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## **Ideology of Hegemonic Masculinity in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

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### **Abstract:**

Various strains of feminism have attributed differences between men and women entirely to socialization rather than physiology. Patriarchal culture assigns men particular masculine roles, such as engaging in politics and military service. Man fits into particular slots in society's imagined human order. Similarly, a woman is a secondary member of an imagined order. Society assigns women unique feminine roles, such as raising children and performing duties such as obedience to their husbands. Thus, society, rather than biology, defines the roles, rights, and duties of men and women. The definitions of manhood and womanhood have varied significantly from one community to another. However, the patriarchal ideology of male domination can be traced in all cultures. This paper aims to critically analyze the ideology of hegemonic masculinity in Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in light of the theory of masculinity by R W Connell.

**Keywords:** Types of masculinities, hegemonic masculinity, patriarchal structures, marginalization, oppression.

### **Introduction:**

Khaled Hosseini is a well-known Afghan-American novelist, UNHCR goodwill ambassador, and former physician born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. His writings have brought Afghan society into the spotlight. One of his significant works is *A Thousand Splendid*

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*Suns*, which deals with Afghan society from the pre-Soviet era to the present. Hosseini has a deep emotional relationship with Afghanistan and its social problems because he experienced political, economic, and social distress during his childhood as the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan in the 1980s. He used his writing as a form of activism; he used his novel to paint a picture of the real Afghanistan and its societal makeup through the perspective of the Afghan people and to delve deep into understanding people's struggle with hegemonic masculinity and women's rights. By writing *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, he intended to portray women's issues from Afghan women's perspective. These actual survivors are dealing with the consequences of Afghanistan's toxic patriarchal structures. Though the novel concentrates on female personalities, the author also shows a spectrum of male characters who have developed varied perceptions of masculinity. This mixed perception develops through their ways of living and surviving in the war-ravaged Afghanistan.

Gender hierarchy has always been in existence. In his remarkable book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind*, Yuval Harari investigates the origins of gender discrimination and argues, "People everywhere have divided themselves into men and women" (152). Nature provides more similarities than differences between men and women, and these differences are only for reproduction. However, society, rather than biology, distinguishes men and women and determines the roles, rights, and duties of men and women. Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*: "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (301). As she pointed out: "*biological fate* does not determine the figure that the human being presents to society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature indeterminate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (295). The definitions of manhood and womanhood have varied significantly from one community to the next. However, the patriarchal ideology or the ideology of male domination is present in all cultures.

Masculinity study is an offset of feminism and cultural studies. It is a social and cultural construct. The word masculinity refers to "a set of practices, norms, and behaviors associated with the idea of being male, believed to stand in opposition to femininity and

women" (Waling 2), and Hegemonic masculinity is described as a practice that supports men's dominance in society and justifies the subordination of other men and women, as well as other marginalized aspects of what it means to be a man. *Hegemonic masculinity* is a theory that aims to explain how and why men continue to hold dominating social roles over women and other gender identities that are seen as "feminine" in certain societies. Hegemonic masculinity is a component of R. W. Connell's gender order theory in gender studies, which acknowledges several masculinities that differ over time in society, culture, and the individual. According to Connell, such practices as physical aggression may contribute to strengthening men's control over women in Western communities. She emphasizes that such practices constitute a prominent component of hegemonic masculinity, although they are not always the defining characteristics.

The patriarchal beliefs that have been in existence for centuries in our society deny gender equality. Masculinity is the root of the patriarchal system and the main reason why so many women are subjected to injustice and violence worldwide. Peter F. Murphy, in *Feminism and Masculinities*, says:

Under patriarchy, men are the arbiters of essence for both males and females because the artistic norm of human identity is, by definition, male identity masculinity. Moreover, under patriarchy, the cultural norm of male identity consists of power, prestige, privilege, and prerogative over and against the gender class women. That is what masculinity is. It is not something else (41).

