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HOSSEINI'S MARIAM AS A 'PURE WOMAN'- THE AFGHANI TESS

Sonum Khajuria

Lecturer in English, Govt. Model Degree College Mahanpur, Jammu and Kashmir

Abstract

*The following paper aims at dissecting two novels- one depicting sufferings of women in the east (England) and the other in the west (Afghanistan). The two dissimilar novels viz. "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" by Thomas Hardy and "A Thousand Splendid Suns" by Khaled Hosseini when studied with some insight into each other actually bring out Tess and Mariam as similar in their entire course of life and destiny. Both the women are pure as they leave the lap of nature at a very tender age and without having a glimpse of the cruel people waiting outside they become victims of oppression and rejection. My endeavour is to study the contrasts and similarities between the two respective protagonists of Hardy and Hosseini. The paper revolves around the underlying victimhood of women, in general, be it eastern or western and the similarity in oppressiveness\_of all cultures and men.*

**Keywords:** Purity, Chastity, Oppression, Rejection, Illegitimacy, Nature, Destiny, Innocence, Sacrifice.

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**Introduction:**

"Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still. As she walked along today, for all her bouncing handsome womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks, or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over curves of her mouth now and then" ("Tess of the D'Urbervilles" chapter 1, page 17)

"Tess of the D'Urbervilles is an 1891 novel by Thomas Hardy which depicts its eponymous heroine Tess as a very young maiden who is poor and mature more than her age if not mentally then at least physically. She is ready to shoulder the family's responsibility

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and hence moves out of her village Marlott to work as a caretaker in the house of D'Urbervilles. At this place, she is seduced and raped by Alec D'Urberville but once, she returns back to her village she doesn't remain entitled to same innocence as soon she gives birth to a baby. Hereafter, she leaves her village to save her family's remaining dignity and strives to make a place for herself at a dairy farm. It's here that she falls in love with Angel Clare who loves her back immensely only to reject her on their wedding night on learning of her past. This man himself had a similar past but considers only Tess's act as unpardonable. The struggle of Tess continues and she meets Alec D'Urberville again who seduces her again with his money and help the family. Though Tess reluctantly gives in she ends up murdering Alec when Angel returns back apologetically and spends a week with him before getting hanged. Her purity though questioned time and again in the novel and by the critics is something to be inferred from one's own understanding of the words chastity and purity.

“A Thousand Splendid Suns” on the other hand, is a 2007 novel by Khaled Hosseini which depicts the life of Afghani women under Taliban and communism. Most of the people lost their sons to join the movement against USSR and communism. Others lost their own lives when a terrible fight erupted between the Communists now ruled by Hazaras and the freedom fighters. Somewhere amidst this noise and bombarding and bloodshed, two houses are brought into light with two heroines who end up becoming co-wives and gradually dearer than sisters or rather close to mother-daughter.

Mariam is the second wife to Rasheed- ostentatiously a devout Muslim, whose first wife and son are dead. And, Laila is his third wife about forty-five years younger. While Mariam accepts him as a husband and gives all her youth and years of her marriage to serving and enduring abuses of Rasheed. Laila only accepts Rasheed to give her unborn baby a name of the father. Laila constantly dreams of escaping the clutches of Rasheed's torture and torments while Mariam only learns to smile through the smiles of Laila's daughter Aziza. Laila's dream comes true and her lover Tariq returns back. When Rasheed comes to know about it, he attacks Laila and to save her Mariam kills Rasheed. Thus, she sacrifices her life for a better future of Laila and her children with Tariq in peace and devoid of further torments.

As Hosseini has said in his speech at Book Expo America in 2007 that he has described the sufferings of Afghani women during Taliban and even well before the Taliban 'whose suffering has been matched by very few groups in recent world history'.

This novel is replete with sorrows and miseries of the two heroines Mariam and Laila. The two not only fight the oppressions of their common husband but even the common patriarchal in charges of maintaining peace and order, for example, the officer at police station says:

“It is my responsibility, you see, to maintain order.”

However, the next moment he nullifies the statement by not helping the women to get free from the clutches of their abusive husband.

“...what a man does in his home is his business”

To this Laila replies aptly;

“of course, you don’t(interfere) when it benefits the man...”

Similarly, when Mariam is standing in court for her trial, the Talib says:

“God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can...this is why we require only one male witness but two female ones.” (chapter 47- “A Thousand Splendid Suns”)

The tone of Talib is like that of a chauvinist of any era who thinks women can neither think, nor decide nor have a superior understanding like that of men.

Likewise, if we talk of “Tess of the D’Urbervilles”, the aura is altogether different- there is no war in the background but the only romanticised description of every meadow, persona and situation. Tess is an innocent, incorruptible young girl who wants to see her family happy, she is too innocent to understand the evil intentions of Alec yet beneath, it has the same string connecting Mariam and Tess and even Angel and Jaleel and Alec and Rasheed.

