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Women being Subjugated or Fighting to Break
the Shackle of Patriarchy?: A Comparative
Study of Zahir Raihan's *হাজার বছর ধরে* (*Hajar
Bachor Dhore*) and Khaled Hosseini's *A
Thousand Splendid Suns*

ABSTRACT

Despite the diversity of time, place, and culture, both the patriarchal society described in Zahir Raihan's *হাজার বছর ধরে* (*Hajar Bachor Dhore*) and Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* first tries to diminish, then moulds the individual identity of a woman according to its own preference; and finally subject them to extreme oppression. As world literature gives meaning to the vision of universality, comparing these two novels brings to light the legacy of women's pain and suffering under this manifestation of patriarchy. Though these women from Raihan and Hosseini's narratives are prominently similar, they are singularly different in their response to this patriarchal dominance. Thus, through a feminist approach, this study argues that while Raihan's women characters are bound to patriarchal laws, Hosseini's women characters offer an attempt to subvert the power of patriarchy and fight for freedom.

Keywords: Patriarchy; Oppression; Dominance; Resistance; Freedom

Introduction

From the distant past, patriarchy remains the core concern of feminist critiques. Broadly focusing on male power, patriarchy can be defined as "a familiar-social, ideological, political system in which men— by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part

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women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (qtd. in Bennett 55). And therefore, patriarchy is not only attached to men; instead it refers to a broader aspect. This social structure favours male privilege by being men-centred. Thus, “a society or government that encourages or upholds the governance or rule of male in a community is patriarchal” (Brendal 2). As patriarchy resides deep within the system, it is almost impossible to obliterate it from the root. Nevertheless, in an attempt to subvert this patriarchal social system, it must first be understood, examined, and explained. However, the ideology of patriarchy is portrayed as a prominent part of literature that eventually unfolds the underlying power politics of male authoritativeness and tells the stories of women enduring exploitation and dominance. As “world literature gives meaning to the vision of universality” (Remenyi 248), a comparison between novels concerning patriarchal domination can bring the legacy of women’s pain and suffering “across cultures, [...] time and space” (Bassnett 1); therefore, this comparative study is defined as “the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression” (qtd. in Bassnett 31).

Hajar Bachor Dhore (1964), considered to be the magnum opus of Bangladeshi novelist Zahir Raihan, is set against the backdrop of the harsh patriarchal culture and rural life of Bangladesh and portrays the agony and powerlessness of women as well as the propensity of women to accept this life of torture rather than risk being socially “ostracized” for speaking up. Then again, the setting of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini is Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, where the underlying subject remains the same: how politics, religion, and society have marginalized women throughout history and how their power to resist is constrained. Hosseini “manifests a resistance to the rampant gender patriarchal norms that go against women’s basic rights to survive” (Rehman and Anwar 121). Moreover, the female characters portrayed by Hosseini “are the subaltern or marginalized characters [and] social constructs of the patriarchal society that make the women marginalized, submissive and subordinate to their men” (Yasin et al. 2); yet “not all Afghan women are bound to remain oppressed, and that the women behind the veils have inner lives and aspirations” (Çevik and Töngür 57).

Thus, both Zahir Raihan’s *Hajar Bachor Dhore* (1964) and Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) depict the saga of pains and sufferings of women inflicted by patriarchy despite their divergent socio-cultural and temporal backgrounds. Upon reviewing the literature concerning the two texts, it is found that there are very few relevant research works on Raihan’s *Hajar Bachor Dhore*. In contrast, Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has been critically reviewed and acclaimed regarding the patriarchal social order and women’s oppression that are represented in the

text. However, despite having sufficient thematic and contextual dis/similarities, more critical literature was needed to present a comparative study of these two novels. Therefore, through close reading, this paper attempts a feminist approach while comparing these two novels to demonstrate the universality of how women have been subjected to patriarchal domination, where some of them still dare to challenge the patriarchal power system and fight for freedom.

Women: Partner or Property?

To distinguish sex from gender Simone de Beauvoir in *Second Sex* (1949) provides a formulation that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (301). Although sex is determined biologically, it is the gender that creates an imbalanced construction that provides a privileged hegemonic position to the male for time immemorial; therefore, masculine attributes always ask for a substantial inequality that allows for the subjection of women. In this world of men, women have always been consumed— sometimes economically, sometimes politically, and sometimes sexually. Raihan and Hosseini heavily portray this exploitation of women in their respective novels, *Hajar Bachor Dhore* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Women from both narratives share the common plight of suffering where men treat them as nothing but mere objects or property that men believe they own. Raihan's *Hajar Bachor Dhore* delineates such exploitation of women's labour through the portrayal of one of his male characters Maqbool who thinks that more than one wife can bring him an economic fortune:

