

BECOMING VISIBLE: RESONANCES OF CONSTRUCTIVE RESISTANCE IN *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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ABSTRACT

Socio-cultural institutions create, uphold and perpetuate inequality and oppression through a process of 'othering'. Such marginalization disrupting the social fabric calls forth opposition against the discriminatory power, though the modes of resistance remain different varying from the moderate ones exposing the status quo to the confrontational ones posing serious threat to the particular dominant structure. Literature has always remained the strongest medium to register any kind of protest and to create neoteric visions of the life by denouncing bigotry and violence in all forms. Both male and female writers in their literary accounts have broached upon the vexed issue of women's oppression that relegates them to invisibility. Through the theoretical stance of Galtung's conceptualization of 'violence' and Sorensen's conceptualization of 'Constructive Resistance', the present paper traces this dialectics of agency and coercion in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* foregrounding the constructive qualities of resistance which aims at the establishment of a just and all-inclusive society.

Keywords: agency, constructive resistance, patriarchy, violence, visibility

Patriarchy aims at establishing a unique habitus for women to produce normative beings. All sorts of violence are exercised against them to maintain the status quo and to ward off the practices that threaten its existence. Violence occurs when human beings are denied choices/possibilities and it precludes them from realizing their potentialities. Johan Galtung avers, "Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (168). He further asserts, "Violence is that which increases the distance between the potential and the actual, and that which impedes the decrease of this distance" (168). The violent activities against women manifest themselves in curtailment of geographical freedom, established gendered codes of behaviour, physical torture, use of expletives, indoctrination of different kinds, denial of sexual autonomy, unfounded accusations, unequal opportunities for progress and much more. All such acts of violence are unleashed by the prescriptive socio-cultural norms which invite some resistance on the part of women ranging from strategies for survival, both conscious and unconscious, to the confrontational activities against the oppressive power structures. Resistance, whether individual or collective, explicit or implicit, intended or unintended, "holds the potential to constructively transform societies and change history" (Baaz et al., par. 5).

Majken Jul Sorensen uses a collective term "Constructive Resistance" for the variegated initiatives taken by the people to "build the society they desire independently of structures of power" (57). Aiming at social transformation, Constructive Resistance entails the elements of 'resistance' to oppose or undermine unjust and oppressive dominant structures of power through 'construction' of alternatives to establish a just society. It "focuses on creating, building, carrying out and

experimenting with what is considered desirable”(Sorensen 57). Elaborating on constructive element, Sorensen asserts that “constructive element can be either concrete or symbolic, and ranges from initiatives that aim to inspire others to actions that partly replace or lead to the collapse of the dominant way of behaving and thinking” (57).

The present paper is an attempt to trace the dialectics of agency and coercion in Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It addresses the issues of the constructive power of resistance and the ethical values it engenders. It is a testimony of resistance(s) against the different manifestations of violence which relegate women to 'invisibility'. Female characters in the novel combat violence unleashed by the reductive norms in their own respective manner through their acts of everyday resistance.¹ Throwing down the gauntlet, they register their dissensus with 'visuality'.² They showcase resentment against the normative culture which seeks “forcible separation from is anarchic opposite” (Mirzoeff 483). They refuse to be segregated from the core group, but their acts of resistance remain disengaged from the logic of subversion and overturning of the established structures. Their refusal to be segregated from the aesthetic core of the society serves as an act of countervisuality seeking a new social order celebrating equality, togetherness and humanity where they can be acknowledged and 'visualized'.³ They contend for “the right to look” that “claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism” which is always opposed by “the authority of visuality” (Mirzoeff 473,476).

Spanning a period of thirty years, the novel traces the history of Afghanistan devastated by several invaders and the internal forces. The gender apartheid imposed on Afghan women is made evident through two female characters separated by a generation gap but united by an inseparable bond of humanity. Their life narratives in the novel are testimony to the fact that women have been subjected to violence not only by the monolithic patriarchal presence in their lives, but also by the political powers treating them as instruments of retaliation during civil strife to soothe the hurt masculine pride. Mariam, one of the two central characters in the novel, is destined to be labeled as *harami* (an illegitimate child) being born out of wedlock. The idea of being an illegitimate child is stigmatic for it conveys a social identity that doesn't conform to the prescribed moral codes of the society and is bound to suffer “disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination” (Link and Phelan 367). The 'label' of 'harami' brings her discredit and reduces her “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman qtd. in Link and Phelan 364).

