Chapter-3

The Female Voice
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Like the Medusa of the myth, the image of women has been molded to serve the interests of phallogocentrism; her voice about her own self, body and language has been repressed and drawn in a way that she appears naturally evil and inferior when compared to man. The part of this myth about beauty and truth of woman has been erased. She has been shown as an ugly enchantress with snakes intertwined in her hair, with a wicked spell which turns the onlookers into stones. Helene Cixous writes that men have “riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss” (885). M.A.R. Habib observes that the word “abyss” used by Helene Cixous refers “to the connotations and implications of Freud’s designation of woman as a “dark continent,” pregnant with a mystery recalcitrant to analysis and understanding, and signifying lack, castration, negativity, and dependence (on the positive identity of the male)” (702). Cixous in her essay “Le Rire de la Méduse” (1975), translated as “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976) has tried to redeem this part of the Medusa myth where the real beauty of women has been overlooked quite intentionally. In this context Habib writes, “What Cixous effectively does is to redeem that part of the Medusa myth which has been repressed: the Medusa as she was prior to the repression of her sexuality, prior to the disfigurement of her beauty, and prior to her metamorphosis into a monster” (703). In “The Laugh of the Medusa” Cixous writes, “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (885). For Cixous the Medusa myth expresses the repression of female sexuality and beauty; her hair which is usually seen as a symbol of beauty has been transformed in a symbol of evil “and although the agent of this
repression and punishment was a female goddess, Athena, this happens to be a
goddess with very “masculine” attributes . . .” (Habib 703).

For Helene Cixous, there is no essential difference between a man and a
woman; she believes in humanity and she evades defining men or women as two
different categories. She argues “. . . that if we define what it means to be a man or a
woman we risk a fundamentalist orthodoxy about sexual difference which limits
rather than liberates our understanding of what it means to be a human” (Bray 5). She
goes ahead and looks for the actual reasons behind the actual repression of the female
voice; one of the reasons in her eyes being heterosexuality. She objects to the world of
heterosexuality and argues that such a stereotyped relationship often proves
authoritarian “. . . because it limits an experience of love and desire by imposing rigid
roles and prefixed sexual identities onto men and women. Moreover, what we might
term the metaphysics of heterosexuality, the sense that this sexed couple is the
foundation of binary thought, also restricts creative thought” (Bray 50). Instead she
gives a new concept of ‘the other bisexuality’, that is, “a sexuality which is more than
female or male, a sexuality that can move beyond, exceed the very limits of what
counts as female desire or male desire” (Bray 50). Bray notes that Helene Cixous’
suggestion about ‘the other bisexuality’ somewhere echoes Virginia Woolf’s concept
of ‘androgyne’ which represents an entirely new sexual being combining the male and
the female. In “A Room of One’s Own”, Virginia Woolf writes, “And I went on
amateurishly to sketch a plan of soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one
male, one female; and in the man’s brain, the man predominates over the woman, and
in the woman’s brain, the woman predominates over the man” (Woolf 2143). Virginia
Woolf refers to Coleridge who said that “a great mind is androgynous” (2143) but she
clarifies “Coleridge certainly did not mean, when he said that a great mind is
androgynous, that it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women; a mind that
takes up their cause or devotes itself to their interpretation" (Woolf 2143).

**Woman: Voice and Audibility**

Cixous argues, “It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming
to know her. . . ” (878). For this liberation she strongly advocates that woman should
make their voice audible, they need to write about their bodies which implies that they
need to give voice to their own experiences and desires; they need to break their
misrepresentation by men who have till now taken the uninvited task of creating their
(women) image in literary discourses. She emphasizes:

> And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your
body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written. (And why I didn't write before
the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's
reserved for the great-that is, for "great men"; and it's “silly.” (Cixous 876)

At another place she adds, “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech
at the same time” (Cixous 880). She thus believes that the voice of a woman is
directly related to her body and unless a woman acknowledges her body she cannot
find right expression of her voice. However mainly referring to “The Laugh of
Medusa,” many Anglo-American feminists have accused Helene Cixous of
“promoting “essentialism”- that is, of equating female writing with an idealized and
unhistoricized “femininity”. By making such claims as “women are multiple,”
“women are open to one another,” “women write in white ink,” she does seem to be
affirming some sort of “essence” of woman” (Lietch 2038). However the point in
Cixous that “women are multiple” is an assertion of women’s individuality and not
their being one single amorphous species indistinguishable from each other.
Socially influenced and morally acceptable view about the voice of woman has achieved the status of a theory and has been used as a touchstone. If a survey of the history is taken one finds very few women writers, out of whom most have been vulnerable to the male hegemony and male constructed image of woman. Thus they too have contributed to this image of woman. Man have always acted as mouthpiece of woman and rendered the female voice dented and manipulated. In this affair the former has benefitted at the cost of the latter's freedom and representation and the actual female voice was never heard. Virginia Woolf in her essay, “A Room of One’s Own” finds the women’s presence wanting in almost all kinds of discourses. Woolf notes that most of the books on women have been written by men, defining women so as to protect men’s image of superiority (Habib 677). In this context, Helene Cixous writes:

It is well known that the number of women writers (while having increased very slightly from the nineteenth century on) has always been ridiculously small. This is a useless and deceptive fact unless from their species of female writers we do not first deduct the immense majority whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women as sensitive-intuitive-dreamy, etc. (879).

The records of the history show that her voice, her body and psyche have been misunderstood and misrepresented in almost all the discourses namely philosophy, theology, psychoanalysis, language etc. Masculine voice is the only audible form of human speech which disables woman’s voice from being audible. Helene Cixous writes in this regard, “... even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine” (Cixous 880-881). Though woman is there but she has been kept on the margins in
history and the treatment has been unfair and parallel to her treatment in real life where her voice has been always repressed and muted.

Virginia Woolf discusses the presence and absence of female voice in these words: “She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominated the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents force a ring upon her finger” (2114). Almost all the discourses are dominated by male voice while female voice is suppressed. As a result an entirely fabricated and artificial form of speech is attributed to woman. No doubt there are some attempts to deconstruct this kind of attribution and many theorists have achieved success, nonetheless the strong and dominating voice of men still reigns to a great extend. In this case the biased social and literary discourses have always won and the attempts, if any, to break these stereotypes have been countered by the adherents of the traditional order with counter excuses and theories to explain and assert the legitimacy of superiority of male voice over the female voice. Besides such attempts have been labeled as lopsided, unsubstantiated and pervert and have been sidelined socially and politically. The reason is the fear that such attempts may snatch the dominance from men and render them voiceless and thus ultimately powerless going by the law of opposite and equal reaction.

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 a meaning to the ideas and feelings of a human being. Power gives identity and a sense of belonging to an individual and it is the ability to speak coherently that marks the difference between human and inanimate objects of nature. According to
creationists, as per Semitic tradition- language enables human species to stand out the other living beings. Unless one speaks one cannot be heard. In ancient times when the written form of language was not there it was the voice/sound which was used by the early man to communicate and convey his message. He used to make different sounds to convey the message to his fellow beings. Even in animal behavior one notes that they too communicate in their own way using their power of voice. In case an individual cannot speak, he/she feels helpless and distressed and is unable to express his feelings in a proper way. Though modern technology has devised tools to tackle this problem yet they have never compensated for the natural voice of a human being.

**The Muted Group Theory**

More serious is the case when a human being has a voice and an identity but the voice is suppressed and unheard thereby resulting in an absence and mutedness. The voice is there but due to several reasons, it is in a muted form. Over a long period of time in history the dominant group devises a communication system that reflects its perception of the world and then declares it the common and accepted language of that particular society while sidelining the Others' viewpoint and subjecting it to experiences that does not reflect it in its entirety. Although the recessive group may or may not be conscious of this forced ideology but this declivity is present. Edwin Ardener writes: “The muted structures are ‘there’ but cannot be ‘realized’ in the language of the dominant structure” (qtd. in A. Foss, K. Foss and Griffin 21). In the context of particular societies, there are certain cultural, ethical, religious or linguistic groups which go unheard due to their lack of proper expressions or due to their lack of access to it in the social ladder. Elderly persons, the disabled, homosexuals, the poor
and homeless may too fall in this marginalized category sometimes. This can also be due to their less number or due to their backwardness and illiteracy or even due to predominance of the definition of normal and natural by the hegemonic group. Mark P. Orbe echoes S. Ardener:

Over time, dominant group members formulate- consciously or unconsciously- a communication system that supports their perceptions of the world and conceptualizes it as the appropriate language for the rest of society. This process subjects nondominant group members to function with a communication system that is not representative of their lived experiences. (20)

Although there may be a sincere effort on the part of the unheard social groups to get their voices heard and acknowledged, but the problem persists as the dominant group is not willing to consider their voice at par with their own.

On a universal level such has been the case with women who although have a voice of their own but have been rendered muted by the patriarchal set up of the society in which the terminology of the speech is entirely man-made. Krolokke and Soreson write:

. . . women face a dilemma arising from the fact that their experiences and means of communication are restricted by their marginalization in society and their relative isolation within the private sphere- deemed not only irrelevant to public discourse but also less effective than paid labor and consequently less valuable. (31)

Women are in no way different from men but their experiences of life and perception differs. Orbe illustrates Cheris Kramarae’s observations in this context as he writes,

First, women perceive the world differently than men on the basis of different experiences and activities rooted in the division of labor. Second, because of their political dominance, men’s system of perception is dominant, impeding
the free expression of women’s alternative models. Last, to participate in society women must transform their own models in terms of the perceived male system of expression. (22)

Thus what he says is that women traditionally have been muted by a male-dominated communication system, which considers women’s interests and speech as marginal and unimportant and gives value to whatever is associated with men. Kramarae argues that language is "man-made" and "aids in defining, depreciating and excluding women" (Griffin 459). This thesis that the language is man-made is developed by Dale Spender in her book *Man Made Language* (1981) which also argues that “language is not a neutral medium but one which contains many features which reflect its role as the instrument through which patriarchy finds expression” (Barry 127).

