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# Muslim English Literature

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# Gender and Fundamentalism in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to challenge the reductionist views of Islam and Muslim women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2017). In doing so, this paper explores the connection of gender discourse with the Islamic political movement in Hosseini's novel. It also seeks to challenge the gendered bias in the novel by using Amina Wadud's concept of Islamic Feminism. Through the subjugated life of women's characters, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is applied to give an in-depth analysis of gender relations and fundamentalism in the novel. The research focuses on understanding misogynist attempts that marginalized women and legitimized gender inequality. The findings indicate that hegemonic masculinity is unquestionably backed up under the fundamentalist's reign of the Mujahideen and the Taliban with their implementation of Sharia law. Furthermore, the characters have shown dissimilar attitudes in facing the situations. As the main male character, Rasheed is depicted as a manifestation of the misogynistic setting created by both regimes. Meanwhile, the two main female characters show strength, resistance, and resilience in facing the unequal systems. However, while the fundamentalist justifies their action by using Islam as their shield, it is written in the Quran that Islam never discriminates against women but encourages their fundamental rights. Thus, Hosseini's novel complicates the ideas of gender, fundamentalism, and masculinity through the complex relationships of his characters within their families and societies. However, these complex societies do not represent Islam or the Muslim communities as the Muslim world is not only Afghanistan, but many countries, such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia practice Islam in a very different way from those in Afghanistan and Hosseini's novel.

**Keywords:** *Hegemonic Masculinity, Resistance, Islamic Law, Taliban, Islamic Feminism.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Afghan women have suffered oppression, exclusion, and deprivation resulting from cultural beliefs and interpretations of religious beliefs (Newton). The inequality is so prevalent that it has become the culture's norm (Akhtar, Rauf, Ikram, & Raees). The sociocultural idea about gender roles has jeopardized women because it causes most men to engage in misogynist practices, preserving gender order and utilizing social constructions of masculinity to justify it. Despite the rise of Islamic fundamentalist groups, public or private matters have been highly gendered despite the great efforts to demand social change and empower women. Despite the extensive protest, under the leadership of King Amanullah and the People Democratic Party of Afghanistan, women had a greater position in society. However, the rapid social changes had tragically ended in total decline and encouraged the birth of the Mujahideen and the Taliban.

The Mujahideen (1992-1996) and the Taliban (1996-2001) emergence endorsed women's vulnerability, put men's ascendancy at its highest level, and used religion as a tool of resistance to men's superiority. Many women were left vulnerable under "Islamization," so many men participated in the maintenance of unjust gender relations, and sexist practices used social and religion's constructions of masculinity to justify it. Such inequality was so omnipotent, giving men the potential ability to affirm their dominance and perpetuate the hegemonic masculinity in the society.

Hegemonic masculinity is a form of practice that legitimizes men's domination who involves a specific strategy for the subordination of women (Donaldson). Further, Messerschmidt (Messerschmidt) defined hegemonic masculinity as a form of masculinity that legitimate and unequal relationship between men and women (Messerschmidt). This concept was formulated "to acknowledge the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal gender order" (Connell and Messerschmidt 848). It does not certainly address what powerful men are but is underlining what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support. As a concept, hegemonic masculinity is an output of historical and cultural circumstances that carries an essential role in constructing men's gender identity. In Muslim society, gender construction is closely related to a religious text. Hasyim explains that it can be seen how Islamic verse on male leadership over women (Surah an-Nisa: 34) influences men in shaping their self-concept and directing men to behave in a certain way toward women (Hasyim). Thus, it builds a patriarchal interaction both on individual or societal level.