বড়, মেজো আর ছোট- এই তিন বউ নিয়ে মকবুলের সংসার। তিন বউকে বসিয়ে খাওয়ানোর মতো জমিজমা নেই ওর। আসলে বউদের আয় দিয়ে চলে ও। বড় দুই বউ দিব্যি আয় করে। [...] বাজার থেকে পাতা কিনে এনে দিয়েই খালাস মকবুল। দুই বউ মিলে একদিনে তিন-চারটে চাটাই বুনে শেষ করে। [...] ফসলের দিন সবাই যখন গরু দিয়ে ধান মাড়ায়, তখন তিন বউকে লাগিয়ে ধান মাড়ানোর কাজটা সেরে ফেলে ও। বর্ষা পেরিয়ে গেলে বাড়ির উপরে যে ছোট জমিটা রয়েছে তাতে তিন বউকে কোদাল হাতে নামিয়ে দেয়। (92)

Maqbool's family consists of his three wives. However, he has no land to feed his three wives. It is his wives whose hardship is his bread and butter. The eldest two wives are the main earners. [...] Buying leaves from the market for weaving mats is the only thing that Maqbool considers his responsibility. Two wives finish weaving three-four mats in a day. [...] On harvest day, when everyone threshes paddy with cows, Maqbool uses three of his

wives as the replacement for those cows. Moreover, when the monsoon is over, the three wives are brought down with a spade in his small plot of land to ready the seedbed.¹ (my trans.; 92)

Patriarchy here is so pervasive that Maqbool believes he possesses three of his wives as if he ‘purchases’ them with four “taka mohrana” (“marriage portion”):

বউদের দিয়েই লাঙ্গল টানাবে সে। অবশ্য বউরা আপত্তি করতে পারে।
কিন্তু ওসবের পরোয়া করে না মকবুল। মুফত বিয়ে করেনি সে। পুরো
চার চারটে মোহরানা দিয়ে একেকটা বিয়ে করেছে। হুঁ। (94)

Finally, he decides to use his wives to plough the land. They may refuse, but as if he cares! He didn't marry them free of cost. Each marriage cost him a *maharana* of four *takes*, huh? (my trans.; 94)

Abul, Raihan's other male character who feels entitled to abuse his wives, only becomes concerned about his wounded wife Halima thinking of the unfinished household chores:

আইজ আর ছাড়ি নাই ভাবী। যতক্ষণ পারছি মারছি। হাড়ি না দুই
একখান ভাইঙ্গা গেছে কে জানে। তাইলে তো বড় বিপদ অইবো। কাম
কাজ কত পইর্যা রইছে। (99)

I didn't spare her today “bhabi” (“sister-in-law”); I kept beating her as much as I could. Who knows if a bone or two is fractured? If so, that will cause big trouble. So much work is left to do. (my trans.; 99)

Socio-religious ideology reinforces this social construction of gender, which seeks and attains women's consent to be subordinated. So this very idea of the commodification of women has been approved by the women themselves, and *Hajar Bachor Dhore* keeps reflecting this approval throughout the whole narration. During the discussion of Mantu's marriage, Amena, one of Maqbool's wives chooses Ambia eligible only after pondering over its economic potential: “আমাগো আশ্বিয়া কি খারাপ মাইয়া নাহি? ও হইলেই খুব ভালো হয়। দিনরাত গতরখাটবার পারে।” (110) (“What's about our Ambia? Don't you think she is an eligible choice? She can toil day and night”; my trans.; 110). However, it is insignificant whether Ambia would be a good match for Mantu; here, a woman's ‘market value’ is judged by the scale of economic profit.

This similar treatment of women under marriage is also prominent in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Even before understanding the concept of marriage, Mariam is forced into wedlock with a forty-year-old man,

Rasheed. Moreover, Nana, Mariam's mother, who already experienced the rules of patriarchy, explains to her daughter the onerous yet unavoidable duty of being a wife:

At the other end of that unimaginable distance, she would be living in a stranger's house, where she would have to concede to his moods and issue demands. She would have to clean after this man, Rasheed, cook for him, and wash his clothes. Moreover, there would be other chores as well—Nana had told her what husbands did to their wives. (Hosseini 45)

Through this marriage, Mariam enters into a world where patriarchy is deeply rooted— into a man-made cage without apparent escape. Likely, no desperate attempt of women to be free from this domination can be attained as “running away from home” (316) is considered a punishable crime in the eyes of patriarchal law. Moreover, when it concerns the sexual exploitation of women, Hosseini gives an explicit detail of how men exploit woman's body:

He was a man, after all [...] His needs differed from hers. For her, all these months later, their coupling was still an exercise in tolerating pain. On the other hand, his appetite was fierce, sometimes bordering on violence. The way he pinned her down, his hard squeezes at her breasts, how furiously his hips worked. He was a man. [...] Could she fault him for being the way God had created him? (61-62)

For Rasheed, his wives, Laila and Mariam, are nothing but two bodies of flesh and blood that he thinks can fulfil his sexual desire and bless him with a male child.