On the basis of these assumptions, this theory was later called Muted Group Theory, which was developed by Cheris Kramarae in her book *Women and Men Speaking: Frameworks for Analysis* (1981) though the theory is originally based on the work of anthropologist Shirley Ardener and Edwin Ardener’s *Perceiving Women* (1975). Muted Group theory challenges the gender assumptions of society and attempts to revisit the ways in which male domination restricts communication of females and the ways in which they mute the voice of women. In their book, Shirley Ardener and Edwin Ardener made an important observation that most of the times the anthropologists talk to and about the leaders of a particular culture, who usually happens 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. However this theory was not recognized till recent times because it dealt with a subordinate group i.e. women and “for many,
women and other marginalized groups’ lack of voice remains "the problem with no name" (Kramarae, 1981) or worse, not a problem at all” (Bente).

There have been a lot of rhetorical debates about women’s empowerment and their equal place in the field of communication. It may be said in theory that women have the same place and contribution in the formation of a particular language but the fact is that, “Men developed the language of our culture to express what they knew to be reality accompanied by how they wanted their world to be. The experiences, values, beliefs of men became institutionalized whereas women's concerns, needs and rights became marginalized and devalued” (Bente). Thus even here the construct of the female voice as weak and inaudible has worked to a large extent. In this regard E. Ardener writes, “Groups that are on the top of the social hierarchy determine to a greater extent the dominant communication system of a society” (qtd. in A. Foss, K. Foss and Griffin 19). If there had been any effort on the part of some knowledgeable or self-aware women to get their voice heard against patriarchy or to challenge the dominating male view, they have been termed as, unnatural, unattractive, frigid, man-haters and eccentric in order to uphold heteropatriarchy. “... heterosexuality and male dominance are assumed to be natural and “male” and “female” to be natural, eternal categories rather than the expression of concepts essential to the maintenance of the heteropatriarchy” (A. Foss, K. Foss and Griffin 41). In an essay titled “Introduction to Cheris Kramarae”, they attempt to simplify this issue, “Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men” (19). So it becomes very difficult if not impossible for the women to directly articulate their experiences; the experiences which are quite different from those of men as the former looks at life
differently, “. . . the words and norms for speaking are not generated from or fitted to women’s experiences. Women are thus “muted.”” (19). This muting, however, is not silencing and is successful only because women have no other alternative communication style to express their experiences and code their messages in (Krolokke and Soreson 30).

The whole communication mode has been a prey to this appropriation of language and even if any alternative is made possible, it has proved to be equally susceptible to the same fate. In this regard Krolokke and Soreson write, “There are also structural barriers to the development of alternate communication modes, as men, whether consciously or not, will perpetuate their power by preventing other voices from being heard and acknowledged . . . As a result, women’s expression is muted” (30). Women are thus relegated to an inferior position in this clearly demarcated mayhem where “the binary logic that structures the opposition between “male” and “female” is set up as a relation not between “A” and “B” but between “A” and “not-A”. (Lietch 2037). In such a set up where power is directly related to the decibels of the voice, men have all the power to mould the systems to their advantage thereby relegating women to a corner from where her voice is unheard. Mark P. Orbe writes in the same vein, “Concerning language use, Kramarae notes that men historically have possessed greater speaking rights and been largely responsible for establishing and maintaining the criteria used to judge men and women’s speech. In this respect, women historically have been “muted” by men” (22). In the whole affair the power and the way in which women have been constructed for centuries- discussed in detail in the earlier chapter- play an important role. They have been muffled throughout their history to live in their muted bodies and silent aphonic revolts (Cixous 886). As their representation has been absent from the mainstream discourses which makes
them powerless in real life, their voice has been hardly heard. There is power play where a specific group based on gender, race, or cultural background cannot be heard for who they are, but rather only by acting in ways they are reflective of who is "listening," i.e. the dominant group (Baer).

Muted group theory does not relate to any particular group of women although the starting point of this theory is based on a study of rituals of Bakwari women of Cameron. However about the theory Krolokke and Soreson write:

Provides a rather generalized perspective on women’s oppression: (All) women are muted, (and) all men mute. As such, it replaces Marxist class-related concerns with gender-related concerns, and although this perspective puts gender at the focus of analysis, the category of sex- women as a group and men as a group- is maintained. (31)

Women are left with two options- they have either to adjust themselves to the language of men or “they can go backward, delving into layers of communication competencies previously acquired and abandoned” (Krolokke and Soreson 31). In both ways they somehow willingly or unwillingly ratify their demeaned value and powerless position in the society. Actually what happens is that the experiences of women are not understood by men and the fault does not wholly lie here; the basic reason is that women do not find proper words at their disposal to explain their experiences. A woman cannot find the right words to get her experiences communicated in a comprehensible manner- the language and the words being man made, what she says passes through a mesh of a dominant world view of men, loses its clarity and ultimately significance. In this regard Anne Bente gives a very common and illustrating example in her article on muted group theory. She says that in the beginning it was very difficult for a woman to explain what we call sexual harassment
today. She had to paint the entire situation with illustrations and how it made her feel. Although at present this term is a part of general understanding but earlier if women had rejected the translations, illustrations, grammar and style, “men would not have assigned the problem validity (or even considered it a problem) because it would have been too foreign to their experiences and understanding” (Bente). One explanation to this issue can be that historically men have attained a higher position in the social hierarchy and they never felt the need of entering the women’s world, so they did not find it necessary to understand the experiences of women. Besides it can be also said that men unintentionally partake in their dominance and act only as the society and culture have taught them. In a way it can be termed as a part of cultural conditioning. However the latter explanation has a weak base as it absolves men of their entire culpability. And as a universal phenomenon no dominant groups want to surrender their dominance and power unless they are made to realize and are convinced strongly that they ought to lay off their dominance for some logical and just reason. However, this is unlikely to happen as society would sense a turn of tables and unsettling of the status quo. Joanne Baer makes a more mature suggestion:

Rather a more sensitive (a woman’s word!) way to accomplish this equality could be achieved through research and implementation of new techniques that will enable both men and women to become equal partners in the creation and use of language. Once language has shifted and become more equal, the power shift will eventually happen.

Although Muted Group Theory has given a kind of explanation if not a proper voice to the experiences of women and has made it possible for them to understand their status in a more logical and clear manner but “it doesn’t explain how to get around those situations” (Baer). Anne Bente too expresses an apprehension, “But how
does one go about encouraging the dominant group to accept a theory that will diminish their power and advantages for the sake of justice?"

**Dominance and Difference Theories**

An explanation to the variations in communication and language on the basis of gender is to some extent explained by the ‘Dominance Theory’ which has been explained by Pamela Fishman in *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*. 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. The discussion in the previous chapter of the role of power in the construction of the image of woman holds true to the voice of woman as well. Although it has relevance with relation to the two sexes but the practical validity is limited according to Shan Wareing who asserts that, “The strength of this explanation is particularly clear in some situations, such as business meetings, where women often report that they have difficulty in gaining the floor (i.e. the right to speak), that they are more often interrupted, and that their points are not taken as seriously as men’s are” (71). Besides power relations do change with time, place and space, therefore socially constructed differences of language has more validity. However the importance of this theory in considering power as the reason holds ground as power ascribed to a particular sex does play a part in creating impact in speech and articulation of ideas. At the same time language also affects the power dynamics between men and women.

Another theory which bases its 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 is Difference Theory illustrated by Deborah Tannen (1990, 1991). Shan Wareing says, “According to ‘difference’
theory, playing in single sex groups as children, and having same sex friendships in adult life, leads men and women to have separate ‘sub-cultures’ each of which have their own ‘sub-cultural norms’, that is, rules for behaviour and in particular, talking” (71-72). However this difference may not be always there; “although Tannen claims that men can also do ‘rapport talk’ and women may do ‘report talk’” (Mills 135), it can be argued that this is not a general norm. Men and women do not necessarily belong to the homogenously and strictly demarcated linguistic communities. Cameron goes further and rejects this power based theory; she declares, “Power relations are constitutive of gender differentiation as we know it” (Cameron 438).

