



Exile and Fleeing in Khalid Hussaini's 'A Thousand Splendid Suns'

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT Unlike 'The Kite Runner' the story about two boys, this is a story of two girls, growing up to two women, neighbours and then wives of the same man. The story is a story about women, starting with Mariam, her mother Nana, shifting to Laila and her mother Mammy, leading to Aziza Laila's daughter who binds Laila and Mariam. Banishment and exile both being physical as well as mental, emotional and psychological. Considering the setting of the story being Afghanistan, from the years 1959 to April 2003. The background is the ever changing political situation, the change in regime intertwining the lives of all the citizens, specially the women.

The title is the English translation, based on 17th century poet Saib e Tabrizi's poem about Kabul- 'One could not count the moons that shimmer on her or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls'.

The story starts 2 kms from Herat, Afghanistan, with five year old Mariam's childish anticipation to see her father Jaleel every Thursday, the first lesson the little girl learns from her illiterate mother is 'Like a compass needle that points North, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman'. Fleeing and banishment come early into Mariam's life - she had been used to the sense of being discarded, the process started even before her birth, with her maternal grand father, disowning his daughter Mariam's mother Nana, who was a petty house help, to have the wealthy master's child. The city of her father, was inaccessible to her, but she is content that he was present there. Little did she realize why she and her mother lived isolated and alone separated by land and water. It was only in her fifteenth year did she learn he had done this to save his reputation and the wrath of his three legitimate wives. In fact Jaleel was fleeing from burdening himself being Mariam's father, and her mother's husband, thereby banishing Nana and Mariam out of his city. Nana fled from the subject of Mariam's education, saying that the only education women like herself and Mariam needed was knowing to endure. Another reason was that she did not want Mariam to have any outside contacts, driving fear into her head that she was a of unlawful birth in the eyes of religion and society. Considering the political situation of Afghanistan, if Mariam was born in the later part of the novel, both she and her mother might have been condemned to death. But she is born to survive and to be hailed as the one who silently perseveres and finally becomes saviour to Laila and her children.

Mariam was an unlucky woman, who spent all her life following a beacon of false hope filled with never ending hardships. Strong hope to see her 'father and family' her brothers and sisters had led her to move out of her shelter and her mother which protected her from harsh realities. Crossing the forbidden border, leading to Nana's suicide, hanging from the willow branch literally exposing her to the world and Jaleel's reality to her.

Her hasty marriage to Rasheed the shoemaker from Kandahar, almost a two day bus journey away from Herat, into

exile, by Jaleel and his wives, never to return and intrude into the tranquillity of their legitimate world. Mariam accepted her total exile, wearing the floor length burqa, with its meshed window, finding peace in the anonymity afraid from her past, fleeing, it might catch up with her. She developed a companionship for Rasheed, after discovering an unsmiling picture of his dead first wife, where Mariam saw more of what was there, she saw a woman trying to move away from his grasp, and his son's picture who had drowned. But she was wrong, she loses her unborn child and with that her husband, to be banished from his heart forever. Rasheed was living a sham life, he was running away from his past too, as we later learn that he had been a drunk, and was lost in a stupor when his young son had drowned, and he owned a revolver, a man of violent temperament, a man who had much to hide and much to run from. The two men Mariam trusts first her father Jaleel and then her husband Rasheed turn out to be nothing she thought they were. Her real allies being women, her mother, later Laila and Aziza.

The other main female character, Laila and her mother Mammy who lived in the memories of her two sons and forgot all about the present, in the form of the living, breathing Laila, her mother refused to believe in the reality of the present and fled from it in her reveries about her sons. Laila did all the growing up and taking care of the house alone. Laila's only fond memory - where she chose to retreat - was of the day trip to the Bamiyan Buddhas, with both the men she truly loved her father and her friend Tariq - by the stream where her only friend and love Tariq slept with a folded coat as a pillow, while her father Babi read a paperback of 'The Old Man And The Sea', Laila correlated her father to Santiago and Kabul likened to a prize fish being taken bites at by sharks.

