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Echoes of subjugation, submission and insurgence: Feminist study of female characters in Khalid Hussein’s and the Mountains Echoed.

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ABSTRACT:

This paper deals with the feminist study of the female characters portrayed in the novel *And the Mountains Echoed* by Khalid Hussein. The understudied novel has been set in Afghanistan and the storyline covers the long span of time from 1949 to 2010. This middle portion of Asia is known as patriarchal belt making the lives of women more miserable. Afghanistan was under conflict for more than four decades as a result the women of this region were doubly marginalised one by patriarchal culture and second by the rigid rules and practices of the Mujahidin and Taliban. Being an Afghan-American writer Hussein effectively depicts the plight and miseries of Afghani women in particular and people in general. The researcher attempts to explore and investigate the lives of women through the viewpoint of feminism. The study reveals how patriarchy subjugated and pressurized women to submission. And how liberal feminist like Nila challenges the monopoly and status-quo of patriarchs and becomes the voice of feminine insurgence.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Patriarchy, Submission, Insurgence.

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INTRODUCTION

Khalid Hosseini, widely acclaimed writer of three best seller novels, is an Afghan born writer who has subtly depicted the lives and condition of Afghan people. The novel *And the Mountains Echoed* have been set in Afghanistan against the backdrop of the cold war. The storyline moves from Afghanistan to France and other western countries. It consists of nine chapters with multiple narrations from different perspectives like the collection of short stories connected with each other. Novel starts with the story of a small family belonging to the village called *shadbagh* narrating the separation of siblings. Due to the utter poverty Saboor sells his two year old daughter *Pari*, which separates Abdullah from his sister. The whole thread of events covers the life of many people who are connected with the main narrative making it the never ending saga of Afghan families. The study aims to analyse the life and plight of female characters from feminist perspective. These women have been constantly subjugated and silenced into voiceless entities. But few of them have devised the new ways to negate and resist patriarchal oppression. Feminism is a widely used and famous term, many researchers and scholars tried to define and explain it differently. The term feminism has a long history and it has gone through various phases of evolution. The origin of this term can be traced in France in the late 19th century. This term has gained much more momentum from the French Revolution. *Hunbertine Aculert* in her journal '*La Citoyenne as La feminite*' where she criticized the male domination and claim for women's rights in addition to the emancipation promised by the French Revolution.

The moment which began as a social movement to achieve political equality for women started defining, establishing and defending economic, social, literary and sexual rights. It fights to get equal opportunities for women in every sphere of life. The term feminism originates from the Latin word '*Femina*' that describes women's issues. There is no any specific definition of feminism which can cover all the facets of this movement, according to *A New Approach Dictionary of Living English*: "feminism is a belief or movement advocating the cause of women's rights and opportunities particularly equal rights with men by challenging inequalities between sexes in society"¹.

In the society of the past all decisions in the family were dependent on male and therefore women were given secondary status. This system is known as patriarchy. Hence male enjoyed all the privileges allowed to them by society; whereas women were always given secondary positions. From this general observation feminist theory came into existence that raised the issues of inequality between male and female. Feminist activist have opposed various injustices such as domestic violence, sexual

harassment, restrictions imposed on behaviour, separation and many other injustices. Feminism covers two major issues of gender inequality and patriarchy. The first wave of feminism has started in the 19th century. The ground work for the movement led by the important works of this period like Mary Wollstonecraft's *A vindication of the rights of women* (1792) , John Stuart Mill's *The subjection of women* (1869) and American Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth century* (1845). In this period the issues like Right to Vote, suffrage, working conditions and Educational rights were raised. It started in the US in 1809 with Married Women Property Law and remained till to get Voting Rights for women in 1928. The notable event of this period was the celebration of the first International Women's Day in 1913. The second wave of feminism started in the early 40s and the late 1960s which is mostly referred as radical feminism. It focuses on issues like inequality of law, cultural inequality and the role of women in society. The movement triggered by the Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and produced other notable works like Carol Hanisch's *The Personal is Political*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The important incident of this period was the report on American Presidential Commission in 1963 which resulted in the formation of the Equal Pay Act. This moment produced many expressions that became the symbol of feminism in the USA like 'The personal is political' 'Sisterhood is powerful', 'Consciousness rising'. Feminist of this period wanted to be independent in everything including her body and feelings. The important achievements of this period were the foundation of the National organisation of women in 1966, establishment of American radical organisation 'Redstocking' in 1969.

The third wave of feminist movement came in 1992 as a reaction of the second wave ideas and activities like women in pornography, sex work and prostitution. To be precise it started with the publication of American feminist Rebecca Walker's article '*Becoming the third wave*' which established Riot Grrrls moment in Washington. Activists of this period wanted to awake women to love and believe in themselves. The major gains of this period were Gender Equality in Education Act and The Violence against Women Act in America in 1994.

These feminist movements have been originated in the western countries and substantially changing the condition of women has started to influence the other countries as well. Third world countries have also witnessed the emergence of such feminist movement in Africa, India and in Arab or Islamic nations. Islamic religion has always received the criticism from the west for being an oppressive and rigid kind of religion. The veil or Burqa system becomes the symbol of oppression. The concept of Islamic feminism began to appear in the 1990s as a reaction against Western liberal feminism. The movement started to gain prominence in Egypt, Iran and other Muslim countries. The scholars and

researchers started to study and discuss the stories of women from the Quran and other historical texts to find out the principles of gender equality and wider issues of social justice do lay grounds to challenge the patriarchal traditions. But, 'Feminism was derailed in countries such as Afghanistan, where the staunchly reactionary and antifeminist Taliban banned even the education of girls'².