Marriage: A Living Hell?

The term “domestic violence” (also known as “domestic abuse” and “intimate partner violence”) can be defined as “a pattern of coercive behaviors to control one's partner through physical abuse, the threat of physical abuse, sexual assault, progressive social isolation, deprivation, intimidation, or economic coercion [...] norms granting men control over female behavior, acceptance of violence as a way to resolve conflict, the idea that masculinity is linked to dominance” (Danis and Bhandari 32). Here, Raihan's and Hosseini's women characters parallelly merge by discussing an abusive marriage marked by domestic violence. Moreover, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and polygamy bind these two novels in such a manner that the socio-temporal boundaries of these two backdrops get blurred. Both patriarchal societies described by Raihan and Hosseini favour polygamy as “Patriarchal ideology often leads to gender-

based violence and repressive cultural and religious practices that victimized women [...], particularly in polygamous cases” (Hasan et al. 2). Whether it is Maqbool and Abul from *Hajar Bachor Dhore* or Jalil and Rasheed from *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, all of these men have married several times as if taking more than one wife is both a social and biological right exclusive for a man. Thus, the gender-biased misinterpreted references from Holy Scriptures strengthen the basis of polygamy, sometimes concerning the issue of reproduction:

Quranic studies in the early period depicted women as sexual objects through the authorization of polygamy [...] Some of the reasons used to authorize polygamy are infertility and a wife's inability [...] The two reasons mentioned have dominated the interpretation of the Quran from the early days to the present[...] It has also been [...] reinforced by local customary law. These studies showed that wives have been the object of sexual and reproductive goals. Once these aspects are not fulfilled, wives rather than husbands become the target of injustice and gender-biased treatment by referring to the Quranic verses through patriarchal and textual interpretations. (Hasan et al. 2)

Both the narratives by Raihan and Hosseini reflect this issue regarding polygamy and procreation. Kashem Shikdar in *Hajar Bachor Dhore* was a wealthy man who did not have a heir who could look after his property after his death. His wife, Samiran Bibi, could not stand the pain and stress that her husband went through. She considered herself ‘guilty’ for not giving a child to his husband; therefore proposed him to remarry even though this decision broke her heart:

তারপর, একদিন জলভরা-চোখে স্বামীর পাশে এসে দাঁড়ালেন ছমিরন
বিবি। আন্তে করে বললেন, “তুমি আর একডা নিকা করো।” বলতে
গিয়ে বুকটা ফেটে যাচ্ছিল তাঁর। দু-গন্ড বেয়ে অবিরাম পানি গড়িয়ে
পড়ছিল। (94)

Then, one day, Samiran Bibi quietly told her husband, “why don’t you remarry?” Her own words were piercing her heart. She tried to diminish the pain through her silent cry. (my trans.; 94)

Then again, Rasheed from *A Thousand Splendid Suns* remarries Laila as his first wife Mariam ‘fails’ to give him a male heir. After seven miscarriages, Mariam has to endure years of Rasheed’s torment in silence. Similarly, for giving birth to a girl, Laila suffers through the same physical and mental pain inflicted by Rasheed, as Mariam hopelessly says, “He’ll turn on you too, you know, [...] you gave him a daughter. So, you see, your sin is even less forgivable than mine” (123). In such a patriarchal society, it

is not only hard to be a woman but also considered sin to be born in the first place.

In a social institution like marriage, the men are the determiners of a woman's destiny. Nevertheless, here, only women are the ones with consequences, as “dominance within families is part of a wider system of male power [that] occurs at women's cost” (Ferree 866). From Hosseini's narrative, Jalil, “a husband of three and father of nine”, maintained a relationship with Nana out of wedlock. However, throughout her whole life, it's Nana who only has to bear the consequence: “a reward for everything (she) has endured: An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little *harami* [...] whose only sin is being born” (1). This plight of suffering devours Nana, Mariam's mother. Being a mother to a “*harami*” (“illegitimate”) child, the cost was her to pay, and she paid it with her life: a life that Jalil, Mariam's father, entirely exploited. This “one of Herat's wealthiest men” continued his way of domination even after the death of Nana; this time, the victim was Mariam, his daughter. At age fifteen, Mariam married Rasheed against her will because her father wanted to get rid of his] “*harami*” child. In the later period, Rasheed also forced Laila into marriage by taking advantage of her orphanhood.

