

The Silent Soldiers: A Postcolonial Feminist Study of Selina Hossain's *River of My Blood* and Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

This paper attempts a postcolonial feminist interpretation of Selina Hossain's *River of My Blood* and Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to identify parallels between women protagonists – Boori, Mariam, Laila, Nita and Ramija – who grapple with political imbalance as well as social and sexual oppression in their respective conservative, patriarchal societies. Driven by nationalism as well as a desire for freedom, these Muslim women exhibit a passive resistance and embody the power of the socially and sexually oppressed as they traverse through pain and suffering in two war-torn countries, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. The resounding force of nature and folk and oral traditions in Hossain's rural village, Haldi, echo the imagery used in Hosseini's depiction of the bustling cities, Kabul and Herat. The significance of how women's cultural and social identities and their critical minds in postcolonial countries are closely identified with the linguistic traditions and folk culture of their societies is also highlighted. In accordance with the norms of postcolonial feminism, the significance of women's immeasurable sacrifices, as portrayed in the selected words, is examined and celebrated.

Keywords

Postcolonial feminism, Third World feminism, nationalism, Muslim women, folk, identity

Introduction

This paper attempts to draw a comparison between Bangladeshi writer Selina Hossain's novel *Hangor Nodi Grenade* (1976), translated into English as *River of My*

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Blood (2016) and Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), as both the works highlight emotional and physical complexities of the condition of women in Third World countries. Both Hossain and Hosseini manifest how the women protagonists use various forms of agency to give expression to their subaltern voices, defying political and social restrictions. The essence of Bangladesh is deeply rooted in the political and social struggles in the pre- and post-Liberation periods. From the Language Movement of 1952 to the War of Liberation in 1971, Bangladeshi women played a pivotal role in creating a Bangladeshi identity. Hossain's *River of My Blood* is an exposition of Boori, her rural, female psyche and her intricate role in the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 along with her friend Nita and her step-daughter-in-law Ramija.

While Bangladesh prides itself in its secular identity after a prolonged period of being under colonial rule, Afghanistan has been plagued with socio-political wars and religious conflicts for several decades. Hosseini's protagonists Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* masterfully expose the political, cultural and religious oppression of Afghan Muslim women throughout the transitions of political power from 1970 to 2003. Both the novels are situated in two Third World, Muslim majority countries – Bangladesh and Afghanistan – strikingly similar yet singularly different. Given this background, this paper draws comparisons between the novels and celebrates the strengths of third world women by examining the presence and immeasurable contributions of Third World women in literature. Prior to embarking upon an analysis of Hossain's novel, it is essential to gain an in-depth understanding of the history of Bangladesh, on which the following section sheds some light.

Historical Review of Feminism in Bangladesh

Born in 1971, Bangladesh is still a relatively young and developing nation. Previously part of Bengal, this region has a rich and diverse historical and cultural background. From the fourth to seventh centuries BC, this region was ruled successively by the Mauryas, Guptas and the Palas. During this time, Buddhists migrated to Bengal and enriched the local culture. From the 11th century, after almost two centuries of Hindu rule, Bakhtiyar Khilji established Muslim rule in Bengal. Soon after Khilji, the Sultanate of Bengal, during the 14th century, created a unified Muslim state in Bengal. The Mughals (Turco-Mongol-Chagatai from Central Asia and Afghanistan) took control of the Bengal region after the Sultans. In 1707, British colonisation over the Indian subcontinent began to play a role in influencing the cultural practices of the region. Thus, by the 18th century, Bengal's culture was a hybrid of the remnants of Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity co-existing with strong Islamic influences.

Subsequently in the 20th century, Muslims of Bengal were influenced by countries like Turkey which were witnessing sweeping reforms. Ghadially states that in the post-World War I period, Western influences of secularism and

extended communication networks resulted in a more “individual interpretation” of Islamic rules and traditions (1). This helped to further define the identity of the urban middle class and upper class Muslim and non-Muslim women of Bengal. Issues ranging from veiling (purdah), education, age of marriage, polygyny and divorce came under severe scrutiny.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), of the then undivided Bengal, exemplifies how women used their literary talents to modernise social views. A brave writer and social reformer, Rokeya strongly criticised the role of orthodox interpretations of purdah norms that subjugate women. However, Azim et al. assert that despite their efforts, middle class women’s “participation in these debates was also intense and engaged, but from the perspective of the mainstream male discourse, marginal to its outcome” (1). This encouraged women to fight for equal rights during the anticolonial movement of the 1920s and 30s and the Pakistan movement of the 1940s. Women’s involvement in political activism took off especially during the Language Movement of 1952 and Liberation War of 1971. Women joined hands with the *Muktijoddhas* (freedom fighters) and paved the way for the creation of an independent Bangladesh in 1971. In the post millennial era, the feminist movement in Bangladesh has progressed significantly, despite some political and social obstacles which still pervade society.

We will analyse Hossain’s novel which showcases the bloodiest nine-month war between East and West Pakistan. Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation after paying a terrible price in the form of innumerable rapes and killings.

