

# Twisted Religious Politics and Oppression of Women in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns

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**Abstract:** *This paper is the study of the aspects that lead to the decadence of the public life of the Afghan women and the restriction of freedoms caused by extremist religious politics. Afghanistan is considered a conservative country that adheres to strict cultural norms and regulations. One such system is the hardline religious system, which has grown tougher after the Taliban seized power. Persecution of women and restricting their freedom due to narrow religious thought and extremist religious policies are among the most important topics discussed in Hosseini's novels. Adorno's theory "The Authoritarian Personality" was taken primarily to analyze the religious aspect of the addressed novel. The study has focused on the activities and practices of these groups which take religion as a source of authority. That authority has contributed to doubling the oppression of women. The study has adopted the socio-religious framework to illustrate the policies which persecuted women by using strict religious rulings.*

**Keywords:** *Adorno, Authoritarian Personality, conservative, Khaled Hosseini, persecution.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### Hosseini and A Thousand Splendid Suns

Hosseini is an Afghan-born American novelist Known for his realism and depiction of the real life of Afghan people. He gained a good reputation for his first novel The Kite Runner (2003), Which to the world the most important problems experienced by the Afghan society and reflected different images of what was reported by the media. It is second novel A Thousand Splendid Suns in (2007) came to depict Afghani life and make the picture brighter in which civility and freedom were part of the Afghani society. The novel shows the life of the Afghani people from the post-monarchy period through the Taliban to the end of their regime. It embodies the tragic realities experienced by women in the patriarchal society of in Afghanistan. Afghani women are persecuted according to Afghanistan's culture and tradition, and the situation worsened when Afghan religious groups took power in Afghanistan. Therefore, this study investigates the impact of religious fatwas issued by extremists on the lives of Afghani women. Those religious Fatwas and social norms have become a weapon directed against all women in Afghanistan, in particular those who have decided to regain their rights.

### Women in Afghan society before and under the Taliban regime

In addition to the religious aspects of exploitation, it is noteworthy to mention the social life of Afghani women that preceded the Taliban Regime during the USSR occupation. In social and cultural aspects, women have a certain equality with men in various aspects including job opportunities and the right to education even if that was only in the cities like Kabul. Some women, especially officers' wives, were allowed to walk in the streets alone without covering their faces and even their heads. Some of them were wearing makeup and smoking also. All that mentioned by Khaled Hosseini in the novel "These women were all swinging handbags and rustling skirts. Mariam, even spotted one smoking behind the wheel of a car. Their nails were long, polished pink or orange, their red as tulips" (Hosseini, 74). Referring to the advanced level

of rights and freedom that Afghani women obtained during the 1970s; Nancy Dupree writes, "Women moved freely in public and filled government offices and higher educational institutions leading members of the western media to write glowingly about women clad in blue jeans and the fact that women students outnumbered males at Kabul University" (Dupree, 34).

However, all these gains disappeared and all aspects of urbanization and civilization vanished with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. During that period laws and norms were applied in the name of religion. Most of them were directed against women, in which that period was characterized by repression, injustice, and restriction of freedom. Moving and talking outside the home became almost forbidden to women except on conditions. Besides female education was abolished and women were not free in their marriage. In her book, Shaima Khinjani argues that women's life became worst during Taliban regime. Women were beaten publicly for simple things like wearing white shoes or high heels, even the windows of the house were painted to prevent other men from looking inside (Khinjani, 35).

"The Authoritarian Personality" and the religion subscale

Authoritarian Personality is a theory set by Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford in 1950. Those theorists set four scales for this theory, three of them are to measure Anti-Semitism (AS), Ethnocentrism (E), Political and Economic Conservatism (PEC), and the fourth one is to measure Potentiality for Fascism, which is known as F-scale which Adorno also refers to it as Implicit Anti-Democratic Trends scale. They mentioned nine characteristics of an authoritarian personality: Conventionalism, Authoritarian Submission, Authoritarian Aggression, Anti-interception, Superstition and Stereotypy, Power and 'toughness', Destructiveness and cynicism, Projectivity, Exaggerated concern with sexual 'goings-on' (Adorno, 222).

