Abstract

The thesis entitled "Victims of History and Culture: Women in the Novels of Khaled Hosseini and Siba Shakib" has been chapterised into four chapters. It attempts to discuss the victimization of women characters in the hands of history and culture.

Women and History

Though the novels concerned are not historical in the strict sense of the word, the title of the thesis demands a parallel study of literary (the novels) and non-literary (the history of the country) texts. Both the novelists have drawn in abundance from the historical happenings of Afghanistan. The unstable political history of Afghanistan which had been marked by power struggles, armed revolts and mass uprisings had a direct bearing on the social fabric of this multi-ethnic country which is well mirrored in the novels. History of Afghanistan stands a testimony to the fact that the issues related to women have always been one of the various reasons for unstable polity. A cursory examination of history reveals that at various junctures in the history, the issues related to women have been among the reasons behind the fall of various regimes.

Afghanistan is a country with deep patriarchal roots and a tribal-based family structure. In Afghanistan, family is at the heart of the society. Often, the alliance of tradition, family, and Islam has collided with women’s rights who are basically considered as receptacle of honour. If on any occasion the honour of a woman is violated, she is considered as a liability on the family and is usually secluded from the rest of the members as a form of strict punishment. Man has always assumed the role of participating in war and ruling, woman of the domestic affairs and the care of
children. Any interference in this centuries old historical element is seen as a serious threat to the social setup by both the Afghan men and women.

**Woman as a Cultural Construct**

Gender is a social term with purely social interpretations and these interpretations vary from society to society and from culture to culture. Gender in no case is an ultimate and inscrutable reality that cannot be probed into, questioned and problematized. In all definitions and discussions, women are however defined in relation to men. One may or may not agree but in the binary relation between men and women it seems as if the power is in a limited quantity and if men have it women cannot possess it. The different connotations associated with the word ‘woman’ with the passage of time are not in any way inherent in the referrent but have been bestowed by the society which uses it. Nevertheless suspending meanings and connotations of a word and infusing it with a new set of meanings is a difficult task.

In the Paleolithic age, men got better chances of coming out of their huts for hunting purposes where as women got limited within the tribal boundaries. At the advent of the family and society the separate families were held together by the authority and the protection of the eldest male descendant. Patriarchal society came into existence on the basis of power acquired by the males and subordination by the females. The latter got limited chances but due to their procreative role as during the time of pregnancy and lactation it became difficult for them to leave their homes.

Socio-biologists assert that women’s roles in child care and other domestic tasks are outcomes of biological adaptations related to reproduction. According to their theories, because pregnancy lasts nine months, mothers have an innate physical and psychic investment in the child that is far more intense than that of fathers whose
role in procreation consumes less time and energy. And, because a woman can have fewer children in her lifetime than a man potentially can, she is more concerned with the survival and development of her offspring.

Through the character of Samir, *Samira and Samir* questions and probes into the concept of ‘gender’ and debunks the myths related to the word. It tries to prove that strength is just a matter of practice and it has nothing to do with the sex of an individual. In the novels under study and in particular in *Samira and Samir*, there is a strong demarcation between the two territories which are hierarchically stratified; all what is frivolous and negative is associated with the woman and whatever is normal and positive with the men. Women are supposed to be shy, caring, responsive, dreaming and beautiful whereas men as tough, coarse, ‘insolent’, wild and brave. And anything other than the status quo is treated as threat and is dealt with severely.

In the novels the ignorance of the male characters about their religion is clearly reflected in the way they interpret and implement their interpretation and wherever there is any reflection of knowledge it is used against women. In fact the tribal-cultural codes play a stronger role than religion. Patriarchal ideology is visualized as powerfully incorporated into religious beliefs and practices. Men have in one way or the other created it in different contexts and thus religion becomes a contrivance to uphold sexual hegemony and create prominently dimorphic sexual beings.

Women are considered capable for working in the four walls of home only. Education is thought of as a male prerogative. There are just two or three characters in the novels who seem to have different opinion and favour women’s education. Even the question of trans-gendering and sexual preference has been raised in the novels.
Siba Shakib in particular, questions the norm of heterosexual orientation. She proves through the character of Samira that sexual preferences of an individual depend on his/her upbringing. Many a times in the novel, the question of sexuality is raised where Samira is herself not able to decide whom she should feel attracted to—Bashir or Gol-Sar.

**The Female Voice**

Voice, power and identity are inter-related. Literally ‘voice’ means any audible sound or an expression of opinion. Symbolically voice represents power, control and authority. It is the voice which in close association with language gives meaning to the ideas and feelings of a human being. The power gives identity and a sense of belonging to an individual and it is the ability to speak in a coherently that marks the difference between human and inanimate objects of nature. According to creationists, as per Semitic tradition—language makes human species superior to the other living beings. Unless one speaks one cannot be heard. A voiceless person is no more than a stone as is seen in the case of a dumb human being. In case an individual cannot speak, she/he feels helpless and distressed and is unable to express his feelings in a proper way.