No doubt both the sexes have their own little world and their own sub-cultures with their specific norms of behavior in general and speech in particular which can neither be understood nor learnt in its entirety by the other sex in ordinary conditions. Women have a world all their own which they haunt secretly since their early childhood (Cixous 876). Women have a different tone and way of talking when they communicate within themselves which changes when it comes to interaction with men. Same holds true of men as well. The reason may be variation in their understanding and moreover their shared experiences and perceptions which has already been discussed in the Muted Group Theory. Still another view is that it depends on the discrimination in the upbringing of the children where bias is usually shown towards the male child. Girls are taught to be polite and submissive and boys are praised for being aggressive and active. Even the ‘Difference Theory’ appears to enhance an essentialist view about women when it says, women “desire from their relationships collaboration, intimacy, equality, understanding, support and approval. Men, on the other hand, allegedly place a greater premium on status and independence, and are less concerned about overt disagreement and inequality in their
relationships” (Wareing 72). Everything goes well until the social mixing of sexes at any level but “the rub comes when women and men try to communicate with one another: their different styles can lead to misunderstandings” (Wareing 72). Neither men nor women are a homogenized group in any manner nor have they same ways of thinking about their identity so such a general observation cannot be applied to all of them. The difference lies even within the sex in the form of culture, age difference, education, nationality, class, sexual orientation and regional and religious background. Sara Mills mentions such a work edited by Coates and Cameron (Women in Their Speech Communities 1988) where they have tried a specific analysis of the production of language by particular groups of women in particular communities at specific locations and times (138). The meanings of the words vary accordingly and thus even the meaning of the word ‘woman’ may be different for two different women who are different in any way, say in culture, nation, religion, colour etc. Thus the ‘Difference Theory’ although explains the differences in language and communication but lacks the pivot on which such a theory should be based. Sara Mills writes in this context:

The one striking overall assessment which can be made of nearly all of the research done on language and gender differences is that the research is contradictory. The hypotheses are generally very clear, usually taking the format: ‘in what way does women’s use of such and such an element differ from men’s use of the same element, when other variables are kept constant?’ (137)

She quotes several examples to prove her point and concludes:

This is not to say that empirical research should be completely discarded but it does suggest that other factors than gender may be playing a role in the way that people behave linguistically. It also suggests that language and gender
research must move beyond the binary oppositions of male and female. (Mills 138)

Actually with the advent of post structuralism and post modernism, the approaches towards almost all discourses took a big leap and became complex. The diversities in male-female relationship have undergone remarkable changes rather the complexities about this relationship which were already there have been discovered, acknowledged and understood with time. With such new findings, the researches on language and gender have become challenging in the context of great variety of positions in the language of men and women. Besides, even stereotypes about gender and language fluctuate with location, time, culture, race, age etc. In this regard, here is an interesting observation by Sara Mills:

We are no longer able to make generalizations about the way women or men speak, nor are we able to assume that stereotypes work in the same way in all situations. Instead, we need a complex, finely tuned system of analysis which is sensitive to the specificities of the context and which can describe the way in which gender operates as a system. (151)

Bing and Bergvall question the clear cut division between the speech of men and women. They argue that the line drawn between them is too imprecise to divide them into “only two” (2). They illustrate their viewpoint by drawing their attention to transsexual and transgender individuals, androgynes, hermaphrodites who cross the dividing wall between female and male (2).

Whatever the criticism, the contribution of such theories in assisting to understand the issue of women’s language and voice cannot be overlooked as these theories acted as a starting point of debate, thereby resulting in more comprehensive insights and criticism during yesteryears. Sara Mills notes:
This consciousness-raising research, which was very widely read by people outside academic circles, made a major impact on many women, forcing them to reflect on language use as an indicator of power relations and, indeed, encouraging them to make metalinguistic comments on language use. (134)

She adds:

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of this work is that women felt that they could comment on an interruption by a male interlocutor and, rather than dismissing such behaviour as solely due to the particular chauvinism of that individual, they could relate it to wider societal structures which made available to men privileged positions which it did not provide for women. (Mills 134-135)

In the novels under study we have many female characters. The novels are rather all about their lives. Though there are male characters but it is the lives of women characters which find a larger space. Other than The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini, all the novels deal with the ordeals of the female voices. We have the touching familial stories of Mariam and Laila in A Thousand Splendid Suns, Shirin-Gol’s struggle in Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes To Weep, and Samira’s identity crises in Samira and Samir. The exploitation of women and their day-to-day struggle is shown in its terrifying ordinariness. Their private sorrows and daily grind along with the patriarchal cultural set up confronts the reader with its starkness leaving behind many unanswered questions. There is a range of decibels of the female voice which has a lot of fluctuation. In a general sense it may be said that the women characters are muted or have a voice which is quite diffident and thus inaudible. They speak but their say has no value and is usually laughed at or go completely unheard. Although Samira has a strong voice but the important thing to be noted is that the case
is in her favour only when she lives in the guise of a man. Once her sexual identity is revealed, she experiences sudden inaudibility.

However, to say that there are only silent or voiceless female characters in the novels would be a gross inaccuracy as far as the technical aspect of this chapter is concerned. We have the female characters who have a strong voice and who resist throughout their life; rather almost all of them prove to be the strong at the end in their own ways although the ending nowhere seems satisfactory in terms of poetic justice. There is Mariam’s death and Laila’s waste of youth, there is Samira’s renunciation; there is Sanaubar’s painful ridicule and Shirin-Gol’s defeat which leave a reader baffled with dissatisfaction. Nonetheless such endings add to the realistic element of the novels which, though fictitious in nature, mirror the social setup of Afghanistan. Any deviation from such endings no doubt would have satisfied the readers but it would have rendered the novels artistically and technically inaccurate. However there are women like Azadine and Mariam who do not surrender throughout their lives. Mariam no doubt starts as a mute and weak lady but ends as a strong woman who releases Laila and Aziza from Rasheed’s clutches by sacrificing her life.

There is silencing, murmuring and grumbling as well as screaming and shouting on the part of the women in all the four novels under study. The level of their articulation is directly influenced by Afghan culture where women, particularly the rural ones, have been deprived of her voice for centuries now. Both the Dominance and Difference theories can be used to explain linguistic behaviour of women in the novels. The difference in the power does play a part and the different ways girls and boys are brought up too accounts for the difference of voices. The position of woman in Afghanistan has been recorded in detail in chapter One of this thesis.
The Muted Voices

In *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep* there is a height of false morality as the women who are forced to spend night with a stranger for getting square daily meals encounters the pretentious show of hollow culture and cankered faith when they go to collect that meal. Such an instance comes to light at the very outset of the novel when Shirin-Gol’s sister has to go to the Russian soldiers “with her lips painted red and eyes black” (Shakib 17). They are dragged into forced prostitution for the sake of two meals a day, for the sake of so called jihad and for a few rounds of arms and hand grenades which they later supply to their brothers fighting in the mountains. Another such instance in the novel is that of the ‘girl-woman’ whom Shirin-Gol meets at the border and who tells her the way to feed herself and her family. She reveals that she sells her body to the Pakistani officials and other Afghan men on the border. “Men who have not had a woman’s body for ages and whose mouths water when they see mine. By and large I earn enough, sometimes more than enough” (Shakib 59). This condition exposes the inner weakness of the Afghan people’s resistance against Russian invasion and the failure of their attempt to save their country and culture in the name of God and the Prophet. The condition further puts a question mark on the purpose of their fighting a war for the sake of religion at the cost of their women’s honour. This irony further deepens in relation to the earlier speech by Shirin’s father who advocates fighting a holy war against the infidels to save the honour of their women. Even Shirin-Gol is forced into the flesh trade for the sake of her family when Morad meets with an accident and Shirin meets the smuggler chief for whom Morad is working. The ‘kind’ smuggler chief gives her money and good food and in return demands Shirin’s body with the words, “You can try your luck out there like many of your compatriots. There are
plenty of my fellow countrymen in the bazaar who would take you in a flash” (Shakib 90). She is left with no option as a refusal to his lustful demands means starvation for her children and her invalid husband and thus as Shakib writes, “Shirin-Gol let it happen” (90). Here the repression takes a new shape as until now it hadn’t touched Shirin-Gol’s sexuality. Her womanly body becomes her source of income as she can’t escape the situation. It is the same woman whose ambition of becoming a doctor was not fulfilled in her childhood due to her early marriage and lack of educational environment. Her womanly pride and self respect get totally shattered and “even the knowledge that many hundreds and thousands of Afghan women have done the same is of no comfort to Shirin-Gol” (Shakib, Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep 91).

Shirin-Gol’s voice starts getting muted towards the end and she starts losing strength. As one moves to the concluding pages of the novel, this mutedness is felt. Shirin-Gol even tries to commit suicide once; her daughter Nafas sees, “Shirin Gol is lying on the floor with two red bracelets on each wrist. Blood-bracelets” (Shakib 295). Siba Shakib hints at this mutedness when she refers Shirin-Gol again as “Shirin-Gol cloth” (297) after she returns back from Iran. Shirin-Gol in fact starts wearing the burqa again which symbolizes the suppression of her voice. Siba Shakib hints at her mutedness by using the phrases like “blue, pleated cloth” (3), “living ghosts” (3), “Shirin-Gol cloth” (297) etc. All these addresses link her identity with a muted individual where she is treated like an object. About Shirin-Gol, Shakib writes:

Shirin-Gol is neither happy nor unhappy about Morad’s return. By now she is coming to terms by not being allowed to walk in the street and having to be veiled from head to foot. She has learned how to get around the Taleban’s prohibition on women working, and to find food for herself and four children.
And now that Opium-Morad is with his family again, she will manage to feed him, too. (Shakib 288)

Shirin-Gol reflects the novelist’s voice when she says, “I learned that good and evil in people does not lie in whether they pray five times a day or cover their faces with cloths. . . . I learned that women are no less valuable than men, and that they can do all things that men do” (Shakib 44). In the mountains where she lives happily for sometime before the US drones bomb the village, she says, “We are all God’s creations . . . and he loves us all. Women and men to the same degree” (126). She makes the other women of the village understand, “A bird needs two wings. The world is like a bird. It too needs two wings to fly. It needs women and men so that it doesn’t come to a standstill (Shakib 126). However the best comes from her when she raises her voice in front of the Talib who comes for the hand of her daughter Noor-Aftab. She questions:

What has true Islam to do with I work or I don’t? What do true Islam and peace in our homeland have to do with the fact that I am condemned to be locked within the four walls of my room? What does that have to do with anything at all? Who benefits, who is harmed whether or not our daughters go to school? What you are forbidding has nothing to do with Islam, or anything else. (Shakib 164)

Shirin raises her voice against patriarchal version of Islam. Although distressed with a fractured voice most of the times, she speaks all the time. She says to the young Taleb, “You and your brothers in faith claim to be our leaders. We lay claim to answers” (Shakib 167). The only thing which weakens her is the sight of her helpless children who have to suffer the pangs of hunger due to poverty and lack of work. They don’t have proper clothes over their bodies. Siba Shakib writes pitifully, “Their faded, thin fabric shirts, trousers and dresses flutter in the wind, whip against
their thin bodies" (105). When they have to escape from Kabul after Morad murders the three Pakistani policemen, "Shirin-Gol dies a thousand deaths at the sight of her children, who barely have life in their bodies. They have stopped whimpering, the only sound from them is the chattering of their teeth" (Shakib 105). In fact in all the four novels, the maternal love and passion has been treated as a part of sense of responsibility a human should have. Besides Shirin-Gol's love for children, there is Laila's love for Aziza and her son Zalmai, there is Nana's love for Mariam, and there is Mariam, who remains childless, who loves Aziza more than anything in her life. In fact, her maternal love which could never materialize for her own children finds expression in her sacrifice for Aziza. There is Daria's love for her Samira in *Samira and Samir* and there is Sanouber's love for her son Hassan in *The Kite Runner*. Although Sanouber's love for her son proves weak in front of the free woman living inside her but towards the end she comes back to him and dies happily with her family. The point to be noted is that the novelists have gone off the track in terms of post feministic treatment of maternal love in depicting the selflessness of a mother for her children.

