

Third World Women or the Struggles of a Feminist Identity in Development: Female Characters in Khaled Hosseini's Novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

This paper examines the main female characters in Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. While many argue that Mariam and Laila represent the typical 'Third World Woman' described by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, my argument is that a feminist identity development analysis reveals their struggles of an awakening feminist awareness and critical consciousness. By using the feminist identity development model designed by Nancy E. Downing and Kristin L. Roush as a tool of analysis, this paper aims to deconstruct the limits of the 'Third World Woman' discourse within Western feminism and acknowledge the diversity of female characters in this novel.

Keywords: feminist identity development, Third World Women, Afghan women, Khaled Hosseini, feminist discourse

Introduction

In this paper, I am going to examine the main female characters in the Afghan writer, Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). While many argue that the representation of Afghan women in this particular novel is another example of the dominant Western feminist representation of the 'Third World Woman', I will demonstrate that there are traces of a feminist identity development process behind the representation of these characters.

On the one hand, I will base my main assumptions on Chandra Talpade Mohanty's notion of the 'Third World Woman'. On the other hand, I will use Nancy E. Downing and Kristin L. Roush's 'Feminist Identity Development Model' as a tool to critically examine the main female characters, Mariam and Laila and their feminist identity changes. In this context, my main research question is: Are Mariam and Laila represented as traditional 'Third World Women' or are they evidences of the struggles of a feminist

identity development process in a 'Third World' country like Afghanistan as depicted in this novel?

Third World Women or The Struggles of a Feminist Identity Development?

To begin with, Mohanty highlights that 'Woman' a cultural and ideological composite 'Other' constructed through diverse representational discourses is an arbitrary representation of 'women' – "the real, material subjects of their collective histories" – set up by particular cultures (259). 'Third World Women' - including Afghan women - is "an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse" (260). Mass media and numerous literary works contribute to the descriptive discourse of women in the 'Third World' countries as ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, sexually constrained, and oppressed. Mohanty argues that "a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed which produces the image of an 'average third world woman'" (261). The same Western feminist representation can be found about Afghan women in many academic and literary works. For instance, Sonali Kolhatkar, Vice-President of Afghan Women's Mission also highlights that "in almost every portrayal of Afghan women in the Western media, mainstream or alternative, shapeless blue clad forms of Afghan women covered with burqa dominate" (4). It means that "women have a coherent group identity within the different cultures discussed, prior to their entry into social relations" (Mohanty 262). In other words, prior to any real analysis, Afghan women are generally described as 'typical' Third World Women a powerless and oppressed group. The question is whether the Afghan-born Khaled

Hosseini's book is another example of this dominant Western feminist discourse or whether the narrative challenges it.

In order to be able to answer this question, we must first examine the female characters in the novel. To do so, I will use the 'Feminist Identity Development Model' by Downing and Roush. They wrote their article '*From Passive Acceptance to Active Commitment: A Model of Feminist Identity Development for Women*' from a feminist perspective "on the premise that women (...) must first acknowledge, then struggle with, and repeatedly work through their feelings about the prejudice and discrimination they experience as women in order to achieve authentic and positive feminist identity" (695). They propose a five stage model of this process: passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness-emanation, synthesis, and active commitment. *Passive acceptance* is the first stage of this process when a woman is "either unaware of or denies the individual, institutional, and cultural prejudice and discrimination against her" (698). This is the stage where sex-role stereotypes are seen as normal, even advantageous by a woman and men are considered to be 'naturally' superior to women. Stage two is the *revelation*, "precipitated by one or a series of crisis or contradictions that the woman can no longer ignore or deny" (698). Downing and Roush also notice that some women make the transition to this stage suddenly, but this process might be further complicated by the "perceptual distortions (698) caused by a traditional female socialization. The third stage, called *embeddedness-emanation* is a time for the "discovery of sisterhood" (700). The authors emphasize that the barriers for women to reach this stage may be very significant and imposed by others or by society. Nevertheless, the newly discovered connectedness of 'sisterhood' provides the woman with a supportive environment which strengthens her

new identity formation. *Synthesis* is the next stage where a woman can “value the positive aspects of being female” (702). Finally, the last stage of the process is called *active commitment* which “involves the translation of the newly developed consolidated identity into meaningful and effective action” (702). However, the authors argue that few women can truly evolve to this final stage, and they assume that women may stagnate at a specific stage, most often the stage of *revelation* or *embeddedness*. Notwithstanding, they highlight that the “progress from stage to stage is determined not only by the woman’s readiness, but also by the unique interpersonal and environmental context of her life” (702).

