

## Mariam's Traditional Gender Roles in Patriarchal Society in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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### Abstract:

This study examines the traditional gender role imposed on Mariam in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* using Allan G. Johnson's patriarchy theory. This theory explains that male dominance, male identification, male centeredness, and obsession with control are four aspects that are highly valued in a patriarchal society. This study uses a qualitative method as the data were taken from descriptions and dialogues in the novel. The researcher then collected data based on the research objectives and analyzed using the theory explained earlier. The study result reveals that gender roles in the novel result in the oppression of Mariam. She is obliged to accept an arranged marriage with Rasheed, a widower who is thirty years older than her and experienced domestic violence by Rasheed. In addition, this study also found that Mariam had two responses regarding gender roles that oppressed her, namely acceptance and rebellion. The acceptance response is demonstrated by Mariam's actions in submitting to the arranged marriage and obeying her husband's restrictive rules. Meanwhile, the rebellious response is shown by Mariam's decision to run away from Rasheed's house and physical resistance to him. Finally, this study explains the adverse effects of patriarchy on Mariam. The research implication is to provide a new perspective on women in traditional society.

**Keywords:** gender roles; patriarchy; novel

### Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran gender tradisional yang disematkan pada Mariam dalam novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* karya Khaled Hosseini dengan menggunakan teori patriarki Allan G. Johnson. Teori ini menjelaskan bahwa dominasi laki-laki, identifikasi laki-laki, keterpusatan laki-laki, dan obsesi terhadap kontrol adalah empat aspek yang dijunjung tinggi dalam masyarakat patriarkis. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan data diambil dari deskripsi dan dialog dalam novel. Peneliti kemudian mengumpulkan data berdasarkan tujuan penelitian dan melakukan analisis dengan menggunakan teori yang telah dijelaskan sebelumnya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa peran gender dalam novel mengakibatkan ketertindasan Mariam. Dia dipaksa menerima perjodohan dengan Rasheed, duda berusia tiga puluh tahun lebih tua darinya dan mengalami kekerasan rumah tangga yang dilakukan Rasheed. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga menemukan bahwa Mariam mempunyai dua respons atas peran gender yang membuatnya tertindas, yakni penerimaan dan pemberontakan. Respons penerimaan ditunjukkan dengan tindakan Mariam yang tunduk pada perjodohan dan patuh pada aturan-aturan mengekang Rasheed. Sementara itu, respons pemberontakan ditunjukkan dengan keputusan Mariam kabur dari rumah Rasheed dan perlawanan fisik terhadapnya. Terakhir, penelitian ini menjelaskan dampak buruk patriarki terhadap Mariam. Implikasi penelitian ini adalah untuk memberikan perspektif baru tentang perempuan di masyarakat tradisional.

**Kata kunci:** gender roles; patriarchy; novel



## INTRODUCTION

The lives of men and women are never separated from society's expectations and social demands. Blackstone (2003) stated that "Gender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on each society's values and beliefs about gender." In the context of gender roles, misunderstandings often occur in comprehending the concepts of sex and gender.

According to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, "Sex is usually categorized as female or male, but there is variation in the biological attributes that comprise sex and how those attributes are expressed. [Meanwhile], gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, expressions, and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender diverse people." Furthermore, gender is usually divided into two categories: feminine and masculine. These two categories are not related to a person's biological sex. Therefore, it means someone who is biologically said to be male might have an attitude with gender traits that are feminine instead of masculine.

Regarding behavior, significant differences in society's expectations of how men and women should act are essential topics that should not be missed. Women are expected to be individuals with a gentle, polite, and nurturing attitude, while men are expected to be individuals with an attitude that is not fragile and brave.

In the case of households, women are always expected to hold the role of caring for children. Conversely, men are expected always to hold the head of the family and the breadwinner role. The European Institute for Gender Equality in 2021 reports a significant discrepancy between the amounts of time cared for by male and female parents, "about 91% of women with children spend at least an hour daily on housework, compared with 30% of men with children." They added that the higher percentage of time women spend in childcare than men was influenced by education level. Women with a higher education level tend to spend less time doing housework.