Mariam's mother Nana becomes the victim of male ruthlessness when she is sexually exploited by Jalil to be later deported to an isolated "kolba" (Hosseini *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 3) in the outskirts of the city of Herat to give birth to an illegitimate daughter Mariam. Jalil visits them every Thursday and is deeply loved by Mariam who waits anxiously for the day of their meeting. Although Nana speaks ill of Jalil at his back but once in front of him, she smiles demurely. She waits until he leaves the kolba and once he is gone, she instigates Mariam, "The children of the strangers get ice cream. What do you get, Mariam? Stories of ice cream" (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 6). Somewhere the novelist is hinting at Nana's weak inner
self which backpedals in front of Jalil. Nana is in a sense muted or at least indirect in her speech because she does not have courage to speak at Jalil’s face. And once he is not there, she gives a vent to her anger with Mariam, “Rich man telling rich lies. He never took you to any tree. And don’t let him charm you. He betrayed us, your beloved father. He cast us out. He cast us out of his big fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 5). Though Nana has a deep grudge for Jalil but she does not raise her voice and somehow her character substantiates the essentialist view of women’s inferiority with no voice of her own. Even if she has a voice, it would not be understood by Jalil. Further, her own acceptance of her inferiority symbolized by her obsequiousness puts a question mark on the feminist notion of women’s emancipation. Powerless is willing to surrender. However keeping Nana’s condition in mind, one may understand her behaviour but Mariam’s later struggle breaks this notion to a large extent. Moreover Nana teaches Mariam the same lesson of endurance and advises her every now and then to remain silent. In this context when Mullah Faizullah suggests sending Mariam to school, Nana reacts that woman has only to learn a single skill in her life, “Only one skill. And it’s this: *tahamul*. Endurance” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 17). She adds, “It’s our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It’s all we have” (Hosseini 18). No doubt Nana’s words prove prophetic as Mariam endures a lot. From her humiliation at the hands of her parents to her marriage to a bully like Rasheed and her physical assault by Rasheed and the Taliban; she endures everything silently till Rasheed’s murder. More than that, as Marylin Herbert writes, “She is displaced by Laila as Rasheed’s second wife and must endure the loss of status with all that it entails. The ultimate test of her endurance is waiting to be executed for the killing of Rasheed” (33).
Mullah Faizullah, an old and conventional kind of man always supports Mariam in her efforts and his character reminds one of Samira’s one-armed grandfather and Laila’s father Hakeem. He is the only person whom Mariam trusts even after her mother’s death. Unlike him, Nana is pessimistic or rather it can be said that she is over possessive about Mariam who does not value maternal love due to her blind and idealized faith in Jalil. In fact “Mariam wants a real father so badly that she creates Jalil in the image she would like him to be” (Herbert 54). Nana always lives under an unexpressed fear of losing Mariam and once the latter goes away she commits suicide in a fit of fear.

When Jalil’s sons come with the wheelbarrow every month, “filled with rice, floor, tea, sugar, cooking oil, tooth paste” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 13), she “yelled at the boys as she carried bags of rice inside, and called them names Mariam didn’t understand. She cursed their mothers, made hateful faces at them” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 14). Her oddity can be attributed to her instinct of revenge for her treatment in the hands of Jalil and his wives who put the blame of promiscuity on her and absolve Jalil of the guilt. This happens due to Jalil’s social status unlike that of Nana who is just an orphan at his mercy. Jalil too cannot do anything at this stage, though he shows some signs of remorse, as he himself is a tool in the hands of social machinery and thus turns a deaf ear to her pain. In her own way, Nana is right in her foible nature as she is an uneducated woman who spends her whole life as a maid in Jalil’s house “Until her belly began to swell” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 6). She has been marginalized severely by poverty and moreover by Jalil as a result of which she comes to terms with her inferior and powerless position and surrenders. Factors like gender, class poverty and orphanhood decide and explain her lack of a voice in presence of Jalil. Mariam too proves to be
Nana’s daughter to a large extent until she decides to take action against Rasheed to get rid of him. However one important thing to be kept in mind while analyzing her situation is that Mariam lives in Afghanistan where a woman has very few options other than to submit to her husband’s demands and orders. Mariam’s capital punishment later substantiates the view.

Laila’s school friends Hasina and Giti too are muted in the sense that they are not as lucky as Laila in having an audible voice. Although Hasina talks too much but once in front of her ill-tempered father she turns silent. She feels helpless when she tells Laila that her ill-tempered father would almost certainly give her away. She tells Laila that “. . . it has been already decided that she would marry a first cousin who was twenty years older than her” (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 104). However an exceptional character in the novel is Fariba who is able to dominate her husband Hakim. In almost all the cases there are dominant husbands and recessive wives in the novel but this couple is an exception. Hosseini writes, “Laila knew the routine: Mammy, ferocious, indomitable, pacing and ranting; Babi, sitting, looking sheepish and dazed, nodding obediently, waiting for the storm to pass” (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 98). What lends interest to their relation is that Hakim is unlike other men in the novel; he is a quiet, patient and well educated visionary.

Samira lives in an illusionary world till she comes to know about her gender identity. After her discovery she is dumbstruck. She falls apart and as Shakib writes, “Samira moves her tongue, opens and closes her mouth. The words do not come out. Samira cannot hear the words she speaks. Samira says nothing. Remains mute. Mute. Mute” (Shakib, Samira and Samir 54). From this point in the novel, Siba Shakib emphasis her mutedness by the phrases like, “thinks Samira” (61), “Samira the mute
stares at the ground, bites her lips” (66), “Samira the mute laughs” (78), “Samira the mute nods” (78), “Samira the mute shakes her head” (78), “Samira the mute obeys” (80), “Samira the mute stays mute” (83) etc. Samira’s loss of her voice is symbolic of her helplessness and victimisation in the hands of the phallogocentric Afghan tribal society. She feels that she has nothing to say; rather she has so much to say that she is unable to speak, “Samira the mute does not say a word. She does not say a word because a lifetime is not enough for all the words she would have to say if she could speak. She does not say a word because she does not know where the beginning and the end of her words are” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 57). The reason behind her mutedness is that, “she does not see the point of saying false words when she knows the truth. Truth is not truth and lie is not lie. What is the point of Samira speaking when the people think it is Samir who speaks? If she does not even know herself whether it is Samira who speaks or Samir” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 58).

Towards the end of the novel Samira once again falls silent but for a shorter duration. Shakib writes, “Now you know my secret, says Samira, then falls silent” (*Samira and Samir* 245). She actually tries to get into the frame of patriarchal norms which define a woman within the limited parenthesis, by getting married to Bashir. Bashir acts as a typical representative of male mentality when he says, “I will get woman’s clothes for you, from now on you can let your hair grow long and weave it into plaits” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 245). As already discussed in the previous chapter, in most of the cultures a woman is supposed to grow long hair and not a man. The image of a beautiful woman is always idealized as someone with long and flowing hair sometimes worn into plaits. Bashir reveals a typical male mindset when he says, “I am not your friend. I am going to be your husband and you will be my wife” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 245). Samira tries to suppress the free human being
living inside her rather she tries to suppress the free-thinking voice in her but it becomes tough as she has always been treated as a boy by her society. She has been doing all the supposedly male activities and it becomes next impossible for her to fit into the image of a woman. For the time being, she tries to live life according to the normative culture of the male female dichotomy. She tries to be as silent as one can be as she is time and again rebuked by Bashir for behaving like a man.

She does not want to act like a man. She wants to stop being a man, she wants to be a woman. A real woman. Samira is silent in public, does not wear her gun over her shoulder, does not jump from the horse and does not swing on to the back of her stallion, waits for Bashir to help her to climb on to her horse and get back down again. (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 277)

However Samira fails to kill the man living inside her and once she sees the *buzkashi game* going on, she cannot stop herself though she wants to.

She does not know why everything happens as it does. She does not intend to whistle through her teeth, to shove her heels into her stallion's sides, Samira does not intend to urge the stallion on. But she does. She charges off, crosses river. The water splashes high, and she dashes across the plain. (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 274)

Male and female behaviour and speech patterns (including silence) are based on their different sets of experiences. Ultimately she leaves Bashir with, “a thousand and one questions and not a single answer. Samira stays mute” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 279). Siba Shakib hints at a bright future for Samira in her dream of becoming a pilot. Though this dream cannot be taken in a literal sense yet one can anticipate the future to be free and bright. One can guess her optimistic and free mind which will never yield again to the cultural and patriarchal compulsions.
Although there is not any major female character in *The Kite Runner* yet there are echoes of repression of voice and the presence of female characters is felt through their suppressed voices. There is no direct suppression of female voice but there is ethnic discrimination in the novel which ultimately leads to the suppression of the voice of those groups who have a poor representation. Like the women of the other novels they are sidelined as effeminate and victimized in *The Kite Runner*. Their poverty and suppression can be attributed to many factors, chief among them being their poor economic conditions, their educational backwardness, their religious variations and their different descent.