Historical Review of Feminism in Afghanistan

The condition of women in Afghanistan also underwent dramatic changes in the 20th century. Afghanistan has various ethnic, religious and tribal groups living in a rugged landscape. The largest ethnic group is the Pashtuns, followed by Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Aimaq. Ghosh illustrates how up to the seventeenth century, Afghanistan was ruled by multifarious tribal and ethnic laws (3). Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, who ruled from 1880 to 1901, was the first ruler who tried to make Afghanistan a modern state. His son Amir Habibullah Khan, who continued to fulfil his father’s dream, was also responsible for bringing Mahmud Beg Tarzi back from exile. Tarzi, being educated in Turkey and Syria, introduced social reforms advocating democracy and women’s rights through his newspaper *Seraj ul Akhbhar* where he had a special section called “Celebrating Women of the World.” After Habibullah’s assassination, his son Amanullah defeated the British in the third Anglo-Afghan war of 1919 and embarked on a mission to liberate women from tribal cultural norms. By the late ’20s, when the monarchy raised the marriageable age of women to 18 and gave women the right to choose their own partners, a subversive coalition of opponents of Amanullah was created and

Amanullah was forced to flee the country. The central issue of women's rights was the main reason behind the fall of the monarchy in Afghanistan.

In the 1950s, with the assistance of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan embarked on yet another spurt of modernisation, when women were again encouraged to become nurses, doctors and teachers. Yet again, the Afghan fundamentalists were unhappy with the progressive social reforms in the 1970s. This led to the creation of the Mujahideen, who defeated the Soviets in 1989. The Mujahideen declared Afghanistan as an Islamic State in 1992 and deprived women of basic human rights, including the right to education. Ironically, in 1996 the Taliban thwarted the oppressive Mujahideen and established even more strict restrictions on women. Women were not allowed to leave their homes without a male companion. Nor could they visit male doctors.

Thus, feminism in Afghanistan is marred by conflicts between religion and power. From 2001, the democratic governments of the country are still struggling with the orthodox fundamentalists who do not believe in women's liberation. Hosseini, in his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, portrays the tumultuous times spanning the Soviet invasion to Taliban rule through the lives of Mariam and Laila. Having provided a historical background of women's involvement in public life in Bangladesh and Afghanistan, in what follows we will elucidate key theoretical conceptions of Third World feminism.

Important Theoretical Underpinnings

Postcolonial theories repudiate the colonisers' discourse and its shaping of the experiences and realities of the colonised, focusing on resistance to colonial powers and the resulting impact upon the discourse in colonised nations. Postcolonial feminism integrates indigenous ideas with Third World feminist ideas and discusses the representation of women in "once colonized countries" (Tyagi 45), which is deeply embedded in nationalism. Therefore, postcolonial feminism in Third World countries invariably has strong political connotations and, as a result, the identity of a Third World feminist is implicitly nurtured by internal ideologies and socio-political factors.

In order to realise a fair and just picture of women in colonised nations, it is essential to employ Third World feminist perspectives; however, Tyagi points out that though feminism seeks to empower women by transcending national boundaries and geographical distances, nationalism "has exaggerated such characteristics and boundaries in order to resist hegemonic occupation" (Tyagi 46). Citing Ketu Katrak, Tyagi notes that Indian nationalism, during Gandhi's resistance to British colonial rule in the 1920s and 30s, tried to control female bodies by imprisoning them into stereotypes, "where females symbolised the pre-colonial, the traditional, and the untouched domestic spaces" (46). Likewise, Peterson and Rutherford opine that Third World women were in a precarious condition of "double colonization" (qtd. in Tyagi 45) as they simultaneously

experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy in the postcolonial period.

In contrast, Mohanty (338) criticises First World feminism, stating that Third World women are perceived as “powerless,” “exploited” and “sexually harassed.” From the Western viewpoint, consequently, a misconception of Third World feminist discourse as a “discourse of the weak” has been created by these faulty assumptions. In her opinion, Third World women are a composite and singular construction, not victims of patriarchy and traditional culture; hence a unique position of Third World women embracing their socio-political background and inter-relationships with other colonised women is advocated by Third World feminism. Crowley concurs with this view as she says, “the descriptive and normative dimensions of western feminism are found to be sadly lacking when applied to non-western societies” (44).

Crowley further notes that nationalistic movements are nominally pro-feminist, citing the examples of some Islamic nationalist movements such as those of Iran and Algeria. She also shows how Eritrean women, who fought in the frontlines during a nationalistic movement, had to conform to Islamic rules when they returned home. As a result, the liberation of women, although a priority for Muslims theoretically, is fraught with “huge dilemmas, when confronted with the forces of religious fervor and traditionalism” (Crowley 49). Moreover, Mernissi explains that “both modernity and tradition confront each other with dramatic consequences for relations between sexes” (8). Therefore, in Third World countries, a postcolonial feminist approach must incorporate cultural dimensions to comprehend the varied forms of agency used by women to make their voices heard. The next section discusses the selected novels in the light of postcolonial feminist theory.