The theory, moreover, measures the relationship between religion and prejudice, and the relationship between religion and E- scale. Likewise, Leonard et al. argue that "the religious son of a religious family was more authoritarian than a nonreligious son of a religious family, but not significantly more authoritarian than the religious son of a nonreligious family" (Leonard, 17). Accordingly, to this quotation the characteristics of authoritarian personality can be clearly recognized among people who come from religious families. In this respect people with authoritarian personalities tend to divide society into two divisions, religious and non-religious. The characteristics of authoritarian personality are shared among religious people more than less religious people. Those people who get their authority from religion use that power for their ingroup personal interest; Adorno writes, "[h]igh scorers, more often than low scorers, seem to make use of religious ideas in order to gain some immediate practical advantage or to aid in the manipulation of other people" (Adorno, 733). The religious ideology of those people leads them to believe that they are elected by God and supported by the belief which give them the right to force those, who are outgroups, to be under their submission and follow their orders. Lee refers to that and says, "religion is not only fundamentally conservative, but anti-democratic. Aside from a few rare exceptions, religion claims that God's will is delivered through special revelation: it was given to certain people, at certain times and places, and not others" (Lee, 4).

The problem of the study

The use of extreme religion laws by the Taliban as an excuse to confiscate women's rights and the use of cruelty to reduce women's strength and rid of their threat.

Significance of the study

The importance of the study lies in trying to uncover the relationship between the Taliban's use of extremist religious rulings and the oppression of women, which aims to eliminate the threat of women to Taliban authority.

Purpose of the study

The study attempts to investigate the reasons for the persecution of women by the Taliban, using extremist religious rulings.

The study approaches the following set of questions

How did religion and ethnic fanaticism mix in the oppression of women?

What was the real purpose of using extreme religious rulings towards women?

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

This study is a case study designed to discuss Afghan women's oppression during the Taliban regime, in which social communication and characters from the Afghan community will be analyzed by using the target novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini. Instead of using other methods which aims to describe generalizable facts, Case study used to focus especially on women's oppression during a specific time. Adorno's theory "the authoritarian personality" will be basically used to analyze the target aspects.

## **III. DISCUSSION**

A new authority and a glimpse of positiveness

This novel has been associated with many stages in the history of modern Afghanistan, but what is important in this study is the period during which Taliban took power. The story revolves around a variety of female characters, though they are different in their ages, but they are similar in terms of injustice, marginalization, and persecution. Nana, a maid at the home of businessman Jalil, was exiled to a remote area because of her illicit relationship with her master. That relationship gave birth to Mariam the illegitimate girl. The latter's insistence on visiting her father's house, however, led her to lose her dignity and her mother's too. Mariam was then forced to marry Rashid, who is older than her. A new phase of injustice, violence and persecution has begun. Rasheed used to beat and abuse her and force her to wear the veil.

Another example is the third female character, Laila, the educated daughter of educated parents who support women and their freedoms and who believe in their role in building Afghanistan, Laila, who is forced to marry Rashid after losing her parents in bombardment; he deceived her that her lover had died. After a short time, Rashid practices his power to marginalize and oppress Laila, especially after the birth of her girl Aziza. With the Taliban take over, everyone becomes happy, even Mariam and Laila, that the fighting will stop, security and living conditions will improve. As Rasheed states, "[a]t least they're decent Muslim boys, Wallah, when they come, they will clean up this place. They'll bring peace and order" (Hosseini, 267). But all these wishes disappear; these groups have enacted a set of provisions and laws that everyone should follow without debate or face the punishment that accompanied those provisions.

From the inferno of social militancy to the quagmire of religious extremism

The Taliban's attempt to impose its reactionary ideology on everyone and force them to follow it is considered the goal of that group. Taliban members were radical low educated people. Aisha Ahmed describing them in her article writes, "The Taliban leadership was largely made up of rural Pashtun men with little to no education, and a staunch understanding of traditional values" (Ahmed, 32). The points of those guidelines, which are mentioned by the Taliban and form the constitution of their work, should be discussed and linked to the examples contained in the novel and the theoretical grounds that made them issue such unjust laws against women. According to Adorno's "The Authoritarian Personality", people with authoritarian personality tend to divide society to in and out groups. Taliban ideologies divide people on the basis of religion into religious (ingroup) and nonreligious (outgroups). This principle is the starting point for the Taliban in dealing with Afghan society. The Taliban established a caliphate on the same model followed after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad and considered their approach to the right religion. So, all the provisions of the Taliban instructions concerning women were based on their extremist reading of religion.

