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The Paradoxical Potential of Trauma: Mapping Mariam's Traumatic Manifestations in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the psychological trajectory of Mariam, one of the two protagonists in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, within the conceptual framework of Trauma Studies to understand the paradoxical potential of trauma. This study accentuates how the trauma inflicted self of Mariam exhibits its repercussions in multiple layers, such as intergenerational, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral manifestations. Drawing upon the insights of the trauma theorist Judith Herman, this research significantly underscores how these different manifestations of trauma aid in transforming Mariam from being a reticent victim into an empowered redeemer. Subsequently, the analysis of this novel through the lens of a trauma-focused framework contributes to the broader discussions in feminist trauma studies on how solidarity and empathy would bring the possibilities of healing and redemption even within the strongly rooted oppressive patriarchal structures.

Key Words: Intergenerational Manifestation, Emotional Manifestation, Cognitive Manifestation, Behavioural Manifestation, Fatalistic Worldview.

Introduction

Trauma studies is an interdisciplinary field that emerged in the 1990s, deeply rooted in fields like Psychology and Psychoanalysis. It facilitates the comprehension of various traumatic experiences recorded in the different academic disciplines such as Literature, Culture, History, and Sociology. In the realm of literary theory and criticism, this contemporary conceptual framework investigates and analyzes how individual and collective traumas are remembered, narrated, silenced, and revisited. This area of inquiry provides a critical framework to comprehend the significant role played by power politics, which is embedded in literary texts. The research article titled "Fragmented Narratives and Sudden Harm: A Comprehensive Study of Trauma in Literature and Unintentional Trauma" highlights the impact the trauma creates in the minds of the readers.

In written works, literature trauma explores psychological or emotional distress, often portraying characters' traumatic experiences or examining how these themes affect readers.

This approach facilitates engagement with the complex and often painful aspects of human existence, which can serve as a cathartic experience for both writers and readers, offering a safe space to process and understand difficult emotions. It can also raise awareness of mental health issues and foster empathy for those who have experienced trauma. Furthermore, literature trauma can be a powerful tool for social commentary, illuminating societal issues and promoting dialogue about collective trauma. (Asati and Tiwari³⁷)

Judith Herman, one of the major exponents of Trauma Studies, in her seminal work *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), underscores the social and therapeutic dimensions of trauma through a psychological model. She authenticates that the experience of trauma not just leaves a psychological wound, but as an experience, brings healing to the subjugated psychological self. This approach is widely used to analyze the texts that deal with war, post-colonial displacement, political persecution, and gendered oppression.

The elaboration of gendered and systemic aspects of trauma in Feminist Trauma Studies makes it a critical lens to analyse the literary narratives portraying women's oppression and marginalization. In this context, Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* can be considered a notable literary text that offers substantial material for the study of trauma as experienced by Mariam - one of the two protagonists of the novel - navigating her way through the regressive patriarchal structures of the society.

Khaled Hosseini, a physician by profession, is a contemporary Afghan-American novelist whose novels often delve into the themes of displacement, identity, family, and political conflict. He has penned his novels based on his own experiences of growing up in Afghanistan before emigrating to the United States. The most notable characteristic of his narrative is the intertwining of the authentic portrayals of individual lives with the broader socio-political upheavals of Afghan history, highlighting an insightful portrayal of how an individual's life is influenced by the historical and cultural forces of a nation. His works are appreciated for their emotional depth, vivid characterizations, and nuanced exploration of women's experiences in patriarchal societies. According to Xinmei and Xia,

Hosseini's narratives, articulated in English, render a quintessential aspect of his literary oeuvre, allowing readers to not only immerse themselves in his storytelling but also to connect with the profound essence of Afghanistan. He skillfully intertwines his personal experiences and insights with the broader narrative fabric of Kabul, akin to the precise art of kite flying – masterfully manipulating the cord and fine-tuning his position to craft deeply resonant works. Through his reflective and intricate prose, he offers a portrayal of Afghanistan that transcends mere factual representation, evoking rich emotional responses and providing a perspective that stands in stark contrast to Edward Said's Orientalist interpretations. (458 -459)

A Thousand Splendid Suns, published in 2007, is Hosseini's second novel with a multi-generational narrative. It pictures the dishevelled social and familial lives of two Afghan women, namely Mariam and Laila. The story is set in Afghanistan against the backdrop of decades of war, political instability, and patriarchal-influenced social oppression. It paints the struggles of women under patriarchal and oppressive conditions, highlighting issues such as domestic violence, forced marriage, and subjugation. Through the evolving connection between Mariam and Laila, Hosseini emphasizes how the fortitude of women encompassing qualities such as endurance, strength, and solidarity serves as a radiant force for Mariam to confront societal oppressions. This sets the analytical ground for rereading the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* within the conceptual framework of Feminist Trauma Studies.

Analysis

The novel primarily traces the life of Mariam, an illegitimate child of Jalil, a wealthy and prominent businessman, and Nana, a poor housemaid. Jalil lives in the city and maintains a seemingly distant relationship with Mariam. His occasional visits give Mariam a beacon of hope and longing for paternal love. On the other hand, Nana, Mariam's poor mother, begrudges Jalil and instills a sense of bitterness in Mariam. This paves the way for Mariam to harbour a sense of shame and insecurity about her illegitimacy throughout her life. As a result, she grows up facing social stigma, marginalization, and emotional neglect from her family.

