

## **DISRUPTION OF THE STEREOTYPICAL GENDER CONSTRUCTION THROUGH AFGHAN WOMEN'S VOICES IN KHALID HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS***

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### **Abstract**

*The paper aims to explore Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns(2007) from the deconstructive perspective of gender construction through the untraditional and challenging role of women in patriarchal Afghan society. Hosseini is one of the acclaimed Afghan-American novelists whose art speaks against the concerns of discrimination and segregation on ethnic, religious and gender basis. His novels are deeply entrenched with his own observations and experiences to portray the grim realities and the woes of Afghan society that is badly torn by the unending wars on its soil. The deconstructive approach challenges the taken-for-granted patriarchal socio-cultural norms of Afghan society represented in A Thousand Splendid Suns. Women characters engage in diverse performances that question the stability of gender construction in the novel. The variability of gender in the novel depends upon performativity of the characters. In their actions, they generate multiple shades of gender identities while deviating from norms of masculinity and femininity. So performances of the characters in the novel determine their gender identities in their social existence, their sexual labelling has nothing to do with their gender identification. Therefore, the novel exhibits the stereotypical and patriarchal norms prevalent in Afghan society that are used as a justification for the persecution and discrimination of women on gender basis. The paper thus argues that the country's rampant gender stereotypical standards are resisted and challenged by the performativity of women characters. Furthermore, the research presents an*

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*innovative approach to study gender construction in a feudal Afghan society through its interrogation of gender stereotyping.*

**Keywords:** Afghan, gender construction, patriarchy, deconstruction, resistance, stereotypical norms, fluidity

## Introduction

### Background of the Research

Gender has recently been one of the hotly debated themes across all disciplines of the world to highlight inequality and discrimination. We are surrounded by gender stereotypical ideals<sup>1</sup> that are too deep-rooted to be challenged. For a long time, women were considered to be for the service of men. They are thought to be born for domestic chores and household responsibilities. Outside these assumed limitations, women had no identity. The deeply-rooted community system strengthens gender norms that support patriarchy. “Community system puts the relationship of women and men manifested in various forms and patterns of behavior that reflects the acceptance of the women and men in the position of each gender.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the study problematizes taken-for-granted gender notions in Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) from Judith Butler’s deconstructive perspective. The deconstructive approach through the analytical exploration of the novel is to interrogate the prevalent stereotypical gender identities in Afghan society.

The applied theoretical framework contends to question the dichotomous categorization of gender that leads to discrimination and inequality. Basically, a deconstructive approach disrupts the binary concept of gender that is defined into two i.e. masculinity and femininity. As Heathcote (1998) contends, “patriarchy institutes univocal and discrete meanings in its place, so that sex and gender come to be seen as one” (p.139). Butler (1999) explains it that gender refers to the societal and cultural constitution of “masculinity and femininity and its ascription to the male and / or female sex” (p.526).

Therefore, the binary concept of gender that is challenged by the set objectives of the research to be the key concern in the novel. The traditional feminist and gender schools of thought believe that identity can only be promoted and acknowledged if it conforms to the binary categorization – masculinity<sup>3</sup> and femininity, out of the dichotomous concept that is strange and unnatural to believe. However, the present research challenges this

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<sup>1</sup> Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> Soray, “The Subalter Voice in A thousand Splendid Suns.” *Jakarta, Journal Lingua Cultura* 9 (2), (2015). Retrieved from <http://journal.binus.ac.id>

<sup>3</sup> Ray, “Memory, Identity, Patriarchy: Projecting a Past in the Memoirs of Sara Suleri and Michael Ondaatje.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 39 (1), (1993): 37-58

stance of feminism by saying, "Gender is not an essential, biologically determined quality or an inherent entity but is repeatedly performed, based on, and reinforced by, societal norms"<sup>4</sup>

### **About the novelist and brief critical overview of the selected work**

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-American writer, was born in 1965 in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul where his father served on key posts in Afghan foreign ministry. Hosseini earned an international acclaim and recognition due to the appeal of his major works – *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *The Mountains Echoed* and *The Kite Runner*. Kumar commented on this by saying, "all these three novels have been best-sellers. These novels are set in the backdrop of the Afghan conflict. In these novels, he has discussed the harsh realities of the contemporary world" (2018,p.22). His works echo harsh and grim realities of the war-torn Afghan society with comparison to the modern world. His first book, *The Kite Runner* which was published in 2003 proved one of the best-selling novels with its more than 10 million copies being sold worldwide. Later one, this work was adapted into a film with<sup>5</sup> the same name in 2007. His second novel, the focus of the present study is *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was published in 2007. Hosseini's works represent the conservative, feudal and patriarchal background of Afghanistan that is badly affected by the unending wars on its soil by indigenous as well as foreign usurpers. His art is the manifestation of socio-political and economic issues of the Afghan nation from an historical background.

