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Article:	Deconstructing Gender Identities: A Feminist Poststructuralist Study of A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini
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ABSTRACT

This study takes a poststructuralist stance on gender construction in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and explores how the inextricably interwoven gender discourses of the selected text result in negotiated gender identities and power relations. The complexity of competing discourses results in the plurality of meaning where gender 'signifier' itself becomes a site of struggle for the multitude of 'signified'. With this poststructuralist viewpoint that treats gender identities as a fluid and negotiated phenomenon, the current study employs the theoretical framework of Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA) to study the dynamic feminine identities in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It is envisaged that the current study will provide a new lens for looking at gender identities and power relations as a multi-dimensional and pluralistic phenomenon.

Keywords: Gender Identities, FPDA, Poststructuralism, Discourse, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Introduction

The claim that we live in an objectively verifiable world reflects the sexist orientation of any empirical research. Harding (1986) explains that the discourses on "what counts as a scientific problem and in concepts, theories, methods, and interpretations of research" are not only masculine constructions "but also racist, classist and culturally coercive" (p. 9). On the other hand, the poststructuralist approaches to gender do not establish essentialist truth claims; they only highlight the discursive formation of feminist identities realized through the discourses of power and knowledge. This study is significant as it challenges the traditional structuralist approaches to gender and explores the dynamic feminine identities in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by employing three strands of the FPDA framework. First, the study explores the negotiation and contestation of gender discourses in the text; second, it dismantles and deconstructs the gender binaries and explicates the fluid nature of gender; and finally, the study demonstrates the performative nature of gender in the text.

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-born American writer, is the author of four best-seller novels: *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *The Mountains Echoed*, and *Sea Prayer*. He is widely acclaimed for his superb books, undoubtedly masterpieces in modern English literature. The most exciting thing about his novels is the versatility of themes; identity, war, peace, and gender are significant themes in his writings. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is an exciting novel that presents Afghan socio-political conditions in the background of the story of female characters, i.e., Nana, Maryam, Laila, and Aziza.

Nana is Mariam's mother, who lives a very challenging life due to her complicated past and the birth of her love child, Mariam. Nana represents the sufferings of Afghan women. She had strained relations with her child Mariam and was quite skeptical and critical towards men. Mariam is an important female character in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, whose whole life can be summed up in the following four verses of the poem that Jalil used to sing to Mariam when they went fishing in the nearby stream:

"Lili Lili bird bath

Sitting on a dirt path

Minnow sat on the rim and drank

Slipped and in the water she sank" (Hosseini, 2007, p.326).

These verses are suggestive of Mariam's origin, alluding to her portrayal as *Harami* in the novel. She spent all her life with this stigmatized identity, but when for Laila and Aziza, she killed Rasheed, then "this was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginning" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 329). The second important female character, Laila, belonged to a liberal Afghan family and was born a little after Maryam's marriage to Rasheed. During Laila's stay in Rasheed's house, Rasheed became interested in Laila's beautiful youth and left no stone unturned to cause mental and physical pain to her first wife, Mariam. After marrying Laila, Rasheed wished to have a baby boy, but a baby girl, Aziza, was born, which frustrated him a lot.

Feminist criticism, according to Lois Tyson (1999), is to scrutinize how literature depicts how social, religious, economic, psychological, linguistic, and political forces oppress females (p. 83). According to third-wave feminists, gender is not fixed and confined to binaries as males or females; rather, it is performative and always in a state of flux. Gender as a social construct is realized through the repetitive enactment of certain behaviours generally shaped

by the societal structures and norms. Furthermore, individuals perform these behavioural enactments continuously and repetitively through their everyday social and linguistic practices. This dynamic approach to gender identities challenges the essentialist explanation of gender relations and has, over the years, broadened our understanding of the role of social norms, power, and language in constructing gender identities. With this focus, the current study attempts to answer the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. How do certain gender discourses in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* contest, resist and negotiate to construct subjective gender identities?
2. How are the binary oppositions of masculine and feminine identities dismantled in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?
3. How is the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* a narrative of gender performance?

Literature Review

Feminism is not at all a single ideology or movement. It is a set of dogmas and theories that grapple with gender identities, their construction, and their enactment in society. As Mary (1970), in the appendix of her well-known book named *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, questions, "If all men are born free, how is it that women are born slaves? As they must be if the being subjected to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of man, be the perfect condition of slavery" (p. IX).