There are several facets of masculinity, but R W Connell, in his book *Masculinities* (2005), introduces four kinds of masculinity: *hegemonic, subordinate, complacent, and marginal*. Hegemonic masculinity is derived from Gramsci's analysis of the class relationship, where one group demands and maintains the position of leadership in social life. In the same way, hegemonic masculinity guarantees the prevailing position of men and the obedience of women. Hegemonic masculinity embodies male domination and exercises power and authority over women with all the consequences of oppression, violence, and privileges. Hence, "Hegemonic

masculinity is defined as a configuration of generic practices that embody the currently accepted response to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchal attitudes, guaranteeing the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77). In the second stance, Subordinate masculinity is seen on the fringes of conventional lifestyles, with behaviors and emotions conventionally attributed to women, so it is deemed inappropriate and feminine by most men. This type of masculinity would include both male manners of a homosexual orientation and some different ways of being a man to the values usually seen as typical of women. The third is Complacent masculinity, which relates to men who have no meaningful key to power and lack any high economic or social status but still want the patriarchal rewards associated with the male sex without ever asking for the justice of such privileges. Finally, Marginal masculinity guides those bodies of men who mourn social exclusion and have only a tiny excess of power. They are at the receiving back of all sorts of inequity and oppression in communities governed by males who shamelessly practice the most authoritarian and inequitable form of hegemonic masculinity. Despite this, they do not question male dominance or its behavioral patterns or separate themselves significantly from the misogynistic and forceful style embraced by patriarchal culture.

This paper discusses the concept of hegemonic masculinity through the character of Rasheed. He is one of the prominent male characters portrayed as an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, who tries to retain his pride by trying hard to keep up with the Afghan cultural masculine standard. Furthermore, the symbols show different attitudes when facing problems. As the main male character, Rasheed is described as a manifestation of the misogynistic environment created by both regimes. Meanwhile, the two main female characters show power, resistance, and resilience when facing unequal systems. Rasheed presents the physical and psychological suffering women have at the hands of men, and his violence grows in intensity as political violence overtakes the city. Rasheed's aggressive behavior leaves devaluing effects on Mariam's and Laila's mental conditions. To him, power is related to a male heir for whom he marries thrice, and only in the third marriage are his expectations met as Zalmai is

born. He holds his wife responsible for not satisfying his desire for a male heir; Rasheed loses his son and first wife and faces psychological trauma. Mariam receives the respect and attention she wants. However, after repeated miscarriages, he loses hope of having a son and becomes downcast, starts blaming her for everything. Rashid became extremely violent both verbally and physically after the repeated miscarriage. He forced Mariam to chew pebbles: "CHEW! He bellowed..... Mariam chewed. Something in the back of her mouth cracked..... Leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars" (Hosseini 94-95). This is an ordinary and harsh reality that many women face. In Afghanistan, "fertility and motherhood are considered as shields, a resistance mechanism" (Azzi and Belkhiri 44) to have an essential place in the house. The primary role of women in this culture is to bear children and take care of household chores. Still, society believes that the son means 'immortality' as the son carries on the name for generations. He feels the necessity of having a son who would immortalize his generation, and when Mariam could not conceive, she was considered a failure by her husband. Rasheed holds immense authority over Mariam and Laila for the rest of their lives until they choose not to accept his toxic masculinity. They must strictly tolerate the oppression of Rasheed, who considers them to be things rather than people. Women are regarded as men's chattels. Rasheed very insolently explained to Mariam, "A woman's face is her husband's business only" (Hosseini 82). This is an example of toxic masculinity or male domination of females by claiming women as the property of males. In the end, hegemonic masculinity causes difficulties and loss in both Rasheed's and his son's lives; it causes Rasheed's death and, for Zalmai, the loss of his identity.

Women are the only reproductive creatures needed to produce sons to carry on the family name. Women unable to give birth to a male child are deemed worthless and tormented. Rasheed also tormented Mariam because she was unable to bear him any child, and when his third wife, Laila, gave birth to a baby girl, he tormented her too because boys are always far more desirable than girls.

