

Subversion and Submission: Gender and Sexuality in Khaled Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed*

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Abstract

Sex and gender are very problematic concepts, as in many languages they are referred to using the same word. Now a days, everybody knows that sex is biological whereas gender is a social construct. In poststructuralism, gender came to be considered as a cultural construct. Society attributes certain gender roles as typical to men and women, and the “deviants” from this pattern are branded as tainted. Gender is something that evolves through performance. Sexuality differs from both, being the expression or representation of sexual desire and orientation. Patriarchy has constituted the “natural” principle that the people of opposite gender are attracted to each other for the fulfilment of desire. Hence, heterosexuality becomes the practice of patriarchy to perpetuate the politics of male domination. The present paper tries to explore Khaled Hosseini's novel *And the Mountains Echoed* in the light of these concepts of gender and sexuality. It analyses how the traditional Afghan society has forced human beings to stick to the normative gender roles and sexualities. Minor sexualities were not at all identified as existing, leading to the existence of veiled selves within accepted appearances.

Keywords

Gender, sexuality, heteronormativity, queer, ecriture feminine

Gender, as known to everybody, is a social construct that categorises all human beings with its binary notions of male-female. This binary nature of sex/gender system has long since been questioned by writers and theorists. As Helene Cixous contends: “Men and women are caught up in a web of age-old cultural determinations that are almost unanalyzable in their complexity” (“Sorties” 83). Gender has come to be accepted as performative through the works of Judith Butler like *Gender Trouble*. Sexuality differs from both sex and gender, being the expression of sexual desire and orientation. Patriarchy has constituted the “natural” principle that the people of opposite gender are attracted to each other for the fulfilment of desire. Hence, heterosexuality becomes a practice of the patriarchy to perpetuate the politics of male domination. The works of gender and queer theorists like Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Sharon Marcus have exposed the culturally attributed primacy of heterosexuality and explored the existence of queer desire. Sexual minorities are marginalised identities in literature, where not many instances of a favourable treatment towards them is seen throughout the entire literature of all cultures. Hegemonic heterosexuality regulates and negotiates the approach to non-normative sexualities, making heteronormativity the accepted practice.

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan by origin, currently living in the USA, owing to the turbulent situations in Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion of the country. Noted for his portrayal of Afghan history, culture and society in his early novels like *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini attempts to explore the bond of love and relationships in his third novel *And the Mountains Echoed*. On the surface level a novel that deals with the bond of love between a brother and sister, *And the Mountains Echoed* is much more than that. It takes us through many paths connecting character to character from place to place, leading us even to the hidden secrets lying in the dark corners of their hearts.

The present paper explores how the rigid societal norms regarding gender roles force people to submissively accept the conventional cultural practices related to marriage and family life, even if they are not inclined to it. It also probes into the identity issues

regarding sexuality and how the persons themselves hide it from the world's eye without coming out as they fear being ostracised. It analyses how the societal norms play a destructive role in the lives of Mr Suleiman Wahdati and Nila Wahdati, where they are compelled forcibly to abide by its norms. The paper enquires their responses to the regulating clutches of patriarchal society in their lives.

Patriarchy has been a universalising force that helped in fixing the binary notions of gender roles in society. As Butler states: "The very notion of 'patriarchy' has threatened to become a universalising concept that overrides or reduces distinct articulations of gender asymmetry in different cultural contexts" (*Gender* 45). It encourages and endorses typical manifestations of male and female roles. Those who fail to stick to the traditional gender roles or appearance are susceptible to face ostracism from the patriarchally constituted societies. Nila's infamy as she is not a person sticking to the stipulated gender roles results in her father trying to intimidate her, her mother-in-law abusing her, and even servants like Zahid talking ill of her, whereas she is a loveable person with a kind heart ready to help others. Educated women have always resisted patriarchy everywhere, which were categorised as outbursts of insanity. The greatest accusation was that "she had no *nang* and *namoos*, no honor, and that though she was only twenty she had already been 'ridden all over town' like Mr Wahdati's car" (93). The worst of her crimes was that she did not attempt to deny this allegation. The patriarchal society would have been happy if she denied everything and covered her real self behind a mask. But Nila chose to be honest to herself, basking in the glory of her womanhood, celebrating her sexuality and writing poems about it.