Feminism is a revolt against the persistent exercise of disregarding females' plight and turning a deaf ear to females' complaints of injustice. Feminist criticism, according to Lois Tyson (1999), is to scrutinize how literature depicts the oppression of females through the social structures and discourse of religion, politics, economics, and culture. Feminism is not just a single movement based on certain predefined assumptions and notions; it has evolved and transformed with time, accompanied by societal development and metamorphosis in the female's state.

Feminism is broadly divided into three waves with different objectives and aims. These are discussed in the following.

The first wave of feminism began in the late 19th century and continued till the mid-20th century. The first wave of feminists was mainly concerned about the suffrage of females in different disciplines of life. The first wave had its primary focus on female equality with males. These feminists believe all human beings are born equal irrespective of their caste, creed, nationality, colour, social standing, and status. They struggled for the equal rights of females and wanted them to be no more dependent on males for everyday life needs. They also struggled for females' right to vote. Female authors got great acknowledgment in the field of literature during this era.

The second wave of feminism began in the 1960s and ended in the 1990s. The second-wave feminists were staunch believers that all females face the same problem irrespective of their caste, creed, nationality, colour, social standing, and status, presenting them as believers of universality. Second-wave feminists were more humanitarian as compared to the first-wave feminists. They were essentialists and believed in the binary oppositions of structuralists.

The third wave of feminism appeared in the 1990s and is still in the present era. For the feminists of the third wave, although females are no doubt facing gender inequalities, these inequalities are not the same for all females. These inequalities vary from one female to another

as they are discursively produced, as a result of which they are always in a state of perpetual flux. Female identity and character are never static, and it varies under the effect of various discourses. If one finds females dominated by males in one place, we may discover females dominating the males in the next instance. Everything that happens is a result of the effect of discourse. If discourses of masculinity hegemonize, males dominate the females. If counter-discourses of masculinity dominate, females become forceful and dominate the males.

The emergence of third-wave feminists began around the 1990s when there came a theoretical shift in feminism, and scholars began to approach gender as a complex, dynamic, and ever-changing phenomenon. That is, feminist identities are not fixed and singular; a woman may have several identities and several states of being powerful and powerless. In this regard, a great emphasis was laid on the role of language and, resultantly, on discourse as conceived by Foucault (1972). Michael Foucault (1972) asserts that discourse is not merely signs or language to identify things but more that we must reveal and describe (p.49). Genders under the influence of different discourses that contest, compete and negotiate with one another lead to dynamic change in power relations. So, third-wave feminism, like other postmodern approaches, dismantles the essentialist approach of structuralism and rejects all the grand narratives. Woods (1999), in his book, opines that postmodernism rejects all rationalities, rejecting metanarrative and universal truth" (p.10). Woods (1999) opines that postmodern feminism is characterized by:

- "1. The celebration of the confusion of gender boundaries.
2. The erosion of self in the face of rigid demarcations of the masculine Cartesian universe.
3. The reconfiguration of the patriarchal fetishization of the female body" (p.45).

According to FPDA, the theoretical framework used for the study, gender is performative rather than fixed; human gender identities are constructed through their performance. Baxter (2004) asserts, "FPDA can be defined as "a *feminist* approach to analysing the ways in which speakers negotiate their identities, relationships and positions in the world according to the ways they are located by interwoven discourses" (p. 1). According to FPDA, the text is the center of attraction, and language is the site through which identities and power are enacted, negotiated, and acquired. FPDA focuses on the discourses that reinforce power hierarchies and unequal gender power relations. As a method of textual analysis, it dismantles the social hierarchies established in the text and deconstructs the narratives that perpetuate the unequal power relations between men and women.

Research Methodology

As discussed earlier, the current study applies Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA) as a theoretical and methodological framework to study dynamic gender identities in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. FPDA is an efficient approach for conducting an in-depth, multifaceted, and complex analysis of a text. It primarily explores how gendered identities are an outcome of ever-contesting discourses and exchange of power in different contexts FPDA provides a toolbox for discovering how different characters or speakers compete and change their positions. By applying FPDA, the study focuses on how the gender of the characters in the selected text keeps moving between the extremes and challenges the inertia and stability present in patriarchal discourses. As discussed by Baxter (2007) main tenets of FPDA are the following seven points

- 1: Discourse as a societal act.