Background of the Novels

Selina Hossain, a prolific writer, explores different dimensions of the experiences of women in Bangladesh in *River of My Blood*, where the central image is an explicit metaphor of the pain and struggles of women not only during the Liberation War but also in society at large. The central character of Hossain’s captivating story is Boori (which literally means “an old woman”), the youngest of twelve children, a rambunctious, spirited young girl with preferences and a mind of her own, who does not conform to the stereotypical role of the docile daughter. The novel is in ten parts and named after the Bengali seasons, and readers traverse down memory lane as Boori relates her life-story along with those of her friend Nita and daughter-in-law Ramija. She lives out her entire life in Haldi, a typical, traditional, rural backwater, Bangladeshi village, and continues to yearn for freedom as she progresses through puberty, her first love, heartbreak, marriage and motherhood.

Within this tapestry, Hossain skilfully interweaves the events of the bloody and violent Liberation War.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Khaled Hosseini captures the essence of Third World women and their struggles through several diverse, socio-political movements through his narrative of Mariam and Laila, two co-wives in war-torn Afghanistan. The novel is divided into three parts and tells the stories of Mariam, then Laila and, finally, integrates both protagonists' narratives within which Hosseini masterfully interweaves the political and cultural shifts in Afghanistan. Though the women and narratives belong to different times and places there are recurrent themes and strong resemblances between the lives, events and thoughts of Mariam and Laila and Boori, Ramija and Nita.

Childhood, Desire for Freedom, Marriage and Oppression

Hossain begins with: "Red is blood is birth is life is.... Or is it the other way round?" (1). She thus establishes the undeniable significance of blood in a woman's life, and further reinforces this image with: "Red was the colour of her earliest memories, the seeds that burst and rooted in the shallows where the crane stalked fish" (Hossain 1). The first glimpse into Boori's train of thoughts shows her to be unhappy that her father Ramjan Ali named her "Boori"; she feels "fractious" when people utter her name, and she would prefer to have been named "Noori, Nargis or Yasmeen." So, from the very beginning, she has a mind and opinion of her own. Despite being different from her siblings and despite hearing the unwanted judgemental comments from her neighbours, her mother supports her completely as she lets "her grow up with her own ideas as long as it suited her. The villagers were silenced" (Hossain 2). But references are made to the transient, ephemeral state of things which will not last and soon change for the worse when she is described "as a drop of water on a *maankochu* leaf" (Hossain 4), and compared to a small fly hovering over the damp swamp grass (Hossain 4).

Through Boori's interactions with her classmate Jalil, we learn about the position of women in an ultra-conservative, patriarchal society. Boori is desirous of freedom and independence and declares, "I will go! Definitely! I'll go away one of these days!" (Hossain 4). However, she also has a deep rooted understanding and realisation of her position as a woman in a patriarchal society as she reasons that: "she knew that in reality they were not the same. Jalil was a boy and that made all the difference!" (Hossain 4). This difference is reinforced by the fact that Jalil was allowed to have dreams and ambitions of moving out of Haldi one day whereas Boori had to fit in with her surroundings and forget any such elusive, unrealistic dreams, and so she "blended into village life like an insect camouflaged against bark or foliage – she wanted so many things, but they were beyond her reach – her dreams faded like the mail train into a faraway land" (Hossain 5).

She had immense curiosity for the world “outside Haldi,” and wanted freedom and a life outside the confines of the village as she wants to be like a free bird and envies Jalil for his independence. However, conforming to the tenets of Third World feminism, she accepts her father’s decision and discontinues her education after primary school; her acceptance of this decision without any fuss is because of her sense of her helplessness. Before Jalil leaves for Dhaka, he professes his love for her, but Boori is unable to leave her parents and defy societal norms, and consequently cannot muster up the courage to reciprocate his love. Soon after Jalil’s departure from Haldi, Boori’s father dies, thus drastically changing her life forever. She soon reaches puberty and has her first menstruation; her once supportive mother now says that “it’s not safe for girls when the red river flows... it’s like a burning fire!” (Hossain 12). This red river imagery concurs with the imagery at the beginning of the novel. Unable to comprehend the deeper meanings of such banter at such an early age, Boori docilely surrenders to the will of her family and marries her cousin Gafoor, a much older widower with children, thus reinforcing the double standards of patriarchy where an innocent child is married off to a previously married older man.