Social expectations of women and men also occur in the workplace. Certain fields of work are usually associated with certain genders. Blackstone (2003) notes that "women are more likely to be expected to work as secretaries, and men are more likely to be expected to work as managers and executives." Furthermore, in 2020, UNESCO researched STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education for women in Asia. They further found that the low participation of women in STEM-related jobs is due to several reasons, such as the notion that men are better suited to work in

STEM fields than women, societal expectations that women are expected to focus on domestic work, lack of family support, and mobility difficulties in carrying out their work career.

Traditional gender roles can be found in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a bestselling novel by Khaled Hosseini, published in 2007. Stephanie Emrich (2013) notes that the novel was a *New York Times* Best Seller in 2007 for over three and a half months after publication. This novel has also been translated into fifty languages and published in over one hundred countries (Mike Fleming Jr, 2021). Set against the backdrop of Afghanistan, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* tells the story of the lives of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, amid conflict, war, and the strong patriarchal culture of Afghan society. Mariam is the illegitimate child of Jalil, a businessman in Herat, and Nana, Jalil's former maid. Not accepted by Jalil's family, Jalil set up a secluded *kolba* for Nana and their illegitimate child in a remote area near Herat. Throughout the story, Nana always shows hatred towards Jalil, especially when Jalil is not around. When Mariam chose to visit Jalil's house in Herat, Nana, who could not accept it, committed suicide. Fifteen-year-old Mariam is then forced to marry a widower from Kabul, Rasheed, who turns out to be an abusive man.

Meanwhile, another main character, Laila, is described as a smart and beautiful girl, Mariam and Rasheed's neighbor. The age difference between Laila and Mariam is 19 years, with Laila being younger. When Laila was 15 years old, Kabul was in a state of intense civil war where Laila's house was hit by a war rocket attack, which resulted in the death of Laila's parent. Laila was injured and lost one of her hearing. She then was helped by the couple Rasheed and Mariam. Hurt and bereft, Laila turns out to be pregnant with her lover and childhood friend, Tariq, who at that time went to Pakistan with his parent to flee. Laila's suffering continues when she gets news from a stranger that Tariq has died in an accident. This condition causes Laila to accept Rasheed's proposal to become his second wife.

In this novel, Khaled Hosseini depicts the state of gender roles in Afghanistan from the 1960s to the early 2000s. One of the main characters in the novel, Mariam, experiences negative experiences in the context of gender amidst the strong patriarchal culture of Afghan society. To analyze gender roles in patriarchal culture, I use Allan G. Johnson's theory of patriarchy as a ground theory. Johnson (2014) defines a patriarchal society as "A society [that] promotes male privilege by being male-dominated, male-identified, and



male-centered. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women." The reason I state that the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* reflects a strong patriarchal culture is because this novel reflects male dominance, male identification, male-centeredness, and obsession with control. Johnson explained that male dominance is a condition in which men dominate various fields, such as economics, politics, religion, etc. Male identification, meanwhile, is a concept that views masculinity as a superior standard. Johnson notes, "When a society identifies a particular group such as men as the standard for human beings in general, it follows that men will be seen as superior, preferable, and of greater value than women." In other words, women are considered inferior in a society that generally identifies itself as male. The concept of male-centeredness, on the other hand, concerns how society, in general, is more centered on men while women are mostly treated only as "supporting roles." Lastly, obsession with control is a characteristic of a patriarchal society, where men constantly try to maintain their power over both women and fellow men.