In Nila Wahdati one sees an extremely liberated woman who celebrates her womanhood to the core. Trapped in a marriage, dissatisfying to both the parties because of her husband's alternate sexuality, she finds other ways to satisfy herself. She throws parties at home occasionally for her friends, smokes and drinks, wears extremely fashionable dresses, listens to jazz and does everything according to her likes and dislikes. She is not directed by the societal standards regarding man-woman relationships. Nila's explicit

references to her body and sexual life in her poems startle the orthodox society around her: “Nila wrote about love ... she wrote about lovers whispering across pillows, touching each other. She wrote about pleasure. I had never heard language such as this spoken by a woman” (111-12). It was scandalous as this was spoken by a woman. What is considered progressive and open-mindedness in man is abhorred and detested when it comes from a woman.

Nila’s father, a true patriarch, cannot accept her explicit references to sexuality in her writings as well as behaviour, which leads to different attempts to regulate her behaviour. Nila is a woman of strong opinions, which could not be approved by her father. Nila chooses to fall in love as a way of rebelling with her father. Her father would send a search party for her and lock her up in the room for days. He wants to tame her to suit the societal standards by using force: “And sometimes he answered that question with his belt, or a closed fist. He’d chase me around the room” (238). He tries to terrorise her to submission which she was not ready to do. Nila’s father is the representative of people who consider women’s virtue as the responsibility of the men in the house. That is why he says: “You humiliate me. Why do you humiliate me so?” (237). He was worried about his family name and respectability.

Nila is a poet who has imbibed the essence of Cixous’ writing. Cixous exhorts: “Write yourself. Your body must be heard” (“Laugh” 880). Nila’s interview in the French magazine *Parallaxe* marks her rightly as a poet who revolted against the patriarchy through her poems. Cixous exhorts: “Woman must write her self ... woman must put herself into the text” (“Laugh” 875). Nila wrote about herself, her body and her passions. She says that she wrote “long, scandalous poems dripping with adolescent passion” (238). Her poems are examples of “écriture féminine” which are “female-sexed texts” (“Laugh” 877). For French feminists, body is a site of sexuality. Sexed body becomes a text or rather a “sext” for Nila too, undermining the conventional norms regarding poetry. Her poems are “volcanic” as Cixous says, being “subversive” in nature (“Laugh” 888). French feminists connect subjectivity to body by arguing that there is a one-to-one correspondence between sexuality and textuality. When Nila

undergoes a surgery that deprives her of her uterus, it thoroughly shakes her creativity as well as existence. She feels as if she has lost her identity: "... I felt, disoriented, suspended in confusion, stripped of my compass. Unspeakably depressed as well" (244). She consents to the marriage with Suleiman Wahdati following this spell of depression.

Beneath the overt sexuality, her poems are filled with loneliness and uncontainable sorrow. There has been a "sense of struggle against the tyranny of circumstance – often depicted as a never named sinister male figure who looms" (238). Her father always imposed himself as a towering figure over her. She might have been considered a literary pioneer somewhere else, but in Kabul she was considered as a pioneer of "bad taste, debauchery and immoral character" (240). Her father despised her writings as "the ramblings of a whore" (240). The interviewer rightly recognises her poetry as a search for new boundaries for women:

Arguing, in a way, through both your life and your writing, for new boundaries for women, for women to have a say in their own status, to arrive at legitimate selfhood. You were defying the monopoly that men like him had held for ages ... You were conducting a small, one-woman revolution, one could say. (241)

Nila, through her overtly erotic poems, was challenging the age-old patriarchy and shaking its roots. She was expressing her womanhood through her poems, sabotaging the patriarchal norms. Her poems were polemical in nature and they were angry indictments of Afghan gender roles. She was questioning the patronising attitude of patriarchy: "I was angry about the attitude that I had to be protected from sex. That I had to be protected from my own body. Because I was a woman. And women, don't you know, are emotionally, morally and intellectually immature" (242). She protested with her body against this patronising attitude.

