rule of Taliban as well. In 1996, poor beggar women protested to persuade the governor making it compulsory on the shopkeepers to accept small currency notes [35]. Alongside protests and rallies, they organized to run underground schools to fulfill their practical needs of education and handicraft training [25]. They continued their struggle despite strict check and persecution from Taliban. They even encouraged other women to join them or start their own struggle to reclaim their rights. The Revolutionary Afghan Women's Association (RAWA) is one such example which advocated women participation in the political arena, demanding the right to education, training, and employment [27]. During all this while they remained within the Islamic fold [21]. These are very strong examples of political activism and these are true standpoints but Hosseini has intentionally missed this side. His novel covers a large portion of the conflicted history of Afghanistan: the attack of the Soviet Union, the Taliban rule and the US invasion. But he was unable to find a single female figure of resistance, in order to give her some credit in his novel.

It is evident from the above given examples that Afghan women were not "passive targets of policies or the victims of distorted development", like Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, rather "they are also shapers and makers of social change" [8], who sought ways to move forward despite the unfavorable odds. But these strong social catalytic characters are missing in Hosseini's narrative.

Taliban or Wars: A Misrepresentation of Facts

Spivak has powerfully exposed the problematic ways through which oppressed people are represented by "benevolent" academics in her essay [32]. She argues that intellectuals place themselves as unbiased communicators of the voices of the oppressed people and objects that:

... between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-construction and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third world woman' caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development [32].

This is very true in case of Afghanistan because the response from the academia was in favor of war. Many of them failed to link the worse condition of Afghanistan and its women to the previous US policies. As part of their Cold-war strategy the US supported the extremist amongst the Afghan militant groups. The US media surprisingly failed to connect this massive economic and military support as a reason to the prevailing predicament of Afghan women. The US played an important role by their silence in creating the miserable condition for Afghan women. Concomitant to this silence was the recharged enthusiasm, within academia and among general public, for US military operation which characterized the response towards the huge number of casualties resulting from the US bombing and the threatening famine that continued to aggravate due to this campaign.

Hosseini, like many other writers, has associated the worse condition of women in the country to Taliban. It has been shown that a war is going on among different unnamed fraction of Afghanistan and one of them is of Taliban. But anyone aware of the history of this region can account for it that long before the arrival of Taliban; Afghan women struggled for their basic rights. Outside of a few urban areas, the patriarchal rule and tribal laws have denied women their right to work, education, health, and independence—all of this made worse by three decades of war, displacement, and anarchy. The US government and media do not acknowledge these as contributory factors to the plight of Afghan women. They put all the blame on Taliban.

Against such a backdrop, it is also a fact that Afghanistan was a neglected part of South West Asia for the US until it was invaded by the Soviet Union in 1979. Jimmy Carter issued a directive to start covert operations in Afghanistan by supplying arms and funds to the Afghan *Mujahidin*. The purpose was to harass the Russian forces in Afghanistan. By 1986 it had become the largest covert operation since World War II. More than three billion dollars were funded to *Mujahidin*. When an official of the CIA was questioned about the funding to Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, leader of one militant group and famous for throwing acid on women's faces for not wearing a veil, he explained, "Fanatics fight better" [7]. This policy of the US, over the course of ten years, created a political environment, the predictable outcome of which was the emergence of Taliban. Hosseini, too, surprisingly misses to associate the worse condition of Afghan women to the US policies. But he could not have deviated from the already accepted course of action because he would have been labeled as soft on Taliban and antithetical towards the cause of Afghan women.

Moreover, Hosseini suggests a relatively mild picture of women's condition before the rule of Taliban. The Taliban era is not only shown in contrast to the period after the US invasion but to its preceding time as well. According to the novel, the communist regime was "a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan" [13]. But it is a common knowledge for the people interested in the field that women have suffered long before the ills Hosseini is trying to attribute to Taliban. Afghanistan had for many years the highest rates of infant and maternity mortality. Adding to this was the factor of two decades of wars, disturbing the whole social balance. In these conditions, making Taliban solely responsible for the women's situation in Afghanistan, ignoring the US funding to the more violent groups seems an attempt to simplify a vastly complicated problem.

In order to attribute all the ills to Taliban, facts and data are being misrepresented on a large scale. Hosseini tells of Kabul when Taliban struggled for taking over the power: "Insults were hurled. Fingers pointed. Accusations flew. Meetings were angrily called off and doors slammed. The city held its breath. In the mountains, loaded magazines snapped into Kalashnikovs"; and describes the people "as helpless as old Santiago watching the sharks take bites out of his prize fish" [13]. He has also been fed these distorted images and misrepresentation of facts through exposure to Western media and their awareness campaigns. Here is an example of this sort of misrepresentation of facts. Taliban's ban on girls' education only affected a tiny urban minority because the majority lived in rural areas, where there were a few schools. Moreover, approximately 75% of Afghans were illiterate, in which the ratio of women was 90%. No one mentions the Taliban's policy to disarm the population and the security surveillance which enabled women after years to go out without the fear of being raped. This peace rapidly disintegrated after the Taliban's exodus from Kabul. Sensitive writers have documented this that Taliban policies rarely affected the majority of rural women. In a New Yorker's published article it is stated that just outside the urban areas, "one sees raised paths subdividing wheat fields...in which men and women work together and the women rarely wear the burka; indeed, since they are sweating and stooping so much, their heads often remain uncovered. The Taliban has scarcely altered the lives of uneducated women, except to make them almost entirely safe from rape". [38]