The researcher expects to provide a new perspective on women in traditional society by conducting this study. The questions proposed in this research include:

- 1) How is Mariam's response towards traditional gender roles depicted in the novel?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have been conducted on patriarchy in the novel *A Thousand Splendid*, but these studies do not use Johnson's theory as support for the analysis. These studies include research conducted by Bekakra (2018) entitled "Patriarchy, Oppression, and Resistance in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by Khaled Hosseini". This research examines the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* using a feminist psychoanalytic lens. This research aims to determine the resilience and resistance of female characters in novels in a patriarchal society and hard conditions. The research results show that patriarchy is the main problem that causes the suffering of the female characters in the novel, and thanks to spiritual things, the female characters in this novel can finally achieve positive feelings in their lives in the context of being a woman. The next research is conducted by Suciati (2017) in a journal article entitled "Khaled Hosseini's Deconstruction of Patriarchy in the Novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*." This research uses Kate Millet's theory of patriarchy and the deconstruction theory of patriarchy. This research aims to find out how Khaled Hosseini deconstructs patriarchy in the novel. The research results show a reversal of

hierarchy between men and women in the novel. The previously subordinated women finally showed confident attitudes, which showed that they also had the power to control men.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research on Mariam's gender roles in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* uses a qualitative methodology because this methodology is most appropriate for describing the research objectives. Dawson (2019) stated that qualitative methodology "explores attitudes, behavior, and experiences." In this research, I aim to discover the characters' attitudes in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in treating Mariam by relating her to the concept of gender roles. Subsequently, I will also explain the attitude or response of Mariam's character in dealing with the gender roles problem that she experienced.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Gender Roles imposed on Mariam in the novel

The characters' expectations in the novel for Mariam, especially the male characters, are that Mariam will be obedient. When Nana, Mariam's mother, died by suicide, Mariam was forced to follow the wishes of her father and his three wives to accept an arranged marriage with Rasheed, a widower who was 30 years older than her. Sadly, this arranged marriage was carried out when Mariam was still a minor, which was about a week after her 15th birthday (Chapter 6). In Chapter 6, the arranged marriage is carried out after Nana dies. Previously, Mariam only lived with Nana in Kolba, in a fairly remote mountainous area. Mariam and Nana did not live with Jalil (Mariam's father) and his three wives in a luxurious house in Herat because Nana and Jalil's relationship was considered disgraceful and did not receive the blessing of Jalil's family. Jalil impregnated Nana when Nana was still working as a servant in Jalil's house, causing Nana to be expelled from Jalil's house.

After Nana's death, Jalil, who had refused Mariam's arrival at his luxurious house in Herat the day before, was reluctant to take care of and raise Mariam in the same house where he lived with his three other wives and children. The key to Mariam's arranged marriage with Rasheed was Jalil. The arranged marriage only took place after Jalil said something that indicated that he was reluctant to "save" Mariam from the arranged marriage that had trapped her. In chapter 7, Mariam says, "Say something" to Jalil as she waits for Jalil's opinion on her arranged marriage with Rasheed. However, the words that

came out of Jalil's mouth were only expressions that indicated rejection. Instead of defending Mariam, all Jalil said was, "Goddamn it, Mariam, don't do this to me." In this situation, Jalil presented male dominance, whereas as a man, he acted as the party with the power to dominate decision-making. Therefore, it can be concluded that Mariam's arranged marriage is one of the gender roles that is forced on Mariam by other parties to be followed.

Apart from being forced to comply in terms of matchmaking, Mariam was also forced to comply in terms of dress and behavior. Rasheed, her husband, arranged for Mariam to wear a burqa. While giving Mariam the burqa, Rasheed expressed his opinion on how women should act and how men should arrange for women to act. In Chapter 10, Rasheed says,

In this very neighborhood, these soft men. There's a teacher living down the street. Hakim is his name, and I see his wife, Fariba, walking the streets alone all the time with nothing on her head but a scarf. It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife." (Hosseini, 2007, Chapter 10)

In this quote, Rasheed considers a situation where a woman does not wear a scarf as a shame, and a man has to control his woman. Based on Johnson's theory of patriarchy, this quote shows how men attempt to dominate and control women. Rasheed represents how he tries to dominate Mariam by showing how Mariam should dress based on Islamic standards and trying to control how Mariam should behave and act. Rasheed's orders to Mariam to obey Islamic rules conflict with Rasheed's attitude of having adult magazines in his room (Chapter 12) and constantly acting abusively towards Mariam (Chapters 15, 41, 36), where Islamic rules prohibit viewing the body of the opposite sex who are not in a marriage relationship and prohibit committing acts of violence.

