

THE OPPRESSION AGAINST WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN PORTRAYED IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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Abstrak

Artikel ini merupakan contoh kritik sastra yang mengupas jenis penindasan yang dialami oleh perempuan dalam novel '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*' karya Khaled Hosseini dan bagaimana cara mereka menghadapi penindasan. Dengan menggunakan teori penindasan oleh Iris muda, penelitian ini mencoba untuk menggambarkan penindasan yang dialami oleh Mariam dan Laila di dalam novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya lima jenis penindasan, diantaranya eksploitasi, marginalisasi, ketidakberdayaan, imperialisme budaya, dan kekerasan yang dialami oleh dua tokoh wanita tersebut. Kelima penindasan ini berasal dari suami dan masyarakat di mana mereka tinggal. Mariam cenderung untuk bertahan atas penindasan yang dialami, sementara Laila cenderung untuk melawan. Tapi pada akhirnya, baik Mariam dan Laila melawan penindasan untuk menentukan kehidupan mereka masing-masing.

Kata Kunci: penindasan, penindasan perempuan

INTRODUCTION

A Thousand Splendid Suns has been published in 60 countries and translated into many languages. From those achievements *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has accomplished, this novel is worthy to be analyzed. Women oppression is one of social issues exist in the novel. Iris Young quoted in her article *Five Faces of Oppression in Oppression, Privilege, & Resistance*, oppression can be defined as "an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people" (Frye, in Young, 1992: 41).

Mariam and Laila represent the women oppressed in Afghanistan as it is clearly depicted by Khaled Hosseini. This novel tells the story about the struggle of two women in finding their freedom in a life of torments from their abusive husband in an unsupported circumstance. This study is to describe the women oppression in Afghanistan in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Sun* through the description of oppression of

Mariam and Laila both from their husband and surrounding society and on how they deal with the oppression. Hence, this analysis will be based on feminist perspective.

METHODOLOGY

Feminism is a fight for the rights of women, as bell hooks quoted the definition from her book *Margin to Center* and stated it in her book *Feminist is for Everybody*, "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression," (hooks, 2000:1).

Feminism itself has grown since its initial emergence; it is divided into three waves, the first wave was in 1848-1920, the second wave was in 1960-1990 and the third wave was in 1990-present. Each wave fought for different things, the first wave fought for the rights of women to vote in general election, because at that time women were not allowed to vote. While in the second wave, feminism fought for economic and social equality, and in the third wave, is to be determined, this consideration is taken from (http://www.umsl.edu/~keelr/3210/3210_lectures/feminism.html)

There are five types of oppression as Irish Young has explained in her article; they are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Those types of oppression might happen to any kind of people category, one of the categories is women. Young added, "As a group women are subject to gender-based exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence" (Young, 1992:64).

SYNOPSIS OF A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS

Khaled Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, is a story of two women and their lives in Afghanistan over the past 40 years. Mariam was born as an illegal child and was forced to marry Rasheed, an abusive husband at age 15. Rasheed is an ugly, cruel man inside and out. Her husband broke her spirit with his abuse and was forced to wear a *burqa* against her wishes, while Laila is an attractive girl who lives just up the street. She was born to educated, liberal parents and enjoyed the freedoms Mariam was restricted from.

During the wars of the 1980's and 1990's, a rocket destroyed Laila's home with her parents in it. This tragedy and an unexpected pregnancy forces Laila to become Rasheed's second wife. After an initial rivalry, Mariam and Laila become best friends.

ANALYSIS

4.1. Types of Oppression

According to Iris Young in *Five Faces of Oppression*, oppression is divided into five types: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

4.1.1. Exploitation

The first type of oppression to be described is exploitation. Exploitation is the act of using people's labour to earn profit without fairly compensating them as Iris Young said, "some people exercise their capacities under the control, according to the purposes, and for the benefit of other people" (Young, 1992: 49). In the following discussion, exploitation happens to Mariam only. She experiences exploitation from her husband, Rasheed.