Mariam's mother, Nana, becomes a victim of the sanctioned moral framework which categorizes women's acts into two polar groups of 'normalcy and deviance' and excludes males fixing no different categories for them. Her alleged transgression of sanctioned behavioural codes places her in what Seemanthini Niranjana calls an “uninhabitable” domain of life where she is forced to live a compromised life (7).⁴ She faces violence in the form of 'rejection' by her partner of that 'bodily act of disgrace' and is coerced to live in a distant *kolba* through a “face saving deal” (Hosseini 7). *Kolba*, disconnected from the real world, serves as signifier of assured immobility and entrapped identity due to curtailment of geographical freedom. Nana's desertion by her family preoccupied with the questions of prestige and honour is a continuum of violence. It reflects monolithic patriarchal notions that posit woman as the repository of family honour and pride which must be protected at any cost and any act of violation would invite retribution. Nana faces family's wrath for violation of the notion of 'purity', a much-prized attribution of a female. Nana sums up the reality of phallogocentric system saying, “Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman” (7).

Jalil's inhibition to claim Mariam his child publically lends her a stigmatised status that is devalued in the society, hence divests her not only of her legitimate claim to “love, family, home,

[and] acceptance”, but also block the opportunities she desires (4). Mariam's desire to attend 'a real school' like her father's legitimate daughters provokes the ire of her mother who cautions her of what Link and Phelan calls “persistent predicament” of the women like them (380).⁵ She articulates the constraints their 'otherness' entails: “It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have... Besides, they'll laugh at you in school. They will. They'll call you *harami*. They'll say the most terrible things about you. I won't have it (Hosseini 18).”

Nana fails to define themselves outside the regulatory norms of the society and her resistance to violence exercised by Jalil in the forms of restricted mobility and crushed life chances remains limited to “rants against him when he wasn't around” (21). Her subdued and mannerly behaviour in his presence reflects her ardent desire for 'acceptance' expunging her past unpleasant memories. Mariam is also desperate to be recognized as an 'ordinary' person having “a life in which she would love and be loved back, without reservation or agenda, without shame” (30). Her mother's pleas and warnings fail to dissuade her from defying spatial restrictions imposed on her and she dares to enter the world of her father which has hitherto remained a prohibited space for her. She enjoys her anonymity in Herat where she was “unexpectedly, marvelously, an ordinary person” (30). The ignominy appended to her identity returns and all her hopes to achieve an unblemished identity are dashed to the ground when her biological father “let her sleep on the street” (35). Instead of accepting her whole-heartedly in his house after her mother's suicide, he colludes with his wives to get rid of “the walking, breathing embodiment of their shame” by marrying her to an aged shoe-maker living far away in Kabul (48). Disillusioned Mariam resigns to her fate but breaks her 'silence' to make Jalil realize his hypocrisy saying, “I didn't know that you were ashamed of me” (54). She shows her resentment and refuses to meet him ever in her life.

Mariam's husband, Rasheed, symbolizes entrenched patriarchy that demarcates home as the primary space of a woman's being and associates family's honour, '*nang and namoos*', with the socially sanctioned codes of behaviour which women are required to adhere to. He can't countenance the attitude of “soft men” who gives freedom to their wives (69). He commands Mariam to wear burqua in public as for him “a woman's face is her husband's business only” (69). On the other hand, being a man he himself has a privileged position to live his life the way he intends to; to retain magazines having pictures of women who “wore nothing at all” (81). Mariam wonders, “Why did Rasheed insist that she cover when he thought nothing of looking at the private areas of other men's wives and sisters?” (82). This institutional pressure in the garb of her husband's insecurity at first appears to her “imposing and immovable” depriving her of peripheral visions (69). Later she feels “buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers”, seeking safety in her anonymity (72).