Domestic abuse causes physical symptoms and “a range of negative mental health outcomes including suicidal tendency, depression, and anxiety” (Krug et al. 2002). Hence, the fathom of pain and suffering that the women from these two novels go through in their respective patriarchal societies is reflected through their urge to commit suicide. Raihan's usage of suicide as a motif in *Hajar Bachor Dhore* similarly demonstrates the hopeless lives of his women characters, for whom breathing in this toxic society felt like nothing but a living hell. Elderly Samiran Bibi, who was not able to give her husband a child, or the daughter of Kalimullah “Majhi” (“boatman”), who had not a loving relationship with her husband, considered suicide as the only way to escape their miserable lives. Nevertheless, Raihan also demonstrates human's innate desire to live despite all those intolerable sufferings:

মস্তুর আর বুঝতে বাকি রইলো না, গলায় ফাঁস দিয়ে মরতে চায় হালিমা। এই দুনিয়াটা বোধ হয় অসহ্য হয়ে উঠেছে ওর কাছে। তাই আর বাঁচতে চায় না ও। মস্তুর এই মুহুর্তে কী করবে ভেবে উঠতে পারছিলো না। হঠাত ওকে অবাক করে দিয়ে গলার ফাঁসটা খুলে ফেলে আপন মনে কেঁদে উঠলো হালিমা। [...] দুনিয়াটা অতি নির্মম হলেও ছেড়ে যেতে ইচ্ছা করছে না হয়ত [...] এরমধ্যে বার চারেক ফাঁস খুলেছে আর পড়েছে হালিমা। [...] ধীরে ধীরে ওর খুব কাছে এগিয়ে

গেল সে। তারপর অকস্মাৎ ওর একখানা হাত চেপে ধরলো মন্তু। একটা করুণ উক্তির সঙ্গে সঙ্গে চমকে উঠে ঘুরে দাঁড়ালো হালিমা। বড় বিষন্ন চাহনি ওর। [...] ঈষৎ চাঁদের আলোয় মন্তু দেখলো, হালিমার নাক আর চোখ দুটো অসম্ভব রকম ফুলে গেছে। এত মার মেরেছে ওকে আবুল। (Raihan 105)

Mantu realizes Halima wants to put an end to her life. Maybe this world has become a living hell for her. The burden of suffering does not let her live. The whole situation catches him perplexed. Then suddenly, Halima frees herself from the noose and bursts into tears. [...] This world is the cruellest place to live, yet leaving it behind may be the hardest thing to do [...] In between, Halima has put the noose four times around her neck. [...] He slowly moved closer to her. Then all of a sudden, Mantu grabs one of her hands. Halima turned around in surprise with a pitiful glance. Her melancholic eyes tell it all. [...] Mantu notices Halima's nose and eyes are incredibly swollen in the dim moonlight. This much brutally, Abul beats her. (my trans.; Raihan 105)

This vivid description of Halima's wound resemblances Laila's miserable condition in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*; Rasheed's inhuman violence towards Laila turns her into a mirror image of Halima:

It hurts to talk. Her (Laila) jaw was still sore, and her back and neck ached. Her lip was swollen, and her tongue kept poking the empty pocket of the lower incisor Rasheed had knocked loose two days before. [...] Laila never would have believed that a human body could withstand this much beating, viciously and regularly and keep functioning. (Hosseini 257)

According to Hanmer and Maynard (1987), violence grows out of inequality within marriage and reinforces male dominance and female subordination within the home and outside; in other words, "violence against women is a part of male control" (qtd. in Stark 22). Though Abul or Rasheed from both novels similarly merges through their practice of having more than one wife, none of them can stand that their wives only 'talk' to some other man; for them, it is an 'unforgiving' sin like adultery.

Therefore, Raihan vividly delineates anger of Abul:

হঠাৎ দাওয়া থেকে ছুটে এসে মুহুর্তে হালিমার চুলের গোছা চেপে ধরলো আবুল। তারপর কোনো চিন্তা না করে সজোরে একটা লাথি বসিয়ে দিলো ওর তলপেটে। [...] রাগে তখন ফোঁপাচ্ছে আবুল, আমার ঘরের ভাত মাংস ধ্বংস কইরা রাস্তার মানুষের লগে পিরীত। জানে খতম

কইরা দিমু না তোরে। [...] বেড়ার সঙ্গে পুরনো একটা ছড়ি ঝোলানো ছিলো। সেটা এনে হালিমার নরম তুলতুলে কপালে কয়েকটা আঁচড় টেনে দেয় আবুল। এইবার পিরীত করো। আরো পিরীত করো রাস্তার মানুষের লগে। (96-97)

Suddenly Abul rushed to Halima and tightly grabbed her hair. Then, without any second thought, he kicked her in the lower abdomen [...] Abul is bubbling in anger, destroying my bread and butter; you dare to flirt with a stranger. You whore! Today no one can save you [...] There was an old stick hanging from the fence. Bringing it, Abul deeply scratched Halima's forehead. Go, now, do some more unchaste behaviour. (my trans.; 96-97)

Similarly, when Rasheed comes to know that Laila talked with a stranger, he almost beats her to death:

They stood frozen, Mariam and Laila, eyes to the ground, as though looking at each other would give credence to the way Rasheed saw things, that [...] a lewd conspiracy was shaping behind his back, in his home [...] Without saying a word, he swung the belt at Laila. He did it with such speed that she had no time to retreat, duck, or even raise a protective arm. Laila touched her fingers to her temple, looked at the blood, and looked at Rasheed with astonishment. (Hosseini 260)

In both novels, this gruesome domestic violence finally leads to deaths. However, due to patriarchal norms, the treatment of these deaths is different. We see one of them (Abul) passing unpunished as violence against women is accepted as normal by the patriarchal society he lives in whereas the other (Mariam) is punished ruthlessly even though her act of crime was a form of self-defence.-Abul from *Hajar Bachor Dhore* did not get any punishment for murdering three of his wives as if it is a mere incident to beat someone to death: “বউ মারায় পৈশাচিক আনন্দ পায় আবুল। পান-বিড়ির মত এও যেন একটা নেশা হয়ে গেছে ওর। মেরে মেরে এর আগে দু’দুটো বউকে প্রাণে শেষ করে দিয়েছে সে” (97) (“Abul feels a diabolic pleasure while beating his wife as if it is an addiction for him. As a result, he has already beaten two of his wives to death”; my trans.; 97). Additionally, violence is not a recurring way to outburst rage and frustration; instead, each occurrence of such physical abuse forms a tiny element of a broader pattern of patriarchy that intends to exert and sustain control over the victim. Though his first wife, Ayesha, survives this abusive marriage for three years, he killed Jamila, his second wife, within two years of their marriage:

মেয়েটা ছিলো একটু বাচাল গোছের আর রুক্ষ মেজাজের। সহজে আবুলের কিল-চাপড়গুলো গ্রহণ করতে রাজি হতো না সে। মারতে এলে কোমরে আঁচল বেঁধে রুখে দাঁড়াতো। হাজার হোক মেয়ে তো। পুরুষের সঙ্গে পারবে কেন? বাধা দিতে গিয়ে আরো বেশি পরিমাণে মার খেতো জামিলা। ও যখন মারা গেলো আর ওর মৃতদেহটা যখন গরম পানি দিয়ে পরিষ্কার করছিল সবাই, তখন ওর সাদা ধবধবে পিঠের উপর সাপের মত আঁকাবাঁকা ফুলে-ওঠা রেখাগুলো দেখে শিওরে উঠেছিল অনেকেই। (98)

Jamila was talkative. Because of her temper issue, she did not accept Abul's assault that easily. When he came to beat her, she always showed some resistance. However, what is the point? After all, she was a woman. How dare she challenge a man? Instead, as a reward for her protest, Jamila even received more bruises. After her death, people were terrified to see the snake-like swelling lines on her body while cleaning her. (my trans.; 98)

According to Danis and Bhandari, “adherence to rigid traditional gender roles and unhealthy relationships are considered risk factors; having peers that engage in violent behaviour may normalize the use of violence against a partner” (37). Therefore, this patriarchal rural society does not discern Abul as a perpetrator; here, wives are considered as a possession of their husbands. Moreover, this predicament provides a 'taken for granted' agency to a man: “ওর বউরে মারুক কি কাটুক কি নদীতে ভাসায়া দিক, আমাগো কি আছে তাতে” (98) (“Whether he beats his wife or cuts down and throws, that's nothing to do with us”; my trans.; 98). Here, Abul is successful in his power practice as his coercive control subverts the autonomy of his wives. Then again, Maqbool considers himself ‘moderate’ as he beats his wives, but not beat them to death like Abul:

বউদের অবশ্য মকবুলও মারে। তাই বলে আবুলের মত অত নির্দয় হওয়াটা মোটেই পছন্দ করে না সে। মারবি তো মার; একটুখানি সহিয়া মার। এ হলো মকবুলের নিজস্ব অভিমত।” (98)

It is true that Maqbool also beats his wives; even so, he doesn't like being as ruthless as Abul. Fine, beat her if you want, but at least spare her a bit! That's Maqbool's personal ethics. (my trans.; 98)

Ironically, people like Maqbool, who think of themselves as better people than people like Abul, cannot even go beyond the idea of domestic violence.

There is no difference between them at all. On the contrary, society does not forgive Mariam for the 'violent crime' of killing an abusive husband in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Moreover, the helpless voice of Laila reflects it all:

I want to see you before I testify. I'll tell them how it happened.
I'll explain that it wasn't your fault. That you had to do it. They'll understand, won't they, Mariam? They'll understand. (Hosseini 320)

Nevertheless, both Mariam and Laila knew 'they' would not understand. This deep-rooted patriarchy confronted by Laila and Mariam considers this killing an unforgivable sin and wants to put an extraordinary example out of the execution of Mariam so that no other women in that society further dare to do such a "heinous" act of protest. There exists only one law here; it is not the law of humanity but rather the law that always favours male supremacy and allows men to practice violence without remorse and punishment.