- 2: Performative nature of gender.
- 3: The variety and array of the speaker's identities.
- 4: Meanings are constructed.
- 5: Dismantling of binary oppositions.
- 6: Negotiations and contestations amongst discourses.
- 7: Unceasing Self-reflexivity. (Baxter, 2008, p.244)

Data Analysis

Human beings are constantly subjected to various discourses. These discourses always struggle to dominate them and create their momentary gender identity accompanied by power relations. Different discourses reinforce themselves by contesting and negotiating with other contemporary counter-discourses. Discourse itself is never fixed or stable in nature, so its resultant factor is also never fixed. Different discourses support gender roles and power relations to create human subjectivity by dominating the individual. The analysis section will first explore the stereotypical representation of female characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and later, applying the FPDA lens, the analysis will explore how these traditional gender roles and identities are dismantled and challenged in the novel. This section is divided into two main sections:

- Stereotypes of Female Characters
- Dismantling Stereotypes and Traditional Feminist Identities

Stereotypes of Female Characters

This section identifies what stereotypes are used to construct the character of Nana, Mariam, and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Most of these stereotypes represent Afghan women according to the traditional discourses of Afghan culture.

a. Nana

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Nana, the mother of Mariam, is seen acting and behaving conventionally as a poor woman should behave. Like a ruthless and unjust society victim, we see her complaining, harsh, rude, abusive, and uncontended. She appears to be somebody who has surrendered before society and has readily accepted her fate to suffer forever. In answer to Mullah Faizullah's view of sending Mariam to school, she says to Mariam, "There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and I need in life, and they don't teach it in school... And it's this: Tahamul. Endure" (Hosseini, 2007, p.17). She is witnessed as a person who has subjugated herself before society but shows her anger and anxiety to Mariam only whom, "Nana was always cursing and sweeping out of Kolba" (Hosseini, 2007, p.4).

In her youth, Nana couldn't get married because a jinn entered her body, and she couldn't get married. Like a weak woman, she let Jalil exploit her physically and left Herat when she got pregnant with Jalil's baby. She had no courage to face the people, so she opted to live in the outskirts of Gul Damam in the Kolba made by Jalil in extreme loneliness, "She said she wanted to live somewhere removed, detached, where neighbours wouldn't stare at her belly" (Hosseini, 2007, p.8). Nana disliked Jalil for what he did to her but still depended on the Rashan he sent monthly for her survival. She behaved very softly and sophisticatedly in his presence, the way traditionally a female should act. Nana just gave an outlet to her emotions in the company of Mariam, by mostly staying in anger and showing her frustration. But still, Nana is a protective mother; as long as she lives, she saves her from the cruel world. Like a traditional mother, she taught her daughter how to do all household chores to make her a perfect woman.

b. Mariam

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the story of Mariam whose life is a journey from illegitimacy to legitimacy. Mariam herself appears stereotypically constructed in the novel, behaving mainly as a traditional daughter, wife, and mother. We see her as a poor victim of Nana's anger, frustration, and abuse. She had to listen to Nana, most of the time, as Nana wished without a word of complaint like a traditional daughter. Mariam trusted every word Jalil spoke and never believed in any word Nana said against Jalil.

When married to Rasheed, Mariam appears as a traditional wife doing all she could to please her husband and managing the home in the best possible manner. She is witnessed as bearing all atrocities laid down on her by Rasheed without a word of protest. Considering Rasheed as her master, she led a life of slavery in his house. Rasheed abused and tortured her physically and mentally, but she never rebelled. Rasheed even frustrated Mariam emotionally when he instigated her to convince Laila to marry him, and Mariam quietly did what he said. Mariam suffered physically and mentally from all the miscarriages she had in her life. She even buried the clothes of her first baby after a miscarriage. She always wept and remained sad, but Rasheed was never there to console her, although she felt for Rasheed and asked him if he was annoyed or unhappy. When Laila got married to Rasheed, we witness traditional grudge and jealousy in Mariam's mind in the early days, she was always ready to argue and never kind to Laila. But when the situation changed, and Mariam started considering Laila as her daughter and loved Aziza, we saw her as a perfect mother. Mariam is ready to sacrifice, and like a conventional mother, she offers her life for Laila's love.