However, the Quran, as a statement of God, is definitely unchallengeable and representational wording of the Qur'an is not decisive, it is important to stress that the Quran, which is the most authoritative source of Islam, does not discriminate against women (Udoh). In fact, one verse in the Qur'an is dedicated specifically to women (Saiful and Fendri). One of the causes, why Qur'an maintains man's superiority and domination over women is the interpretation of Qur'an, was formulated in the structure of patriarchal society, in addition to religious texts in the formative period of religion written by the male scholars. Thus, men's interpretation of the Qur'an forms the basis of Islamic law, application, and practice. Consequently, Muslim women suffer the result of repressive interpretation of the Qur'an which causes many disadvantages, as clearly illustrated in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* delineate the culture of Afghan society; religious, traditional, and patriarchal on its nature. It tells how male figures implicitly and explicitly use Islamic religious values and norms as their basis for inequality behavior towards women by limiting their participation in public space. However, this male representation is often associated with Muslim men who tend to oppress their women. Indeed, this negative association seemingly works to reduce the image of Muslims and Islam in orientalist debates. Hasnul Djohar (2021) argues that although Edward Said has produced his orientalist concepts for more than four decades, Islam and Muslims tend to be discussed in a reductionist view in orientalism and gender studies (1). To challenge this misrepresentation, this paper evaluates Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by exploring how men and women are depicted in the novel and how do the female characters question this patriarchal system, including the Mujahideen and Taliban hegemonies. Indeed, the Mujahideen and the Taliban's interpretation of purdah, or Sharia are used to validate their plan to hard-pressed women by giving detrimental subjugations. Thus, the hand of

fundamentalists has undoubtedly lent a quick and decidedly oppression forced on gendered behavior and space.

Further, repressive social structure and religious authorities make women powerless, and they tend to accept this situation passively. In the past decade, many scholars have investigated *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Shaikh, Ansari, and Memon claim that Islamic world is juggling in gender politics when they conducted a study to examine the deprived women's status in the novel (Shaikh, Ansari, and Memon). Furthermore, Siddiqui and Sarhandi draw research to explore the role of political Islam and how it influences Afghani women (Siddiqui and Sarhandi). To extend the previous researches, we investigate the novel by focusing on the issue of hegemonic masculinity and its intricate relation with Islamic fundamentalism under the Mujahideen and the Taliban regimes and to challenge the reductionist views of Islam, women, and gender that this novel misrepresents by providing a better understanding of women's positions in the Qur'an and exegesis as discussed in the following sections.

## METHOD

This research uses close textual analysis in examining the literary text. The primary text used in this research is Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* published by Riverhead Tread in 2008. The secondary texts for this research include all articles discussing Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2008). The scholars' discussion is still related to this research focusing on Gender and Muslim women's experiences living in Afghanistan. These secondary texts are engaged with theoretical perspectives, especially postcolonial and gender studies with the frameworks of Islamic studies. In examining the corpus, we read the primary texts several times by focusing on Muslim women, gender, and fundamentalism issues in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. In so doing, we engage with theories in Postcolonial studies and Gender studies to contribute to larger debates around Gender studies and orientalism. We also use comparative studies by comparing the contemporary Hosseini's characters in the novel with Islamic studies, including Amina Wadud's concept of Islamic Feminism.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The successive wars since the Soviet Union invasion have significantly impacted the configuration of gender dynamics in Afghanistan (Ahmad and Avoine). This impact is present through the narrative of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* which can be traced to a few key moments. The novel has depicted the problem of Islamic political dominance on a larger scale which completely reverses gender relations among Afghani society. It is noticeable how Hosseini portrays men's privileges over women who are struggling under Mujahideen and Taliban's misogynistic rule in Afghanistan. Therefore, we argue that an established patriarchal system and a strict Islamic fundamentalist power strongly encourage hegemonic masculinity and perpetuate women's oppression within society. Furthermore, as this novel misrepresents Islam as patriarchal, oppressive and incompatible with values such as freedom, democracy, and human rights as represented by the Mujahideen and Taliban who are misogynist oppressors, our paper seeks to challenge these misrepresentations of Islam by providing a better understanding of gender equality within Islamic tenets, such as the Quran and exegesis.



The discussion would be divided into three parts to answer the research questions and support our arguments. Firstly, we narrow down the use of the value of Islamic fundamentalism by the Mujahideen and the Taliban regimes who tend to legitimize hegemonic masculinity on a societal level. Before we discuss the position of women in the the Qur'an and the exegesis, we examine the attitudes the three main characters showed regarding the inequality in the narrative. Thus, the core problem of this analysis will be focused on the portrayal of Islamic fundamentalism value, which is deployed to legitimize hegemonic masculinity and how three main characters; Rasheed, Mariam, and Laila react to the situation.

