

# *The Subversion of Male Unlimitism*

--an Eco-feminist Reading of A Thousand Splendid Suns

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**Abstract:** Khaled Hosseini is now a world renowned writer famous for his three novels: *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*. His second book *A Thousand Splendid Suns* mainly deals with two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, whom in the book are ruthlessly oppressed by male dominators under the patriarchal system, together with the two heroines, nature is another oppressed object in the novel. After years of destruction, nature in Afghanistan is severely destroyed. This paper is divided into four parts. In the introduction part, a brief analysis on the author as well as the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* will be presented. Besides, a brief definition on eco-feminism will also be given; in the second part, the close relationship between nature and women first and the oppression that nature and two heroines have suffered will be exposed; in the third part, the revolt of two heroines against male power will be analyzed respectively; in the fourth part, a conclusion of the whole paper will be offered.

## 1. Introduction

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* written by the Afghan-born American writer Khaled Hosseini, deals with stories of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila. Mariam is a harami, which refers to the child of a wealthy and highly ranked man and his maid. She lives in a kolba with her mother Nana, who commits suicide after Mariam leaves the little house to find her father regardless of her mother's begging and threatening. After her mother's death, her father and his wives decided to find a husband for Mariam to keep her away from their sight, and the husband is Rasheed. After the wedding, Mariam comes with Rasheed to his home in Kabul.

Laila is the youngest child of an educated teacher and his warm and big hearted wife. She loses her parents in a bombard and is rescued by Rasheed, Mariam's husband. That is how the two women's life begins to merge. At first, they constantly quarrels with each other, later through further acquaintance, they become friends and they become so intimate with the story develops that their relationship equals the mother-daughter one. In the end, Mariam kills her husband Rasheed to save Laila and for the sake of her better living, but she herself is arrested and killed.

Eco-feminism is first initiated by the French philosopher, Francoise d' Eaubonne. Eco-feminism, a word combined by two words, eco-criticism and feminism, is thus a kind of criticism of the combination of eco-criticism and feminism. Eco-criticism opposes to anthrop-centrism while feminism criticizes patriarchy, and together, eco-feminism objects to them both.

Overpopulation and environment deterioration are believed to be the most urgent and threatening

issues on our earth currently and according to Eaubonne, patriarchal society should undertake whole responsibility for those two crisis, and she also believes that these are the eligible consequence of the wielding of power by men from five thousand years ago since men has the same ability to inseminate in women as well as in land (qtd. in Gates 21). The reason why Eaubonne makes the above claims is that although women play an important role in the process of reproduction and they seem to be the ones who would decide the birth of a child, but the fact is not necessarily so. In the patriarchal society, women are always in the subordinate position and they are always in an inferior rank to men. Therefore, it is not a woman's choice to decide whether to have a child or not, instead, it is the male who hold the authority to decide the birth of a child. Eaubonne also says that numerous recorded statistics in human history has also shown that man has always had control over women reproductive ability and male scholars of relevant subjects also lay emphasis on the ceremonies for fertility rather than on contraception (qtd. in Gates 22). Furthermore, industrialization and urbanization led by male also has brought inevitable environment catastrophe to our earth.

Women and the land, "the other" in the male-dominated society, have long been oppressed by patriarchy, and currently, confronted with serious and severe world problems such as overpopulation and environment destruction, it is the women's responsibility to realize the periled position of themselves and the environment, to reveal the real initiator of the world crisis and to make efforts to protect themselves and to conserve the land and that is the meaning as well as mission of eco-feminism.

## **2. Women and Nature---Victims of Male Unlimitism**

"Unlimitism" is a term coined by the scholar who has initiated the word "eco-feminism", Francoise d' Eaubonne. According to her, "unlimitism" is the trademark of the patriarchal political system and organizations; the power of the male in this system is unlimited, i.e. it transcends the rights of the country and the people (qtd. in Gates 25). In the novel, unlimitism is wantonly exercised upon Afghan nature and two heroines, Mariam and Laila.