c. Laila

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Laila is seen as a person mainly deviating from the hegemonic ideals. She is primarily viewed as a person different from traditional females, and the most crucial reason behind it is her parents, who were liberal and educated. Her parents felt no difference between sons and daughters, so they brought her up in the best liberal manner giving her freedom, confidence, and education. But still, at several moments in the novel, we find her stereotypical construction. For instance, we see her always seeking refuge in Tariq's company, always looking towards him for her security and protection. Once in the novel, a boy throws urine on Laila, but she does nothing in defense. Instead, she told Tariq, who gave that boy and his friends a good beating and took revenge.

Although Laila's mother was a liberal person, she still told Laila, "The reputation of a girl, especially one as pretty as you, is a dedicate thing, Laila. Like a mynah bird in your hands, slacken your grips and away it flies" (Hosseini, 2007, p.146). When Laila's mother asked her about Tariq, she told her that he was like a brother to her but knew at heart that she was telling a lie as she was nurturing a feeling of love for him. As a weak female, she is overwhelmed with emotions of love for Tariq, leading to her pregnancy. She later decides to marry Rasheed to legitimize her illegitimate pregnancy and give her baby a father's name. Laila accepted all the atrocities laid down on her and Aziza by Rasheed but couldn't do anything as she was helpless. She had to send Aziza to the orphanage. Furthermore, she had to give birth to Zalmai, although at first she thought to abort the baby, but later, being a mother, she couldn't muster up the courage to do so. After Rasheed's murder, we see Laila is rattled, and later, like a traditional mother, she decides to leave Afghanistan for her children's safety.

Dismantling and Subverting Traditional Feminine Identities

In the previous section, we have seen how Nana, Mariam, and Laila are stereotypically constructed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Nonetheless, FPDA is a method of deconstructing the superficial surface structures that attempt to give close and unified meanings to the text. A deep analysis of the text reveals that all these female characters also resisted and subverted their stereotypical roles in Afghan society.

Women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* appear as living beings capable of thinking and acting the way they find suitable and exercising power. They are not always witnessed as mindlessly following the hegemonic ideals that fix their gender identity and give them a marginalized and powerless existence. Instead, they are seen as dynamic beings born to live, not to exist only. The three major female characters of the novel can be viewed differently than the hegemonic ideals. Let's comprehend their rebellion and subversion.

a. Nana

Nana, Mariam's mother, is a powerful character that is seen rebelling and acting against hegemonic ideals. Although one might see her as a victim of a male's sexual lust that resulted in her illegitimate pregnancy, she is not always seen behaving according to the traditional gender roles. Nana is a practical person who is not a traditional mother patting her child's back, over-protecting her, and making her weak and sensitive. Life has always been very harsh to Nana, so she brings to her daughter the accurate and grim picture of the world and tries to make Mariam brave. She asserts, "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that? Mariam" (Hosseini, 2007, p.7).

Nana, time and again, tells Mariam about Jalil's reality. Although Mariam never agreed to her till Nana commits suicide. After Nana's death, Mariam sees Jalil's real face and has to accept her destiny. Nana never compromised in her life. When Nana learns that she is pregnant of Jalil's baby and Jalil lays all the blame on her, she decides to leave Herat instead of seeing Jalil and his legitimate family enjoy while she suffers. She chooses to live alone in Kolba on the outskirts of Gul Daman independently. When Jalil refuses to take responsibility for his sin Nana not only gives birth to Mariam alone but also takes care of her till her last breath. She proves to be her daughter's only protector against all odds.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Nana is often observed to be rude and harsh towards Mariam, but at the same time, she is the only sincere and genuinely loving relationship Mariam ever cherishes. She was brave enough to cut the umbilical cord at Mariam's birth. Nana's insults, abuses, and rebuking expressed unconventional motherly love meant to make her daughter brave.