Mariam's excitement to see Kabul women “cantering uninhibited down the street” reflects her desire to explore the outside world which has hitherto remained a restricted space for her (74). Independence of modern women from Kabul not only mystifies her but also makes her aware of her “own lowliness, her plain looks, her lack of aspirations, her ignorance of so many things” (74). Her 'overprotective' husband does not allow her extend her outreach like these Kabul women. Instead, the intransigent patriarchal figure considers extension of family through bearing a son the prime responsibility of a married woman. Mariam's embodied incapacity to produce a male child takes a toll on her sense of well-being.⁶ She faces physical violence and psychological oppression when she fails to bear a 'son' after seven miscarriages. She lives in constant fear of his “shifting moods, his volatile temperament” which results in “punches, slaps, kicks” (97-98). Rasheed even forces her to chew pebbles leaving her bleeding with two broken molars. He not only resorts to physical violence, but also negates her integrity and personhood. His fault-finding with the food cooked by her leaves her

“stricken in the kitchen with self-doubt” (99). She lives with constant guilt and feels that she is “nothing but a burden to him” which she could observe in the way he looks at her (98-99). She tolerates everything in his slighted marriage maintaining silence due to her vulnerable socio-economic condition and her sense of commitment to her marriage.

Laila is entirely different from Mariam in disposition and conduct. In contrast to Mariam who had no access to the outside world beyond the incarcerating space of *Kolba*, Laila enjoys freedom to get education and hang out with friends in childhood. Whereas Mariam interiorize the lessons of cowed subservience taught by her mother, Laila remains an 'Inqilabi Girl' (Revolutionary Girl) right from her school days being brought up by a father who epitomizes the denial of essentialisms attached to gender. Her father becomes mouthpiece of Hosseini when he motivates Laila to actualize her potential:

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, may be even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance. (114)

Laila becomes a victim of patriarchy and religious fundamentalism when her parents die in a bomb attack and she is manoeuvred into marriage by Rasheed. Like Mariam, Laila also becomes the repository of Rasheed's honour. As a coercive agency, he subjects Laila to strict disciplined life in order to keep her sexuality and thoughtfulness in check. His warning reflects the patriarchal strategy of defining a woman in terms of her corporeality: “Mariam will be my eyes and ears when I am away... you are still a young woman, Laila Jan, a *dokhtar e jawan*, and young women can make unfortunate choices” (218). Laila's resistance to Rasheed's impositions and his scathing attacks operates at moderate level. She avoids any direct confrontation with Rasheed. Avoidance becomes her strategy to escape destitution. Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Johansson consider this act of avoidance as everyday resistance since it makes impossible for Rasheed to exercise his power on Laila, though temporarily (24). Further, it remains a part of Laila's strategy to make resistance possible at a later stage when she gets an opportunity to escape (Vinthagen and Johansson 24).

Despite their earlier hostility, Mariam and Laila develop an inseparable bond when Laila's first child Aziza is born. Mariam for whom “love was a damaging mistake, and its accomplice, hope, a treacherous illusion”, now nourishes a dream of a new life where “she would find the blessings that Nana had said a *harami* like her would never see” (Hosseini 249-50). The nourishment of this dream of a new life is a significant sign of protest against the restrictive societal norms. It makes her accomplice Laila who secretly plans to leave Kabul with her and Aziza. To execute her plan, Laila keeps pilfering small amount of money from Rasheed. James C. Scott categorizes such act of hidden resistance as dissimulation which becomes significant when open defiance may jeopardize the possibilities of the resister (53-54).⁷ Their plan to escape is shattered because travelling without a *mahram* was forbidden at that time. Such excruciating and discriminatory dictates by Talibans intended to keep a check on the mobility of women as travelling is associated with “transgressive impulses” (Ravi 2).

This attempt to elope makes Rasheed's hackles rise leading him to beat both Mariam and Laila unsparingly. He locks Laila and Aziza in a dark room without providing them even a drop of water. But all this oppression makes Mariam and Laila more resolute and defiant. When Rasheed sends Aziza to orphanage and refuses to accompany Laila to visit Aziza, Laila resolutely resists, “You can't stop me, Rasheed. Do you hear me? You can hit me all you want, but I'll keep going there” (Hosseini 313). Despite Taliban's dictates for women to go out only in the company a male relative

and alarming number of cases of rape by the militia to intimidate civilians, Laila keeps visiting Aziza. She even wears “extra layers, even in the heat, two, three sweaters beneath the burqa, for padding against the beatings” (313-14). The narrative emphasizes the strength in both the actions and silences of both women characters as the markers of agency and reflects that only the body can be assaulted not the mind.