Afghanistan has a deeply demarcated ethnic culture wherein the ethnicity has always been one of the major factors behind war. Hassan and his father belong to the Hazara tribe of Afghanistan which is considered as the most ignorant and backward tribal group. They form around 9% of the total population and are mostly Shi’a Muslims. In the novel they are called by the names like, “mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 8). Amir reads from a book from his mother’s shelf:

> ... the Pashtuns, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaraa. It said the Hazaras had tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had “quelled them with unspeakable violence ... [Pashtuns] had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women ... the reason Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shi’a. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 8)

The novel reveals their social position through the characters of Hassan and his father Ali who work as servants in Amir’s house and never raise their voice against their masters out of their loyal nature. It is however not only their poverty and
backwardness that renders them voiceless but also their sense of loyalty and honesty. Quite interestingly Hassan later turns out to be Amir’s step brother which further deepens the victimisation of the weak in the novel.

In the relation between Hassan and Amir, there are a plenty of instances of ethnic colonization and mutedness of the slaves’ voice. Amir always boasts of his superiority as a master and as a member of the dominant Pashtun group. Any mischief which is usually planned by Amir is ascribed to Hassan who never counteract, he rather always try to save his master from any rebuke from his father. One peculiar difference between the women of the novels concerned and Hassan is that the latter never complains and is happy in his submission to his master’s will. However despite remaining quiet, after his death Hassan is able to effect a change in Amir and sets him on the path of redemption which may be explained in relation to the fact that Amir comes to know later that Hassan is his brother. He is quiet yet heard. While women, on the other hand, talk, complain, clamour and nag, they remain inaudible and their voice is like a ‘white noise’ as in the novels concerned there is no instance where a man undergoes attitudinal change towards women due to any woman’s coaxing, insistence or fight. The irony is that Hassan is audible despite his silence and women remain inaudible despite speaking a lot because the patriarchal linguistic system provides no room for the legitimacy of their claims and experiences.

Hassan’s loyalty towards Amir reflects, at an objective level, the nature of Hazara tribe who are submissive and tolerant people living a hard yet simple life. Hassan’s sacrifice and loyalty is the major theme of the novel and sets Amir on a path of redemption. It is this loyalty which makes Amir feels guilty conscious who later tries to make amends by adopting Hassan’s son Sohrab.
There is a fleeting mention of Homaira who too belongs to the Hazara tribe. Rahim Khan narrates his love for Homaira to Amir; he says, “She was as beautiful as a *pari*, light brown hair, big hazel eyes . . . she had this laugh . . . I can still hear it sometimes” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 86). But in her case again she is silenced and sent away as Rahim Khan’s father and other family members object to their marriage on the grounds of her poverty and ethnic inferiority. The voice of Homaira and her family remains muted in this case and Rahim Khan’ family who belong to a higher social strata proves dominant as Rahim Khan says, “That same day, my father put Homaira and her family on a lorry and sent them off to Hazarajat. I never saw her again” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 86). Homaira is thus treated like an inanimate object whose say and strength of character is violently curbed by the dominant group.

**The Spirit of Female Friendship; Shared Experiences and Voice**

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 *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep* Azadine- the woman doctor, Fawzi- the teacher, Malalai- the bold girl, Bahara- a widow and the “girl-woman” whom Shirin meets at the border are some of the women through whom Siba Shakib highlights the element of spirit of resistance, hope and female friendship into the novel. The only respite which a woman gets in the novel is in the company of some other woman. At many places in the novel, 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 Shirin-Gol calls “resistance” (Shakib, *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep* 148). Hope is the only thing to which the women stick to throughout the novel. When
Shirin-Gol gets discouraged and regrets that she has nothing left and that everything has been snatched by war and poverty, the one of the women says, “Our hope . . . they cannot take our hope from us . . . Not as long as we stand together. Not as long as we help each other and other women. Not as long as we live and breathe” (Shakib, *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep* 286). These women believe in the unity of their sex and make all possible efforts to hold onto it even when the Taliban puts sanctions in place to avoid women meetings. At another place the village teacher says, “Women, whatever country they live in, whatever language they speak, whatever religion they have, must stick together and resist the oppression and the nonsense that men spread” (Shakib, *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep* 286). When Shirin-Gol returns from Iran towards the end, “They help one another to find work. To earn money. To find a place where they and their children can live. They help other women to drag themselves and their children through life. This is resistance” (Shakib, *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep* 232). They assemble at Azadine’s house, read, write and discuss their plans although the Taliban forbids it. They secretly go against Taliban verdicts which represent their resistance, unity and strength. Shirin-Gol finds a kind lady in the camp who gives her “a pot, a cup and some fat” (Shakib, *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep* 77) and when Shirin-Gol asks her why and how they can help one another, “Very simple, says the woman, very simple, we listen to them, that is all we do. And by doing that we help the other women, but we help ourselves as well” (Shakib, *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep* 77). Woman’s experience is audible to other women. Another woman Bahara, “a neighbour, a friend, a kind soul, herself someone who needs help, herself someone who bears so much suffering in her breast that it threatens to burst on her, worthy of pity herself” (Shakib, *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep*
97) helps Shirin when she is brutally raped by three Pakistani policemen. She “sits Shirin-Gol up, moistens her lips, drips water into her mouth, washes her face, her hands, her feet, cooks a pot of broth, cooks rice, feeds the children, puts a plate of food in front of Morad” (Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep 97).

Sisterhood and Same Sex Relationship

In Samira and Samir there is a strong bond between Gol-Sar and Samira although for the former Samira is a man with whom she is going to marry. Nonetheless there are some instances in the novel where there is a hint of same sex relationship. At one place, “Samira does not notice that she puts her arm around Gol-Sar and pulls her tight to her. The girl-man lays his hand on the hand of the girl-woman’s thigh. The girl-man and the girl-woman hold each other tight. Very tight” (Shakib, Samira and Samir 229). Samira once kisses Golsar and afterwards is baffled with her act as her conscience asks, “Was it Samira who nearly kissed her? Or was it Samir? . . . For you are Samir, a young man, so you may not come too close to Golsar. But we both know that you are Samira, a young woman, so you may not come closer to the brother” (Samira and Samir 199-200). Although Samira cannot understand her mildly lesbian attraction towards Golsar but when the latter places her hand on hers, “she does like it, and it is warm and pleasant” (156). At another encounter with the girl prostitute, Samira’s urge for her own sex confuses her; “the only thought that has room in her head is the question of how it can be that she liked what she saw” (Samira and Samir 152). As already mentioned in the previous chapter, all this may be due to her bringing up as a boy and the ‘Samir’ in her feels attracted towards Golsar and the Samira towards Bashir. Her care for Gol-Sar puts a question mark on the norms of heterosexual world and the novelist’s intention gets almost clear that she may be
questioning the essentialist view of sexual relations. The novelist may even be hinting that the sexual orientation has nothing to do with the sex one is born with and it all depends on how an individual grows up. It can also be estimated that she is questioning the most accepted heterosexual social setup of this universe in general and that of Afghanistan in particular. However one more convincing explanation to the case can be that Samira finds a female friend in Gol-Sar. Samira who can neither find friends in men nor in women finds solace in both Bashir and Gol-Sar. In real life, a person sometimes feels sexually attracted to the other person in whom he finds a good friend. Actually such a relationship here is not to be taken entirely in terms of sexuality, emotions rather play a more significant role. Whatever the case is, Samira does find a good friend and companion in Gol-Sar with whom she brings a revolution of its own kind in the field of woman education by motivating commander Rasheed to permit them to open a school for women. In fact Samira puts this as a precondition when he asks her to marry Gol-Sar. On Gol-Sar’s part, she was already well versed in reading and writing as she has learned it from Bashir secretly. Later after their marriage, Samira advises her not to abandon teaching girls even if Samira is not there and the result is that after Samir’s death, Gol-Sar takes a pledge to revere the memory of her husband and continues teaching in the village.

Mariam finds in Laila a person with whom she gives a vent off to her anger soon after the latter’s marriage with Rasheed. She directs her anger against Rasheed directs towards Laila. Mariam rebukes Laila, “You may be a malika and me a dehati, but I won’t take orders from you. You can complain to him and he can slit my throat, but I won’t do it. Do you hear me? I won’t be your servant” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 202). However with time this anger recesses and Mariam finds a strange thing happening. “To her surprise, Mariam found herself pitying the girl” (Hosseini
214). From here the female bond starts growing as Hosseini writes, "An unguarded, knowing look. And in this fleeting, wordless exchange with Mariam, Laila knew that they were not enemies any longer" (A Thousand Splendid Suns 224). What gives strength to their bond is their common oppressor Rasheed who after sometime starts abusing and kicking Laila as well. Another important reason of this bond is Aziza who is exceptionally fond of Mariam and clings to her legs quite often. After Mariam’s death when Laila and Tariq return to Kabul, they start a new life and devote most of their time in the maintenance of the orphanage which earlier ran under Zaman and where Aziza was delivered due to poverty. However the bond between them continues and Laila continues to live for the sake of Mariam’s memory “who is never more than a breath or two below her consciousness” (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 363). Laila’s always feels Mariam’s presence around her; Hosseini writes:

Mariam is never very far. She is here, in these walls they’ve repainted, in the trees they’ve planted, in the blankets that keep the children warm, in these pillows and books and pencils. She is in the children’s laughter. She is in the verses Aziza recites and in the prayers she mutters when she bows westward. But, mostly, Mariam is in Laila’s own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns. (A Thousand Splendid Suns 366)

The bond is everlasting as Laila is pregnant and they play the naming game, “But the game involves only the male names. Because, if it’s a girl, Laila has already named her” (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 367).