### **Legitimizing hegemonic masculinity in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.**

Upon highlighting the legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity, the focus is zoomed in to the use of the value of Islamic fundamentalism by Mujahideen and the Taliban at the societal level. There are five different forms of utilization that are found in the novel. These unjust treatments exclude women's participation in the outside world and signify the rise of hegemonic masculinity within Afghani society at that specific period. By applying these restrictions toward women, both regimes helped sustain the patriarchal subjectivity, depicting a dreadful image of Islam. Further, the following paragraphs will explore more about the unequal treatment that women experienced under the Mujahideen and the Taliban misogynistic reign.

The first form of the use of Islamic fundamentalism values to legitimize hegemonic masculinity is restricting women from leaving the house without male relatives. The Taliban is intended to protect women's purity as an honor of the family; that is why the Taliban's ordinance forbids women from going out without a *mahram* or male relatives. This ordinance, however, is eliminating women's freedom. It is written on the narrative that if a woman is caught alone on the street, she will be "severely beaten" (248), as is portrayed when Laila wanted to visit Aziza, her daughter, whom she left in the orphanage. In contrast, Rasheed, as her mahram, refused to take Laila for various reasons. Laila ended up visiting Aziza, though she barely made it there. This scene illustrates the Taliban way of protecting the so-called "women's honors" in the contemporary Afghani society. To protect women, they are not reluctant to commit physical violence that hurts women and deprives their rights, just as what Laila experienced when she was "scolded" and "trudged home bloodied" (286). The Taliban never intended to learn facts about why women did what they did. All they know is to accuse women and subjectively abolish women's existence in public and persecuting them while claiming to protect them simultaneously. As the Taliban applied this rule during their occupation, it is marked as the beginning of the plight of Afghani women. Incidentally, this ordinance puts men as determinants of everything. Like what Laila experienced, she is undervalued and tortured just because she shows up publicly all by herself.

Secondly, the Taliban diminishes women's financial position by letting men as the only economic actors. Once Laila heard the Taliban announcement, she expressed her opinion that the Taliban "can't make half the population stay home and do nothing" (249) because it seemed very irrelevant to her. Rasheed, on the contrary, says, "you think this is some new, radical idea the Taliban are bringing?... Ever cared to visit *real* Afganistan?...there are many places in this country that have always lived this way or close enough in anyhow" (249) which illustrates convincingly how this restriction seems normal for him. Further, what

is conveyed through that narration is that the husband tries to provoke his wife's way of thinking by telling her that women have always lived that way in most parts of Afghanistan, which is the true face of Afghanistan. Since women were forbidden to work, it is acknowledged that men's job was to earn a living. The most striking element of this law is that men are left to be the ones with economic power that somehow make them feel they are taking control of everything, while women are left with little finances. This strict misogynistic rule gives husbands and men extensive maintenance power to prevent women from working and having a bigger role in their family and society.

Thirdly, during their reign, the Mujahideen and the Taliban indulged in a sporadically and unequally law system that mistreated women. This is portrayed several times in the novel. For example, there was a time Mariam, Laila, and Aziza were trying to escape Afghanistan and flee to Pakistan because they could no longer tolerate Rasheed's aggressive behavior towards them. Afghanistan is not safe anymore for them to live. Nonetheless, this attempt failed because they got caught by a police officer named Rahman. The verbal irony in this situation is inevitable. Officer Rahman acts innocent, insisting that he is there to "maintain order" (238) while ignoring the petrifying background motive that encourages the women to leave their husbands. But considering the horror that the Mujahideen have caused for women; "the lootings, the rapes...and the tortures..." (238), it is ironic how he candidly acknowledges himself as a defender of the law when he accused Mariam and Laila of saving themselves. Besides, the name "Rahman" which is taken from Arabic word that means merciful, "honor...and show compassion" (238) is a name that contradicts his attitude. This paradox reveals the apparent truth about officer Rahman who shows no mercy as he sends the women back to their abusive husbands.