### **2.1 The Alliance between Women and Nature**

As mentioned above, eco-feminists believe that women and nature are closely connected to each other or at least are more connected than men. Therefore, the question ensues is that why woman is deemed as closer to nature? Ortner has argued in her essay *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture* that there are three reasons why women are seen as closer to nature and the first is that "woman's physiology seen as closer to nature" (85). Women's body and some organs function for the benefit of reproduction, yet they still have to suffer from pains since the reproductive organs often hurts, and this phenomenon is called "woman's enslavement to the species" by De Beauvoir (qtd. in Ortner 86), which is a phenomenon that is viewed as a natural reproduction process in nature. The second and third reasons are "woman's social role seen as closer to nature" (87) and "woman's psyche seen as closer to nature" (90). Women's biological traits determine that they have to feed the baby as other mammals do and since children are viewed more closely connected to nature, thus are women, because women are close to children; the process of woman identification and entering into relationships also resembles nature since the process is immanent.

Ecologists or now even average people perceive how badly the land or nature is destroyed by human beings, yet through the above argumentation and the argumentation offered by Eaubonne, it is more plausible and valid to connect women and nature together in the study and identify the "criminals" of current environment deterioration with not only anthrop-centrism but also patriarchal system.

## 2.2 Destroyed Nature in Afghanistan

In the novel, wars constantly happen in Afghanistan, the fights for power bring disastrous consequences to nature and the land. Before the war, when Afghanistan is still in peace, the heroine Mariam lives in a kolba situated in the suburb area of the Heart city. The landscape there is harmonious and beautiful. There is a stream on the hill where the kolba is located and fish swims in the stream; high grass weaves in the wind and flowers bloom in between. Mariam and her mother Nana also raise chicken, goat and some other animals. Ever since the death of Nana, the mother of Mariam, the world has changed greatly and wars occur incessantly: Russia invades Afghanistan first, and then there are constant civil wars, when finally Taliban takes power, the American troop arrives and another war begins. In the process, nobody notices the natural environment, and consequently, nature is ruined in the process. Many years later, Laila comes back only to find desolation and forlornness. The stream disappears, and it has dried up long time ago and the shattered kolba stands lonely on the hill.

Similarly, when Laila is young, the city, also the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul, is beautiful. The sky is blue and there are lines of trees standing along the streets. But later, under the destruction of wars, these all disappear: “everywhere Laila turned, walls blocked her way” and she misses “her days of sitting with Tariq in a bed of clover on the banks of a stream...watching the sun go down” (224:pt3, ch.32). Suffering from years of wars, people in Kabul have no resources to generate heat and cook dinner in winter, and then lines and rows of trees in the city are cut down to keep life move on. As to those few trees which have not been hacked, (as Laila has witnessed) people “tore off the last of the clinging leaves, and left the trees looking ghostly against the muted brown of the hills” (223:pt3, ch.32).

As mentioned above, war is the optimum way to wield patriarchal wanton desire and exercise unlimitism. No matter the Russian invasion, the civil wars or American invasion, they are just massive destructive actions impelled by the desire of holding power.

## 2.3 Two Female Heroines---Mariam and Laila under the Oppression of Male Dominators

The novel mainly deals with the stories of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila. Born in different families and received different upbringing, the ways how they are oppressed under the male unlimitism are different, yet the oppression on them has one thing in common, that is, their dressing, Burqa. Many Islamic countries stipulate that women should wear burqa, a kind of dressing which merely allows women to expose their eyes while other parts of the body from head to toe are fully concealed. Women who are obliged to wear burqa are viewed by their husbands or the whole society as possession, property of or appendix to their husbands. They are not equal citizens. As can be seen in the novel, Mariam is forced to wear burqa under the demand of her husband, Rasheed, while Laila, who has received liberal upbringing when she is a child, is also forced by her husband and Taliban government to wear burqa.

Mariam is a harami, an illegitimate child born out of the wedlock. Her father abandons her mother and her in order to keep his status and fame. But she still loves and admires her father and this kind of affection does not end until her mother dies and she is forced to marry to a man who is much older than her and the marriage is arranged by his father and his wives to keep her away from them. Mariam has been pregnant for several times, but suffers from abortion every time without exception. And her husband beats her capriciously. At first, Mariam tries to work hard to please him to avoid the beating and punching, later she finds that her efforts are futile and when Rasheed is going to beat her again, she just let her arms “instinctively crossed over her chest, where he often struck her first” (234:pt3, ch.33), by the end of the novel, she is totally numb about the violence that her husband has callously exercised on her, when she knows another beating is about to come, she

“quietly took a seat on the couch” (261:pt3, ch.35) and wait for the violence to come.