Despite her meek acceptance of her marriage arrangements, Boori was secretly happy. Hossain presents Boori as a rebel in spirit when she states that Boori “was bored to death in her own village. At long last, she would be free to venture beyond the borders of Haldi. She longed to get on a boat and see the world” (Hossain 13). Unfortunately, she was married in the same village and her new home was just a few steps from her mother’s home. Instead of freedom she was confined to yet another room in her husband Gafoor’s house. Her typical, daily, rural housewifely chores are juxtaposed with her constantly wandering mind; while caring for her stepsons Salim and Kalim, her thoughts would flit like a butterfly crossing the boundaries of Haldi village. She wonders if she would have been better off with her childhood crush Jalil and regrets that she let him “slip through her fingers” (Hossain 17). Sometimes, she finds Gafoor’s presence unbearable and “she could sense a storm shatter the inside of her heart” (Hossain 17). This reminds us of Susan, in Doris Lessing’s *To Room Nineteen* (1963), who yearns to get away from her troubled domestic life and finds refuge in a rented room. Although Boori does not face any existential crisis after her marriage, she still desires a refuge of her own. She finds refuge in nature. Lessing depicts the dichotomy of the intellect and instinct through Susan and a similar dichotomy is depicted in Boori in the pre-Liberation era of Bangladesh by infusing the beauty of rural Haldi in the narrative: “the birds chirped, as the cold wind blew over the tree tops; the branches of the *sajna* swayed in the air – Boori sat with her legs stretched out” (Hossain 17). For a rural housewife, sitting with outstretched legs is looked down upon by society. But when she is in nature, she feels free to

question her own life and, like Lessing's Susan, totally immerses herself in Haldi's green setting and the Shomeshwari river.

Hosseini's plot begins with the story of Mariam, the illegitimate child of Jalil, a Herat merchant, and his former maid. Mariam lives with her rather indifferent, uncaring mother Nana in Gul Daman, a bustling city, two kilometres away from Herat and is known as "harami" (illegitimate) by her own mother and the neighbours, though her father visits them every Thursday. Despite her orientation in a strong patriarchal community, at the age of 15 in 1974, Mariam rebels against the injustice done to her, hoping her father and his legitimate family will accept her and let her live with them. Defying her mother's advice, she boldly decides to travel alone and "for the first time in her life, headed down the hill for Herat" (Hosseini 30). Guha notes that "when a victim, however timid, comes to regard herself as an object of injustice, she already steps into the role of a critic of the system that victimizes her" (qtd. in Raheja 177). However, her rebellion fails as her father refuses to see her and her mother, terrified that her daughter has deserted her, commits suicide. Thus, like Boori, Mariam is all alone and helpless at a young age and in an analogous way she is also forced by her father to marry Rasheed, who is 30 years older. Just like Boori, Mariam is subjected to a life of domestic submission after her move to her husband's house in Kabul; she too is circumscribed by religion and society when her husband ceremoniously gives her a stereotypical Burqa. Mariam's feelings of confinement and oppression echo Boori's: "the padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen... the loss of peripheral vision was unnerving..." (Hosseini 71).

Mariam appears to be "a silent woman" who chooses not to rebel against oppression. This silence can be analysed in several ways. Spivak noted that "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (104). Therefore, subjugated women's sufferings are never noticed. Mohanty points out that western feminists assert that subaltern Third World women like Mariam cannot be heard because society is not ready to listen to them. Just as Boori accepted her father's wishes, Mariam also knows that in order to live and survive she must obey her father. Her husband Rasheed shows the cruelty of patriarchy, symbolic of aggressive religious ideologies and Taliban teachings in Afghanistan, where women are only procreators, not equal human beings. Synonymous to Boori's transformation during the Liberation War, Mariam transforms into a brave soul, sacrificing her own life to save Laila.

Hosseini's second protagonist, Laila, was born in Kabul in 1978, the same year "a new" Afghanistan was born (Hosseini 100). Against the backdrop of the Russian Communist Afghan regime, Laila exists in the shadows of her brothers, Ahmad and Noor, who join the anti-Soviet Mujahideen movement when Laila is two years old. We are here reminded of Boori's stepson Salim who joins the War of Liberation in *River of My Blood*. Laila's mother is obsessed with her sons

and neglects Laila. The plot parallels Mariam's story as she was also neglected in her childhood by her mother and everyone else because of her illegitimacy. Like Boori and Jalil, Laila cherishes the friendship and protection of her childhood friend Tariq, with whom she shares a sense of familiarity and comfort as they grow up together and later become romantically involved despite the strict guidelines of Afghan society. Jalil opened up horizons in Boori's life with stories of faraway lands and, similarly, Tariq gave Laila comic relief from the crisis and tensions of her nation and her family. Unlike Boori's authoritarian father and Mariam's passive father, Laila's father Hakim is a scholar who believes in equal rights for men and women. Despite his wife's apathy towards Laila, Hakeem instilled a fierce love for knowledge in Laila and allowed her relationship with Tariq to blossom. Hosseini illustrates Laila's aspirations through the words of her friend:

By the time we're twenty, Giti and I we'll have pushed out four, five kids each. But you, Laila, you'll make us two dummies proud. You're going to be somebody, I know one day I'll pick up a newspaper and find your picture on the front page." (Hosseini 163)

