

# Gender and Crimes in Fiction: A Reading of Khaled Hosseini's *Thousand Splendid Suns*

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## ABSTRACT

This research investigates how gender and crimes are presented in fiction. This study analyses Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). By using descriptive statistics on how the narrative devices narrate the female characters, this research explores the female characters as victim and perpetrator in crimes. Butler (1990) believes that gender ideology refers to a convention that builds the way of the body is viewed as a culture. She proposes that gender departs from sexual opposition that differs between male and female. Then, it distinguishes characteristics between male and female roles. Furthermore, analysing gender means not only looking at the differences between male and female, but also discussing how gender as a hierarchy puts male as a centre that wields power, and marginalises female's role. Narrative techniques are used as a tool to assess the author's idea in a narrative (Genette 1970; Kenan 2003). Kenan (2003) argues that focalization, which is derived from Genette's notion of voice, is an important tool to analyse whose perspective is used in narrative, who focalizes it, and the contents of the focalization.

**Keywords:** gender, crimes, focalization, narrative

## INTRODUCTION

Literature is one of the many forms of cultural representation (like the visual arts, photography, television, film, advertising) in which gender relations are routinely depicted. Goodman (1996) explores that literary texts can both reinforce gender stereotypes and create newer, more liberating representations of gender. This study explores how Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) shows gender stereotypes reinforce and create more liberating representations of gender. Beauvoir (1970) argues that women regarded as the second sex, not only marginalised in social practices but also in a narrative work. When the heroine's thought is not narrated, it can be said that narrative imprisons the idea. The imprisoned of woman in suggested her mind is related to gender ideology in narrative. Butler (1990) states that gender ideology referring to a

habit build the way the body of viewed as a culture. Next, Butler proposes that gender depart from sexual opposition that distinguishing characteristics of male and female. Furthermore, gender binary is not just the difference between male and female, but seen as a hierarchy that puts male as center that wields power and furthermore marginalises women position. By reading and identifying Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a literary work, one form of cultural representation, in which gender issues and crimes are depicted.

By using descriptive statistics on how the narrative devices narrate the female characters, this research explores the female character as victim and perpetrator. In this study, I analyse not only the number of female and male characters in a story, but also at what they say and do not say, whether they are central to the story's action

or marginal to it, whether they are important characters or props to other characters. I examine the characterization, to consider the gender of authors and readers; and to think in more sophisticated terms about the gender dynamics of writing and reading and studying literature. Goodman (1996) believes that by doing so, we as authors or/and readers can get the whole picture of literature and gender.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* shows several female characters' struggles in the context of patriarchal system and the Islamic religion. Mariam, the heroine, experiences subordination, domestic violence and crimes. First, as a female, as Beauvoir (1970) argues that women regarded as "the second sex". Next, related to gender issues, Butler (1990) defines gender as a construction social that departs from sexual differences men and women then distinguish the nature of men and women in the end put men as holders of power and marginalizes women. Second, Mariam was born from a mother who does not have an official and lawful status so that she is not recognised socially and of a religiously in her society.

The story is delivered by a narrator from the very beginning until the end. Narrative presents the heroine's story, Mariam, since she was five years old up to she was thirty-three years and died because the execution of the death penalty (1964-2001) in several territories in Afghanistan. Mariam is a girl who was born from unlawful father and mother relationship so that she is identified as *harami*. Mariam through a crisis of internal and external identity, as *harami*, female, and wife related to the issue of gender and sexuality. The events that traversed Mariam show how she deals with her *harami* identity in different ways within individual and social interactions. The events are examined through the contexts, the point of view used in the narrative, and how they are presented. Mariam is involved in crimes either as victim or perpetrator. Although the whole story is dominated by the heroine's

focalization, the heroine per se is subordinated in gender practices.

As the five-year-old daughter, Mariam was several times summoned and called by Nana, her mother, as "*you are a clumsy little harami!*" (Hosseini, 2007:4). Mariam understood *harami* as one kind of insects like cockroaches. On the other hand, Jalil, her father, gave her Mariam name according to the name of his mother and is also one of Jalil's favourite flowers, "*the tuberose is a lovely flower*" and in another time he also praised Mariam, "*... you look like a queen,*" which made Mariam love Jalil more than Nana (Hosseini, 2007:12). Narrator describes small Mariam's thought that chose to believe the words of Jalil than Nana because she thought that Nana "*You are afraid that I might find the happiness you never had and you don't want me to be happy. You don't want a good life for me. You're the one with the wretched heart*" (Hosseini, 2007:28).

On her fourteen birthday, Jalil didn't keep his promise to welcome Mariam in his house, Mariam and her mother live away from Jalil's house because Nana's status as Jalil's unlawful wife. This made Mariam disappointed and since then didn't believe in Jalil and everything he said. Mariam came to believe what has been said by Nana to her that *harami* means "*unwanted thing, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance*" (Hosseini, 2007:4)<sup>1</sup>. After Nana died, Mariam lived with Jalil's other

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<sup>1</sup> Goodman in *Literature and Gender* (1996) explains that the madness theme is often associated with the fictional character women in a literary work in the nineteen and twentieth, as fiction the work of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath *The bell jar* (1963) describe the female main character with internal and external identity conflict identity internal who chose to commit a suicide as a form of freedom. Mariam, along narrative, not only recalls of her mother's words but also confirms her idea that decided to kill herself because of depression and disappointment. In this novel, Mariam unconsciously follows Nana's way but Mariam does not utter her mind directly when she has identity identity conflict in social interaction as Nana did.

three wives. A few days of living together, the wives of Jalil arranged Mariam marriage with Rasheed without her knowing and approval. Even when Mariam refused, Jalil did not defend or respond to Mariam.