Assuming that the female characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are examples of the ‘Third World Woman’ discourse would mean that we can categorize them as stagnating in the first stage (*passive acceptance*) of the feminist identity development model. For instance, it would mean that throughout the novel, Afghan women are described through the lens of the ‘typical’ Western representation of Third World Women: oppressed, powerless; passively accepting their inferior role in their society. However, by analyzing the characters of Mariam and Laila, I argue that the representation of Afghan women in Hosseini’s novel is not another example of the ‘Third World Women’ as per Mohanty’s definition, but rather the evidence of difficulties of the feminist identity development process a woman faces in a ‘Third World’ country under a repressive regime. In order to prove my assumptions, I am going to analyze the two main characters to reveal their process of feminist identity development throughout the novel.

Feminist Identity Development in the Novel

Mariam

The character of Mariam is stigmatized from the very beginning of the novel as being a *harami*, an illegitimate child of Jalil, a wealthy man and his servant, Nana. Mariam was born in 1959 in Herat, Afghanistan. Nana, her mother was disowned by Mariam's father who is from a wealthy family and owns a cinema in the small town of Herat. He has officially three wives and nine children. For his illegitimate child, Mariam, he arranges a small house out of town and visits her every Thursday. In order to fully understand Mariam's identity development process, we must first examine her mother's character and its impacts on Mariam.

Nana's character reveals a woman between the stages of *passive acceptance* and *revelation*. She accepts the place imposed on her by society and the discrimination against her, although she continuously criticizes the rigid patriarchal system of Afghan society. Her isolation with her daughter at a lonely cottage outside the town and the minimal exposure to any social interactions could not further her feminist identity development. When Mariam dreams about getting education, Nana claims that "there is only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school (...) and it's this: *tahammul*. Endure" (Hosseini 17, emphasis in the original). Nana reflects her disappointment in men and in life on Mariam: "There is nothing out there for her. Nothing, but rejection and heartache" (Hosseini 18). Nana's continuous feelings of anger and guilt about her fate are the evidences of her anticipated evolution to stage two. Furthermore, Moreland argues that "woman in this stage restricts her social contacts to a

small number of people who are comfortable and accepting of her intense feeling” (in Downing and Rush 700). Nana has only Mariam in her life, the only person she can count on and share her life with. When Mariam chooses her father instead of her, she loses her spiritual support with whom she had been comfortable to share her intense feelings. Due to her tragic death, her character cannot evolve fully to the second stage.

For the child Mariam, Nana is rather a negative role model unable to support her dreams about education; therefore it is rather her father who represents the joy in her early childhood. She only sees the outside world through the eyes of her mother and of her father and that vision of the world seems to be completely contradictory: a world of injustice and sorrow opposed to a world full of joy and happiness. Mariam first becomes disillusioned on the day of her fifteenth birthday. As a gift, she asks her father to take her to his cinema, but he does not show up that day and Mariam decides to find her father in the town. However, when she finds the house her father refuses to accept her in his home and she ends up sleeping on the street in front of her father’s house. It is here that Mariam realizes that her father does not fully recognize her as his daughter because she is a *harami*, a *persona non grata*. In the morning, when the driver forces her to return home, Mariam finds that her mother committed suicide. The world of the child Mariam falls apart and she is taken to live in her father’s house that she was previously refused to enter.

It is in her father’s home that the first time in her life she can hear the insincerity in her father’s voice. Mariam becomes aware of her real social situation, as well as of her role as a female in Afghan society and it makes her remember her mother’s words: “I’m the only one who loves you. I’m all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I’m gone

you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing!" (Hosseini 19). The impact of her mother's words and her father's lies open up the first steps toward her awakening feminist identity and act as a catalyst resulting in the first signs of a critical consciousness.

Mariam's childhood ends with her arranged marriage. Forced by her steps-mothers and her father's lack of opposition, she marries Rasheed, a much older shoemaker from the capital city of Kabul. When the three wives of Jalil inform Mariam that they found a potential husband for her, Mariam has to face her subordinate social status. She is a burden for her father's family. Unlike her step-sisters who are the same age and who can go to school and prepare for university studies, Mariam is a *harami* and thus destined for a different future. Although Mariam begs her father not to force her to marry, he is under the control of his wives. He chooses to obey his wives in order to keep the family peace instead of saving his daughter from an unfortunate destiny. On the one hand, this shows women's power in marriage, especially when united, even in a very traditional society. On the other hand, Mariam's marriage demonstrates well that Hosseini acknowledges the lives of women of different classes and castes in Afghanistan and avoids describing them as a homogenous group. We can thus see that Hosseini's image of oppression is set at the intersection of gender and class.