Another example is when a woman named Naghma is trying to elope with her lover but they get caught up and sent back. Her boyfriend who happens to be a Mullah son said that Naghma seduces him and "cast a spell on him" (232) and he turns the blame on her. The boy is released, while Naghma is sentenced to five years without considering her plea. On another occasion, the double standard in law shows in the scene where young Talib tries to persuade Mariam that women cannot deserve the same treatment as men because they are incidental creatures. After all, it is scientifically proven by Western doctors that women are not able to think like the way men think (324). Furthermore, he compares men and women by using religion, saying that God created men and women differently and, therefore, women cannot think the way men think. These differences between men and women explain why women cannot be trusted because, in addition, they also "swear to all sorts of things all the time" (324). As a result, Mariam's defense with Laila as a witness was rejected because one female witness is not enough. A double standard in law, as portrayed, demonstrates that women's condition never becomes the point in law enforcement. The law is there when it favors males but is dismissed when it comes to female justice.

Fourthly, when the Taliban segregates anything based on gender, it results in a disastrous outcome on healthcare services. In early 1997, the Taliban announced that "women and men should be seen in different hospitals" (254). Still, the truth is that women's hospitals have "no clear water, no oxygen, no medications, no electricity" (255). On this subject, the Taliban is trying to stress men's power by limiting health care services for women. It is shown when Laila gives birth to her second child. Though she is dying, she must undergo surgical treatment without getting anesthesia. Not that the doctor does not give it to her a hospital for women is lacking in infrastructure and because "...when NGOs

offer money, the Taliban turn them away. Or they funnel the money to the place that cater to men” (244). Thus it emphasizes the superiority of men in the hand of the Taliban and portrays how helpless women are compared to men in Afghanistan society.

Lastly, the Taliban forbade women from getting an education. Before the Taliban came to invade, women had such freedom to receive proper education in school and university. Mariam and Laila considered being lucky because they were born and grew up during that time. However, “university was shut down and its students sent home” (251), and education was completely prohibited for women under Taliban reign. The misfortune is on Aziza. She cannot experience a formal education in school, so Mariam decided to teach her by herself. Though the private education provided for girls in home schools is evident in the novel, it is very dangerous. This is illustrated as Zaman, the orphanage director, tries to give education to the girls in the orphanage. Those girls in the orphanage need to “pull the curtains” (286) to hide the studying activity inside the building. The curtains can conceal things and represent characters’ relationship to the hardship of the reality they must face in getting an education. Further they even have to set up knitting equipment so that when the Taliban come to inspect, they would “pretend to knit” (286) and act as if they are not learning any actual sciences. By specifically prohibiting the education for girls, men have a greater opportunity and freedom to study as much as they want in school. At the same time, women stay behind the “curtain” without any choice.

### **Male character’s attitude toward the legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.**

As portrayed in the story, a male-dominated society has fancy male characters doing what they do. There are quite a several male characters represented. Still, the writer put Rasheed as the villain and the portrayal of a character whose masculinity and the state sustain aggressiveness. In living life under the Mujahideen and the Taliban regime, Rasheed shows various attitudes that mainly depicted his support towards the regime and their misogynistic treatment of women. The moment *sharia* law is imposed and the Taliban announce their gender rule, Rasheed is not bothered because all he has to do is grow a beard and visit the mosque. It is explained in the narration that Rasheed himself is a Taliban supporter; he “regarded the Taliban with a forgiving, affectionate kind of bemusement” (251).

In Rasheed’s perspective, what the Taliban is doing is right and breaks even because “it’s in the Koran” (252) and the threat of violence is therefore necessary. He cherishes the Taliban’s punishment, which makes him commit a deadly physical attack on his wives. Rasheed's way of visiting Ghazi stadium to watch the punishment day shows that there is an influence for violence from the surrounding environment. He even describes the brutality of punishment with “exhilaration,” meaning that he is okay with it and even learns the aggression from the surroundings. Therefore, it is not surprising that Rasheed can commit a brutal attack on his wives.

