



## A STUDY OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN TWO CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

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### ABSTRACT:-

Even at the risk of sounding platitudinous one cannot help observing that a considerable number of men inhabiting the twenty-first-century, post colonial, globalized world contain within themselves both Brobdingnag and Liliput. No wonder then that in fields like science and technology we have made gigantic strides, while in the realm of ideas, in the domain of thoughts we have not moved much beyond our Neanderthal counterparts. Naturally, in many societies we build and mend multiple walls, we nourish and perpetuate age-old biases and mind-forged manacles to the disadvantage and detriment of everybody in general and women in particular. Especially in societies erected, directed and oppressively dominated by men, women are invariably at the receiving end. The present article, on the basis of a close study of *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and *The Walled City* by Esther David seeks to gauge the extent and plumb the depth of women's sufferings caused by social reality forged largely by patriarchy, by antediluvian, retrograde, irrelevant, prejudiced and harmful ideas stubbornly held by men, by double standard applied by men.

**KEYWORDS:-** Kite Runner ,Naturally,pro-male .

### INTRODUCTION:-

In Afghan society delineated in *The Kite Runner*, the pro-male bias is unmistakably strong and the application of double standard in every sphere of life is extremely common. In fact, so firmly planted, so deeply embedded is this attitude in Afghan psyche that even the sophisticated and privileged Afghans living in America for a considerable length of time are not immune from their potent and harmful influence. Be that as it may, the moment one is born a man in Afghanistan, one wins a lottery, a genetic lottery. Amir, the central character in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* succinctly sums up the truth when he says, "I had won at the genetic lottery that had determined my sex".<sup>1</sup> An Afghan male is Fortune's favourite, the recipient and beneficiary of social advantages, benedictions and favours. Hence in Afghan society fathers and sons can hold conversations on and express opinions about girls/women with a great deal of freedom. But no decent, respectable and good Afghan girl can dream of asking her father about any young man and no Afghan father, especially a Pashtun father, will ever discuss a young man with his daughter<sup>2</sup> because Pashtun men have very strong and sublime ideas of Nang (honour) and Namooos (pride) especially when it comes to the chastity of a wife or that of a daughter. Incidentally this accounts for General Iqbal Taheri's disapproval of women drinking alcohol or singing in public.

Again, in Afghan society when a young, unmarried man chats with a young, unmarried girl in public, eyebrows are raised and vicious remarks are passed. Amir comments, "Poison tongues would flap. And she would bear the brunt of that poison, not me—I was fully aware of the Afghan double standard that favoured my gender."<sup>3</sup> Assessing the impact of such an incident, Amir opines that the adverse comments and barbed innuendoes that will be flung at a woman can seriously compromise, nay, permanently damage her reputation. On the contrary, such an incident can bruise a man's ego at the most. But while bruised ego heals up with the passage of time, lost reputation can never be restored. In other words, one's gender determines the nature and effect of damage caused by a minor social indiscretion like chatting in public. In a man's case the injury is superficial and temporary whereas in a woman's case it is deep and long-lasting.

The last example of glaring gender discrimination is provided by Soraya, daughter of General Iqbal Taheri. When she lived in Virginia she ran away with an Afghan man who happened to be a drug addict. Being a rebellious and foolish eighteen-year-old teenager she stayed with him for almost a month. This faux pas of hers generated strident and hostile criticisms from Virginia-based Afghan society to such a degree that the family had to leave for California. But even in California she was socially boycotted and criticized. Because once a woman is found guilty, she is always subjected to social excommunication and snide remarks. Passage of time, change of place, distance cannot diminish or remove the severe impact of ostracism and criticism. Soraya says, "That was four years ago and three thousand miles away and I am still hearing them."<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, men violate social norms with impunity without attracting any comment whatsoever from anybody. Soraya indignantly fulminates against excesses committed by men and says: "Their sons go out to nightclubs looking for meat and get their girlfriends pregnant, they have kids out of wedlock and no one says a goddamn thing."<sup>5</sup> Society connives at these transgressions and considers them "fun".<sup>6</sup> But one single instance of impropriety on the part of a girl/woman is regarded in the light of a grave threat to Afghan concept of pride and honour and the errant female is turned into a permanent object of ignominy and ridicule in society.