Mariam as the wife has done her duties in the household without wishing any wage but a comfort and happy marriage. But Rasheed does not compensate her fairly, he does not give Mariam a comfort, a happy marriage, even, he treats Mariam badly by always pointing her faults, "he was more apt to these days, to fault her cooking, to complain about clutter around the yard or point out even minor uncleanliness in the house," (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 100).

In addition, Rasheed too, offends Mariam by speaking rudely toward her. He easily judges Mariam's innocence as a stupidity, even he chortles. What he does, pointing Mariam's fault, is like the employer who is not satisfied with the slave's work, and indirectly he wants Mariam to do better and command her to avoid her fault in the other times.

Rasheed's fault finding does not end, it goes on. He makes a judgment of Mariam's cooking, as if Mariam cooks improperly. As he keeps trying to find Mariam's fault, he becomes closer to the term exploitation. The form of exploitation in this novel is not like the exploitation in the colonialism era, the thing to be emphasized here is how Rasheed compensates Mariam. These evidences are to explain how wicked Rasheed is in compensating Mariam's work.

"What's the matter?" he mewled, mimicking at her. "What's the matter is that you've done it again."

"But I boiled it five minutes more than usual."

“That’s a bold lie.”

“I swear—“

He shook the rice angrily from his fingers and pushed the plate away, spilling sauce and rice on the *sofrah*. Mariam watched as he stormed out of the living room, then out of the house, slamming the door in his way out. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 109-110)

Furthermore, she always becomes the object of Rasheed’s fault finding and humiliating. Both fault finding and humiliating are the same as bad compensation or low wage amount in the work place. Rasheed benefits from Mariam the meals every day, the clean house, the clean clothes, and nights of coupling, just like the employer who benefits from the good work of the slave’s. It is his turn to pay Mariam back with compliments, comfort, and happiness like the employer who pay the slavewith the fair amount of wage.

4.1.2. Marginalization

Iris Young states that marginalization or alienation oppresses people by expelling them from the useful participations in the social life (Young, 1992: 50).Some categories of people are marginalized in the social life because of their differences which reduce their abilities and power. They are the people who live in lack of equality and said as the dependent people. Marginalization in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* happens to both Mariam and Laila.

Mariam is born as a *harami*, “a *harami* was an unwanted thing; that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 4). The *harami* status which is attached to her has reduced her ability to move freely and be important as the other people in the society. It is not physical ability which is reduced by her *harami* status, but her rights to have love, family, home, and acceptance.

Mariam is totally normal physically and mentally, but she is marginalized for the reason of her *harami* status. She is expelled by her father from his family by marrying her to Rasheed. But the marginalization didoes not end here; it goes on in her marriage. For years, he had eaten without looking up, without speaking, his silence condemning, as though some judgment were being passed, then broken only

by an accusatory grunt, a disapproving cluck of his tongue, a one-word command for more bread, more water. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 224)

Rasheed himself treats her like someone who worthless of respect. The way he eats, without looking up, without speaking to her, and commanding for more bread or water, explains clearly how much Mariam is loathsome to him, who is worthless of anything, even not to be spoken to. It happens because Mariam cannot give him a son, and moreover, she is a *harami*. But it is never being true to marginalize anyone because they can neither bear a son nor because they are illegitimate person, still they are human being like the other people who worth of respect and equality.

4.1.3. Powerlessness

Iris Young states, the powerless people are those who lack authority or power (Young, 1992: 52). This type of oppression consists of people who are powerless that they do not even talk about their oppression. This type of oppression happens to both Mariam and Laila.

The powerlessness which is experienced by Mariam goes on after almost four years of her marriage; Rasheed shows her that he is the man who cannot tolerate anyone disappointing him. Since Mariam's pregnancies fails him seven times, as none of the pregnancies cannot give him a son, even not a baby, Rasheed bring Mariam to an understanding that she is disappointing him by easily pouncing on mistakes she does. But Mariam is not strong enough to build her self defence against Rasheed's accusation, Mariam is still in powerlessness. She cannot feel anything but a fear, a dread, a fright of Rasheed's coming in the evening.