Although initially Mariam refused the marriage, she played her role as Rasheed's wife. Knowing that she was pregnant with Rasheed, "*I am going to be a mother*" (Hosseini, 2007:88), Mariam felt that all the things happened in her life finally make sense, all of losses, sufferings, loneliness. Afterwards, knowing that the Mariam suffered a miscarriage, Rasheed fully blamed Mariam. Rasheed's words made Mariam recall her mother, "*Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam*" (Hosseini, 2007:90). After repeatedly suffered from miscarriage, Rasheed blamed Mariam because she cannot give him children, "*Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food and nothing else*", and then Rasheed "*spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars*" (Hosseini, 2007:103).

Due to Mariam's incapability of giving Rasheed child, he married Laila, a girl aged fourteen years who was born and grew up in Kabul, the same area with Rasheed but not Mariam's. Rasheed and Laila marriage gave dreadful pain for Mariam because Rasheed still blamed and looked down on her.

*"We are city people, you (Laila) and I, but she is dehati. A village girl. Not even a village girl. She grew up in a kolba made of mud outside the village. Her father put her there. Have you told her that you are a harami? Well, she is. But she is not without qualities, all things*

*considered. You'll see for yourself, Laila jan. She is sturdy, for one thing, a good worker, and without pretensions. I'll say it this way: If she were a car, she would be a Volga"* (Hosseini, 2007:216).

On the contrary, Rasheed describes Laila as "*A Benz. A brand new, first class, shiny Benz. Wah wah. But. But. One must take certain ... cares ... with a Benz. As a matter of respect for its beauty and craftsmanship, you see*" (Hosseini, 2007:217). Rasheed's speech in identifying Mariam as *harami* can be associated with her identity as a woman. Furthermore, Rasheed implies that he does not consider Mariam as his wife (because Mariam cannot give birth), but Mariam as a good domestic worker.

From Rasheed and Laila's marriage, they have a daughter and a son, Aziza and Zalmai. Although Mariam regretted at the beginning of that marriage, as time goes by Mariam has a good relationship with Laila and considers the two children of Laila as her own. Mariam learns and plays the role of a mother.

*"Mariam saw now the sacrifices a mother made. Decency was but one. She thought ruefully of Nana, of the sacrifices that she too had made. Nana, who could given her away, or tossed her in a ditch somewhere and run. But she hadn't. Instead, Nana had endured the shame of*

*bearing a harami,  
had shaped her life  
around the  
thankless task of  
raising Mariam  
and, in her own  
way, of loving her.  
As she fought her  
way with impudent  
resolve to the front  
of the melee,  
Mariam wished  
she'd understood  
then what she  
understood now  
about  
motherhood”*  
(Hosseini,  
2007:280).

Narrative presents Rasheed as a rough and cruel husband to not only Mariam but also Laila even to Aziza. Rasheed concerns only to Zalmai. Domestic violence often happens, as Rasheed hit Laila and Mariam with a belt because they do not follow his orders or just because they do not please him. Violence after violence happened makes Laila want to run away with her two children and Mariam. It makes Mariam think that if she joined Laila, she could start a new life, her life would be better. *“A new life, a life in which she would find the blessings that Nana had said a harami like her would never see”* (Hosseini, 2007:250).

Failed to run away from home, Rasheed punished Laila and Mariam. They happened to be in a fight. Rebel Laila is threatened to be killed by Rasheed. Realising the fight is getting insanely and Laila might get killed, Mariam went outside and came back home with a shovel, she hit Rasheed's head with it. Rasheed fell and found dead. Narrator describes this killing act as Mariam's turn back point, *“... it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life”* (Hosseini, 2007:341).

*“For me, it  
ends here.  
There's  
nothing more I*

*want.  
Everything I'd  
ever wished for  
as a little girl  
you've already  
given me. You  
(Laila) and  
your children  
have made me  
so very happy”*  
(Hosseini,  
2007:350).

Admitting that she killed Rasheed, narrator through Mariam's focalization defines her *harami* woman identity as a free woman. She can do actions as she wishes, not a *harami* woman who used to receive insults and had no choice in life.

*“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. This was a  
legitimate end to a  
life of illegitimate  
beginnings”*  
(Hosseini,  
2007:361).

Related to the existence and the essence as a female, Mariam at last shows her way of seeing it that she can be a mother without having given birth herself, and although she is punished with death penalty

she feels released and free. She states that she eventually has the right to make choices upon her life. more importantly, Mariam defines her *harami* identity as the winner in the course of her life.

## CONCLUSION

Mariam as the heroine of the narration is victimized through her own actions involving her female body. She becomes the victim of gender issues and practices in several contexts. At the end, she becomes the perpetrator of crimes as she knocked Rasheed down. Mariam becomes the centre of narration but she has no power over what happens to her related to gender issues and crimes.

At the beginning of narration, Mariam is presented through other characters' thought and opinion. Along the narration, she is being subordinated in some levels. At the end, Mariam is convicted as murderous wife, a criminal. The analysis shows that the author, Hosseini, constructs Mariam that intentionally or unintentionally ends up superminating the heroine eventhough she is a killer. On the the narration level, the heroine takes control of the narration but on the idea level related to gender issues and crimes, the heroine turns out as both victim or perpetrator.

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