As Rebecca Stuhr (2017) comments,

*"Hosseini tucks within the plots and narratives of his two novels events and details that address the state of civil strife and international hegemony in Afghanistan, including the U.S. involvement there beginning in 2001. Although, the details of his plots and interaction of his characters, Hosseini presents problems of racism and ethnocentrism, as well as exile and immigration."* (p.65)

The novel under study depicts the sordid relationship of patriarchy with the women of their society. Actually the novel represents a thematic shift from his earlier work, *The Kite Runner* that narrates the story of two boys. So, the entire plot revolves around a male character which may be named as the protagonist of the novel. However, this work manifests the lasting and challenging bond of attachment between the two key women figures- Mariam and Laila who confront the bitter repression and discrimination by the society they survive in. The tale of the two women symbolizes the

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<sup>4</sup> Morgenroth & Ryan, "Gender Trouble in Social Psychology: How can Butler's Work Inform Experimental Social Psychologists Conceptualization of Gender?." *Front Psychol*, (2018)

<sup>5</sup> Sangia. *Stylistic Analysis of Khaled Hosseini's Novel*. (2009). Retrieved from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327976213> (accessed October 2019).

horrifying effects of socio-political uncertainty<sup>6</sup> in Afghanistan through the life-portrayal of major characters of the novel. Therefore, the novel is a historical narration of the story of Afghanistan that is the fictional representation of her instability and chaotic history of more than four decades by the novelist. For instance, chapter fifteen of the novel describes the political, historical unrest though the growth of its protagonist, Mariam. The chapter starts with the following words

On April 17, 1978, the year Mariam turned nineteen, a man named Mir Akbar Khyber was found murdered two days later, there was a large demonstration in Kabul. Everyone in the neighborhood was in the streets talking about it . . . Rasheed said that Mir Akbar Khyber had been a prominent Communist and that his supporters were blaming the murder on President Daud Khan's government.<sup>7</sup>

Mariam is Jalil's illegitimate daughter, who is one of the big businessmen in the city of Herat. Mariam's mother, Nana is a maid at Jalil's house since she got pregnant by him. As she gave birth to Mariam, this was taken as a question on the family's name and honor, so both, Nana and Mariam were forced by Jalil and his family to live in a remote house in a desolate village of Gul Daman. They were thrown away to suffer in insolation so that no questions can be asked about the so-called honour of patriarchy. Nana's attitude with her illegitimate daughter is very abusive and harsh, she conveys to Mariam that she is an unwanted being. So the novel exhibits the stereotypical and patriarchal norms prevalent in Afghan society that are used as a justification for the persecution and discrimination of women on gender basis. This is commented by Nana while talking to her daughter, "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman always. You remember that Mariam".<sup>8</sup>

Jalil visits Nana and Mariam once a week for which Mariam keeps waiting the whole week irritably. She spends the whole week at the heels for her father's arrival. However, she is rebuked by her mother for saying that men are selfish and use women as scapegoats for their own crimes. Therefore, the novel is the best reflection of historical and socio-political issues through the projection of gender construction that are promoted as a result of the traditional feudal system.

### Research Questions

1. What is Judith Butler's deconstructive approach to analyze the socio-cultural gender Construction?

<sup>6</sup> Sangia. *Stylistic Analysis of Khaled Hosseini's Novel*. (2009). Retrieved from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327976213> (accessed October 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Khaled Hosseini, "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 96-97.

<sup>8</sup> Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 7

2. How does the deconstructive gender approach challenge the Afghan gender stereotyping represented in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?
3. Why does gender binary categorization is questioned by the research through the assertive performance of different characters that leads to gender discrimination and inequality?