Together with Mariam and her little Aziza, Laila plans to escape and flee to Pakistan. On the day when they run away, they manage to reach bus station, but finally they are caught and returned home by police.

It infuriates Rasheed. In the following extract, Rasheed tortures them by punching and locking them in different places, without food, water, and light, and it lasts for several days. The powerlessness takes a role as Mariam and Laila cannot unlock the door to get out. They do not have power or authority to make Rasheed undo his action. "Azan rang out a second time and still Rasheed had not given them

any food, and worse, no water. That day, a thick, suffocating heat fell on them. The room turned into a pressure cooker” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 288).

The way Rasheed intimidates them actually is to show how powerful he is. He wants them to believe that they are powerless and unable to fight against him.

4.1.4. Cultural imperialism

Cultural imperialism is what Young called as universalization of dominant group experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm (Young, 1992: 59). It constructs a difference that shows the other people’s lack and finally it becomes oppressive since it results the feeling of deviance and inferiority. There were many forms of cultural imperialism, it depended on in what society it existed. The form of cultural imperialism in this context was a patriarchy, in which husbands had the dominant power in the household. This type of oppression happens to both Mariam and Laila.

Rasheed’s cruelty has hurt and disappointed both Mariam and Laila. As the objects of his fury, they do not want to put up with him and his wicked behaviour any longer; therefore they plan to run away. They want to set themselves free and far from such atrocious treatment. But they cannot manage to flee, because they are arrested by the police in the bus station, and they are brought to the police quarter. There, they are interrogated. “What a man does in his home is his business,” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 284) said the police to them when Laila begs the police to release them. The police, in the name of *qanoon*, laws, reject her request. He accuses them of violating the law by running away, and as the police he is responsible to maintain the order, to send them back to their home. And they imply subservience to the patriarchal system, in which women are the responsibility of their *mahram*, male relative, in this case is their husband. They are responsible to send the escaping women to their husband without bothering about how their husband treats them in their home.

When Taliban reigns over Afghanistan the law becomes stricter, even they make the hospital for women and men differentiated. It will not be a matter if they fairly facilitated both the men hospital and women hospital. Taliban cannot decide that men are more important than women and need better treatment in the hospital, because both men and women need.

When Laila is in the women hospital to give birth to her second child, the doctor decides that a caesarean needed to be performed; otherwise Laila will lose her baby. In the following extract, it is revealed how bad Taliban facilitates the women hospital where Laila is going to deliver her baby, and it can be seen how patriarchal system makes a sense in the society. Taliban tends to underestimate women's importance; therefore, they do not provide women good service in the hospital.

Patriarchal system basically is designed to protect women and their rights and their equality in the family, but some men have misunderstood the essence of patriarchy by considering men have more power in the family or in the household, and they treat women as the inferior, the subordinated beings.

4.1.5. Violence

According to Iris Young, a systematic violence occurs when members of a group learn to live with fear of attacks with no intention but damaging, humiliating or destroying the person (Young, 1992: 61). This kind of oppression is practiced to intimidate certain group of people. In this context, Mariam, and Laila are the group of people who are oppressed in a systematic violence which committed by their husband.

In the following extract, it can be seen how Rasheed eventually shows his real personality to Mariam by speaking rudely to her, punching her, slapping her, and kicking her which were not aimed but damaging her.

It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat. But after four years of marriage, Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid. And Mariam *was* afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 104-105)

Rasheed is easily annoyed by Mariam's fault, even her minor fault, as if every single thing which Mariam does always infuriated him. He always makes to find Mariam's fault, even though Mariam has tried to avoid mistake, but he always

has excuse to blame her, even worse. In the following extract, Rasheed humiliates Mariam by forcing her to chew pebbles as he is very angry just because he thinks that the rice is not boiled properly. Then she heard the front door opening, and Rasheed was back in the living room.

“Get up,” he said. “Come here. Get up.”

He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it.

“Put these in your mouth.”

“What?”

“Put. These. In your mouth.”

“Stop it, Rasheed, I’m—“

His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in, his upper lip curled in a sneer.