One of these provisions that women should stay at home, not to leave it, except in a companion with a man of their relatives. On addressing women, Taliban authorities state, Hosseini writes "You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home" (Hosseini, 271). The reason behind

preventing women from going out alone and not dealing or connecting with other men is perhaps best stated by Adorno or a very good reason in his context, writes

The ingroup must be kept pure and strong. The only methods of doing this are to liquidate the outgroups altogether, to keep them entirely subordinated, or to segregate them in such a way as to minimize contact with the ingroups. (Adorno, 150)

Indeed, to maintain the strength of the ingroup the other outgroups must be subjugated and excluded by keeping them away from communication with members of the ingroup. Therefore, the imprisonment of women at home is one of those methods followed by the ingroup leaders. We can notice this when Laila tried to visit her daughter Aziza alone after Rasheed refused to accompany her; she was punished and flogged each time she was caught alone. Hartley-Blecic and Meri Melissi In their article "The Invisible Women: The Taliban's Oppression Of Women In Afghanistan" refer to a survey conducted by the Physicians for Human Rights in 1998 about women's torturing and beating under the Taliban state that fifty-four of arrested women under The Taliban have been tortured and less than that have been beaten (Hartley, 24).

The second point in this provision is women should cover their faces with burqa because Taliban consider women's faces as a kind of temptation and leads to sin. Although the cultural heritage requires women to wear the burqa, not every woman wore it before the Taliban regime. In addition to cultural heritage, the burqa is considered as a barrier to avoid communication between the ingroup members and outgroup (females). The burqa is also considered as a kind of subjection of outgroups to the authority of the ingroup. Taliban decree that "You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten" (Hosseini, 271).

Gohari in his book, *The Taliban: Ascent to Power*, refers to a speech said by Taliban spokesman that woman's face is considered a source of temptation for men who are not legally related to that woman (Gohari, 108). Rasheed's view is consistent with that concept of showing the woman's face, addressing Mariam "Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business" (Hosseini, 69). Even the communist teacher whom Laila met at the orphanage, and prevented girls from wearing headscarves under the pretext that men and women are equal now wears her burqa in obedience to Taliban orders.

Female education is another issue to be taken into consideration. The Taliban have closed all schools for girls after announcing a ban on female education. It is clear that educated people have the ability to claim their rights more than non-educated. Education is, indeed, a weapon that can be used to wrest power from the dominant group. In his comments Adorno writes, "While the outgroup is accused of selfishness and materialism, the only virtues of the ingroup are the honesty and efficiency of its methods" (Adorno, 47). Commenting on this, what is considered forbidden and a vice to outgroups (females) is considered a virtue and is permissible for ingroup (males). As education is a good weapon for maintaining power, it should be in the hands of the ingroup (males) and away of outgroups (females). It should be noted here that restricting education to males has two advantages, first to deprive females of this force and second to instill radical ideas in minds of men.

Even if there is education, it will be in secret and effort will be taken to do so. This is what happened with Aziza, the daughter of Laila, when Rasheed forces her to go to the orphanage. Zaman used to teach children but in secret, and Aziza told her mother to draw the curtains. Aziza added that Mr. Zaman was providing needles and knitting balls to trick the Taliban in case of raiding the orphanage, where children would pretend they are knitting instead of reading. It is decreed by Taliban that "Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately" (Hosseini, 271).

In the domain of social working in institutions and organizations women also may find themselves under the tyrannical power of the Taliban and strongly prevented from their rights. All women suffer and are forced to stay home and prevented from practicing any work outside their homes. This ban has affected all the sectors where women were active, especially

in that of education. Indeed, a large proportion of teachers were female. When they were suspended from work, the education sector suffered. The low living conditions of teachers is best represented in the novel when Laila's teacher puts her four children in the orphanage because of the difficulty of maintaining their life and earning them bread, while Laila well remembers her well-styled hair and prosperous life before the rule of the Taliban. In a report of Amnesty international describing the effects of forcing women to leave their jobs and stay indoors "The restrictions have most immediately affected educated, working women living in the towns. However, the impact of the restrictions is felt much wider, affecting the poor, uneducated women too, as well as boys and girls, other family members, and ultimately the long-term development prospects for Afghanistan" (Amnesty, 4).