With the Afghan civil war, the Mujahideen find "the enemy in each other" (Hosseini 169). In this chaotic historical period, Tariq's family decides to move from Kabul, and he proposes to Laila and wants to take her away from Kabul. Unfortunately, torn between her love for her parents and Tariq, Laila, like Boori, chooses to stay with her family. Laila's parents die in a rocket attack soon after Tariq leaves and her idyllic life crumbles suddenly. Her marriage happens with the backdrop of the civil war and a strong Taliban patriarchal society as her neighbour, Rasheed, rescues her. Rasheed's wife Mariam nurses Laila like an affectionate mother, but a crisis arises when the sixty year old Rasheed decides to marry the fourteen year old Laila, justifying his actions to Mariam in the following words: "We need to legitimize this situation.... People will talk. It looks dishonourable, an unmarried young woman living here. It's bad for my reputation. And hers. And yours" (Hosseini 208). Despite Mariam's pleas, Rasheed is resolute in his decision and Mariam, like a typical Third World woman, surrenders to her husband's will. Thus, when Mariam conveys Rasheed's proposal to Laila, Laila accepts it without any protest. Laila's silence is, however, different from Mariam's since she knows that she is pregnant with Tariq's child. Since she was informed that Tariq died in the war, she accepts the reality of her situation but she also willingly embraces deceit to keep her love alive in her womb and in her heart. She turns her silence into a rebellion. This is a perfect example of how Third World women endure double colonisation. She is simultaneously a victim of the chaos of colonial rule in Afghanistan and the patriarchal forces of power within postcolonial society, and a rebel showing passive resistance. Silence

changes the nature of women as they develop as strong women at the end of the narrative.

At first Mariam is strongly opposed to Laila and even repulsed by her sight but the relationship changes when she witnesses oppression being inflicted on young Laila. Soon after their marriage, Rasheed ceremoniously gives Laila a Burqa, in the same way that he had given one to Mariam. Interestingly, while Mariam felt suffocated on first wearing the Burqa, Laila initially feels fear and suffocation but later finds comfort in the confinement, as it conceals her true identity, and her shattered dreams and aspirations from the prying, pitying eyes of her acquaintances: "she wouldn't have to watch the surprise in their eyes, or the pity or the glee, at how far she had fallen, at how her lofty aspirations had been dashed" (Hosseini 226).

Having been raised and mentored by a progressive father, Laila finds this confinement very difficult and yearns to leave the four walls of her husband's house. Her sense of confinement is described thus: "that winter, everywhere Laila turned, walls blocked her way. She thought longingly of the wide-open skies of her childhood, of her days of going to *buzkashi* tournaments with Babi and shopping at Mandaii with Mammy, of her days of running free in the streets" (Hosseini 224). We hear echoes of Boori's ruminations of her childhood days as she runs freely in her beloved Haldi. Boori, Laila and Mariam feel confined and restricted at some point of their lives.

While Boori had the freedom to wander around in her village Haldi, Laila does not have the same liberty. Boori was a free spirited young wife, ignoring all the malicious comments of her neighbours but, unlike Mariam and Laila, she had the love and support of her husband Gafoor who gave her complete freedom. Boori also harboured her secret love for Jalil in her heart, even after her marriage. Laila harbours her love for Tariq and endures the oppression of her husband only to ensure the birth of her and Tariq's baby. While Boori is impulsive and spontaneous, Laila is more calculative and manipulative, because on her marriage night after having intercourse with Rasheed, she deliberately pricks her finger and bleeds a few drops of her blood on the bed sheet, to convince Rasheed of her virginity. Her secret dreams are carefully nurtured within her womb. This brings us to the symbolic power of motherhood in the two Third World countries featured in the novels.

Motherhood and Heartbreak

In the fourth year of marriage, Boori yearns for her own child, stating: "I want to have my own flesh and blood, a baby from my womb and the river of my blood... mine!" (Hossain 26) She seems to be searching for a more powerful identity for herself through her child; her wandering spirit wants new experiences to prevent her soul from being crushed by the monotony of domestic life: "she longed for something new, something different" (Hossain 26). Village women advise her to

give up her random trips to the river and impulsive walks in open fields and suggest, “women should not move so freely” (Hossain 27). They believe that a free spirited woman like her could never have a child. These patriarchal attitudes affected Boori immensely. She “clammed up, within herself, swinging in a cradle of doubts. What would her going out have anything to do with having a baby?” (Hossain 27). But ultimately she sacrifices her spontaneity in the hopes of becoming a mother. Though this sacrifice may be viewed by some as a defeat, Mohanty points out the discrepancy between western feminism and Third World feminism saying:

[T]he homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials, but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals. What binds women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression. It is at this point that an elision takes place between ‘women’ as a discursively constructed group and ‘women’ as material subjects of their own history. Thus, the discursively consensual homogeneity of ‘women’ as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women. This results in an assumption of women as an always-already constituted group, one which has been labelled ‘powerless,’ ‘exploited,’ ‘sexually harassed,’ etc., by feminist scientific, economic, legal and sociological discourses. (337-38)

Two years later, after following every piece of advice and superstitious practices prescribed by others including a painstaking trip to seek Kesa Baba’s blessings, Boori’s desire is fulfilled when her son, Rais, is born. Boori’s desire for motherhood may seem a surrender to patriarchal pressures imposed on women but it is significant in establishing Boori’s character as an independent woman. Her inner spirit and her thirst for freedom seem to integrate with the face of Rais. But, unfortunately, she soon discovers that Rais is mute and all her hopes of raising her son as an ideal, strong man of Haldi are crushed. She reconciles with the fact that Rais will never call her “Maa” and will never be a fisherman like his father or step-brothers.