The similarity between the main female characters being that both girls grew up among phantom families, Mariam with the names of ten brothers and sister, who were the children of Jaleel's three legitimate wives, seeing only three brothers who brought her monthly provisions. Her 'family' was in the form of pebbles, Mariam had lined eleven pebbles symbolising her brothers, sisters and herself. And the eleven pebbles had fallen out of her pockets when she had spent the night in the street out of Jaleel's house, correlating the fact that she was never one of them. And later her husband Rasheed made her chew

upon them which resulted in two broken molars. Symbolic of their irrevocably broken down lives and relation. Similarly Laila, whose only memory of her brothers was, Ahmed with the glittering Allah pendant, and Noor with the patch of dark hair on the left ear, and from seeing them in the many pictures Mammy had in her room.

'Ahmed and Noor had always been like lore to her. Like characters in a fable. Kings in a history book'.

Her brothers Ahmed and Noor had gone to fight the Russians as Mujahideens. Even her father Babi had plans of leaving Afghanistan as much as he loved it, he wanted to go to Pakistan, and then to America, where he planned to open a humble Afghan restaurant. He wanted to leave the country of his birth and the birth of his children for the sake of safety and a hope of life, and to live. This is what his wife Fariba hated him for, that they would want to leave the country and their sons behind, the sons who were fighting for that very country. One way or the other the women are bound and cannot let themselves free.

Both temperamental mothers claiming to be all knowing and that their little girls did not know, and the girls loving their fathers, because of the lack of emotional connections to their mothers. Their mothers grief was far too strong, and the love for their daughters was not strong enough to bring them out of their stupor. During their childhood Mariam at the age of five and Laila at the age of nine, had sensed how relationships grew remote. How both their mothers were disillusioned with the fathers of their children. Both mothers did not want anything to do with their daughter's fathers. Between Laila's Mammy did not want her husband around her, blaming him entirely for the loss of her sons.

Both Laila and Mariam felt condemned by fate on account of their unfeeling towards their own mothers. Mariam always blamed herself as the cause of her mother's suicide and when the messenger gave Laila the news of Tariq's death she blamed herself, that this was divine justice, for she had not shared her mother's pain when both her brothers were killed in war. Mariam's Nana saying she was all she had, till the day she committed suicide, after Mariam left, to lose everything forever, and never to be the same again. The same line echoed when Babi had told Laila on their day trip to the Bamiyan Buddhas that she was all he had left. Which chain her to her house not letting her leave with her beloved Tariq, when he and his parents were leaving for Pakistan. The subject of fleeing is all the more complicated because of the belated action, that the decision to run and escape the bad situation is taken very late, so much so that the situation deteriorates and becomes fatally inescapable.

Mariam realised her connection was cemented with Laila's daughter Aziza because of illegitimate birth like herself. Laila had plans to run running from Kabul to Peshwar, and wanted Mariam to join them. They attempt to do so on a spring morning in 1994, only to be brought back to Rasheed. The similarity being when both the women physically tried to escape their lives were turned upside down, bringing upon them unknown misery.

Both women temperamentally opposite, Mariam an illiterate from a village, whereas Laila who had a school education and a university educated father, yet their fates are inextricably woven together, they are brought together in being married to the same man – whom Mariam ends

up killing not to save herself from his physical torture and abuse but to save Laila, whom he would certainly have killed, because Laila had learnt that Tariq was alive and Rasheed had fabricated the story just to marry her. Killing Rasheed was the second and last independent decision she had taken for herself the first being to leave her Nana and going to Herat. Mariam sacrifices her own life so that four other lives can be saved and maybe find happiness. Mariam is truly the main character who had stopped running, who always considered her own life a waste, but in the end is really the most precious. The simplicity of Mariam her last thoughts as she took the final twenty paces, was of how life had been unkind to her yet she wished it was longer to see Laila, have tea with her, to see Aziza's wedding. She was glad 'this' was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings. Mariam listened to what she was told by her executioner, she died just as she had lived in obedience and without any protest.

Laila's family returns to the orphanage where Aziza had been put two years ago and use Mariam's inheritance for the bettering the lives of orphans, Mariam though not a mother biologically had all the characteristics of a mother - love, dedication, service and sacrifice. They had run long enough and finally found a sanctuary in their mother land. They had fled out of choice and compulsion, they had lost much and gained in return, only to return to the one place they had run from called home.

References-

1. Hosseini, Khalid, 2007, "A Thousand Splendid Suns" Riverhead Books.