The social expectation that a woman must be able to conceive and give birth is also found in this novel. Mariam was physically and emotionally abused by Rasheed when Mariam continued to have miscarriages. The following is a quote from the novel's description of Rasheed's change in attitude towards Mariam after Mariam suffers a miscarriage:

"Meanwhile, a change had come over Rasheed ever since the day at the bathhouse. Most nights, when he came home, he hardly talked anymore. He ate, smoked, went to bed, and sometimes came back in the middle of the night for a brief and, of late, quite a rough session of coupling." (Hosseini, 2007, Chapter 14)

Meanwhile, the physical violence committed by Rasheed due to Mariam's inability to give birth can be seen in Chapter 15 when Rasheed is angry with Mariam because the rice that Mariam was cooking was undercooked. Rasheed is then said to have shoved a pebble into Mariam's mouth and forced her to chew the pebble. In committing the violence, Rasheed said to Mariam, "Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food and nothing else."

In conclusion, the gender role assigned to Mariam as a woman means that she must be an obedient person and be able to have children, resulting in Mariam being oppressed.

### **Mariam's acceptance response toward gender roles imposed on her**

Against the gender roles assigned to her, Mariam has several responses. The first response is acceptance. Mariam's response was influenced by an incident where Mariam found out that Nana was right in saying that Jalil was a man who could not be trusted and was a fraud. Nana's statement that Jalil is a man who cannot be trusted can be seen from the following quote in Chapter 1: "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" which was a reference to Jalil not wanting to marry her after impregnating Nana. In the same chapter, Nana also explicitly says that she is a liar because Jalil keeps speaking kindly to Mariam while Jalil's actions contain a lot of bullying.

Mariam finally understood the truth of Nana's words when she was not allowed to enter Jalil's luxurious house, which, in the end, caused Mariam to accept and tolerate the gender roles assigned to her. This acceptance can be seen from the fact that Mariam obeyed Rasheed to behave as Rasheed wanted, namely, always wearing a burqa when going out of the house as previously mentioned, and not allowing Mariam to talk or meet men as the author has described in Chapter 12 when Rasheed had many male guests in his household: "Rasheed had told Mariam that she was not to come down until the visitors had left."

### **Mariam's resistance response toward gender roles imposed on her**

Another response to the gender roles that caused Mariam's oppression was resistance. After accepting the gender roles imposed on her, Mariam finally dared to fight back in two ways: by running away from her abusive husband and by physically fighting Rasheed when Rasheed brutally committed domestic violence against Laila (Rasheed's second wife). Running away to Pakistan with Laila is one form of Mariam's rebellion against the gender roles imposed on her. Laila is Rasheed's second wife, who has long



planned to escape from Rasheed to Pakistan. It is depicted that Mariam and Laila finally establish a friendly relationship after previously being portrayed as enemies. In chapter 35, when Mariam and Laila are together, Laila, who plans to escape to Pakistan, away from Rasheed, says to Mariam, "We're leaving this spring, Aziza and I. Come with us, Mariam." Mariam accepted the invitation. In the next chapter, Mariam and Laila are busy packing their belongings and running away from the abusive Rasheed to Pakistan. This escape, although failed, was an important event that marked Mariam's desire to be free from Rasheed's constraints and oppression.