The only work that women are allowed to do is in the health field. Women were allowed to enter hospitals, but under very difficult conditions. The women were separated from men in hospitals and men were not allowed to treat women, which caused a severe shortage of medical staff. Even the female staff at the hospital are forced to wear burqa during the operations and under strict surveillance by the Taliban. This is clear when Laila was in labor. The writer describes the human crowds that fill the hospital and the small number of medical staff, he writes "Before the registration window was a horde of women, shoving and pushing against each other. Some were still holding their babies. Some broke from the mass and charged the double doors that led to the treatment rooms" (Hosseini, 297). He describing the obstacles faced by the doctor in terms of lack of medicines and the wearing of the veil at work, one of the doctor says "They won't give me what I need. I have no X-ray either, no suction, no oxygen, not even simple antibiotics. When NGOs offer money, the Taliban turn them away" (Hosseini, 283).

#### Representatives of Divine Authority and Injustice

Inequality, discrimination and unfair sentences against women have been a major feature of the Taliban period. The women are within outgroup and men, who joined the Taliban, are within ingroup even men who commit sins can repent and return to the ingroup to enjoy its privileges, except for great sins. Women are subject to severe penalties reaching to execution or cutting off organs simply for refusing to follow some orders. When Maryam's jail mate Naghma, for example, fled with a young man she loved she was arrested by the Taliban. The young man was allowed to repent and then was released but Naghma was sentenced to five years in prison for seducing the young man (Hosseini, 354).

In the trial of Mariam, everything was settled at the beginning; the judge did not take into consideration the reason for the killing and the circumstances that surrounded it. Because she was a woman and committed this crime, she was condemned to death without any enquiry. The second judge through the prescription of women limits of thinking and their readiness to swear at any time for any reason declares a clear discrimination against women. This reinforces the theory of authoritarian personality and its interaction with outgroups. The second judge presents throughout his speech the qualities of the person with the authoritarian personality and the relationship between ingroup which he belongs to and the outgroups. Adorno discusses the definition of those groups, he says "Outgroups are the objects of negative opinions and hostile attitudes; ingroups are the objects of positive opinions and uncritically supportive attitudes; and it is considered that outgroups should be socially subordinate to ingroups" (Adorno, 104). The second judge is Prejudiced against and looks with contempt at women. For this judge, the issue of the murder of Rasheed was not as important as the rebellion of Mariam and her revolt against the customs and their judgments. According to Adorno, people with authoritarian personality seek to subject everyone to their orders. Any attempt to change the status quo deserves a penalty. The murder of Rasheed is considered by the second judge as a rebellion against and a departure from the laws of the ingroup. On the aggression of ingroup against outgroup, Adorno writes, "Once the individual has convinced himself that there are people who ought to be punished, he is provided with a channel through which his deepest aggressive impulses may be expressed, even while he thinks of himself as thoroughly moral" (Adorno, 233).

#### Women as an eternal outgroup

So now one question should be asked, why does the Taliban finish their announcement for women with the order "Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar"?

As we mentioned above, Adorno explains that people with authoritarian personality who deal with religion divide society into ingroup who have loyalty to them and submit to them, and outgroups who do not have any loyalty to them. Those outgroups have two choices, either, join them and obey their orders or face punishment. Those people with authoritarian personalities think they have divine authority to order people and they should obey only without any further discussion. We can now understand the intensity and arrogance in the discourse of the ingroup addressed to the people and especially women. If we look at the laws that have been enacted for women, they are more severe than those of men. There is always a chance for a man to repent or at least to have his punishment ignored, because man may become a member of the ingroup after repentance or enduring his punishment, while women even if they abide by the laws cannot be considered as a member within the ingroup. For the Taliban, women are always considered outgroup; their duty is only to be at home and bring up children and cook. Those groups that turned religious rulings into distorted social systems mainly aim at obtaining gains for the members of the ingroup and those who declare loyalty to them. Adorno refers to this process of transforming religion into a tool for personal and social purposes writes:

The transformation of religion into an agency of social conformity makes it fall in line with most other conformist tendencies. Adherence to Christianity under such conditions easily lends itself to abuse; to subservience, over adjustment, and ingroup loyalty as an ideology which covers up hatred against the disbeliever, the dissenter, the Jew. (Adorno, 730)

Thus, those who belong to or abide by the laws of the ingroup enjoy protection and can violate the rights of the outgroups, as Rasheed did against his wives by humiliating, beating, and torturing, they knew well he would be protected even if he kills one of them. Indeed, when Mariam mentioned the harsh behaviour of her husband in the court nobody listened to her.