One would find this novel as an overdose of melancholy just like Thomas Hardy’s novel “Tess of the D’Urbervilles”. Both of them pierce your heart to draw unflinching pity for their respective heroines. Though the two novels have totally different themes and subjects to discuss yet there is something about Mariam which reminds us of the sad fate and end of Tess. Mariam is the protagonist of “A Thousand Splendid Suns” though there is another heroine in the novel too named Laila, yet, Mariam is the one who ultimately sneaks away with our hearts.

Although both the novels belong to different genres, have different themes and aims but, somehow the two have that intense poignancy in them which keep them in the topmost place of most sad novels.

### **Why is Mariam so much like Tess?**

While Mariam's sin was she was born a bastard, Tess's sin was she gave birth to a bastard. The whole of Afghanistan has been raped of its past, peace and happiness in "A Thousand Splendid Suns" whereas in Hardy's novel it's just the poor Tess by Alec D'Urberville. While the former protagonist has little beauty to cherish and be relished by anyone, the latter is an epitome of it. But somehow, these differences don't matter. Both face the same misery, rejection and tests all their lives and both finally hit their oppressors hard on their head with all the strength that they gained from their remaining vulnerable and weak all this time.

Tess despite being so beautiful is rejected by Angel Clare on grounds of having a past same as his except(ironically) she gave birth to a baby too because of her being a woman. Somehow, this rejection can be compared to the rejection which Rasheed confers upon Mariam throughout after her marriage with him on grounds of not being able to give him a son and not possessing beauty either, calls her a *harami* (illegitimate) and *dehati*(of tribal origin). He rather despises her looks and hence, gladly accepts the beautiful Laila irrespective of any age or moral factor. Moreover, he not only calls Laila beautiful and declares his love on his wedding night but later on is found complaining after nine years of marriage for becoming Mariam day by day-all thanks to his regular oppression and beating.

Mariam is brought up in a little *kolba*(hut) where she learns the verses of Quran and catch and cut fish, other than this she learns to wait patiently for her father Jalil who visits her on Thursdays with gifts but never accepts her as his daughter before society and hence, keeps his illegitimate wife and daughter in obscurity. Tess, on the other hand, is brought up with many siblings in a small village which keeps her and nature tightly entwined, she is too good at handling animals and birds, Mariam is too good at cutting and cooking fish. A *dehati* as she is once called by Rasheed. She reminds us of the nature and its bond with her like Tess.

Both are robbed of their childhood and maidenhood at the tender age of 14 or 15, while Tess is raped, Mariam is forced upon by her forty-year-old husband. Both suffered from the agony of the loss of a baby, while Mariam is robbed of her babies in the womb, Tess loses her baby within a few days of his birth. Both yearn for a proper burial for the babies, both are unsupported and both do it alone.

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Burial scene of Mariam burying her aborted baby

“Mariam picked a spot in the yard and dug a hole.

“in the name of Allah and with Allah and in the name of the messenger of Allah.....”

She patted the dirt with the back of the shovel. She squatted by the mound, closed her

Give sustenance, Allah

Give sustenance, Allah” (chapter 14 page 95)

Burial scene of Tess;

“So, passed away Sorrow the Undesired-that intrusive creature, that bastard gift of shameless Nature who respects not the social law; a waif to whom eternal Time had been a matter of days merely, who knew not that such things as years and centuries ever were; to whom the cottage interior was the universe, the week’s weather climate, new-born babyhood human existence, and the instinct to suck human knowledge.”

Tess’s baby was buried

“.. in that shabby corner of God’s allotment where he lets the nettles grow, and where all unbaptised infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid. In spite of the untoward surroundings, however, Tess bravely made a little cross of two laths and a piece of string, and having bound it with flowers...”

(Chapter 14, page 106- “Tess...”)

Both have a toilsome life devoid of anyone to love them selflessly except that Tess once finds that supply of love from Angel and Mariam from Aziza (Laila’s daughter). Mariam rather relates herself with Aziza on grounds both are *Harami*, a sin they are born with.

Both lay down their lives for the happiness of others. Mariam lays it down for Laila and her children while Tess lays it for her family and younger sister Liza-Lu.