b. Mariam

The text of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* presents Mariam as the most tragic character. But if we critically analyze the novel, we would be surprised that she is not continuously mindlessly following the hegemonic ideals. She is, at times, a rebel. Her desire to go to school in a scenario when Nana could never think of sending her is a good example. Desire to go to cinema in Herat and go alone to visit Jalil's home, staying outside his gate all night, is entirely against hegemonic ideals. Once in the novel, one sees her sitting alone at her father's gate, waiting for his beneficence. Later in the novel, after Mariam gets married to Rasheed and leaves for Kabul, Mariam refuses to see Jalil when he comes to escort her and leaves Kabul without a goodbye. Mariam is courageous enough to reject Rasheed's marriage proposal. After many

years of Mariam's marriage, Jalil goes to Kabul to visit her place but she refuses to meet him and tears his letter of apology.

Mariam stands up against Rasheed's brutality and decides to flee with Aziza and Laila to Peshawar in the absence of Rasheed. Mariam is brave enough to bury her dead child's clothes with Rasheed's consent and without his assistance. After meeting Tariq, Rasheed's reality of being a deceiver and manipulator comes before Laila and Mariam. When Zalmai tells Rasheed about Tariq's arrival, he, in fear of revelation of his fraud and male chauvinism, decides to kill Laila, but Mariam cannot bear this, so she kills Rasheed with a shovel that is never expected from a wife,

Later Mariam is valiant enough to go to the police and confess everything she has done and is finally shot dead in front of the public. Mariam had a dignified death of a martyr who saved Laila and her children's lives and gifted them with prosperity, comfort, happiness, and joy.

b. Laila

Born in the cheers of her family, Laila is the one who comes before our eyes as the most rebellious from the hegemonic ideals. Her liberal parents brought her up. Her father, much closer to her than her mother, had a university education. He always believed in gender equality and insisted on giving his daughter proper education, confidence, and liberty. He was against hegemonic ideals.

Laila had a happy childhood. Her father, Bibi, was not a conservative traditionalist and never objected to Laila's and Tariq's friendship. Laila independently used to go to Tariq's house, have lunch with his family, and missed him inadequately in his absence. She even went to the cinema with him. Bibi took Laila and Tariq to see sculptures of Buddha in Bamiyan Valley, and all this was against hegemonic ideals that were very dear to most Afghans in that era. When Laila and Tariq grew up, they consummated their love, which led to Laila's pregnancy. As a result of this illegitimate pregnancy, Laila had to accept Rasheed's proposal to legitimise her illegitimate pregnancy. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it is not startling to see several incidents when Laila disagrees with Rasheed and argues with him, and Hosseini presents her as somebody who is audacious enough that in the strict laws of the Taliban, she decides to leave Afghanistan in the absence of Rasheed. This act was entirely unimaginable for her contemporary women in Afghanistan. Taliban were stringent with females. She is courageous enough to go alone to meet Aziza in the orphanage, knowing she can't go out without *Mahram*. She often had a severe beating at the hands of the Taliban but never lost courage. She comes before us as a very brave person, and in the end, we see her exercising great power over Tariq. Laila is seen assisting him in his hotel job in Murree and convincing him to move back to Afghanistan and restart their life there.

Conclusion

The male hegemonic society has devised specific traditional roles to be enacted by men and women that allocate them a particular gender. All human beings do not always stick to their traditional gender roles; instead, they perform the opposites too. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, we have focused on the three major female characters, Nana, Mariam, and Laila, who demonstrate that their gender identities are performative nature. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, most of the time, female characters are perceived as stereotypical beings, living and behaving

according to the traditional gender roles of marginalized people. But it is quite interesting that these female characters simultaneously deviate from hegemonic female ideals.

The application of FPDA demonstrates how the stereotypical construction of female characters temporarily fixes gender identities. However, these stereotypes are dismantled, and women's traditional roles are often subverted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

The study demonstrates how all human beings are exposed to several discourses that either work to empower males or counter masculine discourses by nullifying the effects and influences of masculine discourses and tend to empower females. Both types of discourses are always in a state of contestation and negotiation in order to give an unstable gender identity that is the result of following the conventional gender roles or deviating from them. Due to this reason, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, major female characters show the instability and flux of gender identity and power relations in the novel. This research provides a new perspective on gender identities and power relations as multi-dimensional and pluralistic. This study is exciting and opens new horizons for research.

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