Rasheed is depicted as a manifestation of hegemonic masculinity who tries to retain his “*nam*” (pride) by trying to keep up to the Afghan societal cultural masculine standard. The root of the hegemonic masculinity in Rasheed’s life can be discovered in how he raised his son. He keeps encouraging Zalmai when he talks back to his mother, thus showing the seeds of dominance from his childhood. The way Rasheed thinks of it, Zalmai’s disrespectful attitude and recklessness are what he believes is “a sign of intelligence” (263) which is quite ironic. This, in a way, reveals how Rasheed must have been brought up in his childhood and

how his perception of masculinity can be subconsciously sculpted. What is more, to say is this also implies how the male is favored in the family.

When the Taliban declares its ruling, I first noticed how Rasheed frightened Laila to make sure that she knows exactly how inferior and worthless she was compared to him. He told her that he could just "...go to the Taliban one day, just walk in and say" (252) a thing or two about his prejudice towards Laila, and that is all it takes for him to oppress her. In this sense, what Rasheed tries to do is to terrify Laila to implicitly recall Taliban power and emphasize his power in the family. The passage implicitly tells that men have it easier when it comes to the law, as explained previously.

Given the advantage of the legitimacy of masculinity carried out by the Mujahideen and the Taliban, Rasheed's physical aggression towards his wives is getting even worse. When Laila's and Mariam's attempt to flee to Pakistan, which they fail miserably, Rasheed punishes them by giving physical torture. First, he punches Laila between the lower tip of her breastbone and the belly button. It is so sudden and unnoticeable, and she feels "as if a car had hit her at full speed" (239). Soon after, he begins to beat Mariam. Laila sees "there is blood on his hands, blood on Mariam's face, her hair, down her neck and back" (240). He locks Mariam in the toolshed while Laila and Aziza are in a light-closed room, not giving them food and water for four days straight. From this situation, it can be implied that Rasheed has significantly become more physically aggressive towards his wives since the *sharia* law does not interfere with a private family matter.

Over time, Rasheed turns into more egotistical and chauvinistic. This made Rasheed act arbitrarily towards Mariam, Laila, and Aziza. His aggressive behavior, which includes swearing, cursing, giving physical violence, and so on, is considered normal for him. One day, he said to Laila "I can't be blamed, I am a husband" (221), and from this narrative alone, we can see how Rasheed defined himself as a man and as a husband; unchallengeable, blameless, as if he was the God in the family. The quotation shows another chauvinistic attitude from Rasheed "...you thought you were so clever, with your books and poems. What good are all your smarts to you now? What's keeping you off the streets, your smart or me? (252). Here can also be seen in the presence of irony, "half of the women in this city would kill to have a husband like me. They would kill for it." (252). This is how Rasheed assumed that as if he was a 'guardian angel' for Laila. In fact, looking at the treatment he gave his wife and daughter, the narrative was too narcissistic and ironic. What happens is the opposite, in fact instead of saving Laila he is deceiving her to fall into his trap.

After all, Rasheed, as the main male character, has represented Muslim and Islam negatively. His chauvinistic, oppressive, and violent attitude has helped to frame Muslim and Islam as a repressive religion that denied women rights and empowerment.

### **Female characters' attitude towards the legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.**

Three main attitudes are shown by the two main female characters, Mariam and Laila. The first attitude is challenging the public space limitation for women. Right after the Taliban overran Kabul streets and announced their message that completely abolishes women's freedom in the public space, Laila immediately expressed her disapproval. According to her perspective, the Taliban cannot just make "half the population stay home and do nothing" (249) because women used to take a great part in society. But the Taliban brutality is no joke; they are mainly "vicious towards women and in cities, which were viewed as immoral"

(Cortright and Wall 7). Eventually, Laila has no choice but to experience living under the Taliban ordinance. Even though the Taliban forced women to stay home and forbid them to go out in public without being accompanied by a mahram, it never stopped Laila from going out and visiting her daughter in the orphanage. She challenged Rasheed when he refused to go with her, "you can't stop me...you can hit me all you want, but I'll keep going" (285). This shows Laila's courage to go out without her mahram. Though she knows the consequences that await her, she has the bravery to go against her husband's refusal and the Taliban. Even after getting caught and tortured by the young Talib, never for once did it dampen her courage. Laila shows an attitude of resistance in facing and going through all the obstacles she must undergo to visit her daughter. Here, the young Talib even uses a hyperbolically stated, "I'll beat you until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones" (286) as an exaggeration to terrify her if she is ever spotted alone without her mahram. However, this causes nothing for Laila as she takes another way to walk.