### **Research Objectives**

The study carries some of key research objectives which are as follow,

To explore the novel through Butler deconstructive perspective of gender that is one of the prolific literary works about Afghan society. The study attempts to highlight one of the pivotal concerns of gender constructed identities that are rampant in the patriarchal culture of Afghanistan. It is mostly misrepresented by the traditional disciplines of feminism and gender.

To probe the issue of gender equality through the research framework that carries much importance across all disciplines. Therefore, gender identity invites intellectual attention for analysis. It is one of the leading objectives of the article to critically scrutinize the problem to recommend the causes of gender stereotyping.

1. To explore gender concept out of the traditional stances of feminist and gender studies
2. To highlight the mistaken predominant notions of gender stereotyping that reinforce the concept of gender as a socio-cultural construct.
3. To study from the contexts of Afghan culture portrayed in the selected work that gender is a fluid entity,
4. It is one of the fundamental objectives of the study to recommend the causes of gender discrimination by its findings.

### **Literature Review**

Khaled Hosseini is one of the distinguished South Asian fiction writers having international acclaim and recognition. His literary voice represents the repressed segments of society like minority people, children, immigrants and women. Hence, his novels have attracted scholarly attention across the globe due to their potent voice. The bulk of research to date focuses on his reputed work *A Thousand Splendid Suns* which is as follows

Lindsay B. Shapiro, a scholar from the University of California conducted research in 2010 with the topic of "Middle Eastern Women's issues: An Analysis of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The New York Times*". The study explored the thematic discussion of the renowned novels and the coverage of Middle-Eastern women issues by the *New York Times*. Similarly, the similarity of the thematic identical issues can be found in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* with the coverage made by the reputed newspaper. It is highlighted that what is portrayed by the journalistic

community regarding the concerns of women and their rights, the similar themes are emphasized in the themes of novels too.

There is another notable research on the work, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Azma Kazemian in 2012 titled as, “*A Thousand Splendid Suns: Rhetorical Vision of Afghan women*”, It did a comparative analysis of how the representation of women in the novel can be compared to women’s portrayal in the Western media. The gap between the two is highlighted by the research.

Soraya in 2015 researched the novel under the title of “The Subaltern Voice in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*” by illustrating that the hard life in Afghanistan has marginalized and presented women as a second sex in the society. The research applied Edward Said’s Orientalism as a research framework to pursue the targeted results. Furthermore, women are considered the east to be suppressed and colonized. Gyatrispivak’s *Can a Subaltern Speak* has been used for the explanation of its objectives. As Spivak puts a question that representation of marginalized class is not tolerated by the male-dominancy and their voice is silenced not to be equal with the powerful class of a society. Similarly, women don’t find their voices to be heard equally in Hosseini’s novel being a subaltern class of the country.

Lis Sugianti in 2018 did a comparative study of the two works of the two novelists under the topic of “Gender Discrimination in Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow* and Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*”. It discussed the two works from the perspective of feminism theorized by Damewood’s that is commonly known as the theory of gender discrimination. It projected the prevalent violence, discrimination of women in a patriarchal culture through the framework of the proposed theory. The hard and tough plight of women as a result of this culture has in-detail been evaluated. Women donot find equality in all walks of life due to the prevalence of a specific mind-set.

To wind up the review of literature, the bulk of study has been done on Khaled Hossein’s art but no study is undertaken to look into the stereotypical gender construction from the modern deconstructive perspective that is pursued by the present research. The study goes against the traditional stances taken by feminism and gender theorists. The selected novel portrays the women’s resistance to the stereotypical gender construction through their performativity.

### **Research Methodology**

The study is a qualitative narrative research and follows descriptive-cum investigative method. The textual references from the novel are given for the support of the argument of this research. Butlerian deconstructive gender approach is applied as a research framework to pursue its targeted research objectives. Judith Butler is one of challenging modern American gender theorists, she was born in 1957 in American state of Cleveland Ohio. Her thoughts, more specifically to say, impacted many modern fields of

