The Suffocation Of Women’s Equality In Afghanistan

In the Muslim-majority country of Afghanistan, the Koran is the sacred text in which many of its believers strictly follow. This sacred book allows Afghanistan’s many leaders, from its communist-controlled government to the takeover of the Taliban, to create the foregrounds of unequal treatment against men and women. The author Khaled Hosseini travels back to his home country to create a novel based on many women’s real life experiences that stem from the government’s implementation of the Koran in their every day life. In the book A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini, the two main characters, Mariam and Laila, become the windows into this world of dehumanizing and ever-changing double standards that the women of Afghanistan are forced to adapt to.

Many times throughout the book Hosseini provides a timeline of actual events, such as uprisings and governmental takeovers, that provides insight to the reasoning of shifting treatment towards the women in society. Throughout the novel, the powers of government shift multiple times within Afghanistan’s territory, thus making it almost impossible for Afghanistan’s society to have any social stability or, needless to say, gender equality.

In Part 1 of the book, the King is overthrown by Afghan communists backed by Russian soviets. During the communist rule of Afghanistan, women were able to live a more relaxed and

freed life. Through the perspective of Mariam, Hosseini paints a picture of a more modernized Afghanistan. Mariam, however, has a more traditional husband even during these times and is required by him to wear a full burqa to cover herself completely. While in town with Rasheed, Mariam notices that “these women were all swinging handbags and rustling skirts… their nails were long… they wore high heels… [and they were] modern Afghan women who were married to modern Afghan men” (Hosseini 75). During this period in the country’s history, women are not as restricted by their government because communist-backed Afghan rulers at the time were promoting equality. When Hosseini shifts to Laila’s perspective, the reader is brought into Laila’s more conservative upbringing where her family and friends all support or, some might even say, expect women and young girls to go to school and work normal jobs just like the men do.

Laila’s childhood ends very abruptly in Part Three when her mother and father are killed by a bomb that had hit their house. Laila marries Rasheed and forms a bond with Mariam. At this point in the book, the jihads and communist regimes over Afghanistan had all been defeated. The story now progresses through the era of “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” (Hosseini 277) in which the Taliban are in control of the Afghanistan government.

The rise of the Taliban and strict government rulings marks the end of any trace of hope for women’s equality in Afghanistan. The Taliban uses the Koran as a means of enforcing law and order into the country. According to Eleanor Smeal, a western feminist fighting for women’s rights, “she points out that Islam 'does not say you cannot educate women. The religion does not say women cannot be employed.' Muhammad's first wife was a businesswoman… This has nothing to do with Islam and everything to do with power” (Tanasychuk). The use of the Koran to keep citizens from acting out is just the base of the tyrannical Afghan government. All citizens

are required to pray five times a day, women are not allowed to be alone and without a male relative, women cannot make eye contact with men, cannot laugh, are forbidden from working, cannot show her face, and will be stoned/beaten if found guilty (Hosseini 277 and 278). The Taliban openly encourages men to oppress women in such a way that suffocates any trace of equality.

Through the eyes of Laila, the reader is taken through the treacherous journey of Laila traveling by herself trying to see her daughter, Aziza, in the foster home, without her husband. “One day, a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna… then the whips came down… and she trudged home, bloodied, without so much as a glimpse of Aziza” (Hosseini 321). Because women were not allowed to work or travel without a male relative, they were forced to put their children in foster homes and often starved because of the lack of income and food. This leaves women hopeless and helpless against the governmental mistreatment of women and the double-standards they ruthlessly impose.

Khaled Hosseini has crafted A Thousand Splendid Suns based on the accounts of many women who are going through the struggle of political unrest within the war of Afghanistan, which spans throughout many years of the country’s history. The political allegory of this story is likened to Afghanistan’s struggle with governmental structure much like the characters Mariam and Laila struggle with family acceptance and societal structure. In a Critical Insights Article written by Rebecca Stuhr, she states “Hosseini’s women, much like the country of Afghanistan itself, appear to be propelled by the whims of outside forces, familial and societal, with little chance of influencing their own lives and futures… The story of their lives runs parallel to the story of Afghanistan as the novel stretches over four decades” (Stuhr). Although Hosseini tells this story through the double narrative of only Mariam and Laila, the underlying struggle of treatment is a silent cry from all of Afghan’s women: the constant change and mistreatment of women has only created a larger rift in the stability of the country. This allegory creates a basis of truthfulness to put in to perspective how terribly women truly are treated in Afghanistan.

Works Cited

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