Besides, she shows strength and courage towards women's poor health care system. When Laila had to give birth to her second child, the negative impact of the Taliban ordinance in the medical aspect is zoomed in. Hospitals for women are very poor, and the facilities are very limited, the number of female patients is inversely proportional to the inadequate capacity of hospitals. Even worse, as many female patients queue up to be handled, they have to wait hours until night to get medical treatment even though Laila water is broken. When her turn sets in, Laila does not have much time anymore because the baby is "in the breech position" (258), and the doctor has to do a cesarean section or they have to be ready to give up the baby. Meanwhile, the hospital ran out of medicines, so it was impossible to do the surgery. When Laila learned the urgent situation, instead of resigning and giving up her son, Laila ordered the doctor to cut her open. "cut me open and give me my baby" (259) just like that and she bravely risks her life.

Thirdly, the main female characters resist physical aggression in private space. One night, Rasheed expressed his intention to make Aziza into a street beggar which Laila instantly rejected. Between Mariam and Laila, Laila started to fight back against Rasheed. With a gloomy feeling, she raised her voice and told Rasheed that she would never let him turn Aziza into a street beggar, to which Rasheed constantly responded by slapping Laila's face so hard that "it made her head whip around" (266). And for the first time, Laila punched him back. She hit him quickly and unexpectedly that it "made him stagger two steps backward" (266) and she was astonished by what she had just done to him.

Another attitude towards Rasheed's physical aggression happened when he discovered that Tariq had come to visit Laila and the two of them reunited again. He went mad and physically assaulted her by using his belt. Laila protects herself with her forearm before she manages to "land a punch across his ear which made him spit a curse and pursue her even more relentlessly (308). Feeling unsatisfied with just torturing Laila, he turned on Mariam. In the meantime, Laila came from behind to attack Rasheed with a glass that made his cheek bleeding. He turned around and suffocated Laila until her face turned blue. Mariam would never let Rasheed kill Laila; she "could not allow that to happen" (310). So, she hit him with a shovel, Mariam might have stopped, but she knew Rasheed would kill them both.

Moreover, both characters not only accept the torture after torture they must face but also show a strong and resilient attitude towards the situation they have to go through. Both of these characters also represent the struggle of women to free themselves from the



shackles of patriarchy, specifically under the Islamic fundamentalism era, which abolishes their fundamental rights as women.

### **Qur'anic View of The Position of Women**

The status of women in Afghanistan reflected in *A thousand Splendid Suns* is deteriorating, which continues to portray Islam as a religion that is seriously biased in terms of the gender issue. Traditionally, gender roles are determined by a patriarchal kinship, and letters got worse as the Mujahideen and the Taliban enforced their misogynistic rule over women derived from the Qur'an and tribal traditions. It is marked as a period of desolation and despair for women that also affect the national identity of Afghanistan. Though it is evident that the writer has pointed out some progressive changes in the country, the depiction of the catastrophic war-weary conflict and portrayal of Rasheed as the villain character has wrongly represented Islam. Islam never oppressed women, as portrayed by the Mujahideen and the Taliban in the novel. Therefore, to challenge these misrepresentations of Islam and women, we discuss the Quranic views and the explanation of the position of women in Islam, which is considered from Amina Wadud's thoughts to oppose the stereotypical view of Islam as a repressive religion towards women as it is described in the novel.

As mentioned in the previous examination, the Taliban restricted women from appearing in the public space, having a job, and getting an education, eliminating their fundamental human rights and hiding them behind the *burqa*. Nonetheless, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the Mujahideen or the Taliban have never given a rational reason behind their decision to do what they do explicitly. But noticing the Mujahideen and Taliban's intention to build a pure Islamic country, the Islamic State of Afghanistan, and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, it can be implicitly inferred that the Taliban hold and portrays the view in which women's rights are never a priority in Islam. Islamic fundamentalism values have misled Mariam, Laila, and other Afghanistan women as the novel shows the image of Islam, which led to the oppression of women in many aspects of life. However, Islam does not conceal women behind their veils. The implementation of Islamic teaching is not what the Mujahideen and the Taliban portray, achieved through violence and restraint. The status of women in Islam is the same as that of men. According to Khan injunctions about honor and respect enjoined for one sex are enjoined equally for the other sex (Khan). So far as rights in this world and rewards in the Hereafter are concerned there is no difference between the sexes. Aside from that, in the organization of daily living, both are equal participants and partners.