The union of race and religious extremism to oppress the other

Pashtun fighters, who live in Afghanistan, consider themselves the purest race in Afghan society. They expected everyone to obey them and to be the highest position among the Taliban. They also have received strict religious teaching at institutes in Pakistan. So those people come from a religious background and pure Afghan race and they have the authority to control others who are less religious and of less pure Afghan race. Hartley-Blecic and Meri Melissi about the educational background of Taliban write:

The only claim that has been consistently made by the Taliban is that they are a group of students of pure Islam, Islam jurisprudence and the laws of the Sharia, and that their ultimate goal is to bring Afghanistan under Islamic rule, thereby creating a pure Islamic-Afghan government. (Hartley, 564)

Hence ethnicity and religion work together to form the Taliban ideology in dealing with others.

In his book *Taliban: militant Islam, oil, and fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Rashid refers to the genealogy of Taliban tribe, he claims, "The Taliban, drawn from the majority Pashtun ethnic group which accounts for some 40 percent of Afghanistan's 20 million people, had also galvanized Pashtun nationalism. ... The Taliban victories revived hopes that once again the Pashtuns would dominate Afghanistan" (Rashid, 2). Rasheed referring to the origin of the Taliban says, "They were guerrilla force, he said, made up of young Pashtun men[...]Most of them had been raised-some even born-in refugee camps along the Pakistani border, and in Pakistani madrasa, where they were schooled in Shari'a by Mullahs" (Hosseini, 266). He also adds, "At least the Taliban are pure and Incorruptible" (Hosseini, 267).

Brian R. Farmer in his book *Radical Islam in West Ideology and Challenge* refers to Taliban behaviour towards outgroups (women) who are always discriminated against and tortured in The name of God. He writes "Right-wing authoritarians think of themselves as more moral than the rest of society. This sense of morality is boosted by religion, which helps them eliminate guilt knowing that they are working for God" (Farmer, 31).

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

To sum up, the facts and events mentioned in the novel and laws enacted by the armed groups in persecution of men and women and deprived them of freedom and human rights. Women, in particular, in the Taliban regime were considered as enemy because they belonged to outgroup. The Taliban's members pour their anger on women (Mariam, Laila and Naghma) as an outgroup to reinforce their authority. The Taliban believe that the more restrictions on women, the closer the system would be to religious idealism. In order to establish an ideal Islamic state, all sources of seduction must be removed and obliterated. So, according to authoritarian personality theory, people with authoritarian personality like the Taliban tend to place strict punishments with each law, especially with those related to women.

In general, the study finds that these twisted systems that have taken religion as a cover for their harsh practices which have targeted Afghan society in general and women in particular in all aspects of life are a reason besides cultures in oppressing women. The Taliban used twisted religious method as an ingroup tactic to justify violence against women and to make them more submissive to its members. This is highlighted in the trial of Mariam. Duly women became refugees, widowed, uneducated or even sentenced to death. Hence the importance and quality of Khaled Hosseini's novel in the embodiment of those characters that reflected the reality of Afghanistan. Mariam's life ended after being judged in a court directed by the Taliban, and Laila established her new home in Pakistan after she managed to escape the Taliban rule and began her life with Tariq.

#### **V. RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

The origin of the Taliban as highly conservative Pashtun has a great role in increasing the suffering and persecution of women, which was accompanied by the use of extreme religion rules. This union of strict Pashtun customs and Taliban extremist religious rulings is one of the most important reasons for the suffering of women.

The main goal of using extreme religion rulings and strict punishments towards women is to get rid of the source of the woman's threat to the authority of men and the Taliban in particular, in addition to make them a scapegoat for those trying to violate those extreme rules.

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