At a young age, Mariam is forced into a loveless and abusive marriage with Rasheed, who subjects her to all kinds of trauma. She endures years of domestic violence, ardently following the systemic patriarchy that oppresses women's lives in her society. Following the death of her parents in the rocket attack, Laila is also compelled to marry Rasheed for survival despite being pregnant with the child of her childhood love, Tariq. Through the shared suffering imposed by Rashid's cruelty, Maria and Laila cultivate a profound sisterly connection that helps them to sustain the hardship with emotional support and unwavering resilience. The novel accentuates the importance of women's strength, endurance, and ability to love through the trajectory of the self-authored sacrifice of Marim.

The analysis of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* underscores the complex and multilayered dimensions of psychological trauma inflicted upon Mariam by highlighting how her subjectivity to patriarchal oppression is shaped by recurrent patterns of emotional, cognitive, and relational wounding over time. Her fragmented sense of self and identity is unleashed through multiple manifestations of trauma, encompassing intergenerational, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions. These overlapping layers of her traumatic manifestations demonstrate how her personal experiences are linked to the collective patterns of tumultuous histories of marginalization and internalized emotional pain, endured by women across the world.

Mariam's intergenerational manifestation of trauma in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is most forcefully illustrated through the continuity between Nana's suffering and Mariam's own experiences. Nana, an outcast from Jalil's family due to his extramarital relationship with her, is forced to live in isolation. She becomes an emblematic representation of women broken by patriarchal rejection and social stigma. Her life of abandonment and bitterness caused by a man and the patriarchal society is instilled in the nascent mind of little Mariam. Nana's despair is transferred to Mariam through both words and silences. She even warns her daughter that "like a compass needle that always points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman" (Hosseini 7). This simile quoted by Nana is not just a reflection of her personal disillusionment towards the androcentric world but the broader systemic oppression of women, which Mariam internalizes as part of her psychological inheritance from her mother. This shapes Mariam's earliest understanding of womanhood, inevitably associating it with shame and subjugation.

This psychological inheritance moulds the foundation of Mariam's trajectory, shaping her self-perception, choices, and responses to the systemic oppression she encounters. This claim finds textual support in the following passage of the novel:

Mariam lay on the couch, hands tucked between her knees, watched the whirlpool of snow twisting and spinning outside the window. She remembered Nana saying once that each snowflake was a sigh heaved by an aggrieved woman somewhere in the world. That all the sighs drifted up the sky, gathered into clouds, then broke into tiny pieces that fell silently on the people below. As a reminder of how people like us suffer, she'd said. How quietly we endure all that falls upon us. (Hosseini 89 - 90)

Mariam's forced marriage to Rasheed, arranged without her consent, reverberates with Nana's expulsion from Jalil's household. It recapitulates the same sequence of patriarchal control and dispossession. Just as Nana was silenced and denied legitimacy, Mariam, too, is stripped of agency and demoted to a life where obedience is demanded and resistance reprimanded. The parallel between mother and daughter shows how both women endure different iterations of the same oppressive structures. It highlights how trauma reverberates across generations in altered yet familiar forms. The following words of Nana not only reflect her view of Mariam's father, Jalil, but also reverberate with Mariam's later experience with her husband, Rasheed.

What a stupid girl you are! You think you matter to him, that you are wanted in this house? . . . That he's going to take you in? Let me tell you something. A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you. . . . I am all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I am gone you will have nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing! (Hosseini 27)

Mariam's emotional manifestation of trauma is profoundly revealed through the enduring scars of rejection, neglect, and systemic abuse. From her childhood, she has been burdened by absorbing the emotional atmosphere of abandonment and disgrace, which convinces her that she is inherently illegitimate and unworthy of love. This lays the basis for Mariam's later internal struggles, self-blame, guilt, and resignation. Moreover, her father, Jalil's refusal to acknowledge her as his daughter publicly intensifies her sense of unworthiness. It embeds in her the belief system that she is destined for silence and invisibility. Her emotional scars deepen as she enters into a coercive marriage with Rasheed.

Rasheed's harsh discipline and humiliating treatment induce a growing sense of powerlessness. Mariam's emotional landscape is dominated by feelings of isolation and hopelessness, where moments of fleeting joy are quickly overshadowed by dread. As the story progresses, to protect herself from his constant humiliation and violence, she begins to develop an emotional numbness that functions as a defensive internal armour to protect her emotional self. This trajectory echoes Judith Herman's argument that trauma fundamentally restructures emotional life by replacing trust with fear, intimacy with withdrawal, and hope with despair. She says,

Over time, as most people fail the survivor's exacting test of trustworthiness, she tends to withdraw from relationships. The isolation of the survivor thus persists even after she is free. (62)

These emotional manifestations clearly demonstrate how trauma disintegrates the individual's emotional capacity to connect, dream, and envision a life beyond survival.