Shirin-Gol lends voice to Abina who lives in close rapport with her. “It is clear to Abina that Shirin-Gol is consecrated, a saint, sent by God. Abina spends every minute she can spare with Shirin-Gol, watching her, listening to her every word, memorising everything, copying her every movement, asking a thousand and one questions” (Shakib, Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep 118). She follows
Shirin’s lectures that woman is in no way inferior to man. She learns that the Quran gives equal rights to both the sexes. As a result she turns out to be a liberated lady and starts questioning the dominance of her husband whose response echoes the response of all men, “I am afraid of you” (Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep 119). Morad’s saying, “Men do not want wives who are cleverer than they are” (Shakib, Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep 41) substantiates such an insecurity felt by men in the novel. Men are no doubt afraid of liberated women and in a fit of insecurity call her by all possible bad names. When Morad comes to know that Shirin goes to school, he comes out with his ideas rather the general ideas prevalent in the Afghan social set-up and says, “People say those girls do not respect their husbands. People say girls who have been to school are not to be trusted (Shakib, Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep 41). He speaks here a general truth about men who generally cannot tolerate a more intelligent wife. Only the body is desired in the woman and her brain is desired to be defunct or redundant. At another place an uneducated woman shows the same spirit, “We are under the thumb of our husbands, we are afraid of them” (Shakib, Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep 286). A strong impression of education is present in all the novels. There are hints that women by getting educated and by attending school may learn how to speak in a voice that is audible and acceptable challenging the dominance of men.

The Voices Heard

Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep starts with the birth of Shirin-Gol and ends with a white-headed grandmother “Bibi-Shirin” (Shakib 306). However the most important thing the novel highlights is the courage, and resilience with which Shirin Gol, the protagonist lives against all odds and comes out at the end as Shakib
writes, “Shirin-Gol is like a tree. Like a powerful, slender poplar that withstands the strongest winds and storms, seeing everything, understanding everything, knowing everything and passing everything on” (Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep 7). Another noteworthy feature in Shirin’s character is her sense of self respect and a strong voice. She neither keeps quiet nor submits without struggle once she grows up, although in her childhood she is usually tossed on her head by her mother for her talkative nature. However the tyrannical war, the fundamentalist Taliban, the patriarchal society and culture of Afghanistan and gender discrimination prove to be too strong for her which make her lose the hope of a better future for her children. An important aspect of the novel is that Shirin-Gol is not shown in direct confrontation with the Russians. Moreover Shakib seems to be biased in portraying an idealized picture of the Americans who have been shown generous, liberated and polite unlike the Taliban.

Shirin like all the mothers of the world want to give her children a better and prosperous life. Shakib writes, “She wants them to have a good life, to know neither hunger nor fear, their eyes should not have to see war, their ears should not hear explosions ... she would like them to learn and one day serve their homeland, rebuilt the country, guide it into a happy future and make their mother and father proud” (Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep 81-82). Shirin-Gol hopes that a day will come when everything in her life will be well and there will be plenty of food around with all peace and calm.

She dreams the plastic tents are not tents and are not made of plastic. They are mud huts. And she dreams the shit and piss are not shit and piss. Instead, at every corner of the camp there are little stands with opulent displays of fruit, meat and rice, anyone can help themselves, as often and as much as they like. (Shakib, Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep 86)
At the village, she tells Azadine the reason behind her plan to go to Iran; the reason being the future of her children. She says:

My children have peace and quiet, but what will become of them? Tomorrow they’ll be grown and they’ll have to start a life of their own. What will they do? What will they live on? My daughters cannot go to school and learn a profession. My sons go to school, but every other day the teacher doesn’t turn up because he has to work somewhere else to earn money. (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 150)

Throughout the novel there is a lot of repression of Shirin’s voice. However none can deny her success at various levels at various stages of her life. When the war compels her family to migrate to Kabul, she finds herself burdened with enormous tasks at a tender age. She realizes that “she is still a child, and that children’s lives involve lots of things of which she has been completely unaware” (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 34). She is however a bold girl and like Samira, dreams high. She starts going to school although reluctantly in the beginning and “stands in front of the class and sings a song with her beautiful, deep, full, soft voice, and the other girls and boys clap” (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 34). She has confidence in herself, she sees and learns everything quickly and wants to become a doctor to help and serve her country (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 45). Morad acknowledges with her strength and hope, when she says, “You can depend on me. Now and for ever” (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 47). Later as a wife she does not remain silent; she always questions Morad about his earnings. She asks “What are we going to live on?” (Shakib 42) and to which Morad replies, “That’s not a question a woman should ask her husband . . .” (42). Throughout the novel Morad follows her decisions and does what she says him to do. For instance when the condition in Iran
changes and when they are no more welcomed, she plans to return back to her homeland, “Let’s go on and see what happens” (Shakib 196). When she is rebuked by the Afghan in charge in the refugee camp that she is the responsibility of her twin brothers and that she should not raise her voice, she scolds her Cheeky-twin, “... but I can see, I can speak, I can answer, I can ask questions and I’ll beat you if I have to” (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 73-74).

There is one such character in the novel that is quiet conscious rather the most conscious about her being a woman. She is Azadine whom Shirin-Gol meets in a village where they live before migrating to Iran. Azadine knows how to live as a woman in a male dominated society, in fact she is the strongest woman created by the novelist who lives all alone in an independent manner and “... most people respect and honour her, despite she is a woman” (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 142). She is in fact a picture of a woman which Shirin wants to be. In a way Shirin finds her own self in Azadine which was denied to her as in her childhood Shirin too wanted to become a doctor. Even if the men around Azadine do not want to respect her, they respect her due to some unexplained undertone as Siba Shakib gives an instance of the mullah of the village who, “[h]owever much contempt he tries to put in his voice, that respect is always there. And the mullah does not have the slightest notion where that unintended, respectful undertone comes from” (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 143). Azadine represents a strong female voice in the novel though towards the end she too “is caught... the Taliban put her in prison” (Shakib 293). Her arrest reflects that whatever may happen, the ultimate end of an Afghan woman under the Taliban rule is defeat. Nonetheless, there are many such instances where she emerges out as victorious. At one place she advises Shirin-Gol, “We have to stop living our lives according to what other people
say” (Shakib 145). At another place she gives the other women her strong reason for remaining unmarried. She says:

Because I do not need a man, she says. Because I earn my own money. Because I walk alone in the street. Because I do not want anyone who thinks he owns me. Because I do my own shopping. Because I alone decide when I go to sleep, when I work, whether I work or sleep at all. Because I can decide myself when I eat or whether I want to eat at all. And because I am happier on my own. (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 146)

Shirin-Gol finds the reflection of her unfulfilled dreams in Azadine and there grows a close kinship between the two. When Azadine meets her for the first time, “She takes Shirin-Gol’s hand, shakes it firmly, pulls Shirin-Gol to her and embraces her like a friend. The two women don’t say a word. They just hold each other in their arms. They both swallow back their tears. Like two sisters embracing” (Shakib, *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* 144). Later on Shirin works at Azadine’s clinic and teaches the children of the village on Azadine’s suggestion. They “set up a school for the girls in the village, so that in times to come there will be women doctors, midwives and women teachers” (Shakib 156).

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, there is another such character that shows the strength of a woman particularly towards the end of the novel. The story revolves around two women who are brought together due to war and are married to a single man who throughout his life victimizes and agonizes them to all possible extents. Marilyn Herbert writes, “However, the novel is not simply about the violence inflicted on both the women. It is about the relationship they establish with each other despite the context of violence in their lives” (10). The two women are muted until the two thirds of the novel. There is a gradual shift in their stance once they establish and develop affinity. Their mutedness is due to their non alignment with one another and
due to the fact that none of them has a shoulder to take support from. Mariam’s mother is dead and her illegitimate father is not ready to accept her and Laila’s parents are no more after a bomb devastates in their house. Besides war, patriarchal social set up, the Taliban and the Mujahidin also play their cruel part in their silencing. Again like what happens in Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes To Weep and Samira and Samir, the female friendship and collaboration play a significant role in letting them articulate their voice which was strangulated by Rasheed. Marilyn Herbert writes, “The emerging female bond forms the optimistic nature of the story and is the book’s foundation” (10). They too form the bonds of female friendship like Samira and Golsar, Azadine and Shrin-Gol, Shirin-Gol and Abina and this gives them courage to act and speak. What one notes is the understanding between Mariam and Laila which results in their escape from Kabul; though only death brings solace to the former.

Mariam starts as a five year old girl, what Nana calls in a fit of disgust, “An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little haram” (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 4) and ends her life “as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last . . . This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings” (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 329). In the first half of the novel she is pitted against all kinds of odds, first in the form of her mother’s taunts, then the callous attitude of her father and finally the abusive relationship with her husband. The war and the Taliban aggression add to her woes. In her encounter with her father whose image she had idealized, she feels dejected and heart-broken particularly after her mother’s suicide. In a fit of utter dejection she tells Jalil, “I used to worship you” (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 50). When she is brought back to Jalil’s house in an abject state, Hosseini writes, “Two days before- when Mariam could think of
nothing in the world she wanted more than to walk in this garden with Jalil- felt like another lifetime” (A Thousand Splendid Suns 36). After her mother’s death, Mariam loses interest in her life and turns mute. Her mutedness at this stage symbolizes her gloominess and disappointment from her father. She does not speak to anyone in Jalil’s house and always keeps her head down. She is talked to by the members of Jalil’s family but she remains silent, “She lay in bed looking at the sky, listening to the footsteps below, the voices muffled by the walls and the sheets of rain punishing the window” (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 39). When told about her marriage with Rasheed who is three times older than her, she accepts the proposal with the least reluctance, “I don’t want this. Don’t make me” (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 44). After her marriage everything goes well till there is a cycle of miscarriages which turns the world upside down for her and Rasheed starts showing his true colours.