“Now chew,” he said.

Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes.

“CHEW!” he bellowed. A gust of his smoky breath slammed against her face.

Mariam chewed. Something in the back of her mouth cracked.

“Good,” Rasheed said. His cheeks were quivering. “Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you’ve given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing else. Then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragment of two broken molars. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 110-111)

The way Rasheed tortures Mariam and Laila using violence is aimed to damage and destroy them, as violence results physical wounds to the victim, even, in a certain level, violence might carry a death to the victim. From those types of oppression which experienced by them, violence is the most dangerous and harmful.

Nevertheless, all of the oppression experienced by Mariam and Laila cause them to act in response. In the next subchapter, there will be discussion about the way Mariam and Laila dealing with oppression that they encountered in their life.

4.2. The Way Mariam and Laila Deal With the Oppression

Mariam is aware of Rasheed's unstable temper, but she is armed with patience in facing him. She carefully asks Rasheed if he is angry with her, "Are you angry with me?" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 101). Asking him the question is a way of hers to find out how to face him in his new habit of being silent and pretending that she is invisible. She is trying to overcome the trouble which starts in the early days of her marriage before it becomes bigger and tougher. Mariam becomes frightened at Rasheed. She does not think that Rasheed's misbehaviour can change, but Mariam tries to avoid more mistakes in order to avoid more slaps or punches.

However, at the end of the story, Mariam finally can find her bravery when she accidentally kills Rasheed. Mariam knows the punishment for a murderer, but she will not regret it. She has saved her most precious thing she had: love. She has defeated Rasheed to keep the only love she has alive.

Laila and Aziza are the only true love embodiments of Mariam's; they are as precious as her own life, they are the only reason for her to gain strength to fight Rasheed back. Therefore, she bravely fights Rasheed to set them free, even though she has to pay it with his own life. She will surrender to Taliban and let them determine a death sentence for her. It is the way she determines her life, even though she cannot be free and spend the rest of her life with them, but she has saved them and it is just the same as she keeps them alive, she will not regret it.

Laila seems to have a bravery which Mariam does not have. The heroic act she does to save Mariam is the obvious evidence. There is more, when she and Mariam eventually becomes a solid comrade, she bravely plans to run away, along with her little daughter, Aziza, and she asks Mariam to join her, too. She does so because she is treated as bad as Mariam by Rasheed. She thinks they need to survive themselves before Rasheed harms them more.

Laila's bravery and boldness does not appear only when she has to deal with Rasheed's beating or punching, but also against the pain. She bravely decides to be cut open in the day of her second baby has to be born. She has to feel a so much dreadful pain when the caesarean is performed upon her without using anaesthetic.

CONCLUSSION

In the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, women oppression is one of the major themes that can be clearly seen through the experiences of the main characters, Mariam and Laila. They experience oppression from two directions, from their husband and from the society where they live. The oppression they encounter in their lives have been classified into five types of oppression according to Irish Young, namely exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

Mariam experiences exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, while Laila experiences marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Since they suffer from those types of oppression, they are stimulated to make effort to deal with them.

The effort Mariam and Laila make are different as they have different personalities and family backgrounds. In dealing with the oppression from the society, there is not much thing they can do, as they live in a country which patriarchy is valid. They have to hold out the oppression with patience, but it does not mean that they surrender. Moreover, it shows how strong they are to endure themselves against the oppression. While in dealing with the oppression from Rasheed, Mariam tends to be defenceless, in the other hand, Laila is apt to defend and resist. The running away which is arranged by Laila is just a verification that she uses power feminism to fight against the oppression, although it is unsuccessful, but it shows her decision to determine her own life. In the end, Mariam exerts her power to fight against Rasheed and determine her own life by murdering him to save her only true love embodiments, Laila and Aziza.

Through this study, it is found that women have the power which lies inside to struggle their happiness just like what Mariam and Laila have done. The oppression they experience is not a miserable thing which has to be wept out, but it is something that has to be fought back. The struggle and bravery which have done by Mariam and Laila in determining their life implement power feminism.

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