Mariam's trauma finds profound cognitive manifestation in the fatalistic worldview she develops. A fatalistic worldview can be defined as a belief system that strongly advocates that events happening in life are predetermined, unavoidable, and beyond human control. This belief makes individuals believe that they are powerless to change their circumstances. It often leads to resignation, passivity, and acceptance of suffering as destiny. From her childhood, Mariam is socialized into this belief through Nana's bitter teachings and acrimonious experiences, which imprint themselves on Mariam's consciousness as a cognitive schema, shaping her perception of gender, power, and the world itself.

After witnessing her mother's suicide and experiencing Jalil's rejection, Mariam increasingly internalizes the conviction of a fatalistic worldview that she is unworthy of love and that betrayal is inevitable. Such thought patterns reflect what Judith Herman identifies as trauma's capacity to "fundamentally alter the survivor's assumptions about the world" (Herman 51). It dismantles basic trust and implants expectations of futility. Herman argues,

Traumatic events destroy the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation. They profoundly violate the victim's faith that she can control her life, or that she is worthy of care and protection. After trauma, the world is experienced as a place of potential danger, the self as worthless, and the future as hopeless. (51)

The fatalistic worldview prepares Mariam to accept Rasheed's abuse with resignation, rationalizing it as her life destiny rather than questioning its injustice. This act of submission illustrates how trauma operates cognitively – not only distorting memory and perception, but also establishing a system of beliefs where Mariam's suffering is considered inevitable. Her acceptance of violence as a predestined entity underscores how trauma manifests in cognition, as fatalism forecloses the possibility of change and considers endurance as the only obtainable response.

Mariam's behavioural manifestations of trauma reveal how constant abuse reshapes the individual's everyday actions and conditions the patterns of silence. From her earliest years, she was taught by Nana that "Endure. It's all you can do" (Hosseini 7). This has become a behavioural script in her life. In her marriage to Rasheed, Mariam quickly learns to adjust her responses to his temper, such as being silent at meals, choosing her words carefully, and rushing to obey even his unreasonable demands. She notes that she "waited for his moods to pass, his furies to play themselves out" (Hosseini 94), a behavioural adaptation to minimize violence. This constant monitoring of herself and her surroundings reflects what Judith Herman terms, "After a traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment" (35).

At the same time, Mariam's behavioural manifestation of trauma is also expressed in embodied habits of internalized subservience, such as bowing her head, lowering her eyes, and carrying out domestic tasks with quiet efficiency. When Rasheed forces her to chew pebbles as an act of punishment for poorly cooked rice, she submits to the violence without any question. This tormenting scene exemplifies Mariam's behavioural logic of survival strategy.

His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He showed 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. . . . Mariam chewed something in the back of her mouth, cracked. . . . Rashid said, "Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you have given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing else." Then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars. (Hosseini 102 – 103)

Laila's arrival disrupts the psychological isolation of Mariam. The reticent self of Mariam begins to pursue and empathise with Laila's traumatised self. The accumulated trauma and its different forms of manifestations in Mariam empower her to re-channel her agony into defiance against the ruthless act of her husband, Rasheed. Mariam's later bond with Laila signifies both continuity and rupture in the psychological manifestation of the traumatic cycle. While Mariam inherits the wounds of their mothers' generation, the solidarity that she develops with Laila provides a counter-narrative of resistance and healing. Judith Herman notes the importance of connection in her article titled "Recovery from Psychological Trauma",

The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In renewed connections with other people, the survivor recreates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy. (S145)

The trauma she faces no longer paralyses her; instead transforms her from being a reticent victim to an active resistor, which culminates in a self-authored choice of sacrifice. When Rasheed threatens Laila's life, Mariam surpasses her habitual passivity and takes decisive, violent action to protect Laila. This rupture validates how trauma not only produces submissive behaviours but can also galvanize the victims into acts of agency under extreme circumstances. Hosseini records Mariam's final moment,

Miriam wished for so much in those final moments. Yet as she closed her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the *harami* child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Miriam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings. (361)

Conclusion

In the end, Mariam's life, though marked by different manifestations of intergenerational, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural trauma, surpasses victimhood and transforms into an agency through her final act of self-authored sacrifice. Her existence was shaped by violence, silencing, and fatalism, but her memory reminds us of the redeemer in her. Hosseini underscores this in Laila's reflection:

She wished she could visit Mariam's grave, to sit with her awhile, leave a flower or two. But she sees now that it doesn't matter. Mariam is never very far.... Mariam is in her own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns" (401 - 402).

The metaphor of the bursting radiance of a thousand suns suggests that Mariam's legacy resists the traumatic containment to define her life; instead, it is determined by the culmination of her enduring strength and love, resulting in self-authored sacrifice. In this way, Mariam embodies the paradoxical potential of trauma, which is that trauma not only causes devastation to oneself but also has the capability of inspiring profound courage and transformation. Mariam's presence, internalized by Laila, symbolizes how the once-silenced survivor continues to speak volumes about the significance of solidarity and empathy even after her death by transforming personal pain into collective memory and resilience within the strongly rooted oppressive patriarchal structures.

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