After the official ceremony, when Jalil tries to say goodbye to Mariam, she refuses to talk to him. We can witness the first signs of *revelation* in this act. She does not want to accept her role imposed on her by society that stigmatizes her as a *harami* and actively expresses her anger and disappointment toward her father. Nonetheless, Mariam and Rasheed continue their lives in Kabul where she soon becomes aware of her husband's

conservative, ultra-religious and abusive personality. He demands her to wear a burqa claiming that “where I come from, a woman’s face is her husband’s business only” and he condemns those men who “lost control over their wives” (Hosseini 65). Although we can see the oppression of Afghan women through Rasheed’s character, the author also describes the diversity of marriages and women in Kabul thus eschewing a homogeneous representation of Afghan women-men relations. Mariam sees her own adversity in the ‘modern’ Afghan women who are not covered by a burqa, who can wear make-up, high-heel shoes and skirts. She daydreams about their life, but the gap between them and her own life does not allow for an alternative conceptualization of herself; she accepts her faith and with it, her inferior status in her marriage. Her character goes back and forth between *passive acceptance* and *revelation*. Mariam “carefully selects associates and experiences so as to avoid contact with ideas that may upset her sense of equilibrium as a woman” (Downing and Roush 698). She denies seeing the negative aspects; she suppresses them because of the fear of her husband whose abusive personality frequently leads to physical brutality. Therefore, she prefers to concentrate on the only good thing in her life, her pregnancy. She wants to prove to herself that Nana was not right about her destiny and even a *harami* can have happiness in life. However, after some years of marriage and several miscarriages – a situation that exacerbates her husband’s abuse – she feels worthless and a burden yet again in her life.

Laila

Unlike Mariam, Laila is coming from a very different family background and from a younger generation. She was born in 1978 – in the year of the Soviet occupation – as the third child of Fariba and Hakim a “modern, relatively liberal” (Sentov 264) Afghan

family from Kabul. Hakim, her father is a university teacher and her mother, Fariba is a housewife, but not in the traditional way. She only wears a hijab (a headscarf) and she regards herself as equal to her husband in their marriage. Hakim, as a real intellectual always encourages Laila to study: “I know you’re still young but I want you to understand and learn this now (...). Marriage can wait, education cannot. (...) Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance” (Hosseini 103). Consequently, Laila’s feminist identity formation differs from the very beginning from Mariam’s.

When Laila’s mother learns that her sons – who joined the Mujahedeen in fighting against the Soviet regime – became martyrs, she loses her zest for life (Sentov 265). Laila turns to her father and her best friend, a Pashto boy. Tariq and his family love Laila and provide her family with love and warmth. With time the friendship between the two young people evolves into romantic love, but the war is back to Kabul and Tariq’s family has to leave the country. Before he leaves, he asks Laila to marry him and go with them but she would not be able to leave her parents alone. Their farewell ends up in passionate love-making. Later on, Laila’s parents – on their way to flee from Kabul – are killed in a rocket attack that seriously injures Laila. After a long recovery, she wakes up at Mariam’s house.

As we can see, Laila was raised in an atmosphere of equality between man and woman. Although she did not go through the feminist identity development process, we can put her character on the fourth stage, called *synthesis*. Thanks to her intellectual parents and her education, she has a positive feminist identity and she can value the positive aspects of being female. She does not accept discrimination against women and

the conservative male oppression over women. As Down and Roush describe this stage: she is “able to transcend traditional sex roles, make choices for herself based on well-defined personal values, and evaluate men on an individual basis” (702). Nevertheless, at this point in the novel she has not yet evolved to the final stage of *active commitment* due to her circumstances.

Mariam and Laila: The “Birth of a Sisterhood”

Rasheed becomes very eager to have Laila, a young and attractive woman as his second wife who could finally give birth to a much coveted male offspring and, despite Mariam’s opposition, he proposes to her. Having realized that she is pregnant with Tariq’s child, Laila quickly realizes that her only chance of survival under the oppressive regime is to accept the marriage proposal. At the beginning Rasheed treats Laila like a treasure, a soon-to-be-mother of the child that Mariam could not give him. Mariam in turn, does not hide her hostility towards the girl, therefore Laila does not share her secrets with Mariam about her pregnancy and the two have a very impersonal and unfriendly relationship. Although Mariam accepts the traditional gender roles of her marriage, the ‘newcomer’ acts as another catalyzer in her critical feminist identity consciousness. At first, however, she cannot deal with the new situation, her role as a servant in the family and Laila, the second and for the time being preferred wife of her husband.

