



FSS Reflection Paper

Module: Rights

'3 wishes: Equal childhood, equal opportunities, and equal treatment'

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"Mariam was five years old the first time she heard the word *harami*"¹, says the first sentence of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini. "A child learns what he is called. Every name implies nomenclature, which in turn implies a designated social location."² If one's significant others themselves play a negative role in the process of identification, it results in faulty/dysfunctional internalization. Children from poor families are exposed to the dark side of the world much earlier in life in comparison to children from rich families who live in a much more protected environment. Being an illegitimate child, Mariam faced not only society's wrath but her mother's too. She was called names, considered a bad omen, and not even given any facilities even though her father, Jalil, was one of the richest men of Herat. The problem with family structures, i.e., primary socialization, is that the children have no choice of significant others (the people in immediate contact who affect the process of primary socialization and thus self-identification). Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann mention in 'Society as subjective reality', 'Hic Rhodus, hic salta', which literally translates to "Here is Rhodes, jump here!". This Latin maxim from Aesop's Fables helps us reiterate that individuals have to make fate with their parents as they have no other choice.

A child is born not only in an objective world but in an objective structure. Thus, she internalizes her significant other's world as not one of the many possible worlds but as the only one. Mariam not coming back to her home at night made her mother think that 'the worst had happened'. When she returned home, her mother had hanged herself out of shame. Later in the story, we see how this incident affected Mariam's subjective reality from the perspective of women, their rights, and the extent of infringement of those rights, i.e., what she was willing to do to satisfy the society at the cost of her basic human rights, be it child marriage, marital rape or physical and mental abuse. In our social construct, harassment is considered shameful for the victim instead of the predator who has committed the crime. Throughout history, women have committed suicide or have been killed in the name of 'honour'. In ancient India, Jauhar was a practice of self-immolation by Hindu women to avoid capture, enslavement, and rape by invaders, when facing certain defeat during a war. 'Honour killing', i.e., murder of an individual to protect the dignity and honor of themselves or their family, has been seen across the world. Mariam's mother had expressed her desire for having been killed by her father while she was pregnant with Mariam out of an extra-marital liaison with Jalil.

Mariam was a burden for Jalil; to get rid of this burden as soon as possible, Jalil married her off to a shoemaker who was thirty years elder than her. A fifteen-year-old girl marrying a forty-five-year-old man is not socially acceptable in most urban family structures. However, child marriage is still common in rural areas of many third-world countries. Even today, Mariam and Rasheed's abusive relationship is a reality in many households. Rasheed's second marriage also turned abusive when Laila gave birth to a girl instead of a boy. In a patriarchal world like ours, the birth of a girl child is looked down upon and practices like female foeticide are still common. That is the objective reality of this society.

¹ Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. (Reprint, Riverhead Books, 2008)

² Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. *The social construction of reality a treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. (New York: Open Road Media, 2011.)

Even when women tried to do something themselves, searching for a solution or an alternative, society (Afghanistan) failed them. Mariam and Laila's plan to escape Rasheed failed because of the Taliban's rule of women being allowed to go outside only when they are with a male guardian. Taliban is a jihadist political movement that practices gender apartheid. They force women to cover their faces all the time, not go outside their houses unless necessary, and quit studying. All of this is part of the systematic segregation being practiced against women. This is exactly why we require family justice to overlook family structures. Thus, I disagree with the argument of 'family' being beyond justice.³ To further explain his thought process and sources, Okin quotes Rousseau and Hume. Rousseau talks about how a woman can be both ruled within the family and denied the right to participate in politics, as the husband represents the family. On the same hand, Hume claims that the situations of family life do not allow justice to be an applicable standard. However, we need to keep in mind that both of these philosophers are 18th-century writers. These ideas are not contemporarily applicable. One needs to understand that affection and unity in a family are utopian concepts, i.e., these values can only be seen in the top percentage of functioning families. In reality, a family structure is much more complicated, and more often than not, ugly situations can arise if families are left utterly unsupervised. Most of the families talked about in 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' are shown through a dystopic lens. That is the reality of most third-world countries. Generosity and affection do not come to them naturally. Western thinkers very conveniently disregard the realities of third-world countries when coming to binary conclusions like that of no need for 'justice' in family structures. Thus, the works of Hume, Rousseau, Rawls and are not universally or, in my opinion, even locally applicable. This is because family is not simply a private matter, but an important site of social and political power. I agree with Okin on her opinions saying that many traditional family structures are patriarchal and hierarchical, with men holding most of the power and women and children being subservient. This can lead to a variety of injustices, such as women being excluded from the public sphere and denied equal opportunities, and children being subject to abuse or neglect.

In regards to the book, the question that arises is, would the situation have been different if a boy was born instead of Mariam? Or is Mariam being treated the way she is just because of the circumstances under which she was born in? These questions are totally rhetoric in nature and no solid answer can be framed unless we can create the same situation under the same conditions. However, it's known that the story is set in the late twentieth century in Afghanistan, the period when the Taliban rose to power. The Taliban rule was highly patriarchal in nature; stripping women of even the most basic rights while giving excessive powers to male individuals creating a male supremacist society in Afghanistan.⁴ The substantial inequalities that continue to exist between the sexes in our society have serious effects on the lives of almost all women and an increasing number of children. In order to achieve justice for women and children, we need to rethink the traditional family structure and its role in society. Policies and practices that promote gender equality, such as equal pay for equal work and affordable childcare need to be inculcated as a part of family justice. Also, we need to be aware of and address the cultural and social biases that perpetuate gender inequality.

Considering these facts, we can come to the conclusion that the situation might have been different had Mariam's mother given birth to a boy instead. Jalil might have recognized the boy as his own. However, these are all assumptions. What we do know is that Mariam was made to go through shame because of an event which involved no fault of hers; the circumstances of her birth. She was blamed for her own mother's death. She was made to marry a person thirty years older than her. She was made to go through physical and mental abuse because of multiple miscarriages. She was made to see her husband marry her only friend. She was made to live in an abusive household against her will. She was punished for traveling without a 'male guardian'. She was put in a situation that made her murder her own husband. She was publicly executed. This is not just the story of Mariam. This is the story of women of Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban. This is a story for women all around the globe who have faced discrimination based on their sex as well as their ethnicity, race, color, or profession.

Bibliography

- [1]. Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Reprint, Riverhead Books, 2008.
- [2]. Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. *The social construction of reality a treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York: Open Road Media, 2011.
- [3]. Okin, Susan Moller. *Justice, gender, and the family*. New York: Basic Books a Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2007.
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- [5]. <https://www.cfr.org/background/taliban-afghanistan>.

3 Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books a Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2007).

⁴ Lindsay Maizland, "What Is the Taliban?," Council on Foreign Relations, January 19, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/taliban-afghanistan>.