Laila has a blissful life before her parents die. Her father is an educated teacher who believes that women should receive education and be independent. After Rasheed saves Laila from the ruins and rubbles where her parents die, Laila’s life starts to change. At first, in order to occupy Laila and force she to live in his house, he hires a stranger to tell a fake story to Laila that Tariq has died. Fooled by Rasheed’s trick, Laila is deceived and is subject to Rasheed’s greedy desire to own her. Later, when her daughter is sent to an orphanage due to famine, she tries to see her several times. But the Taliban forbids a woman walking alone on the street and Laila is cruelly beaten by the Talibs. The male wantonness rule over women even deprives a woman’s right to see her child.

### **3. The Rise of the Oppressed Women Against Unlimitism**

Although cruelly oppressed by men, the two heroines still find their way to rise against the male power. Actually, according to the eco-feminists, women play a significant role in overthrowing the patriarchal system and in saving nature. Australian philosopher Val Plumwood says that women are inclined to be positioned in the area of nature and are excluded from the binary culture (between human and nature), therefore, their contribution to the overthrowing of the binary opposition might be of valuable meaning (qtd. in Slicer 68). This contribution presumably involves two aspects, first is to stand against the patriarchal system and male unlimitism, and second is to stand up to make efforts to protect nature, and only through this way can the root of binary opposition be shaken or even severed.

#### **3.1 MARIAM’S Success over Male Tyranny**

In the novel, Mariam seems to be the most pathetic victim of male power. Nevertheless, in the end of the story, readers witness the uprising of Mariam against the male tyranny. At the near end of the story, Laila’s lover Tariq reappears and their love for each other abate not a single bit and they decide to elope. However, this is discovered by Rasheed, the tyrant is irritated and almost beats Laila to death. It is at this moment that Mariam finally awakes and decides to save Laila and to bear Rasheed no more and by the moment she is about to kill Rasheed, “she said his name. She wanted him to see” (340: pt3, ch.45), to see how she kills him. The killing of Rasheed marks the revolt of Mariam from a tolerant sheep to a dauntless woman who dares to fight against the oppressor, the male unlimitism and patriarchy.

#### **3.2 LAILA’S Escape from the Male Oppressor and Environment Protection Consciousness**

Although Laila is deceived and is controlled by Rasheed, she never surrenders to him. She makes a thorough plan and attempts to escape from Rasheed, the oppressor, with her daughter and Mariam. Later, when Tariq reappears into her life, she once more confronts Rasheed dauntlessly in order to pursue her true love and to follow her heart. Furthermore, Laila shows great abhorrence to war, the cruel instrument for men to win power. When one day Tariq says maybe the invasion of America could be something propitious for Afghanistan, Laila is irritated by his words and is totally exasperated. For her, wars are the most culpable sin and do not have a single bit of virtue and do not deserve a single bit of approval.

Laila is also an educated woman who owns strong environment protection consciousness. When she is a child, her father takes her to a historical site to see two giant Buddha. She is fully absorbed into the picturesque scene there, and she remembers that the trees are flourishing, the sky is stainless and blue, and the river is so clear. As a worshiper of nature, all she could do is to breath and says: “it’s so quiet” (146:pt2. ch.20). She feels that people are so small under the giant Buddha

and in the natural landscape. After years of war, one day when Laila learns that the Buddha is bombed by Taliban, she recalls the day and her mood when she travels there years ago and feels pain in her heart.

Eaubonne believes that when women try to protect the land, they consider about everything except for themselves and declare no self-benefits (qtd. in Gates 22). Laila conforms to her claims on women and this can be judged from her awareness to protect the natural sight-seeing and the cultural relics, the Buddha.

#### 4. Conclusion

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* concentrates on the life experience of two Afghan women Mariam and Laila in the most turbulent years of Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, women usually cannot share the same rights with men and in most cases, women are just viewed as possessions of men. The social background of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are wars, different kinds of wars over a long period of time, soviet invasion, civil wars, etc. all these wars has lasted for decades, which exerted extremely detrimental effects upon Afghanistan nature. Given this fact, an eco-feminist reading of the novel seems to be necessary and significant. Eco-feminism which believes that nature and women has close connection with each other; in the current world, in face of severe environmental problems, women have the ability and responsibility to fight against anthrop-centrism and patriarchal system for the better condition of the earth. Women in the world, just like the two women Mariam and Laila in the novel, suffers from oppression yet is still qualified and obliged to stand up for the nature, for the land as well as for women themselves.

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