When Laila gives birth to a baby girl, Aziza, this ‘failure’ displeases Rasheed and he becomes abusive also toward his new wife. As the relationship between Rasheed and Laila worsens, he blames Mariam and starts to beat her with his belt but Laila intervenes. This is the first time Laila stands up against him in order to protect Mariam. Her strong

feminist identity and her values push her to protect another woman from the abuse of their common husband. She demonstrates that she is ready to fight for the values she was raised with and in which she believes. From now on, the two women's relationship takes a huge turn and during their habitual evening 'tea sessions' in the garden they become not only friends but also allies.

Mariam's character slowly evolves to the third stage of *embeddedness-emanation*, which means that she is finally able to verbalize the oppressed woman in herself. As a consequence, she "develops a close emotional connection with" (Downing and Roush 701) Laila. As Downing and Roush highlights "this connectedness provides the woman with a reflection of her new frame of reference, the opportunity to discharge her anger in a supportive environment, and affirmation and strength in her new identity" (701).

One day, Laila decides to share her secret with Mariam. When Mariam realizes that just like herself, Aziza is also a *harami*, she understands the special relationship between herself and Aziza which was so manifest from the little girl's birth. Furthermore, Laila tells of her plan to escape from Rasheed and asks Mariam to go with them. As Mariam realizes that Laila and Aziza became the only joy in her life, she decides to join them. This is the moment when the two women decide to escape from their abusive husband, a sign of sisterhood, a "strong female friendship" (Downing and Roush 701) that encourages them to take action. However, their plan fails and, as unaccompanied women, they get arrested by the police. During the interrogation, Laila remains loyal to the values of her upbringing. She questions the new Mujahedeen rules in the name of equality between men and women, but in vain. In turn, Mariam's newly evolving feminist identity collapses under the harsh treatment.

Afterwards, Rasheed's brutal retaliation almost kills the three of them. He first beats Laila and closes her in the room with Aziza whom he suspects not to be his child, than he brutally thwacks Mariam and closes the severely bleeding woman in the tool shed. While the two women are described here as oppressed 'Third World Women' and victims of their husband's brutality, the fact that they tried to escape is still a sign of their struggle against it. As Downing and Roush emphasize: "progress from stage to stage is determined not only by the woman's readiness, but also by the unique interpersonal and environmental context of her life" (702).

Two years later, the Taliban come to power and bring even stricter rules for the whole society, especially for women in the name of 'true Islam'. Laila is pregnant with Rasheed's baby at this time, and as a consequence, treated very well by him for the time being. She gives birth to a baby boy under dreadful circumstances in a hospital that has no anaesthetics for her C-section surgery. Rasheed names him Zalmi. He is the favourite of his father; he brings him everywhere and he buys his long-awaited son everything. However, as their financial situation worsens, Rasheed first wants Aziza (about whom he learnt that she is not his daughter) to beg for money on the street corner. When Laila opposes him, he hits her. When Laila hits him back, he gets angry and comes back with his gun to threaten Laila. After his shop burns down in a fire, Rasheed loses his job and he takes out his despair on the two women by beating them. Nevertheless, although for the time being they must remain in this abusive marriage given the external circumstances, Laila and Mariam are not passive victims as various episodes of their resistance demonstrate. When Rasheed sends Aziza to an orphanage, her two mothers visit her risking reprisal by the Taliban that do not permit women to go outside without a

male escort. The two women's sisterhood and friendship help them to support each other in this difficult period.

Laila's character is close to the final stage of *active commitment*. As Gordan and Almutairi also highlight: "Through the growth of her personality in these levels, the ideas of the mind and circumstances that result in conflicts, transgression from the standards and lastly level of resistance are captured in the novel" (245). Laila's persistent resistance, sometimes overt, sometimes covert, is evidence that not all Afghan women are passive victims. Mariam in turn is encouraged by Laila's strong commitment, but her character has not yet fully evolved to the next stages. She stagnates in the stage of *embeddedness-emanation*, although Laila's friendship gives her the opportunity for further expansion. In this context, Gordan and Almutairi emphasize that "(...) the perspective of Afghan womanhood (...) shows that Afghan females displays a very simple yet resolute method of level of resistance that highlights the originality of Afghan femininity within their culture and community" (240).