To begin with, Amina Wadud explains that the Quran treats humans as individuals, whether male or female, in the same manner (Wadud). However, the negative effect of rigid interpretations gives "inherent distinction" (Wadud 35) between males and females. Barlas also points out that the patriarchal interpretation of the Quran justice is consistent with men being the exclusive breadwinners, men beating women, and women being denied an equal role in managing a family's affairs (Barlas). Further, in her study "The issue of women-men equality in the Islamic tradition" Hassan exhibits the three theological assumptions which emphasize men's superiority (Hassan). These three assumptions are 1) that man is God's primary creation, while the woman is believed to be created from the man, 2) that woman, not man, is responsible for the Fall, and 3) that woman was not only created from man but also for man. Such interpretations and assumptions have created the belief that

men represent the norm and therefore are fully human, while women are less human than men.

For that reason, Wadud differentiates the position of women as an individual and a member of society. Regarding individual capacity, there is no distinction between males and females. Accordingly, Amina Wadud proposes that the Quran depicts human beings as inherently equal by looking at three phases in human presence. Firstly, in the creation of human, Quran emphasizes the single origin of all humankind with the term *nafs'*: He created you (all) from a single *nafs'*" (4:1) which according to Barlas is the Arabic word that denotes a non-gendered being from which both female and male were created (Barlas). Further, the Quran does not state that man was created before woman, that she was created from man, or that she was responsible for the Fall; this concept is based on Biblical temporalization of the rift between God and Human (Barlas). This shows that the preexisting misogyny was incorporated into Islam in the Middle Ages, later shaping Muslim discourses on women and gender. The negative effect of the story of Eve's creation from rib has negatively impacted the lives of Muslim women. Therefore, if one bears in mind that this rib story has no place in Quran and upholds the view that man and women are created equal by God, the existing inequality between men and women cannot be seen as having been mandated by God but must be seen as a subversion of God's original plan for humanity.

Secondly, Quran figures the potential for change, growth and development lies within the *nafs* of the individual (or the group) as well: Allah does not change the condition of a folk until they (first) change what is in their anfus (13:11). This ayat shows that sex differences do not entail inequalities, nor do they imply hierarchy or precedence (Barlas and Finn). Men and women are two categories of human species given the same or equal consideration and endowed with the same equal potential. There is no difference in the value attributed to them.

Thirdly, all human activity is compensated based on what the individual earns (4:124). In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the gap created by male-dominated surroundings to separate women far behind ignores the fact that the Qur'an never put women as incidental creatures. This ignorance is depicted perfectly by Rasheed character that is chauvinistic and thinks that he is better simply because he is a man, a husband, and therefore capable of doing anything he wants. Futher, Mujahideen, the Taliban, and Rasheed also put themselves above everything as if they were "God". God's Unity and Oneness cannot be shared with others, and no one can claim any form of rule that has the same extent as God's Rule inasmuch as theories of male privilege that draw parallels between God and fathers/husbands as a ruler over women.

Furthermore, in terms of social position, Quran does not make a distinction between humankind summed up by the Qur'anic statement in surah Al-Hujarat (49:13): "We created you male and female and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another, verily the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the one with the most *taqwa*." According to the Qur'anic worldview, the word '*taqwa*' means "piety", a pious manner of behavior that observes constraints appropriate to a social-moral system. Thus, the ayat meaning reveals that in Allah's perspective, males and females are the same; the only thing that differs between the two is *taqwa*. So the patriarchal Qur'anic worldview must be "negated and annihilated" (Al-Sharmani 87) because it is antithetical to the belief in the oneness of God and our submission to his will. It can be inferred that as men and women are created in pairs, therefore a balance must be struck within each level of society,

from inside the private sphere to the public arena. Wadud stated that as mature human being, we could choose between what is good and what is evil and cruel (Wadud). Likewise, Barlas argues that the justice of God establishes the fundamental equality of men and women, as such a deity would never favour specific sex (Barlas). Quoting Qur'an 33:35, she argues that "moral paraxis" is the basis on which humankind will be judged.