Construction of Woman's Identity: Myth and His-Story

Political, cultural, and economic systems all condone and support the use of male dominance to maintain and enforce women's inferior status and unequal power. In *Hajar Bachor Dhore*, Raihan seamlessly highlights how the traditional folk culture of rural Bangladesh plays a vital role in constructing women's social and cultural identities. In most of these folklores, women have been presented as either submissive, 'damsel in distresses', or someone with wicked characteristics such as "dating buri" ("witch") and "Takahashi" ("demon"), and the 'strong', 'brave' men consistently 'achieve' these 'damsels in distresses' by rescuing them from the wicked "dating buri", or "Takahashi". Then again, deconstructing the "myth of Ola Bibi", who is the goddess of cholera and is worshipped by people of the Bengal region (source: Wikipedia), it can be seen that cholera is personified as a female form which was tried to be tamed by a male figure for the 'greater good of the world'; as the myth shows how Hazrat Ali tried to stop *Ola Bibi* by breaking 'her' leg: "খপ কইরা ওলা বিবির একখানা হাত ধইরা দিলেন জোরে এক আছাড়। আছাড় খাইয়া একখানা পা ভাইঙ্গা গেলো ওলা বিবির। আহা সব খোদার কুদরত।" (Raihan 133) ("All of a sudden he grabs *Ola Bibi*'s hand and throws her hard to the ground. As a result, one of her legs got broken. Aha, all hail goes to the Almighty"; my trans.; 133). Then again, the *Puthi of Kamala Shundori* delineated in Raihan's *Hajar bachor Dhore*, tells the story of helpless Kamala who cannot unchain herself from the shackle of patriarchy:

দীঘির পানিতে আছে এক রাজপুরী
 সেইখানে আছে এক রাজপুত্র সুন্দর
 আশেক হইয়াছে তার কমলার উপর।
 কমলারে পাইতে চায় আপন করিয়া।
 কমলার লাইগা তার কান্দিছে হিয়া। (104)

(The literal meaning of this folk song: A charming prince lived in the palace underwater. However, he fell in love with Kamala and wanted to ‘achieve’ her.)

So, it was not significant whether Kamala loved the prince in return; she was chained, and no earthly force could free her from that. This folktale represents Kamala as ‘weak’ and ‘submissive’ who had no free will and had to leave her entire world at the end of the story.

On the other hand, Hosseini blends the compelling narratives of some ‘history’ in his novel to delineate how the patriarchal society constructs history and identity according to its requirements as “male violence [...] results from historical and current power differentials that keep women subordinate, primarily through the use of control, including physical, sexual, economic, and psychological abuse, comprising tactics of intimidation and isolation” (McPhail et al. 818). In war-torn Afghanistan, women not only endured physical violence, humiliation, and imprisonment. Additionally, their fundamental human rights were repeatedly violated in the name of religion. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, there is a narration announced by the Taliban that explains a ‘strictly-not-to-do’ list of women in the name of ‘Islamic principles’:

Attention women: You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander the streets [...] if you go outside, you must be accompanied by a *mahram*, a male relative. You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. [...] You will not speak unless spoken to. You will not make eye contact with men. Girls are forbidden from attending school. [...] Women are forbidden from working. You will be stoned to death if you are found guilty of adultery. Listen. Listen well. Obey. (Husseini, 248-49)

To ensure women’s submissiveness, the death penalty functions as a form of deterrence; to set a mechanism to enforce dominance over women; to confiscate women’s fundamental rights, and finally to show who is in charge. In patriarchal interactions, men want to gain authority over women’s lives in private and public realms. Women are collectively denied full participation in social, political, and economic life in order to accomplish

that objective; therefore, the functions of women's autonomy are consistently undervalued. Moreover, another reference to man-made history can be found as Hosseini narrates: "Those regions where men who lived by ancient tribal laws had rebelled against the communists and their decrees to liberate women, to abolish forced marriage, to raise the minimum marriage age to sixteen for girls. There, men saw it as an insult to their centuries-old tradition" (121).

Those masculine attitudes and beliefs that the men nurture within their souls are constructed through the power play of authoritativeness, and such authoritativeness is their "centuries-old tradition". Babi, Laila's father, once told his daughter, "Laila, my love, the only enemy an Afghan cannot defeat is himself" (122), as the patriarchal social construction will not let them free their mind.

"This Has Always Been a Man's World": Internalizing Patriarchy, or Fighting for Liberty?