Moreover, the dominant version of masculine identity is not

an essence but an ideology of power and women's oppression, which tends to justify male dominance. This desire for superiority challenges women's fundamental human rights. It is the mindset of society that makes women subordinate to men and allows them to have control over resources, decision-making, and ideology. The quasi-notion of masculinity can be traced to Rasheed's life in the way he becomes incapable of expressing his innermost agony. Unable to escape the trap of chauvinism. He keeps pressing his son Zalmai, when he talks about his mother, to show sovereignty over women, thus sowing the seeds of dominance from his childhood. This shows how Rasheed must have been carried up in his childhood and how his perception of masculinity has been carved in him. Millett, in her *Sexual Politics*, argued that though "patriarchy and male domination manifests themselves throughout society, the family is its chief institution. The family encourages members to adjust and conform to patriarchal ideologies and practices through sex-role socialization" (26). Even women have been given the responsibility to propagate patriarchal norms of male domination. When Mariam wants an education, her mother says, "What is the sense of schooling a girl like you? It is like shining a spittoon. Moreover, you will learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they do not teach in school; it is this: Endurance" (Hosseini 18). Pierre Bourdieu points out that "male dominance is possible in so far as women are subjected not merely to culture coercion but also simultaneously to token violence aimed at encouraging acceptance of men's symbolic and cultural capital, that is, of their ways of seeing, understanding, and organizing the world." Mariam and Laila deal with sexism and toxic patriarchy.

Berger, Wallis, and Watson insist that masculinity is always considered ambiguous, multifaceted, and dependent on the needs of personal and institutional power. Thus, manliness is shaped not as a monolithic commodity but as an interrelationship of emotional and intellectual parameters directly affecting men and women and other societal aspects such as race, sexuality, nationality, and class. Masculinity signifies different things to men of different ages, times, and cultures. Hence, fortunately, not all men are the same. Likewise,

masculinity is not fixed or timeless but historical; it is not the manifestation of inner essence but is made socially. Zaman runs a private school in a Taliban-ruled society in which teaching is not allowed, and severe penalties are given to all those who transgress the rules defined by society. Despite this, Zaman has the fortitude to do the right thing by perceiving and retaining the identity of Afghan culture-based masculinity. He also held progressive views regarding the education of girls. Tariq, Laila's beloved, grew up in Hakim's shadow and developed a broader vision of society, as he respects women, particularly Laila. Knowing that she is matched to Rasheed, he readily admits her, and after Rasheed's death, he supports the children, too. Even when the war ends, he makes it a point to bring his family back to his native land, where they all participate in improving their society. Tariq, Laila's father, and even the old Mullah Faiz Ullah are therefore shown as the antithesis of toxic masculinity. It has been observed that they treat women in caring ways, encouraging them to rise to their potential. As Babu says, Laila: "Marriage can wait. Education cannot..... You can be anything you want, Laila. I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as men, maybe even more" (Hosseini 114).

Islamically, the ideal location for a woman is her home, but it has never been declared that she cannot use her talents and interests to contribute to the welfare of her community. The historical women of Islam are role models for women who lived balanced lives. Amna Shamim, in her book *Towards Islamic Feminism*, says:

Khadija, wife of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and first disciple, played a central role in supporting him in his mission. Umme (mother of) Salama, his other wife, dared to ask the Prophet challenging questions concerning women's status in the Qur'an, pleading for equality, to which God responded through a verse that affirmed that he equally addresses both men and women (13).

Afghan tribal laws are different from Islamic laws, which give equal status to both men and women.

### **Conclusion:**

It is essential to discuss how hegemonic masculinity has been

normalized in society. Afghan tribal culture marginalizes women and legitimizes gender inequality. Hegemonic masculinity is unquestionably backed by the fundamentalist reign of the Mujahideen and the Taliban. Afghan men may be culturally violent because they are forced to assert their identity, which is constantly threatened by foreign invasion. Hosseini's novel reveals a spectrum of hegemonic masculinity based on the Afghan culture and society that is the root of patriarchal tyranny, injustice, and violence to which so many women are subjected.

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