Moreover, unlike the depiction of Mujahideen and the Taliban case in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* novel, the Qur'an justify gender equality within Islamic teachings. From the ground explanation above, several points can be drawn against the Mujahideen and the Taliban discrimination treatment. First, women have right not to be discriminated against, and placing women in a subordinate role is incorrect according to the Quran as verse 71 in Surah At-Tawba revealed "And the Muslim men and Muslim women are protectors of one another; enjoining right and forbidding wrong, and keeping the prayer established and paying the obligatory charity, obeying Allah and His Noble Messenger; these are upon whom Allah will soon have mercy; indeed Allah is the Almighty, the Wise" which implies men and women are equal before God. Secondly, Muslim women are encouraged to participate in public life to improve herself, her family, and her community. Thirdly, women have right to evidence. To support this Omran explains that acquiring two female witnesses cannot be applied in general rule because the verse is only dealing with contracts (Omran). He further explains that in cases such as violence and murder, Islam seeks to protect women's compassionate nature, thereby tightening the burden of the women by obligating them to serve two females witnesses is not justified for it is curtailing their equal right. Fourthly, Islam encourages the pursuit of knowledge by all Muslim regardless of their sexes. This is clearly indicated in the Quran Surah Al- Alaq (96: 1-5) which shows the importance of knowledge compulsory for Muslims regardless of gender.

Putting the Mujahideen, the Taliban as well as Rasheed character as the main spotlight that portrayed an oppressive behavior that represents Islam, their inability in differentiating between what is the right way of Islamic teachings and what is the unjust one has nothing to do with the religion but rather the way that they interpret it. Even though that it is clear that the Quran never discriminate based on gender, there is no doubt that the Mujahideen and the Taliban, as Muslim traditionalist, reject this idea of gender equality. As it is described in the narrative of the novel, they go on so far to even silence women, enforcing the law for women not to "laugh in public" (248), let alone to speak. This misunderstanding has helped sustain men's superiority by enforcing Islamic law to favor political and individual interests. Thus, it has misrepresented Islam by ignoring its gender equality value.

To sum up, it is illustrated that the way fundamentalists deprive women of status and keep them subordinate to men in the name of religion is biased. It is because Qur'an has clearly emphasized women's equality with men as well as affirmed their fundamental right to actualize their potential as a human that they share equally with men. To put women as secondary human being compared to men is essentially perpetuating the idea of religion as an instrument of oppression rather than as a mean of liberation. It is important to understand that men and women have the same rights to actualize their potential and taqwa is the only thing that differentiates them. The way the Mujahideen and the Taliban shield themselves by using religious values to promote hegemonic masculinity and to degrade women is a total bias. For that reason, we argue that it is essential to provide a non-gender biased interpretation of the Qur'an to help reduce discrimination and violence



against women by religious radicalism, such as the Mujahedeen and the Taliban as Hosseini's novel describes.

### Conclusion

The relationship of hegemonic masculinity and Islamic fundamentalism is evident. As described in the novel, the value of Islamic fundamentalism used by the Mujahedeen and the Taliban regimes helped influence the strength of hegemonic masculinity. By asserting the fundamentalism value, there are several actions taken by the Mujahideen and the Taliban to limit women participation in a societal level and push women's freedom to an end restricting women over leaving house without male relatives, giving men the access to economic power, creating a double standard in law and judicial system, giving a poor healthcare system for women, and eradicating education for women. Moreover, it is essential to highlight the fact that the Qur'an and the exegesis never discriminate against women, as illuminated in Hosseini's novel. According to Quran, the only thing that makes men and women different is their *'taqwa'*; a pious manner of behavior that observes constraints appropriate to a social-moral system. Islam never discriminates against humankind based on gender and encourages their fundamental right to actualize their potential as humans that they share equally.

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