Hosseini has also presented a very changed picture of Afghanistan after the fall of Taliban. The last lines of the novel present the peaceful days of Afghanistan. Although, it is a very brief description, yet it is in a powerful contrast to the previous parts. He uses many symbols to state his point, for example rain. He describes: "The drought has ended. It snowed at last this past winter, knee-deep, and now it has been raining for days. The Kabul River is flowing once again. Its spring floods have washed away Titanic City". [13] He has shown that people are full of hope, painting and building their houses. Children are going to schools. Parks and theaters have been reopened. But has the condition of women changed so dramatically, as suggested in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. What good the US invasion brought for Afghan women? It was hoped that after the fall of Taliban the situation in Afghanistan will improve for women. But a report shows that even though the reign of Taliban has ended, violence against women has not stopped. More than 100 women have reportedly committed suicide. "In 2006, more than 1,650 cases of violence against women were registered with Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission". [39] What about those many unregistered cases of violence which are never recorded and documented?

Though such data was available to Hosseini, even then he misrepresented facts; it seems that he was clear enough in his agenda of attributing all the ills to Taliban that he kept any ambiguity out of his case. Taking these concerns into account, it is necessary for anyone, who wishes to help Afghan women, to adopt a more nuanced and careful strategy of representation, confessional tales for example. But remember that anyone who attempts to widen

the horizon of the discussion to other issues than the admittedly brutal ways of Taliban might be labeled as soft on Taliban, and as antithetical to the interests of women [28]. Hosseini did not want to be labeled as such. That's the reason his work was packaged and marketed and is a huge success.

The Outsider Within or the Insider Out

Feminist epistemology recognizes the socio-historical location and its role in shaping the experiences of the epistemic agents and the knowledge that it produces. In representing others, according to Alcoff, the location of the speaker is significant. Location is considered potentially a valued contribution to knowledge but some privileged locations are 'discursively dangerous' as well [2]. The race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and capabilities of an agent are important factors in laying the limits of what we are allowed, able or restricted to know.

The oppressed, in order to survive in the social structures, need to understand the ways of oppression, their own condition as the oppressed as well as the oppressor. Thus, they get a double vision which is not available to nor required of the oppressor. For example in New Zealand the locals had to learn the language of the colonizer in order to survive and not on the contrary. Thus, the colonizer is restricted to his mono-visual view of the world while the colonized managed to enter, somehow, to the world of the colonizer to see the world from their perspective as well. Bell Hooks, a black feminist, describes the advantage gained by her while living in Kentucky thus: "Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out ... we understood both". [11] Such a person is called 'the outsider within', those who straddle both sides of the social divide.

On the same token, Hosseini's work, firstly, is significant because of his privileged location and secondly, on account of its wider readership across the globe: reaching more than 20 million people worldwide, and being translated into different languages, and receiving high critical and favorable reviews. As such, the novel continues to influence notions and shape the views of the Western readers about Afghan women, and eventually determine their decisions about the world of Afghan women. Indeed, for them the narratives about Afghan women and what they understand throughout their study of these narratives is more powerful and real than statistics and facts [40].

The scope of these narratives is not only limited to those readers for whom Afghanistan is far away from their perceptual grasp, but it also influences those who have been exposed to the glimpses of Afghanistan [37]. These narratives are capable of changing the reality and to single out the realities that most befit the narrators' ideology and agenda. Hosseini has taken advantage of his privileged location but the question is that whether he has been successful in depicting the true picture of Afghan women, after having gotten double vision, for being an outsider within or has he confirmed the stereotypical images shown repeatedly in the Western media. The fact is that he has under-represented Afghan women and his work has not helped them in any way, except foregrounding the way for the US intervention. Thus, he has functioned not as an *outsider within*, rather as an *insider out* and his privileged location is, then, questionable. That's why feminist strategies of representation reproduce the problems they seek to escape. Thus, ethical strategies of representing others need to be based on working, responsibly, within the framework of impossibility, not trying to put it aside [33]. Feminists need to be responsible in representing and investigating other cultures, so as to avoid the mystification and naturalization of 'others' [14]. If it fails then what (representing other) appears to be a commitment to global feminism easily turns out to be an act of Western imperialism.