Mariam breaks her silence and resorts to action when Rasheed attempts to kill Laila. Mariam who has hitherto lived her married life to appease Rasheed, now resists her brutal action to save Laila from him: “*He is going to kill her, she thought. He really means to.* And Mariam could not, would not, allow that to happen. He'd taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too” (339-40). Mariam eliminates Rasheed with a fatal blow. For the first time, Mariam resorts to violence against Rasheed and feels that “this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life” (341). Despite potential fatal consequences, she maintains her resolve to give Laila and her children a safe and peaceful life. Inside women's prison Mariam gains some notoriety among prisoners and she is offered blankets and food by other women prisoners. It reflects their admiration for her courage to oppose the oppression and also reflects what Afghan women actually want. Mariam, unrepentant of her action, feels a sense of worth that although she came into this world as “an unintended thing”, she would exit as a “person of consequence” and it would be “a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings” (361).

Mariam's love and sacrifice make Laila restless even when she starts living a peaceful life in Pakistan with Tariq and her two children. Mariam's action qualifies as constructive resistance as it provides inspiration for Laila to do something for his country (Sorensen 58). Following her footsteps, Laila chooses to renounce her comfort to help others. She recalls her father's words that “when war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you” (Hosseini 378). She urges Tariq to go back home: “This [Pakistan] isn't home. Kabul is, and back there so much is happening, a lot of it good. I want to be a part of it all. I want to do something. I want to contribute”(379). She comes back to Kabul to regain what was denied to her and to contribute to Afghanistan's reconstruction. She uses Mariam's inheritance left by her father to refurbish the orphanage. She starts working as a teacher there to educate children and to give her life a purpose, as she realizes that “every Afghan story is marked by death and loss and unimaginable grief. And yet, she sees, people find a way to survive, to go on” (384). Mariam becomes her life force who “shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns” in her heart inspiring her to spread this light all around. (402). At last, Laila's resistance for 'survival' changes to constructive resistance to carry out 'what is desirable' for a just and all-inclusive society.

Both women characters in the novel, as agents of action and change, try to extricate themselves from the essentialist reductive paradigms which impede their growth, but contrary to the theorization of women's agency, their acts of resistance remain disengaged from the logic of subversion and overturning of the established structures. They don't form a self-governed counter-power working in opposition to the entrenched patriarchy. Instead, their resistance articulates a process of change in line with their desires, needs and available resources. In a bid to be acknowledged as socially viable beings, they rise above the level of mere personal empowerment to lay the groundwork for the larger social cause. They are not 'anti-men'; they envisage a shared future in solidarity with men. Though their resistance may not achieve the envisioned transition, a new beginning is discernible.

Notes:

1. According to Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Johansson, “Everyday resistance is about how people act in their everyday lives in ways that might undermine power” (2). It is “typically hidden or

disguised, individual and not politically articulated” unlike public and collective resistance (2). It includes “the silent, mundane and ordinary acts that are normalized” (9-10).

2. Visuality means “the visualization of history” and this process is “imaginary, rather than perceptual, because what is being visualized is too substantial for any one person to see and is created from information, images and ideas” (Mirzoeff 474). This creation of visuality manifests “the authority of the visualizer” (474). It goes through three steps of classifying, categorizing and defining the visible, segregating those visualized from the remaining ones and finally making this “separated classification seem right and hence aesthetic” (476).

3. Countervisuality seeks “the recognition of the other” to secure “a place from which to claim a right and to determine what is right” (Mirzoeff 474). It offers means to decipher “unreality created by visuality's authority” and proposes “a real alternative” to counter it (485).

4. While discussing 'silence' as a strategic act of women abducted during partition of India, Seemanthini Niranjana uses the term “uninhabitable domains” for the positions of women which make it “exceedingly problematic” for them to live “any kind of normal social life” (7).

5. Persistent predicament, according to Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan, signifies “a general pattern of disadvantage that is connected to stigma processes of labeling, stereotyping, status loss, and discrimination” (380).

6. Well-being is “a multidimensional concept, including material and psychological well-being, physical well-being, social well-being, security, and freedom of choice and action” (Uma Narayan qtd. in Thapan 132).

7. According to James C. Scott, dissimulation includes the activities performed by the subordinate groups in which “both the symbols and practices of resistance” remain “veiled” in the guise of “deference, compliance, and loyalty” (53).

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