She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasions he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not. (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 89)

She turns quiet and tolerates all the abuses and excesses by Rasheed. Her voice is strangulated and she does not try to open her mouth as any word from her instigates Rasheed to a lethal extent. The wickedness continues; once, “He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in, his upper lip curled in a sneer” (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 94). Mariam tolerates and keeps quiet even when Rasheed makes fun of her in front of Laila. He says:
She is quiet. A blessing, really, because, *wallah*, if a person hasn’t got much to say she might as well be stingy with words. We are city people, you and I, but she is a *dehati*. A village girl. Not even a village girl. No, she grew up in a *kolba* made of mud outside the village. Her father put her there. Have you told her that you are a harami? (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 199)

The important difference between Laila and Mariam lies in the fact that the former does not tolerate Rasheed’s beatings and abuses silently. Laila initially proves to be a stronger woman with a strong voice than Mariam. She retorts back every time she is scolded by her husband unlike Mariam who has become accustomed to this daily exercise of beatings with kicks and punches. When Rasheed asks about Tariq’s visits, she hits back, “You duped me. You lied to me” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 300). Gritting her teeth she adds crossly, “You had that man sit across from me and . . . You knew I would leave if I thought he was alive” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 300). Though she too is beaten by Rasheed but she never submits passively and strikes back. At one point, “Laila ducked and managed to land a punch across his ear, which made him spit a curse and pursue her even more relentlessly” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 308). At last just before Rasheed’s death, when he is just bearing down on Mariam, Mariam sees

. . . Laila behind him pick something up from the ground. She watched Laila’s hand rise overhead, hold, then coming swooping down against the side of his face. Glass shattered. The jagged remains of the drinking glass rained down on the ground. There was blood on Laila’s hands, blood flowing from the open gash on Rasheed’s cheek, blood down his neck, on his shirt. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 310)

In Mariam’s case, endurance and patience reaches its brim and overflows in Rasheed’s death. She expresses her full anger at the end and this expression saves Laila from Rasheed forever. And in her killing Rasheed, “it occurred to her that this
was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 311). With this strike Mariam comes out of her mutedness in a bold and decisive manner. This episode restores her lost confidence and for the time being she proves to be stronger than Laila and says quiet calmly, “There is a way . . . I just have to find it” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 315). Unlike Laila who is baffled and trembling with the thoughts of future course of action, Mariam proves more confident and sane. However, the volcano of anger bursts out of her not for her own sake but for the sake of Laila as she is ready to be killed by Rasheed provided he spares Laila’s life. Thus towards the ending, the novel is sealed by Hosseini with strong stamp of female unity and camaraderie when he writes, “Had Mariam been certain that he would be satisfied with shooting only her, that there was a chance he would spare Laila, she might have dropped the shovel. But in Rasheed’s eyes she saw murder for them both” (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 311).

One note worthy thing in the novel which may be related to the voice of women is the use of burqa by Mariam and Laila. The use of this garment at different stages of their life has different meanings. Although the use of burqa symbolizes the suppression of voice in Shakib and it has been demonized in the West as a wicked weapon of female subordination, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* projects a rarely represented counter view. Jessie M. Nixon writes, “[Hosseini] breaks down the stereotype of the burqa as an oppressive garment by creating two female characters who both initially equate the burqa with comfort” (15). In the beginning even though they are forced to wear the burqa because Rasheed, believes that "a woman's face is her husband's business only" (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 63), both Laila and Mariam are relieved by the secrecy and privacy provided by the burqa. When Rasheed brings Mariam a burqa for the first time:
Rasheed had to help her put it on. The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen. She practiced walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 65)

A similar situation arises in Laila’s case later when she is made to wear burqa for the first time, “Her eyes were still adjusting to the limited, gridlike visibility of the burqa, her feet still stumbling over the hem. She walked in perpetual fear of tripping and falling, of breaking an ankle stepping into a pothole” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 208). Thus on one hand Laila finds comfort in the way the burqa offers her a safe haven from her affluent past and on the other Mariam, “learned to her surprise, [that burqa] was also comforting. It was like a one way window. Inside it, she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 66). Jessie M. Nixon writes:

While most representations of Afghan women suggest that the burqa silences women's voices and strips them of agency, Mariam uses the veil to shut out the voices of her harshest critics: her fellow citizens who disapprove of her mother's lifestyle. Mariam shuts herself out of the world by confining herself to the world created by her husband in both the burqa and in the home. Through escape and denial, Mariam finds the power to silence others. (16)

Mariam alienates herself from the external world with the help of burqa and thus finds a kind of power in it in silencing her critics. Laila who has been the daughter of a highly educated progressive Afghan family is consoled with the use of burqa knowing that “She wouldn't be recognized this way if she ran into an old acquaintance of hers. She wouldn't have to watch the surprise in their eyes, or the pity or the glee, at how
far she had fallen, at how her lofty aspirations had been dashed” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 208).

Mariam sacrifices her life in exchange for Laila’s liberation in consequence of her self-determined action of killing Rasheed in the nick of time when he was about to kill Laila. The novelist’s intention is no doubt to make his readers understand the strength in Mariam’s character and he succeeds in doing it to a great extent. However the idea that her liberation from an abusive husband is only possible with her own death is not convincing as it leaves little room for the liberation of woman in a real sense since the end result death is a gross failure. In this regard Jessie M. Nixon writes, “Mariam's death suggests that Afghan women can only be freed from abusive and oppressive powers by taking extreme measures—not by changing the world around them, but by escaping the world altogether” (25). Unlike Mariam, Laila has a highly mannered and open upbringing. She is the daughter of a university educated man Hakim and an outspoken Fariba. She has everything that is needed for a happy and blissful life. Though her mother is more loving towards her brothers, her father proves to be a real support for her. Hakeem proves to be a man like Mullah Faizullah and believes in woman’s education. He says to Laila:

\[ \ldots I \text{ want you to understand and learn this now} \ldots \text{ Marriage can wait, education cannot. You’re a very, very bright girl. Truly you are. You can be anything you want, Laila. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance.} \] (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 103)

Laila’s mother is conscious that she had not been a good mother to her daughter at all but she is herself too weak to stand against her own self in particular and the son ridden culture of Afghanistan in general. Unlike her father who says, “But
I’m glad I have you. Every day, I thank God for you. Every single day” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 135), her mother always remains engulfed in the thoughts of her martyred sons. The walls of her room remain “... covered with the pictures of Ahmad and Noor. Everywhere Laila looked, two strangers smiled back” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 109). Laila is however quite fortunate to have teachers like Shanzai who was a staunch follower of the Soviet thought. “She did not cover and forbade the female students from doing it, she said women and men were equal in every way and there was no reason women should cover if men didn’t” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 101). Later on, it is the tragedy struck by the war which leads to her parents’ death and ultimately her marriage with Rasheed. However, it is important to note that Laila is not ready to marry him even when she comes to know that she is pregnant by Tariq. Even at this stage of life, she does not lose her strength and thinks of a union with Tariq. Later on it is Rasheed’s villainous trap about Tariq’s death which prompts her to marry him. Besides war too plays a part, as an escape from Rasheed’s hands means landing into some more unseen serious trouble.

In *Samira and Samir* though we have a female protagonist but she lives in the guise of a man for most of the period of her life. The novel traces the journey of a girl from her childhood where she is treated by her father as a boy under the strong cultural influence to a mature lady where she gets conscious about her sexual identity. To study the female voice in her case thus becomes a tough yet interesting task. Samira’s mother Daria lives under the command of her husband throughout the novel but she is lucky enough to have a patient husband in the Commander. Although she is rarely rebuked by her husband but the cruel patriarchy subsides her voice and it is the sway of her husband which reigns. Daria raise her voice sometimes but every time she
regrets as Shakib writes, “Daria hisses her words like a snake. She has hardly spoken them, when she already regrets it” (Samira and Samir 1). She does not believe in the holy power of the rock to which the commander ascribes all his strength and wisdom. She laughs at the other people who believe, “The spirits of all these dead come to him on his rock, speak to him and tell him all that they see and know” (Shakib, Samira and Samir 16). Daria however is not too mute to say, “. . . the commander is neither blessed nor do the dead speak to him” (Shakib, Samira and Samir 16). To the commander she says, “How can it be that a stone, a dead rock, has so much power over you” (Shakib, Samira and Samir 31)? At another place she talks to her newly born daughter, “Now that I have you . . . what do I care for the people and the things they say? What do I care for the rock? Let him go to his rock as often as he will” (Shakib, Samira and Samir 19). Later her act of making love with the commander on the rock symbolizes her love for her child and her way of breaking the male domination which is symbolized by the rock. Another instance of her boldness comes to light when “Daria the warrior. Daria the victor” (Shakib 33) hits back at her husband, who falls silent, “. . . a real boy must start early. A real boy” (Shakib, Samira and Samir 29). Likewise, she understands that the foreign interference in the internal affairs of their country on the pretext of bringing freedom will not do any good; rather, it will push them back to an era of violence and darkness. She shows her intelligence when commenting on the war, she says, “I thought we did not want any foreigners in our homeland” (Shakib, Samira and Samir 83). Daria understands whatever happens around her and does speak her mind but cannot be audible as she is a woman.