Many years later, Tariq appears in front of the house where Laila and Mariam live. Laila realizes that Rasheed deceived her by telling her that Tariq had died in order to be able to marry her. Tariq and Laila's happiness of reunion does not last long because Zalmai tells his father about the strange visitor at their home. The furious Rasheed attempts to strangle Laila, but Mariam intervenes and kills him with a shovel. The anger over her long years of oppression and abuse breaks out from Mariam and gives her strength to act. This is the main catalyzer moment in her life, when she finally sees the moment ready to free herself from the oppression of her husband. The author also emphasizes this fact by adding that this was the first moment in Mariam's life she made a

decision *alone* about her own life. The fact that, when interrogated by the police, she confesses to having committed the crime alone in order to save Laila and the children's life is not only a sign of her love and sacrifice for them but also demonstrates her readiness to accept death as the ultimate liberation from a life full of suffering that she feels has come full circle.

In the prison Mariam is regarded as a "hero" among the other women because they found her action exemplary for all oppressed women. The author highlights that most of the prisoners were arrested because of escaping from home which is considered a crime under the Taliban regime. This again shows the struggles of Afghan women fighting for their freedom and indicates that they are not stuck in the first level of their feminist identity development process. They are ready to take action, they do not simply resign themselves but resist, even if this resistance comes with a high price.

While Mariam's public execution represents one of the many shocking examples of the Taliban regime, one must not see it as the main evidence to describe her character as an oppressed 'Third World Woman'. The way she behaves during her interrogation, we can feel that morally she stands over her executioners. Before her execution she feels at peace; she was born a *harami* but she will die as a beloved person and a free woman. In sum, Mariam's character evolves throughout the novel reaching the third stage of *embeddedness-emanation*. Downing and Roush argue that many women stagnate at this stage or might even "revert to earlier stages when their skills are insufficient to respond to the demands of current life stresses" (702). Mariam's character represents this stagnation and going back and forth between different stages, but it is still the evidence of progress in her feminist identity development process:

“Mariam demonstrates the battles of the Afghan females who live in the conservative / Orthodox community and the knowledge she obtained from decades of sustained various sufferings as a woman. They indicate the females who are split between the conventional principles and discovering their personal feeling of self turned off from community and responsibility” (Gordan and Almutairi 244).

In the last chapter we can witness Laila’s full evolution to the last stage of her identity development process. After the fall of the Taliban regime, Laila, Tariq and the children who had been living in Pakistan decide to return to their homeland. Back in Kabul, Laila works in the orphanage in order to help improve the lives of many children. Due to this commitment, her character fully evolves to the *active commitment* stage; she uses her feminist identity to take meaningful and effective action “a deep and pervasive commitment to (further) social change” (Downing and Roush notice: 702).

Conclusion

The analysis of the feminist identity development process of Mariam and Laila reveals that describing the female characters in Khaled Hosseini’s book as typical ‘Third World Women’ is simply overlooking the complexity, diversity and multiplicity that these female characters represent in the novel. The author rather acknowledges the diversity of Afghan women, the unique context of their lives and environment. Concepts of the family, household, religion and class are used within their specific local cultural and historical contexts which all support the idea of an intersectional rather than a homogenous perspective of their representation. The author pays attention to emphasize the different social, familial and individual backgrounds that shape the two women’s

feminist identity development. In this context, we must also acknowledge that Hosseini always gives a precise description how different historical events, such as the changing regimes affect the individual lives of Afghan women with different backgrounds.

Mohanty's notion of the 'Third World Woman' and Downing and Roush's 'Feminist Identity Development Model' gave the main theoretical framework and tools for my analysis. As Mohanty suggests: "Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be formed in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis" (244). What I examined here is how "the two females came together by war and destiny" (Gordan and Almutairi 244); how the sisterhood formed between Mariam and Laila in a unique historical and political moment in Afghanistan and how it played a role in their individual feminist identity development process. I also highlighted the argument that "a central component (...) of feminist identity development is the development of critical consciousness" (Brodsky et al. 5). In other words, the progress from the lack of awareness of gender oppression to critical consciousness and finally the motivation for change is a crucial turn in the process of a woman's feminist identity development process. The novel offers one literary example of this moment of awakening awareness and critical consciousness and proves that Afghan women, although in some respects are victims of male dominance also manifest various acts of resistance.

Finally, just as Downing and Roush highlight, "greater attention needs to be focused on the intrapersonal and interpersonal, institutional, and cultural forces that both catalyze and impede progress through stages" (707). In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, we could see some of these catalyzers that induced a critical consciousness and the progress of the main characters' feminist identity development. Although according to Brodsky,

the model of Downing and Roush does not “capture multiple, intersecting aspects of identity and social context” (Brodsky et al. 6), I have demonstrated that it can be applied in an intersectional context and thus deconstruct the limits of the ‘Third World Woman’ discourse within Western feminism.

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