thought and disciplines like literature, politics, gender, anthropology,<sup>9</sup> linguistics and feminism etc. Her magnum opus work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity and Bodies that matter* (1990) is one of the bigger roots of her reputation and recognition internationally. The book was published first in 1990 and then due to its worldwide demand, later on it was translated into as many as twenty-seven languages of the world to quench the thirst of researchers, analysts and readers. It is mostly a criticism to, "a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory".<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Butler contends to establish, 'Gender Trouble' by her interrogation and disruption of gender binary concept that is originally supported by the traditional norms of patriarchal culture. Gender construction is wrongly associated with sexual categorization; however, actually gender is not linked with sexual categorization of male and female. Gender is a socio-cultural construction; its identities vary from culture to culture and performativity to performativity. It is, "not essential, biologically determined quality or an inherent entity but is repeatedly performed, based on, and reinforced by, societal norms"<sup>11</sup>. The theorist coined a reputed philosophical idea of gender performativity which states that gender is constructed through one's own repetitive actions. So it is not a natural characteristic of human being, rather it is a fluid entity that keeps on changing as per the variability of actions of a person or a character.

Butlerian Deconstructive gender approach goes against the essentialist school of thought which argues that both gender and sexuality are inherited. Opposite to the understanding of essentialists, Butler claims that socio-cultural norms play a pivotal role in gender construction.

## Discussion and Findings

The novel, *A thousand Splendid Suns* (2013) by Afghan-American writer manifests a resistance to the rampant gender patriarchal norms that go against the basic rights of women to survive. The plot revolves around the hard but challenging lives of three women- Nana, Mariam and Laila. It is a sordid tale of the trio that demonstrates their lasting relationship with each other in the backward society. "It then follows their subsequent friendship and support for each other in the backdrop of Kabul from the 1970s to 2000. The novel is set against the background of instability in Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion. It also details the situation under the Taliban

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<sup>9</sup> Salih Salhi, *Judith Butler*, (Abingdon:Oxon, Routledge, 2002)

<sup>10</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Morgenroth & Ryan, "Gender Trouble in Social Psychology: How can Butler's Work Inform Experimental Social Psychologists Conceptualization of Gender?." *Front Psychol*, (2018).

regime".<sup>12</sup> The novel is segmented into three parts, each of its part is the representation of major female characters who confront and resist against the repression and marginalization due to their rank as an inferior being in the biased culture of patriarchy. Hosseini speaks through female characters of Mariam, Nana and Laila against the prejudiced gender norms set by the socio-cultural standards. As Bouviour in her famous work, *The Second sex* says, "One is not born a woman rather becomes a woman" (p.295). Therefore, women and their identities in a particular society is the outcome of socio-cultural construction. This can be proved from the novel in the beginning when Mariam comes to this world as an illegitimate daughter of a businessman, Jalil for whom she suffers throughout her life along with her mother. Mariam became the victim of the crime of her father who was having an illegitimate relationship with her mother, who was a maid at his house. The novel begins with a comment on this 'act' of her father that declared her to be a bastard. Mariam heard this word (bastard) first time at her age of five.<sup>13</sup>

The illegitimate affairs of Jalil with her maid does not bring a bad image to him, instead Nana and her innocent daughter have been thrown away to a village in the Afghan city of Herat. It shows the unequal treatment of gender norms that Jalil being a male is not affected by his wrong act but his act becomes a life-long 'crime' for Nana and Mariam to suffer for the rest of their lives. Therefore, Mariam and her mother are the victims of the severe Afghan patriarchal culture. Mariam is made aware consistently by her mother that we, women are inferior due to superiority of men. Her mother used to tell her that men's behavior and heart are very different from women since they are in their mother's womb. "Womb will not bleed or stretched because they have to take you in. She also reminds Mariam that," women like us suffer ... How can we bear all our burdens in silence" (p.118).

Mariam after her mother's death has to bear the suffering and repression as a lonely and forsaken woman, she was forced to marry Rashid by Jalil to get rid of her burden on him and his family. Mariam's submissiveness changes into a resistance as she knows that Rasheed is going to marry. She warns her husband by saying enough is enough now, "I ... do not want it" ... "You have many years makes me as a first wife (Ambagh) ... "I do not allow it." (262–263).