DISCUSSION

The novel *And the Mountains Echoed* begin with the motherly love between brother and sister. Abdullah is a ten year old young boy who takes care of his motherless two year old sister Pari. In a country like Afghanistan daughters get always unwillingly martyred to save their families in a time of trouble. They merely turn into commodities which can be easily sold or owned. How patriarchy dominates and controls the life of women is evident in the story of Pari, when her father Saboor sells her to a wealthy family from Kabul in order to survive his family throughout the winter. It is clearly caught by the Ellen Showalter, "... societies do not really sell their sons but their daughters are all for sale sooner or later"³. Being too little, Pari can't resist this injustice and submits herself to the circumstances. There are numerous women like Pari in Afghanistan who get subjugated and silenced under the various circumstances. In male dominated society women are often barred from intellectual discourse like politics, economy and culture which are exclusively men subjects. This is reflected in the novel when Madaline expresses her disappointment towards how she is being left out of the conversation whenever her husband talks about politics with his friends and dejects her opinion.

Elaine Showalter opines that women's silences of their exclusion arise from, "circumstances of being born into the wrong class, race or sex, being denied education, being numbed by economic struggle, muzzled by censorship or restricted or impeded by the demands of nurturing"⁴. The next character in the mountains echoed which has been numbed and unable to speak out, submits herself to the circumstances is Commander Sahib's wife. She chooses to stay despite her gangster husband literally changing their home into a war zone. Author thinks that "perhaps she has accepted out of fear of a husband. Or a bargain for the life of luxury she led"⁵. The condition of Commander Sahib's wife, rightly captured by Yarra and Steel, "... chooses not to leave not because she is happy and she does not want to, but because she is unable to"⁶. This shows that she lacks the courage to speak out her mind with her husband or she does not want to. Despite being discriminated against and segregated, women like her always live with their husbands. This happens with women because women have things in their mind such as the need to be nurtured, the inability to speak out due to lack of education or economic

disparity. According to Bhasin, “patriarchy refers to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways”⁷. In this system there is no value to the women's education, ambition and desires than her role as a mother, daughter and wife. As a young Afghan lady Nila is expected by her father and society to be obedient, silent and compliant. However Nila defies all the norms of Afghan society and goes against the status quo of how women are supposed to have or behaved. Nila as a strong feminist character from her young age fights with the odds of Afghan society. She often fights with her father over “What I wore, where I went, what I said, how I said it, who I said it to”⁵.

Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* argues that, “patriarchy is the primary form of human oppression maintained principally through ideologically control”⁸. Nila is the victim of this patriarchal oppression, right from her adolescence her father tried to cage her under the norms of patriarchy. Thus women’s oppression is admitted by the author, when he writes: “He would lock me up. For days. He would say from the other side of the door, *You humiliate me. Why do you humiliate me so? What will I do about you?* And sometimes he answered that question with his belt, or a closed fist. He’d chase me around the room. I suppose he thought he could terrorize me into submission”⁵.

“In Afghanistan moral standards are closely linked to sexuality; therefore mobility, expression and social interaction are not considered as a woman's domain”⁹. But Nila, young Afghan lady with her extreme carefree life, seems to be defying all cultural laws and the mindset of people. She is a talented, attractive and romantic lady who loves to write poetry. She wears tradition-defying dresses and moves to anywhere she wants to. As observed by Ahmad and Khan that, “Through the use of language, women challenge the Afghan patriarchal thinking”¹⁰. Nila through her poems reject the stereotype roles of women, but her poems are not acceptable in Afghan society. Her father goes to the extent to call her poems “the ramblings of a whore”⁵ and society call her “a pioneer of anything but bad taste, debauchery and immoral character”⁵. Nila’s refusal to comply with the patriarchal contemplation of womanhood suggests the start of her feminine insurgence.

In a society where a wife is considered as the property of husband and does not have any rights over her own life. Nila overthrows this notion by leaving for France when her husband Suleiman becomes terribly ill and disabled. Even though her life was filled with a lot of struggle but she never yielded in front of these obstacles and established herself as a poet. Under the nourishment of liberal lady Nila her daughter Pari completes her education and becomes a Mathematician.

Writer has portrayed one strong and independent character Amra Adomovic who leads the

women of the 21st century. Through this character writer has clearly shows a difference between the Afghan and the Western culture and how the women of the first world are more active and independent. Amra Adomovic is a Bosnian nurse working in a hospital in Afghanistan. She is a strong willed, intelligent and selfless woman who uses her training to care for war-torn patients and runs a mobile clinic on Monday. She is labelled by her male colleagues as “the hardest working women in Kabul”⁵. The courageous Amra puts herself in a working environment mostly occupied by men. She is bright, knowledgeable and challenges the men who look down upon her, when she says, “I am not Afghan. So I am not a real woman”.⁵

CONCLUSION

Thus, Khalid Hussein effectively highlights the trials and tribulations faced by Afghan women in patriarchal society. As a perfect feminist author, he tried to show the discrimination, oppression, and victimization of women and “he never seems to skip any of the feminine impulses and emotions”¹¹. Through the life of characters like Nila and Pari Hussein shows that “a woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man... she is an autonomous being, capable of, through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation”.¹²

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