After Mariam’s execution Laila visits her *kolba* to witness the air and childhood which produced so brave and selfless a woman as Mariam, she is lost in a reverie imagining watching Mariam as a child:

“Laila watches Mariam glue strands of yarn onto her doll’s head. In a few years, this little girl will be a woman who will make small demands on life, who will never burden

others, who will never let on that she too had sorrows...dreams that have been ridiculed. A woman who will be like a rock in a riverbed, enduring without complaint, her grace not sullied but shaped by the turbulence that washes over her”

(Chapter 50, page 389- “A Thousand Splendid Suns”)

Strength, patience, sacrifice, tolerance, morality and purity in nature and intentions are the chief features of both the heroines who have not sinned but been sinned against. Though Mariam has not fallen into the sexual sin and hence, she can be called pure as compared to Tess but only if we lay down such stupid criteria for purity. Tess became a victim to Alec otherwise she never loved any man but Angel and yearned for none other than him:

“My husband that was is gone away, and never will love me anymore, but I love him just the same, and hate all other men, and like to make ‘em think scornfully of me!” (chapter 42 page 284 “Tess...”)

This line transcends all levels to prove chastity of Tess.

The ‘cruelty of lust and fragility of love’ as Hardy puts it leaves no scope for Tess to ever lead a life of acceptance. Nor does Mariam’s constant efforts to please Rasheed yield any harvest. Like Tess, Mariam remains subservient to everything her husband bestows upon her including rejection and even another woman. Rasheed brings in Laila while Angel though momentarily but does propose to Izzy to accompany him to Brazil. Angel’s hypocrisy reaches its peak when he confines his principle to the point of a chaste, untouched or rather a virgin lover. Tess rightly finds her life worse than vanity:

“Tess asked herself; and, thinking of her wasted life, said, ‘All is vanity.’...alas, worse than vanity-injustice, punishment, exaction, death.” (Chapter 41 page 282- “Tess...”)

### **Other similarities**

Rasheed husband of both Laila and Mariam is like Alec in Hardy’s novel- selfish and chauvinist who looks down to women as mere objects. Both have got double standards – Alec is a fake D’Urberville only for the sake of glamour associated with the name while Rasheed is a fake religious man for the same reason. Rasheed boasts of his being a devout Muslim and lays down guidelines to wear burqa and stay inside for his wife Mariam on one hand but on the other hand, he himself keeps porn magazines in his drawer as Mariam observes;

“...and what about all this talk of honour and propriety, his disapproval of the female customers, who after all, were only showing him their feet to get fitted for shoes? A woman’s face, he’d said, is her husband’s business only. Surely the women on these pages had husbands, some of them must.”

Likewise, Alec D’Urberville has double standards. On one hand, he brags of his love for Tess and even turns to preaching but he still looks at Tess as an object to satiate his physical needs and imposes his desire upon her by taking advantage of her helplessness. Once again depriving her of freedom to choose what she wants.

The brothers of Angel Clare are equally Hippocratic. They boast of clergy and high Christian morals but call Tess as a woman of no dignity. They are representatives of patriarchal statutes set by men only for women and Angel under the same influence rejects Tess calling it his principles. Even the wives of Jalil represent the same hypocrisy as depicted by Angel’s brothers they think that Mariam being an illegitimate does not deserve acceptance and education like their own daughters. While their own daughters go to school they decide to get rid of Mariam by getting her married to a man suitable to be her father rather than a husband.

#### **Jaleel and Angel Clare similarity:**

Angel Clare thinks to be a man he has done a smaller sin by having an illegitimate relationship with a woman before meeting Tess just like Jalil thinks it was not his fault at impregnating Nana, he rather blames Nana like Angel blames Tess for committing an equal sin. The following lines from “A Thousand Splendid Suns” emphasise this:

“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.”

(Nana to Mariam in Chapter 1)

Moreover, Jaleel’s penances come very late that is, only after Mariam dies like Clare’s penances. Clare returns very late when Tess has already become a mistress to Alec in return of financial favours to her family. Both Jaleel and Clare fail to value the gem who loved them immensely.

#### **Conclusion**

The two contrasting novels of east and west cultures stink throughout of male chauvinism and oppression. The female protagonists of both the novels are epitomes of sacrifice and greatness. While Mariam sacrifices for the happiness and better life of Laila,

Tess sacrifices for her family. Both the great heroines do not deserve the evil world and its miseries and hence, both decide to get executed for a deed which though a sin and crime is the means of ultimate salvation from their savage oppressors. They not only die for the happiness of others but even perhaps, for the sins of others and hence, the concluding famous lines from Hardy:

“ ‘Justice’ was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase had ended his sport with Tess ...”

- (“Tess of the D’Urbervilles, chapter 59 page 100)

Indeed, a pure and selfless woman like Tess deserves no place among the mortals, the only justice to them would be to live in the kingdom of heaven. Both Mariam and Tess embrace death to enter into a fairer world. Tess leaves her dream of a peaceful life with Angel to her younger sister Liza-Lu and Mariam leaves her dream of a better life with children, love and peace to Laila. By giving away their lives they open up a new world for those behind to live and enjoy all that they couldn’t all their lives.

“Mariam wished for so much in those final moments. Yet as she closed her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the *harami* child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Mariam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate belongings”

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