Once Daria meets Bibi-jan, she gets courage to motivate her husband to take Samira to the rock. She herself is “. . . amazed at the courage in her voice” and even
the astonished commander “. . . does not ask or say anything else. He squats besides her and throws stones into the water” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 34). Bibi-jan symbolizes female strength and confidence. Although the commander rebukes her later but she is not quiet at all and questions his bravery, “Victory over a woman is not a hero’s victory. Victory over a woman is a coward’s victory. Battle with a woman is a battle without decency or dignity” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 34-35).

It is her father’s death which lends Samira her voice back. This episode has a symbolic significance as now that her father is no more, she has to take the charge of her mother’s life. Samira knows the fact well that, in case she remains silent anymore, the lustful men will, as a woman puts it, “come, will want you, and there will be war between our men and the others” (*Samira and Samir* 96). The height of religious hypocrisy comes to light when the oldest of the villagers expresses his desire for Daria. He says, “I have been alone for many summers and winters. It will please God if I take them” (*Samira and Samir* 96).

When she sees her father’s dead body:

Samira screams mutely. Draws her breath.Opens her mouth again. Again not a sound comes from her throat. The taste of blood comes to her mouth. Samira the mute screams. Samira fall, stays on the ground, creeps like an animal that has been hit by a bullet, creeps over to her mother, lies at her feet, claws the mother skirt, pulls her mother down to her, stares into her mother’s eyes that are filled with grief, opens her mouth, says, blood has been spilt (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 88-89).

On one hand she loses her father and on the other she regains her voice and therefore her courage. She stands like a wall between Olfat and his sons, who have an eye on her mother. Before it was due to her father that she lived like a man but now she is forced to by the circumstances as her mother needs a protector. When asked about
their future plan of action she says she will decide, “When the right time for a decision has come . . . In a voice that is clear and distinct. Full of courage. Full of confidence in herself” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 96-97). She chooses her father’s boots, his dagger, and the whip from the bundle which her father gave her earlier. Samira gives the brightly coloured dress to her mother; this act symbolizes her decision to continue living as Samir. She burns her mother’s old dress and “with it burns all sins, all guilt” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 219).

Education gives her more strength and confidence in herself. In fact it was her one-armed grandfather who introduces her to education. During her school hours, she speaks a lot unlike Bashir who is an introvert and remains quiet. In fact it is she who makes a real man out of Bashir. It is Samira whom Bashir follows, “Samira says, Bashir do this and he does it, she says, do that, and he does that” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 174). It is, ironically, Samira who teaches Bashir how to live like a man. However the point to be noted is that it is her gender that gives power to her voice. As she is a man in Bashir’s eyes so he follows her blindly. It would have been interesting to note Bashir’s reaction to Samira’s secret at this stage of their relationship. The ironical height comes towards the end when Bashir tries to tame her after her secret is revealed.

Although in the tight grip of the male dominated culture, Samira comes out as a winner at the end and the reader anticipates a bright future for her as predicted in the words of her grandfather addressed to the dal-seller’ “He will not stay in this little village until he is an old, like you and me, he will go out into the big wide world and make his way in life. Nothing and no one will hold him back” (Samira and Samir 215). She faces a lot of hardships after her father’s death: her mother Daria is raped,
they lose their tent and tribe, they have to beg for money, but she comes out as a winner at every step of the life. All this is done by her in the guise of a man which she considered problematic in the past. After the death of her father there are some chances of her coming out of the enforced gender but she knows that she needs a strong voice which can be had only in the guise of a man. She knows that if she reveals her secret at this juncture, she along with her mother would be in trouble and become a subject of victimization. It can be said that the deceit on the part of the culture comes as a blessing in disguise towards her empowerment as she uses the same stone which is used against her to reiterate with a strong and audible voice of her own.

Another important character in the novel is Gol-Sar who although silent in front of her father talks a lot and talks sense when she is with Samira (for her Samir). She represents modernity and knows how to read and write and express her views. She tells Samir, “You must know that girls understand much more than you men think” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 158). A universal truth comes out of her mouth when she says to her Samir:

> We have no responsibility, we do Nothing. And one day, when some man comes along and marries us, we have children and again we do nothing, again we have no responsibility . . . Do you think it is easy to see my brother being able to do whatever he wants? He does Everything. Yet I am allowed to do Nothing. (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 160)

In fact she is the only character besides Samira who questions male hegemony and the inferior position of women in the novel. Although her way of resistance is quite different from Samira’s and it hardly has any impact, yet her speech puts a more philosophical and weighty question marks on the position of women. Her realization
about the containment of her sex’s voice breaks the stereotype that a typical so-called angel within the four walls of a house lacks awareness over such crucial matters. She believes, “We are beautiful. Nothing more. Until the day when a man comes and takes us as his wife. After that we are not beautiful any more” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 160). She speaks for the entire womanhood when she tells Samira, “You don’t know how much I can think . . . It is possible that I can think more than you can imagine” (Shakib, *Samira and Samir* 161).

Though *The Kite Runner* revolves around Amir and Hassan, there are some minor women characters which make their presence felt. Hassan’s mother Sanauber who “ran off with a clan of traveling singers and dancers” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 6), represents a free woman who does not submit to her parents’ will in her forced marriage to Ali. About their incompatibility in marriage, Hosseini writes, “While Sanauber’s brilliant green eyes and impish face had, rumour has it, tempted countless men into sin, Ali had a congenital paralysis of his lower facial muscles, a condition that rendered him unable to smile and left him perpetually grim-faced” (*The Kite Runner* 7). Although her sexual exploits with a lot of men cannot be justified at least within the strict morals of the Afghan set up as portrayed in the novel, she no doubt represents a female voice who denies cutting down to the definition of the woman of her society. She makes her voice heard although she does not strictly abide by the Afghan moral code. When she leaves Ali and her son, no one is surprised as “People had raised their eyebrows when Ali, a man who had memorized the Koran, married Sanauber, a woman nineteen years younger, a beautiful but notoriously unscrupulous woman who lived up to her dishonorable reputation” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 7).
Among the minor characters another woman, to whom there is a passing, yet inspiring reference in the novel is Amir’s mother Sofia Akrami who has been “a highly educated woman universally regarded as one of the Kabul’s most respected, beautiful, and virtuous ladies” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 14). Then there is another woman about whom the readers are told that she fed Amir and Hassan from the same breast. About her, Ali tells Amir, “She was a fair, blue-eyed Hazara woman from Bamiyan and she sang you old wedding songs” (*The Kite Runner* 65).

The most important female character Soraya however turns out to be an ideal woman in *The Kite Runner*. She first eloped with a young man but is brought back by her family. She repents her decision later and gets married to Amir to whom, she proves to be a perfect wife. Actually she too belongs to an aristocratic family like Amir’s who are later forced to flee from their country. She matures in America and has been brought up in a liberal society as a result of which she never submits to the male will around her. To her father’s will of making his daughter study law to become a lawyer or a political scientist instead of a teacher, she replies quite bluntly, “I’m not a girl, Padar. I’m a married woman. Besides, they’d need teachers too” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 158). She works as a teacher and thus crosses over the fuzzy boundary between the public and private sphere which is quite rare in the context of the Afghan society at least as depicted in the novels. She says to her mother, “Teaching may not pay much, but this is what I want to do! It’s what I love, and it’s a whole lot better than collecting welfare, by the way” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 159). However her strong assertion somehow idealises the concept of women living outside Afghanistan, a major fault pointed out by the critics in Khaled Hosseini. In this regard Nixon writes in her thesis, “Hosseini correlates higher education and elevated social status with Western modernity instead of exploring the rich history of female education in
Afghanistan" (17). It has been thoroughly discussed and historically proved in Chapter Two that the standard of women education was quite satisfactory in Afghanistan since the 1960s when the women in the West had not even the basic rights. This streak runs into another novel by Hosseini as well where he idealizes all that is western as highly educated, polished and modern. There Mariam addresses this issue, stating that the modern women of Kabul "made her aware of her own lowliness, her plain looks, her lack of aspirations, her ignorance of so many things" (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 68). This element is to be found in Shakib’s *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes To Weep* where an American woman is depicted as exceptionally good with all the humility and goodness in her character. Shirin-Gol wonders at her modernity and way of living. Mohanty answers to such a representation by asserting that the portrayal of the Third World Women as less advanced is solely because they do not live up to the parameters of modernity set by the Western readers who assume that "the Third World just has not evolved to the extent that the West has" (40). Nonetheless we have the women like Laila and Mariam, who although may not appear liberated and modern when seen through western eyes, but they prove to be strong in their own way towards the end of the novel. Their case proves to be an excellent instance of the specificity of culture, society and politics already mentioned in this chapter where women tend to behave in a specific way. Already mentioned the parameters of women’s emancipation and their position vary vis-à-vis the difference in cultures. One cannot take the case of women belonging to a particular culture and try to judge or analyze it and try to find solution for, based on western model of modernity and women liberation. This stands truer in case of Afghanistan which stands quite contrary to the western model.
However, it may be argued that through Soraya’s character who succeeds in getting a job of her choice unlike Shirin-Gol, Laila and Samira, Hosseini wants to convey that in the present turbulent scenario, there are hardly any chances for a woman to realize her aim in Afghanistan. Soraya’s modernity and free will is reflected at another place where she enjoys a drink of Merlot with her husband as a celebration when his novel is accepted for publication. She later proves to be quite mature when she allows Amir to leave for Pakistan to meet ailing Rahim Khan and later to bring Sohrab to America. Rather it is she who helps Amir in preparing the necessary adoption documents so as to facilitate Sohrab’s living with them.