A Thousand Splendid Suns, instead of challenging the portrayals of Afghan women in the Western media, reinforces the stereotypical images. These images would be accepted as more authentic and true, for they are coming from an Afghan writer who is well aware of the country's history and culture. But feminist might object to these representations on grounds of the author's sex. How can a male be so sure of women's needs? It is also problematic to legitimize such representations on the basis of giving voice and emancipation to women because, according to Ahmed (1998), Hosseini has no authentic/unbiased way of knowing which values are more emancipatory for women than others. She says that one must not lose sight of who is defining desirable effects for whom in feminist politics. She states, "to argue against the self-evident nature of the category of emancipatory values... is to argue that 'we' need to make decisions about what values are more emancipatory than others, as well as what may constitute 'emancipation'". [1] Moreover, the ethnicity of the author might as well be questioned. The dominant culture shown in the novel is Pashtun. But there are three other ethnical groups in Afghanistan namely Hazara, Uzbek, and Tajik. And as such, the Pashtun women representations in the novel may not be representative of other ethnic groups in the country.

Femininity: A Source of Strength or a Cause of Frailty

Mariam and Laila have accepted their lives as they are but they also, sometimes, resist male domination. Their resistance is a mixed response triggered by maternal love and sentimentalism. Such causative behavior is the result of their feminine strength. But in the novel, patriarchal ideals such as forced marriages, domestic violence and a sense of male ownership underlie the vision of femininity as frail victims. Moreover, the female subordination, ignorance and dependence on male render Afghan women powerless and fragile against patriarchal domination.

There is another theme in the novel, an extension of the previous one, freedom of women through protection. In the case of Mariam, she began to experience adversities when she lost the protection of her ideal figures, Jalil and Mullah Faizullah. Same is the case with Laila; her life was superb as long as she enjoyed the sanctuary provided to her by her father. Apart from her father, Tariq is the second man in Laila's life on whom her dependence is apparent in the novel. It is both "lovely and terrible" when she learns that Tariq has a gun to protect her [13]. Soon after their disappearance, she experienced the same agony Mariam was passing through. Again, it was Tariq who came back from Pakistan to rescue her and set for her a new life in Pakistan. She then decides to go back to Kabul and take part in the peace building and reconstruction of Afghanistan, resulting from the direct intervention of US military. She works there as a teacher, as a devoted mother and a successful woman, her happiness is flourishing but the compelling roles of Tariq and US-led Western intervention are also prominent. The view that Afghan women need protection has been reaffirmed in the novel and thus it turns out to be a typical attempt of justifying US invasion of Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

Representation of other cultures and *others* is as old a phenomenon as human history itself. But representations are intrinsically political in nature and are used for the production of knowledge, which is then used for imperialistic agendas. Same is the case with Afghanistan and its representations in the Western Popular fiction and media; the representations have been taken for granted. Popular images of Afghan women have been repeatedly represented in the Western media and fiction alike. And such simplified stereotypical images provided a late justification for the US forces to invade Afghanistan.

The reviewed literature unveiled that how popular images of Afghan women are maintained by the Western media and films. These representations have served, so far, as the shaper of public opinions on/about the Afghan women. Moreover, it pointed out the fact that these portrayals surprisingly missed the positive and powerful side of Afghan women, in which they are decisive, active, and versatile and have a voice in shaping their own lives. Likewise, the reviewed literature suggested that there is a huge contrast between the portrayals of Afghan women before and after the US invasion. The fiction and films produced after the fall of Taliban show a vast improvement in the condition of women in Afghanistan, especially their contribution in the socio-political contexts, which is totally missing from the representations of Afghan women during Taliban and other regimes. Instead, those representations remained restricted to show the ills of Taliban and to put all the blame of women's worse condition in the country on their heads. Some documentaries, however, have gone beyond representation, giving an impartial account of women lives in Afghanistan, suggesting that condition of rural women have not changed much. They are still under the tyranny of warlords and patriarchy. Many of the interviewed women attributed their present worse situation and despair to the ongoing US war on terror in the region.

Overall, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* conveys the passivity of Afghan women who have no say in the decision making process of their lives. They yearn for male protection, whether that be in the shape of Tariq who appeared like a knight for Laila's rescue or the US-led forces who finally intervened and wiped out the remaining dismal portion of her life. Hosseini's point of view regarding the empowerment and emancipation of Afghan women is largely dependent on reinforcing the need for patriarchal ideology and male protection and this is called protection scenario. Moreover, he places much emphasis on the inevitable role of US involvement in giving a new shape to the lives of Afghan women. Hosseini has used the privileged location to his purpose but even then has offered a portrayal of Afghan women which is not realistic; rather it helped in the authentication of the popular representations in the Western media, instead of challenging them. Even political effectivity fails to legitimize such practices of representation. Thus, he has contributed to the Orientalist discourse, which is a compelling act, while the truth is that he could have been more cautious, respectful and realistic in his treatment of Afghan women in his novel.

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