One of the major theories which study the role of the voice particularly in the marginalized strata of the society is the Muted Group Theory, which was developed by Cheris Kramarae though it is originally based on the theories by anthropologist Shirley Ardener and Edwin Ardener. The Muted Group theory challenges the gender assumptions of society and attempts to revisit the ways in which male domination restricts communication among females and the ways in which it mutes the voice of women. The theory makes an important observation that most of the times the
anthropologists talk to and about the leaders of a particular culture, who usually happen to be adult males. The data collected thus, which is claimed to represent the whole culture, actually represents the voice of men only, leaving out the experiences of women and other voiceless groups. Another theory which explains the variations in communication and language on the basis of gender is the Dominance Theory which has been explained by Pamela Fishman. She claims that the difference in power between women and men is the main cause of this variation in language and ultimately the mutedness of women. A slightly modified form of this theory is the Difference Theory illustrated by Deborah Tannen. He bases his argument on the premise that it is due to the segregation at important stages of their lives that men and women develop their peculiar ways of communication, diction and syntax.

One thing which keeps the novels closely woven is the spirit of female friendship, human, rather woman kindness, and most importantly the hope in their eyes of a better and brighter future for their children. In all the four novels, the only respite which a woman gets is in the company of some other woman. At many places in the novels, there are instances where women try to form a kind of undeclared bond to avoid collapse and to stand against all what comes their way. They try to form what Siba Shakib calls resistance. There are hints of same sex relationships where the spirit of female friendship is further substantiated. The shared experiences enable them to have a voice that can be different and inaudible to the patriarchal tools but comprehensible and audible among the sisterhood.

Another major strength of the novels highlights the courage and resilience with which the women characters live against all odds and come out as winners at the end. There are some women who have a strong her sense of self respect and an
audible voice. They neither keep quiet nor submit without struggle. However the tyrannical war, the fundamentalist Taliban, the patriarchal society and culture of Afghanistan and gender discrimination prove to be too strong for them to withstand and render them inaudible.

**Sexual Colonization**

Usually the terms like ‘subordination’, ‘subjugation’ ‘domination’ etc have been used to define the domestic and external violence against women in a particular society. However for this social disparity I have appended the word ‘sexual’ with ‘colonization’ to explore how, in the novels under study, women characters are colonized as a sex, which has been happening since time immemorial in almost all societies. Further ‘sexual colonization’ also connotes sexual harassment. How women have been sexually colonized in the novels constitute the essence of the phrase. Sexual colonization in the novels is directly related to the seclusion of women which mainly manifests in the form of ‘purdah’ in different forms. As it happens in colonization, the colonized subject is left with no option other than to be exploited by the colonizer, in the case of man-woman relationship, woman suffers as a colonized being. The phrase ‘Sexual colonization’ has been further used to probe into the minds of the women characters who are made to believe that they are duty-bound both in moral and social sense to remain subordinate to their men who may be in the form of a brother, a husband, a father or a son. Religion, culture, morality, social institutions etc are used to make them believe that they have no way out of this predicament. Nonetheless there are some female characters in the novels who try and succeed to various extents in ‘de-colonizing’ themselves from the clutches of society in general and men in particular.
The major institutions which act as agents in the colonization of women characters in the novels are 'home', 'family', 'marriage' 'religion' 'war' and 'rape'. 'Home' however forms the ground on which other factors rest. It is associated with the 'being' of an individual. Most of the female characters themselves feel insecure once they are outside their homes because of the sexual violence they may face outside. However it is ironical that the 'safety' of home may not provide them safety as the enemy or perpetrator of atrocity is at home in the form of some relative especially husband. Nonetheless there are women like Aziza who work outside. There are women like Daria, Shirin-Gol and Samira who have no home at all. And there are women like Mariam and Laila who escape from the 'home' in order to save themselves from the brutality of 'the owner of the home' i.e. their husband Rasheed.

For the women in the novels, modesty is the most essential element of good breeding. They are are required to keep their heads down in public, to cover their heads in front of males, and to avoid interaction with boys. Moral standards are closely linked to sexuality, therefore mobility, expression, and social interactions are not considered woman's domain.

Afghanistan has a grave history in the sense that rape and sexual violence has been used by the commanders, militia and other forces as a means of revenge and terror and to dishonor the men of a particular tribe. There are instances in which women being the 'property' and 'honor' of men according to the Afghan culture are raped, many a times in front of their family members, in order to avenge upon the men. Although during Taliban rule the incidents of rapes and molestation decreased due to their strict punishment to the sexual offenders yet Taliban themselves committed a lot of such crimes where the women and young girls of the opposite
factions were abducted and raped. During the years of war between the Russians and the Mujahidin there were almost no laws in practice to convict the offenders and majority of the cases went unnoticed. At present there are provisions to punish such offenders but it happens rarely as the victim loses honour and the chances of a secure marriage once the crime gets publicized. So these cases are hardly brought to the notice of the local courts that usually lack sensitivity in this regard. Besides it is considered against the tenants of Afghan culture to discuss such issues openly.

In many pages of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* rape seems to be personified as a character. The novel actually covers the times around the horrific episode of 9 September when the twin towers were allegedly bombed by the Taliban and ends when Afghanistan is ruled by the present President Hamid Karzai. The war- first with the Soviet, then among mujahidin followed by the American Operation Enduring Freedom to flush out the Taliban- has one thing in common. In all the cases rape and murder of women was used as a tool to cause a shameful threat to the enemies.