Kate Millett (2016) argues that sex-role stereotyping ensures the social control of women as cultural structures are, therefore, ideological; these structures convince the woman that she is weak and destined to be subordinated and provide a system of belief that gives public power to the man (Nayar 83-84). In *Hajar Bachor Dhore*, Raihan depicts his women characters as an embodiment of resilience: "অপূর্ব সংযম ছিল মেয়েটির। কত মেরেছে ওকে আবুল। কোনদিন একটু শব্দও করেনি। একটা সামান্য প্রতিবাদ নেই"। (97) ("The girl had such power to endure. Who knows how many times Abul beat her? She never uttered a single word. No sign of minimum resistance"; my trans.; 97). Now, the question may arise, what could be the reason/s behind this resilience against domestic violence? The answer "reveals a complexity of influences that would inhibit anyone from walking out the door. These influences may be rooted in herself, the batterer, the culture of origin, her location, socioeconomic status, and religion. The concept of 'intersectionality' explains how each of these influences becomes either a junction for safety or a barrier that must be addressed" (Danis and Bhandari 38). Here, none of the women characters of Raihan who suffer from intimate partner violence 'own' self-esteem as these women "internalize patriarchy without realizing it, pushing aside their best judgment and sacrificing their needs in order to fall in line with how they think they're supposed to behave" (Gilligan and Snider 21). Similarly, three of Maqbool's wives consider themselves a subject to oppression. As a result, they never try to break the chain of patriarchy; rather, Amena and Fatima cannot endure the pain of Maqbool's decision to divorce them. For both of them, being oppressed by an abusive husband is better than being divorced:

ঘরের মাঝখানে, এতগুলো লোকের সামনে হঠাত আমেনা আর ফাতেমা, দুজনকে একসঙ্গে তালাক দিয়ে দিলো সে। রাগে কাঁপতে কাঁপতে বললো, বাইরইয়া যা তোরা আমার বাড়ির থাইকা। ঘটনার আকস্মিকতায় সকলে চমকে উঠলো। পরক্ষণে একটা আতর্নাদ করে মাটিতে পড়লো আমেনা। ফাতেমা মূর্ছা গেলো। [...] পরদিন বিকেলে খবর পেয়ে আমেনা আর ফাতেমার বাড়ি থেকে লোক এসে নিয়ে গেলো ওদের। যাবার সময় করুণ বিলাপে পুরো গ্রামটাকে সচকিত করে গেলো ওরা। এতদিনের গড়ে তোলা সংসার এক মুহুর্তে নিশ্চিহ্ন হয়ে গেল। (141-142)

In the middle of the room, in front of the crowd, he suddenly divorced Amena and Fatima. Trembling in anger, he said, get outside my house. The suddenness of the incident left everyone thundered. The very next moment, Amena fell to the ground wailing. Fatima, on the other hand, fainted. [...] On hearing the news the next day, people from Amena and Fatema's house came to take them back. At the moment of departure, the air of the village became heavy with their lamentation. Their long-cherished household got destroyed just in a moment. (my trans.; 141-142)

In traditional patriarchal cultures, many women appear to accept domestic violence as a part of their marriage as “The women may have been raised in a tradition that does not believe in separation and divorce. She took marriage vows ‘for better or for worse’ and believes she must endure the abuse to save her marriage at all cost” (Danis and Bhandari 39). These women, the consensus to the abuse emanating from their internalization of patriarchy, cannot value autonomy and freedom by rejecting abuse. Though marriage is supposed to be a mutual bonding between a man and a woman, and dissolution of marriage requires consent from both partners, here, in this patriarchal rural setting, the husband only holds the power to end it. Neither woman has control over whom to be married, nor do they have any right to speak against any man-made decision. These women only become a part of marriage but never ‘own’ it. In such a patriarchal infrastructure, women are taught to be silent: you should endure in silence; you should be dominated in silence; you should be oppressed in silence. Almost all the women characters of Raihan genuinely become the embodiment of silence. This extended practice of men being authority and women being subordinate continues “হাজার বছর ধরে” (“for thousand years”). Tuni, who remained disobedient to the ‘law’ of marriage, cannot overpower the conventional patriarchy.

After Maqbool's death, Mantu wants to marry her. He wants to give her a new life to start with— one based on love, one where they can fulfil all those hidden desires that Tuni and Mantu once dreamt of together. As Tuni was never happy in her marriage, she used to make fun of Maqbool being dead: “বুড়া মরলেই তো বাঁচি। বলেই ফিক করে হেসে দেয় টুনি, বলে, পাখির মত উইড়া বাপের বাড়ি চইলা যামু” (89) (“I will be so relieved if he dies. Almost bursts into laughter, Tuni says, I will fly to my fathers' like a free bird”; my trans.; 89). The longing for freedom no matter how intense, can never be met as her subconscious internalization of patriarchy does not let her accept Mantu's proposal. She refuses Mantu as if it is an unforgivable sin for a widow to think about a new life. Her unruly behaviours throughout the whole narration turn into a helpless and hopeless wailing at the end: “তা আর অয় না মিয়া। তা আর অয় না” (149) (“That's no more possible *Miah*. That's not possible at all”; my trans.; 149). Moreover, this is where Raihan's women characters differ from Hosseini's Mariam and Laila, the submissive women who accept their fate and never dream of hope and freedom.