Laila’s experience of motherhood too is fraught with pain and suffering. At the onset she is tricked into marrying Rasheed, an abusive, tyrannical, old, married man, just to give her unborn love-child the stamp of legitimacy. She willingly marries Rasheed and deceives him by pricking a finger to bleed a few drops of blood after the consummation of their marriage in order to secure her unborn child’s social safety and security. But with the birth of her child, who is a girl and not the much desired boy of patriarchal societies, her existence becomes bleaker. Rasheed, who knew about Tariq all along and had her lied to about his death, suspects the child is not his and becomes increasingly abusive. Hosseini highlights the male chauvinistic perspective by portraying the reaction of Rasheed towards

a girl child as he never calls his daughter by her name, Aziza. He hates her because she is not a son and to him, she is just a nuisance and he even expresses a desire to "put that thing in a box and let her float down Kabul River" (Hosseini 231). Finally, he has his way and sends Aziza to an orphanage. But Laila's resolve is always unwavering; her resolve is seen when she is beaten by both Rasheed and the Taliban for going to Aziza's orphanage alone, without any "mahram," but this incident does not prevent her from visiting her daughter Aziza again and again. Her strength is also seen when she gives birth via caesarean section to Rasheed's son Zalmai, without any anaesthesia as per oppressive, tyrannical, patriarchal, Taliban dictates.

Like Boori, Mariam undergoes similar motherhood pangs. During her first pregnancy "when Mariam thought of this baby, her heart swelled inside of her. It swelled and swelled until all the loss, all the grief, all the loneliness and self-abasement of her life washed away" (Hosseini 88). For her it was a chance to prove her power to Rasheed but sadly, she miscarries and is forced to bury her child on her own, just like Hardy's Tess who buried her child Sorrow (Hardy 148), as Mariam's husband Rasheed refuses to acknowledge the existence of a dead baby. For a mother like Mariam, even her aborted baby has an identity but her sense of equity is left unheard by the people around her. After seven miscarriages, Mariam's identity as a Third World woman who is barren suffocates her. She endures years of physical and mental torture inflicted by Rasheed, in silence, just like Boori's daughter-in-law, Ramija. Whenever Mariam speaks, she is punished; though she understands the injustice of her situation she has no other option except to obey passively in order to survive. This seems to support Spivak's observation that in the Third World, patriarchy is not ready to hear women's voices. When Laila enters her life, Mariam's motherly instincts are aroused and she lovingly nurses her almost like a mother. But soon their relationship is challenged as Laila becomes her co-wife and later gives birth to Aziza. Initially, Mariam was apathetic towards the new baby, but upon observing Laila taking care of Aziza, her heart softened: "the strange thing was, the girl's fall from grace ought to have pleased Mariam, brought her a sense of vindication... but it didn't. It didn't to her own surprise.... Mariam found herself pitying the girl" (Hosseini 233). When Rasheed sends Aziza to an orphanage, the two women share the pain of losing a child together and both secretly sneak out of the house to visit Aziza on different occasions. Mariam's sense of loss and the indescribable vacuum of her life is filled up when Laila enters her life, thus a kind of mother-daughter relationship develops between the two co-wives. This unusual mother-daughter bond further strengthens when Laila stops Rasheed from beating Mariam one night; the older woman feels grateful towards Laila and gradually, a very warm relationship, reminiscent of a sisterhood, develops between Laila and Mariam, which brings us to the themes of sisterhood present in the two novels.

Empowering Bonds of Sisterhood

A significant aspect of Hossain's plot is the presence of Boori's friend Nita, the "Baul minstrel." Bauls live a bohemian life, traversing open lands, singing songs of humanity and God. They live on offerings from devotees and do not believe in domesticity, and they never get married or settle down. Nita and Boori have a very strong connection and Nita appears at her doorstep after prolonged periods of time, sometimes months, and provides Boori with a macrocosmic view of the outside world with her stories of faraway lands and people. This fascinates Boori and reminds her of her past: "Nita reminded Boori of Jalil... he was a free man too" (Hossain 31). Nita epitomises the freedom and liberation that all rural Bangladeshi women crave. Her dishevelled appearance contrasts the ideal picture of a domestic housewife. As Boori is deemed a rebel within her community, she feels a strange affinity to Nita. At one point, Boori impulsively tells Nita, "no, please take me with you" (Hossain 31). Their strong bond is like a sisterhood, as they support each other with all their heart throughout their trials: Nita's first partner Ramdas's death; Boori's pregnancy and motherhood struggles. Nita is much older than Boori and this adds an interesting dimension to the plot. Lamb asserts that the role of the older woman in the South Asian oral tradition is essential in comprehending the true meaning of womanhood in the region; as such, stories provide women with a "forum for presenting an alternate way of looking at things, a way that resonates more soundly with the ambiguities of their own life experiences" (Lamb 68). Boori hears Nita's song echoing through the open fields of Haldi and knows she will see her "*soi*" (friend) soon. Thus Boori and Nita maintain a sense of solidarity and kinship, as they face the trials and tribulations of life.