Another form of resistance carried out by Mariam against the gender roles that resulted in her oppression was to resist Rasheed physically. In chapter 45, it is described that Mariam did this when Rasheed brutally abused Laila. Rasheed whipped Laila until she bled because of Laila's action of meeting her ex-lover. Mariam's defense of Laila made Rasheed's brutal abuse move to Mariam, which was then successfully prevented by Laila. At this point, Laila and Mariam acted to protect each other from Rasheed's abuse of them. In the end, when Rasheed strangled Laila for a long time so that Mariam was sure Rasheed was going to kill Laila, Mariam decided to do something very extreme by hitting Rasheed with a shovel. Furthermore, when Mariam felt that her actions would only result in her death and Laila's death at the hands of Rasheed, Mariam, before deciding to take extreme action by killing Rasheed, was described as feeling the following: "This was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life." This description of Mariam's extreme actions reflects the peak of Mariam's resistance against the gender roles that resulted in her oppression.

In conclusion, Mariam responded in the form of acceptance and rebellion against gender roles as a female figure, which resulted in her being oppressed.

### **The adverse effects of patriarchy on Mariam**

As explained earlier, Mariam could not have children as Rasheed had hoped, resulting in Rasheed's violent actions towards her. In addition to forcing Mariam to eat pebbles, as the researcher mentioned earlier, Rasheed also committed other physical violence, including when Mariam tried to escape from Rasheed's house with Laila, as described in the quote in Chapter 36, "Downstairs, the beating began. To Laila, the sounds she heard were those of a methodical, familiar proceeding." Rasheed's beatings against Mariam often happened so that Laila felt that the incident was a "familiar proceeding"—it was not an event she rarely witnessed. Choosing to run away was considered an

unforgivable mistake for Rasheed; the beatings carried out in the incident were very extreme. Mariam's entire body was seriously injured because of it—"There was blood on his hands, blood on Mariam's face, her hair, down her neck and back. Her shirt had been ripped down the front." (Chapter 36)

Not only physical violence, Rasheed also committed mental violence against Mariam. As previously mentioned, Rasheed said that his marriage with Mariam was like gravel, explaining Rasheed's unhappiness, even though, as a wife, Mariam always obeyed Rasheed's orders.

Other mental violence is also shown in Rasheed's actions in analogizing a car to both of his wives: Rasheed calls Laila a "Benz," especially a "brand-new, first-class, shiny Benz," while Mariam Rasheed calls her a "Volga" (Chapter 31). The difference is quite extreme, considering a Benz is classified as a luxury vehicle with a much higher price tag than the Volga.

Based on Johnson's theory, Rasheed's physical and mental violence reflects an attitude of obsession with control where Rasheed feels entitled to power and control Mariam's desires and physical condition. Rasheed's physical violence is an extreme sign that he wants to assert his power over Mariam.

## CONCLUSION(S)

This study aims to determine Mariam's gender role in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and how she reacts to the gender roles imposed on her as a woman. The researcher could answer the two research questions she proposed through the analysis the researcher conducted. First, the gender role imposed on Mariam is to be passive and obedient and must have the ability to have children. Expectations for Mariam to be submissive and passive are known from when Mariam was forced to marry Rasheed, who was 30 years older than Mariam, and when Rasheed arranged for Mariam always to wear a burqa when leaving the house. Mariam was also forbidden to talk to men. Meanwhile, Rasheed's expectations of Mariam being obliged to have offspring are taken to an extreme, so when Mariam fails to give birth to a child, Rasheed is abusive towards Mariam, both verbally and physically.

On the second question, the researcher found that Mariam's response to the gender roles forced on her was twofold: acceptance and rebellion. Acceptance is shown in Mariam's action, who is forced to accept an arranged marriage with a man who is much

older than her. Mariam also accepted Rasheed's orders always to wear a burqa when leaving the house and not meet male guests even though Rasheed was at home. Meanwhile, the response to rebellion was shown by the incident when Mariam complied with Laila's invitation, Rasheed's second wife, to flee from Rasheed to Pakistan.

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