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Female Body as a Salable Commodity: The Psychological Dilemmas of Women Protagonists in *And The Mountains Echoed*

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Abstract

In the post-colonial fiction of Khaled Hosseini female body has been used as a salable commodity in the traditional patriarchal society of Afghanistan. Women are sexually oppressed as men are considered superiors to women. The novels of Khaled Hosseini depict the plight of women who are subjected to the terror of male domination. In each of his novels; The Kite Runner and Thousand Splendid Suns, Hosseini describes the sufferings of women who are treated as the "Other" .Hosseini's latest novel And the Mountains Echoed describes the endless sufferings of women who are trapped in the power structure of men and are always treated as objects of sexual pleasures and not individuals. The Afghan society is patriarchal, repressive, oppressive giving privileges to men and its harsh treatment of women, justified in the name of cultural traditions and religion. In this society men are born with respect, dignity and worth whereas women are considered as salable commodities. Men are considered as individuals and women are thought of as bodies. Therefore, in her life a woman's body is subjected to scrutiny, at home by the father and brother, and outside by strangers.

Keywords: Female body, salable, commodity, other, marginalization, patriarchal

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Feminists such as Mohanty, Ritu Menon and Urvashi Butalia believe in "crossing of boundaries" Turner, Scott and Morgan have made sociological explorations of the body of woman and the contemporary cultural studies have focused on the explorations of body and sexuality It is an established patriarchal assumption that intellectual pursuits are a male legacy, women are for reproduction, their bodies are disruptive and volatile and they need constant surveillance and control by men. In his book Volatile Bodies, Grosz observes that "women are somewhat more biological, more corporeal and more natural." (Grosz 14). But men "appear to possess a body but not be a body". The historical justification of women as a weaker sex is based on the reproduction functionality of the female body:

> . Women have been objectified and alienated as social subjects partly through the denigration and containment of the female body…patriarchal conceptions of the body that have served to establish an identity for women in essentialist, ahistorical and universal terms.(xiv)

Men are characterized as naturally strong, active, rational and dominating while women are seen as passive, emotional, impulsive, foolish and talkative. In the social structure men are positioned at the centre as subjects, possess power whereas women are marginalized as mere objects in social, political, economical and religious discourses. Simon de Beauvoir drew a distinction between "gender" and "sex", postulating the body to be a historical construct:

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> In actuality, the relation of the sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as it is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general: whereas woman represents only the negative defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity." (Quoted in Currie and Raoul 2)

Hosseini's latest novel *And the Mountains Echoed* depicts the traumatic experiences of women who are sold in the open market and are forced to live in alien land. Women suffer because of the enforcement of strict Taliban laws. Women are not allowed to get education; schools and colleges are closed for them. They are forced to wear *burqua* and cannot enjoy all the basic rights. Rapes, sexual oppression and molestation of women are very common in Afghan society. Ashley Jackson published *The Cost of War: Afghan Experiences of Conflict, 1978-2009* narrating the political, social and cultural upheaval in Afghan life. Hosseini had fresh knowledge the realities of the abuse of female body abused by the destructive forces of the Taliban and Islamic fundamentalism. His last novel *And the Mountains Echoed vividly* depicts the plight of Afghan women.

The novel *And the Mountains Echoed* is a heart rending tale of anguish and sexual oppression. The plot of the novel deals with the problems of assimilation and displacement of women protagonists. The beauty of the story lies in the verisimilitude, the imagery and symbolism of Hosseini. The plot of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* gives an insight into the moral and spiritual disorder of the universe of Nila Wahdati and Saboor. The setting of the novel is in the remote

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village of Kabul. The plot of the novel is cosmopolitan as it takes the readers to Europe, to Greece, France and America. Hosseini's magical and bewitching style compels the readers to read every page of the novel to comprehend the plight of Afghan women reeling under the pressure of stereotyped patriarchy. Parwana was a step mother of Abdullah who always neglected Pari and Abdullah. The burden fell on Abdullah who was really devoted to Pari:

> Thus the care had fallen on Abdullah, but he didn't mind at all. He did it gladly. He loved the fact that he was the one to help with her first step, to gasp at her first uttered word. This was his purpose, he believed, the reason God had made him, so he would be there to take care of Pari when He took away their mother. (*Mountains* 28)

The scene of selling of Pari to the rich Nila Wahadati is indeed touching and heart rending. The selling of his beautiful daughter Pari to a rich woman of Kabul symbolizes the orthodox and oppressive mind set of the Afghans who believe that women are less important than men in the society. Poverty of Saboor compels him to sell his daughter. Saboor belongs to a village confronting the harsh life and struggling in abject poverty and starvation. His sin is unforgivable; when he sells his daughter the mountains echoed his sin. Hosseini turned to William Blake for the title suggesting the horrendous social sin committed by Saboor in the beginning of the story. Hosseini has given the image of the echoing of the mountains to depict the cruelty of Saboor who

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sells his pretty daughter for money. Saboor was a good story teller but after he sold Pari his talent disappeared:

> He didn't tell stories anymore, had not told one since he and Abdullah had returned from Kabul. Maybe, Abdullah thought, Father had sold his muse as well. Nothing left. Nothing said. (*Mountains* 40)

Abdullah loves Pari from the core of his heart and he feels the loss of Pari. He feels so much depressed that he leaves Kabul forever and goes to America in quest for peace and growth. He is always haunted by the scenes of "panicking and shrieking" of Pari. He remains sleepless and helpless and curses himself for being the silent spectator of the sale of Pari.