Mariam who has been discarded by her father and his family and she was left alone after her mother's death, now she cannot allow her husband to make her the first wife, someone else the second. Her identity from a submissive and docile person gets changed. She is now a challenging woman who determines to break the shackles set by the stereotypical system

<sup>12</sup>Sangia. *Stylistic Analysis of Khaled Hosseini's Novel*. (2009). Retrieved from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327976213> (accessed October 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2007): 13.



in Afghan society. The time, she sees that Rasheed is going to beat Laila, she comes to her rescue. She becomes a wall against her husband to raise hand to beat a woman. The novel manifests the scene in following words,

*Rasheed will kill her (Laila) ... she thought. Mariam could not let that happen. Rasheed has taken so many things from Mariam's lives in twenty-seven years of their marriage. Mariam never wants to watch Rasheed claims the life of Laila ... Mariam swings the shovel in her hand ... Mariam swings it high ... high until it touches the tip of his back ...while doing so, Mariam thinks that this is the first time she decides her own destiny.*<sup>14</sup>

After the murder of her husband, Mariam does not repent of her action. She takes it as a revenge to the entire society of gender discrimination. Later on, as the novel proceeds further. She is sentenced to be imprisoned, but she became savior of rights of other women. "In prison, Mariam is admired by other woman inmates since only Mariam is sentenced to jail for killing her husband".<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the variability of Mariam's identity from a submissive daughter and a humble wife to a reactive and challenging wife supports the fluidity of gender identity argued by Butler. The protagonist through her performativity resists and challenges the naturalness and reliability of the established gender patriarchal-driven norms of Afghan society. She is setting a precedent to fight against the gender stereotyping in the novel that goes against the equal representation.

Furthermore, Laila is the next character that illustrates to diffuse the impression of superiority of male in power, intelligence and cleverness. She succeeds in fooling Rasheed, her husband at their wedding night by bleeding her finger. Laila lets her finger bleeding so that her husband may be convinced of her virginity. It is illustrated in the novel,

*"Rasheed looks awkward. Her fingers struggles endlessly to open his own shirt.... Through chattering teeth, Laila asks Rasheed to turn off the lights. in silence, after feeling Rasheed is asleep, Laila reaches under the bed and pulls out a knife .. With the knife, she cuts the tip of her finger and let her blood drips on the sheets where they sleep together".*<sup>16</sup>

Besides, Laila is not feeling comfortable with Rasheed because she feels it a guilt and injustice to Mariam, who is his first wife. Laila considers it a burden on her conscience, about which she often apologizes to her, "She rejects the wedding ring that is given by Rasheed since it is purchased by

<sup>14</sup> Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013): 428-430.

<sup>15</sup> Soray, "The Subalter Voice in A thousand Splendid Suns." *Jakarta, Journal Lingua Cultura* 9 (2), (2015): 31.

<sup>16</sup> Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013): 269.

mortgaging Mariam's wedding ring. Laila repeatedly apologizes to Mariam".

Hence, the two women, who have been the construct of the patriarchal society, now question the imposed culture of gender discrimination that deprives them and other women of their society of their basic rights as human being to lead a respectable life. Their identity swings from the victim and passive roles to the resisting and daunting figures to deconstruct the taken-for-granted stereotypical gender norms of Afghan society.

### **Conclusion**

The study has concluded to draw its findings from Hossein's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Gender in the novel is constructed on socio-cultural and religious basis that leads to unequal representation in Afghan society. The representation of gender stereotyping in the novel is analyzed through Butlerian deconstructive gender approach that challenges the traditional concept of gender in the selected novel. Therefore, it illustrated that determination of identities of the focused characters and contexts out of the selected work based on their repeated performances, not on their sexual categorization. As the scope of the research, the present study probed into the conservative misconception about gender and sexuality in Afghan society epitomized by the novelist. Besides, the research presented an innovative approach to study gender construction in a feudal society by deconstruction and disruption of taken-for-granted gender norms rampant in that culture.

Thus, the paper has attained the following results in this last section of the research,

1. Gender in Hosseini's work has a fluid and indeterminate tendency by negating the stereotypical notion of gender binary categorization.
1. The variability of gender in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* depends upon performativity of the characters. They undergo deviations of their actions generating multiple shades of gender. So performances of the characters in the novel do determine identities of their gender, not their sexual labelling.
2. The study presented an alternative approach to examine gender in the perspective Butler's theory of performativity. It led to restructuring of traditional feminist and gender understanding.
3. Gender stereotyping leads to unequal representation of all, men and women in all walks of life.

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