Nila is one who does not adhere to the gender roles assigned to women by society. She does not get involved in any of the household chores, leaving everything to Nabi. She finds it outside her nature to look after Suleiman when he had a stroke: "When people were packing the house wall to wall, Nila retreated upstairs into Pari's bedroom

with her, much to the disgust of the mother-in-law, who doubtless expected ... Nila to remain at her son's side, at least for the sake of appearances if nothing else ... What sort of wife abandoned her loyal, loving husband?" (123). But Nila has never been one who cared for appearances and approvals by society. She finally leaves the house with Pari to Paris, unable to cope up with the situation. Nila makes clear in the interview that she left Afghan for she did not want a life of quiet servitude for herself and her daughter: "I didn't want her turned, against both her will and nature, into one of those diligent, sad women who are bent on a lifelong course of quiet servitude, forever in fear of showing, saying, or doing the wrong thing" (207). She detested that pretentious life where they feigned happiness.

"The category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual" (Wittig). This patriarchal force compels Suleiman Wahdati to enter into a conventional marriage even though he is least inclined to having a heterosexual relationship. Compared to Nila who vehemently resists the attempts to chain her freedom and identity, he hides everything very cleverly from the society, and even from his family, everything coming to light only after he falls ill. The first hint that one gets regarding Suleiman's alternate sexuality is from Nila when she leaves for Paris: "It was you, Nabi ... It was always you. Didn't you know?" (125). Even Nabi could not understand the meaning of that comment at that time as Suleiman had not left any clues regarding his sexuality.

Suleiman hides his real identity, restricting his behaviour to suit the norms of the conventional society that he lives in. What he could hope for was only the physical proximity of Nabi. That led him to insist on Nabi accompanying him in his walks. Nabi was aware of Suleiman's love to draw, but had never seen any of his sketches "because he never shared his artwork with [him]" (87). It is only after Suleiman fell ill that Nabi comes to know that all that Suleiman had been drawing were Nabi's pictures. He finds these sketches hidden in a cardboard box in his closet behind the long winter coats. One can see a person curtailing his desires and burying them within his soul as he is afraid of the way society would react to his identity. Even Nabi feels that Suleiman is "the most lonesome person on earth" (88). He

appeared a mystifying creature to him as he was struggling to hide his identity.

Later, Nabi learns that Suleiman's attraction towards him had been the reason for hiring him as the cook and chauffeur, even though he was not an expert as both. Suleiman makes clear his reason for hiring him: "Because you walked in, and I thought to myself that I had never seen anyone as beautiful" (136). It is then that Suleiman reveals his love for Nabi: "I need to tell you, if only this once, that I have loved you a long, long time. Nabi, please don't be angry" (136). Even then he is being apologetic as he knows his love would not be accepted:

I knew when I met you that we weren't the same, you and I, that it was an impossible thing what I wanted. Still, we had our morning walks, and our drives, and I won't say that was enough for me but it was better than not being with you. I learned to make do with your proximity. (136)

It was the pain of a suppressed life and a happiness that he would never get.

Suleiman camouflages his queer identity through a straight marriage, and that is how he draws Nila into the unhappy marriage into which she is caught unawares. He is forced to be hypocritical to satisfy societal norms regarding a straight family. But the lack of love between them was very evident: "They were two people occupying the same house whose paths rarely seemed to intersect at all" (94). Nila reveals her husband's sexual identity to the interviewer, encouraged perhaps by the accidental revelation that he is gay. She sympathises with him: "He could not have chosen a worse time or worse place to be born the way he was" (245). Her outlook is an inclusive one that acknowledges that it is not a human being's fault to have a particular sexual orientation.

In short, Hosseini explores many burning issues related to gender and sexuality in his novel. He presents before us a revolting response to the patriarchal notions regarding womanhood and gender roles through the character of Nila Wahdati. She writes her body through her poems and they can be considered as best examples of *écriture féminine*. On the contrary, Suleiman Wahdati acquiesces to

the patriarchal norms of heteronormativity by consenting for a straight marriage. He hides his identity from all and feigns to be straight before the world. The culture of the place was not at all conducive to the free expression of their identities. Though Nila fights with it, she is never accepted there. Suleiman wins that acceptance through cheating himself. The power of patriarchy wreaks havoc in their lives. As Ian Buchanan points out, “power exerts itself by creating regimes of inclusion and exclusion” (394). This realm includes Mr Wahdati as he hides his true self and excludes Nila as she is not ready to hide her identity. One has to understand that individuals can be different in their own way and should learn to accept them as they are instead of trying to transform their identities to one’s wish and should give dignified treatment to them. Sexual as well as gender identity is secured only through performance and repetition.

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