> She was like the dust that clung to his shirt. She was in the silences that had become so frequent at the house, silences that welled up between their words, sometimes cold and hollow, sometimes pregnant with things that went unsaid, like a cloud filled with rain that never fell. (*Mountains* 42)

The plot of the novel is packed with multiple stories narrated by multiple characters from a different perspective. The storyline of the novel is very powerful as Hosseini doesn't focus on wars and conflicts of Afghanistan. The structure and the setting of the plot is absolutely new as there are no traces of war and conflicts in Kabul; the people are seen used to the war situation as Kabul is coming back to normalcy. The craze for money has obsessed people of Kabul as everybody is seen hunting for money at the cost of old values of Kabul society.. Idris and his old

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sophisticated values become outdated and it is Timur who is successful. Idris and Timur had left Kabul in 1990 and they had migrated to America to save their life from the atrocities of the Taliban. They have come back in 2003; when they reach Kabul they are shocked to see the demolition of old values and Kabul embracing western values. The modernization and transformation of the city is depicted well by Hosseini. They left their country in childhood and now the memories of old Kabul still haunt them. Hosseini observes that the war and conflicts didn't impact the rich and wealthy people like Wahadi who enjoyed all comforts of life eve during war. The rich people never suffered the shortage of goods as everything was available in the black market. Rich people had plenty money so they could buy comforts conveniently with money. Nabi is a chauffeur to Suleiman who talks of people migrated to Europe and America for security and prosperity during the wars. All major characters move from one place to another because of political uncertainty of the country.

Nila Wahdati is the main woman character who migrates to France with her purchased daughter Pari. All the characters are haunted by their guilt consciousness as the plot unfolds the themes of love and betrayal and selling of Pari. The characters wish to know their roots and struggle to find some space in Kabul; the land of their ancestors. Abdullah longs to visit Kabul; Pari is anxious to know the land of her birth and Nila Wahdati is restless to come back to Kabul but she commits suicide and her dream remains unfulfilled. She is punished for her sin of buying the young and lovely Pari with money. She remains restless and alienated throughout her life. She

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lost her husband; her ancestral home and even love of her daughter Pari. Hosseini writes about sexual oppression, marginalization of women and male domination. Saboor enjoys absolute liberty and sells his daughter. He remarries Parwana who is much younger. People are poor but they value life; they live in muddy huts with crisp grapes and they are seen quite contented with the beautiful scenes and sights of mountains Nila Wahdati is poetic; erotic and sensational in depicting imagery in her poems. Many rich families sent their children in the western schools and Kabul presented in the novel is under the process of radicalism and transformation. Many secular international schools were opened by French, German, English, and American teachers. Students in these schools their native languages and in Persian and Pashto.

Nila is ultra-modern woman who revolts against the oppressive patriarchy of Kabul. She migrates to France to enjoy sexual liberty and publish her erotic poems. She is depicted as modern, ultra-fashionable but a barren woman. Her mother –in law hates her calling her "a harlot. A liar. A drunk. A coward who had run God knows where when her husband needed her most. *(Mountains* 110) But Nabi gives a different picture about her: "I walked into Mr. Wahdati's room one day and found Nila sobbing into his belly." (*Mountains* 108) She was a talk of the town eve in Kabul as her dresses were sleeveless. She would spend money recklessly because she lived with a void. Her married life was horrible as she was a barren. Nila flouted all the moral scruples in the winds and lives as a rebel. Nila shocked the elders of the society when she fell in love with Suleiman and

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later on much heat was generated by her love marriage. Suleiman suffered the paralytic stroke one day; Nila deserted her and left Kabul for France.

Nila and her husband Suleiman were never comfortable in their domestic life because Nila was a flirt and even developed intimacy with Nabi who was her driver. Suleiman was fed up with the erotic and sexual liberty of Nila. He suffered an acute stroke of brain. Nila deserted him when he needed her and she migrated to Paris with Pari. Nila suffers the pain of her fractured identity as nobody knows her in Paris. She becomes a hybrid as she struggles to assimilate in the alien culture; she hosts parties for her wealthy friends to end her alienation. Nila recites her erotic poems before the guests on theme of love and sex and of loss. Most of her poems are concentrated on the theme of loss in love and on sexual cravings of young lovers. The heroes of her poems are crazy lovers who desperately express their hunger for sexual pleasures. (*Mountains* 188) Nila also writes on the theme of sexual oppression of women by the male dominated society. She raised a cry of women propagating her ideas about women empowerment and her education. Nila's beauty charmed many men in Paris, her ideas about love and sex charmed many men including Julien, who loved Pari. She becomes a rival of her daughter and gets frustrated because of sexual repression. She bought Pari and committed a sin of moral transgression. All the characters in the novel suffer the divine retribution who were a party to the sale of Pari. Abdullah suffers dementia; Saboor dies at the prime of his life, Nabi is so much frustrated that he donates all his property to the charity hospital. Suleiman dies of paralysis and

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Nila Wahdati commits suicide in Paris. Nila Pari lost her Kabul identity, her culture and all roots of her parentage. Her mother gave her new illusions in the alien society which resulted into her disintegration of self. Pari never enjoyed good health and peace in her soul because of the guilt. She was developing a strange type of deformity. (*Mountains* 178) Pari became a widow at the age of thirty eight as Eric died of brain stroke.

To conclude, Hosseini depicts the patriarchal structure of male dominated society of Kabul. Women are considered salable commodity in the Afghan society. The sale of Pari depicts the human degradation and the life and experiences of Nila Wahdati reveal her frustrations of life since she remained sexually repressed. The novel raises many deep questions about the status of woman; their objectification and loss of identity. Hosseini vividly depicted the major dilemmas of Saboor and his daughter Pari; Parwana and her sister, Masooma; Idris and Timur. In interview Hosseini admitted that *And the Mountains Echoed* is a "multigenerational family story" dealing with the themes of life, love, sex grief, conflict, duty, and sacrifice" (*Mountains* 3).

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