The feminist theory tries to locate the basis for the woman as the subject of her self, desires, and identity rather than as an object for the male (Nayar 90). Whereas Mantu and Tuni, let alone touch, never express their love to each other, Laila had sexual intercourse with Tariq following their love and desire for each other. Later she married Rasheed only to protect what she loves- Tariq and her daughter, Aziza. In war-torn Afghanistan, where men have decided the fates of women, Hosseini gives voice to Mariam and Laila, who refuse to be bound by the law of patriarchy and keep struggling throughout the whole narrative. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) says, “what binds women together is a sociological notion of the 'sameness' of their oppression” (337); over time, Mariam and Laila become intertwined by the coercion imposed by Rasheed:

Nobody's ever stood up for me before, she said. [...] For the first time, it was not an adversary's face Laila saw but a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotested, a destiny submitted to and endured. If she stayed, would this be her own face, Laila wondered, twenty years from now? (123)

With an aching realization, Mariam knows that Laila will soon be like her. However, their vulnerability becomes their strength once they support each other. Driven by a desire for love and freedom, they dare to unfold their repressed self and finally exhibit passive resistance. They continuously keep trying to break the chain. As Suzan-Lori Parks says, freedom always comes at a price; Mariam dares to negotiate the deal and is ready to pay the price. Her desperate attempt to reframe women's position challenges the man-

made policy and the service system. Moreover, despite the typically damaging, destructive, and harmful nature of violence, “in certain cases and contexts, violence can be constructive- and sometimes absolutely necessary [...] Violence that primarily serves good- healing, wholeness, consciousness, freedom, integrity- can be considered constructive violence” (Diamond 18). Hence, to quell the coercive control and to protect Laila from being murdered, Mariam kills Rasheed in an act of ‘constructive violence’:

He was still on top of Laila, his eyes wide and crazy, his hands wrapped around her neck. Laila's face turned blue now, and her eyes rolled back. Mariam saw that she was no longer struggling. *He is going to kill her*, she thought. *He means to*. Moreover, Mariam could not, would not allow that to happen. He had taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too. Mariam steadied her feet and tightened her grip around the shovel's handle [...] Mariam raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could [...] She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life. Moreover, with that, Mariam brought down the shovel. This time, she gave it everything she had. (311)

While talking about ‘constructive violence’, Diamond states, “It is precisely the momentous decision to finally stand up and fight for one's precious freedom and dignity that lends meaning and significance to an otherwise enslaved existence” (18). Therefore, these lines of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* explicitly forefront the entire transition of Mariam over thirty years, who has been changed through all those lifetimes of anguish, frustration, and anger- from being subjugated to being a fighter. Moreover, Hosseini illustrates the last moments of Mariam with such dignity as she finally can deny the advocacy of patriarchy and succeeds in her relentless pursuit of what one calls life:

Earlier that morning, she had been afraid that [...] she would turn into a pleading, weeping spectacle [...] she might scream or vomit or even wet herself, that, in her last moments, she would be betrayed by animal instinct or bodily disgrace. [...] It did not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the *harami* child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. However, 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; Mariam thought she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings. (328-329)

While explaining the hierarchy of gender, Beauvoir (2009) states that “this has always been a man’s world” (93). *A Thousand Splendid Suns* nearly cover a period of turbulent change in the history of Afghanistan from the 1970s to the 2003s, where one scenario remains unchanged- the condition of women in the men’s world. However, Mariam becomes the embodiment of immeasurable sacrifices to break the patriarchal chain, which is celebrated by the feminist norms: “Mariam is in Laila’s own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns” (443).

Conclusion

As there is universality among the works of literature that can cross the linguistic, national, and cultural border, it can be seen that whether the time is mid-20th century rural Bangladesh or 21st century war-torn Afghanistan, nonetheless, socio-religious ideologies that normalize patriarchy, domestic violence, and sexual oppression are embedded in the backdrop of both Raihan’s *Hajar Bachor Dhore* and Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Both the patriarchal societies described by Raihan and Hosseini try to diminish, then mould a woman’s individual identity according to her preference, and finally subject them to extreme oppression. Though the female characters from both novels originate from different countries, cultures, and languages, they are still intertwined by the bond of suppression and suffering. However, they differ in the decree of their response to these hierarchical relations of the patriarchal order. This gender-based inequality is so deeply ingrained in society that it may appear everywhere, even in outwardly egalitarian settings. Though the misery of women is still prevailing to date, there is always some symbol of resistance that subverts the man-made law and upholds women’s longing for hope and freedom.

Note

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translated quotations are of Raihan's *Hajar Bachor Dhore* (1964) from the Ahmed edition.

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