In the Indianized Jewish society portrayed by Esther David in *The Walled City*, women are like prisoners shut up within the constricting confines of "rules, traditions and appearances".<sup>7</sup> Numerous rigid and demeaning prescriptions and proscriptions laid down by a repressive and an ossified patriarchy seem to govern each and every aspect of their lives. For example, they are supposed to preserve their virtues, suppress their inner feelings and refrain from developing their individuality and asserting themselves because their self-effacement guarantees the continuity of this small and orthodox community! Leah, the narrator's maternal grandmother, tells us, "For generations it had been one of the unspoken rules of the elders that Jewish women should be self-effacing; as long as they did not attract attention, the community was not in any danger."<sup>8</sup> In such a backward society women are not only not allowed to develop, assert and express themselves, but also beguiled into considering body "insignificant"<sup>9</sup> even "sinful"<sup>10</sup> and physical beauty worthless, even dangerous. Small wonder then that Jewish girls are encouraged to ignore or hide body and to avoid using attractive clothes, expensive ornaments and excessive make-up. That is why Naomi compels her daughter to wear "ill-fitting, matronly clothes"<sup>11</sup>, that is why she never allows her daughter to leave her hair loose even for the fancy dress party at the synagogue, that is why she discourages the use of

nail polish and anklets to embellish the body, that is why she stops her daughter from staying long in the bathroom where she can examine her body for some length of time and be conscious of her physique. The Jewish girls are taught to believe that beauty is not external and skin-deep, that it dwells not in body but in noble heart, in pure spirit and therefore it does not require any external adornment whatsoever. But while girls are made to cultivate an attitude of indifference to physical beauty, sartorial elegance and self-assertion, men revel in celebrating them thereby revealing their diametrically opposed attitudes and the double standard of society. For example, Danieldada, the anglicized maternal grandfather of the narrator, used to be quite a dandy in his youth with the get-up and make-up of a “pucca British officer”<sup>12</sup>. Holi, the Hindu festival of colours, sensuous miniature paintings, rounded hips of people swaying to the sound of drums appealed to his mind. Again, Naomi’s narcissistic husband is unusually fond of mirrors since he is interested in looks, in personal appearance. He affirms that “a man must know what he looks like.”<sup>13</sup>

For Jewish girls sex outside marriage is polluting but for men it is not as is amply demonstrated by Danieldada and Emanbaba indulging in extramarital relationship and bigamy respectively. In an extremely selfish and cruel manner Danieldada abandons his wife Leah and goes to live with a Hindu woman named Durga who with her “large black eyes, narrow waist and firm young body”<sup>14</sup> hypnotizes him. Emanbaba, who finds himself in deep trouble because of his act of bigamy, thinks of embracing Islam religion to wriggle out of this distressing situation. He never bothers about the welfare of his children while his wife Queenie is persuaded to “make sacrifices for the sake of her children”.<sup>15</sup>

In Jewish society, boys, usually extrovert and rebellious by nature, are allowed by their parents to escape from their filial responsibility. They are permitted to go to Israel, the Promised Land where they can follow their own religion, their distinctive ways of life and live comfortably in a land of plenty. On the other hand, girls who are usually submissive, caring and responsible either marry or stay at home to take care of their old, weak and ailing parents. Jewish parents are accused of making intentionally insincere attempts at getting their daughters married so as to salve their conscience, to assuage their feeling of guilt. Many instances bring out double standard practised by Jewish parents. Aunty Jerusha, the sister of the narrator’s father, was brought up to be the breadwinner because his father had no faith in his boys. “Offers from suitors were rejected without consulting her.”<sup>16</sup> Danieldada wanted his daughter Naomi to remain unmarried so that she could look after him. Again, when Malkha refused a proposal, her father Uncle Menacham seemed relieved that she would be free to look after them.

So, Naomi’s daughter-cum- the narrator concludes, on the basis of her agonizing knowledge of marriages of maternal grandparents and parents that marriage is a folly, a torture, an endless succession of innumerable tragedies with hardly any relief or variation and, hence it should be avoided like plague. In a fairly long heart-wrenching and soul-benumbing paragraph with which the novel concludes, she not only justifies her decision of spinsterhood and but also vividly captures the existential agony, the eternal plight of Jewish women: “As for me, I do not wish to take a husband, because I am afraid to beget a daughter. According to our laws she would be Jewish and it would be a torture for her and for me. I would try to keep her away from every possible outside influence and she would have to fight me. She would have unruly hair which I would have to pull back in a tight braid, in order to make her look unattractive. I

would try to manipulate and control her every thought and action. Then my unborn daughter would somehow learn to worry about me and my old age and would perhaps end up living with me, as I live with Father and Mother. It is a vishchakra, a never-ending, poisonous cycle because she, as a daughter, would want to know all that I know, forcing me to start this story all over again.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, women, as Shakespeare says in King Lear, seem to be more sinned against than sinning in different ages and in different male-centred societies not for any fault of their own but apparently because of their gender.

#### NOTES

1. Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004) p130 All further references are to this edition.
2. Of course, a single exception to this rule is permitted. An Afghan father and an Afghan daughter can talk about a young man when the “fellow in question is a suitor”. p1293. p130
4. p156
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Esther David, *The Walled City* (New Delhi, Westland Ltd., 2009) p155 All further references are to this edition.
8. p59
9. p59
10. p32
11. Ibid.
12. p37
13. p52
14. p60
15. p189
16. p108
17. p197-198