When Boori's stepson Salim gets married, she develops a similar solidarity with her daughter-in-law Ramija. Ramija instantly blends in with the family and becomes Boori's companion but, when Salim physically and mentally torments Ramija, Boori does not help her as she does not want to interfere in her son's personal life. Like other typical Third World women, Ramija accepts her fate and Salim's scornful behaviour and understands that Boori, though affectionate towards her, cannot help. During the Liberation War we see Boori's protective motherly-cum-sisterly instincts when she insists upon sending Ramija and her new-born child to her father's home for her own protection, as Pakistani soldiers are on the rampage, raping and abducting young women. On Ramija's part we see her distraught at being sent away and requesting her neighbours to take care of Boori, her mother-cum-sister. Boori's character grows in leaps and bounds through her interaction with the two women in her life.

Similarly, after the birth of Aziza, a warm, strong relationship grows between Mariam and Laila. Mariam has sisterly, motherly and grandmotherly feelings for Laila's two children whom she cares for and teaches. Both women share the

common pain of Aziza being sent to the orphanage and routinely sneak out to see the child, defying their husband Rasheed and the tyrannical Taliban. They become confidantes and best friends and even try to run away with Aziza from Kabul and Rasheed, but Rasheed catches them at the bus stop, severely beats up both of them and deprives them of water for several days and almost kills them and the child Aziza. Thus, both are routinely mentally and physically abused by their husband. Mariam knows very well that Laila and Tariq plan to reunite and yet she conceals it from everyone. Ultimately, Mariam murders Rasheed to protect Laila, her daughter-cum-sister, from being murdered. In the character of Mariam, Hosseini explicitly shows how a lifetime of anger, suppression, frustration and anguish can change a woman completely. A much stronger Mariam emerges at the end as Sindhu points out:

Mariam who never shows any sign of rebellion against Rasheed and his barbarous beating, gained courage to fight back and ultimately kill Rasheed by love and respect that she received from Laila and her children. Mariam makes a calculated decision to kill Rasheed as he is in act of murdering Laila. Mariam makes sure that Rasheed sees her so that he can acknowledge her action. (304)

This reminds us of the very close relationship between Boori and Nita and also between Boori and Ramija in Hossain's *River of My Blood*. These women depend on each other in times of crisis – both personal and political. They are comrades who understand each other. Ramija is Boori's daughter-in-law, who transforms into a companion and fellow comrade during the Liberation War as they suffer through the pain of losing Selim, Kalim and Rais. Although Nita is a bohemian, her intense affinity with Boori's independent spirit makes her a soul sister. Nita was present in Boori's house when Boori decided to sacrifice her son Rais to save the muktijoddhas. Mariam's role is similar to Nita's presence in *River of My Blood*, because Mariam transforms into a silent supporter and an anchor for Laila. Her role is glorified at the end of the plot when she takes revenge and kills Rasheed with her own hands. Thus through their bonds of sisterhood these women are sustained in extremely difficult, trying and defining situations in their lives. This brings us to the overwhelming themes of war, violence, death, loss and upheaval at both the personal and national levels that permeate both these narratives.

War, Bloodshed, Loss and Sacrifice

The political storm sweeping East Pakistan in the late 60s begins to affect life in the small village of Haldi and violently rips apart the very fabric of Boori's existence and family. The tone, mood and discourse in *River of My Blood* changes drastically as the War of Liberation, Muktijuddho, begins. Boori's stepson Salim becomes a muktijoddha or a freedom fighter and actively participates in the Liberation War of Bangladesh. This transforms Boori totally; she is extremely

proud of Salim for trying to uphold the rights of Bangladeshis. She regrets that her own son Rais cannot fight in the war because of his disability. We get a glimpse of a Muktiyoddha's mother's pride when her younger stepson Kalim, who stayed home to look after the family, is taken, tortured and brought back by Pakistani soldiers. Reaching the front door of Boori's house, they shout, "You mother of an infidel, open the door" (Hossain 145), and despite being crestfallen upon seeing Kalim's disfigured, bloodied face, and despite her pain, she says to herself, "why do you keep your head down Kalim?... you must look up, son... let the flames blaze your tiger eyes... let Haldi be born again" (Hossain 146). Even as Kalim is tortured and killed, she strokes his head with blood soaked fingers and thinks to herself, "the blood streaming from Kalim's body conjured up crimson cascades of *shimul* flowers" (Hossain 149). Thus in her mind she juxtaposes blood red flowers with the red blood on Kalim's body. Later two young neighbours, Kader and Hakim, who are freedom fighters, take refuge in her house while her friend-cum-sister Nita is also at her house as her companion. Boori hears the distant gunshots and screams of the agitated soldiers when the Pakistani army enters Haldi and she panics and wonders how to save Kader and Hakim as "their very lives were in her hands now. And theirs were precious lives, ones that must live on" (Hossain 186). The narrator, describes the ensuing scene when in her moment of fear and frenzy, Boori suddenly looks at her own mute son Rais, and states:

He was snoring, unperturbed. Boori peered down at his face and inhaled his breath. It smelled like the sweet faces of Kader and Hakim, the day they left their home for *muktijuddho*. She felt she was at the centre of her people, huddled together with lights cupped in their hands. An oracle whispered in her ears, 'There's no time to loiter and stare.... Life is full of fear.' (Hossain 187)

In a split second decision when the soldiers demand to search her house for muktijoddhas, she shoves a gun in Rais's hands and presents him in front of the soldiers. In her perception they, namely, Boori, Kader and Hakim were fighting for the freedom of their "Sonar Bangla," at the cost of their own lives and so she was no longer Rais's "Maa," but "the mother of all Bangladeshis" (Hossain 188). Boori's actions, however controversial, illustrates the helplessness of the times. War can alter someone's reality as well as his/her identity. Boori sheds her identity as Rais' mother and transforms into a mother for the Muktiyoddhas – a silent soldier. It is a heart-breaking decision. Hossain wonderfully blends physical reality with psychical reality in an attempt to portray the selfless sacrifices of women during the Liberation War. Even Rais's death brilliantly integrates folk culture when, on seeing Rais's dead body, Nita consoles Boori saying: "Stop crying, dear. Did you see how

your Rais changed into a blood lotus?" (Hossain 190). Boori imagines that "her hut-her pond-her land-her river-her hands caught between the crosshairs of history. Everything turned red" (Hossain 191).

In resonance with Hossain, Hosseini's narrative is also pervaded by the anti-Soviet war of the Mujahideen as well as the bloody Afghan civil war ignited by the Taliban. Mariam and Laila are married to a tyrannical Taliban supporter, Rasheed. Laila's brothers are Mujahideen fighters who died when she was young. Her lover and companion Tariq and his family leave Kabul because of the civil war. Her mother fanatically supports the Mujahideen, refusing to move out of Kabul which ultimately led to Laila's injury and the death of both of her parents in a rocket blast. Taking advantage of Laila's orphanhood, the general strife and chaos, her cunning old neighbour Rasheed conspires with fellow Taliban supporter Abdul Sharif and gives Laila the fake news of Tariq's death and forces her into marriage. Thus the consecutive and ongoing Afghan wars are depicted in gory detail. Hosseini shows the injustice of the supposedly Islamic strictures imposed by the Taliban, and exposes the victimisation of women in a misrepresentation of Muslim ideals in a Muslim country. Finally, this tyranny leads to Rasheed's murder by Mariam to save Laila. Mariam further elevates herself as a woman and strongly defines her freedom of choice and sense of independence by refusing to go away with Laila and Tariq and deciding to surrender to the Taliban. After a short trial the Taliban predictably sentence her to death and she faces her executioners calmly and serenely as in her mind she thinks of all the women who have guided her and given her strength: Nana, Bibi, Laila and Aziza. Her serenity and demeanour reflect the serenity and true happiness that Laila finds with her long lost love Tariq, her children and the legacy of Mariam's lasting love. Thus we see a gentle helpless woman metamorphose into a fearless, brave silent soldier who makes the ultimate sacrifice of her own self.

Conclusion

Lamb suggests that South Asian women have a complex and multifaceted identity on account of their long standing humiliation and oppression. Women like Mariam and Boori tell stories from a "mother's perspective," focusing on their "powerlessness," presenting their identity as "beggared and displaced" women (Lamb 55). According to Lamb,

through such oral narratives... many Bengali women scrutinize and critique the social worlds they experience, giving voice to their experiences through the language of story.... Their narratives form, then, a kind of subaltern voice, through which they present alternate visions of motherhood and a woman's old age. (Lamb 55)

Mariam, who is a mother/sister to Laila, after dwelling in silence for so long, decided to finally act on her repressed feelings. Her act of killing Rasheed may be seen in this light because, for the first time she feels liberated. The displaced oppressed woman finds an agency through which she can exert her power. Shameem evaluated Hosseini's motives in the portrayal of his women protagonists by commenting that perhaps the prolonged conditions of conflict in Afghanistan from the 1970s to 2003 have adversely impacted its women by "exacerbating patriarchal oppression" on them and consequently forcing them to undergo "unbounded pain and suffering. This pain and suffering was cast in their voicelessness" (65). Shameem reiterates that Hosseini shows that Afghan women have a voice by bringing their suffering to the forefront (65). Hossain in her narrative perhaps does the same. The Spivakian voicelessness or the silence of Boori, Ramija, Mariam and Laila prove to be potently powerful as they develop as human beings and as women. As a result, "silent women" who fight for liberty, justice and equal rights are finally given a voice of some sort. Thus Selina Hossain and Khaled Hosseini masterfully depict and bring to life gentle, powerless, compliant "silent women" who make brave, empowering decisions by sacrificing their loved possessions and emerging as unforgettable "silent soldiers" whose sacrifices, contributions and "silent voices" can no longer be denied or ignored.

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