

MOMENTS LOST FOREVER - A STUDY OF TRAUMATIC PAST OF CHILDREN IN SELECT NOVELS OF KHALED HOSSEINI AND NADIA HASHMI

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Abstract:

The paper aims to capture the effect of trauma in the lives of children as seen in the novels of Khaled Hosseini and Nadia Hashmi. Both the novelists deal with the lives of people in war torn Afghanistan, under both Soviet and the Taliban extremists. Trauma has a debilitating effect on most of the citizens caught in the cross fire of opposite forces, not to speak of the agony of the children. "Psychological trauma is generally the direct personal experience of an event that may cause or lead to death or serious injury, or other threats to the physical integrity" says Malizia N explaining the psychological effects of trauma. (Malizia. N. 2017) The loss that children suffer range from loss of normal childhood, parents, sometimes body parts and being distanced from all that is familiar. The plight of the girls is still worse and leaves a lot to be desired. The aim of the paper is to analyse how children suffer when caught in war zones and how the traumatic past comes to haunt them throughout their life.

Key Words: *Psychological trauma, physical integrity, normal childhood.*

Each child born on earth is entitled to a happy and safe childhood. But not every child seems to enjoy one. Any child's wellbeing depends on various issues like nurturing parents, peaceful surroundings and many others. It is almost like a chain- one interconnected with many other links, very important for its existence and survival. Children are the ones who are badly affected, sometimes irrevocably, even if there is a minor break anywhere. There are certain areas that get affected by trauma of happenings in one's childhood. "There is a prevailing hypothesis that the narrow and partial cognitive processes of memory, attention and dysfunctional problem-solving skills are the main problems of exposure to trauma." (Fenny, Foa 2004)

Afghanistan, a land locked country, has constantly been under the control of militants be it Russian Army or Talibans. The presence of foreign army or Islamic militants has a life changing impact on the lives of the people in the country. From the characters, one understands that life in Afghanistan was very much different from the one before the invasion of militants and Russian army. Afghanistan was an ancient seat of culture, education, art & crafts. People were educated and women occupied great positions in different walks of life. The huge statues of Bahima stand proof to the kind of tolerant culture that prevailed in the past.

With the advent of Talibans, life changed upside down for the Afghans. With all the religious restrictions imposed by the Taliban regime, man wasn't affected much whereas women could feel the heat as it not only affected the way they dressed, but every sphere of their life. A woman was no longer allowed to move freely outside the house. She was no longer allowed to own a job. Many women who held respectable positions were reduced to begging on the streets to save themselves and children. With men having gone to the war, women were left to fend for themselves. Women were also not allowed to walk alone on the streets without being accompanied by a male family member. When Fereiba in 'When the Moon is Low', is forced to go in search of a hospital, being in advanced stage of pregnancy, she is threatened by the Taliban forces to get back home as they feel that she has "no need for the hospital." (109) Life becomes miserable with none to look up to and no means of support and sustenance. With so many

unpleasant happenings happening around them, children can't have a normal life.

With normal life gone for a toss, it is more of a fight for survival than anything else. Girls are forced to drop out of schools and spend their lives waiting to be married. Sometimes the much looked for to marriage doesn't bring solace. It makes things worse and for many women, life becomes a down ward spiral into a certain disaster. Life after marriage more or less depends on the character and nature of the man involved. If she fails to bear a child, she would be forced to live the life of a chief servant for the rest of her life as that would give her husband an excuse to marry.

With a boy, life is suddenly thrown out of gear, as the eventualities leave him high and dry. He is left with no choice other than taking up the additional responsibility of providing food and shelter to the entire family. He is forced to become a young man thanks to the circumstances which are very harsh. With no proper education and financial background, the boy suffers to make both the ends meet. He takes up odd jobs and struggles to provide for the family.

The plight of boys who go to strange lands in search of opportunities to live a better and fearless life is still worse. In Nadia Hashmi's 'When the Moon is Low' Saleem all of a sudden finds himself to be the bread winner of his family of four. His father's death at the hands of terrorists forces responsibility on his young shoulders. Future seems uncertain as their own homeland becomes unsafe. He is in a dilemma not knowing what to expect. He wanted to know "what to expect of tomorrow and what tomorrow would expect of him" (112). Saleem's only aim was to get to England, where his aunt lived so that they could breathe free air. Like any other child, he too wanted "to go to school with his sister. He wanted to take Aziz to a doctor. He wanted to see his mother working as a teacher again." (201) But the long journey from Afghanistan was arduous, uncertain and fraught with dangers of all sorts.

Saleem travels through different lands and cultures on his way to England, where the language and people are equally strange. He is left with no other option other than stealing. And he doesn't do that without a twinge of the conscience. His heart goes back to a time when father taught them all good manners and good behavior. He doesn't divulge the manner of obtaining food to his mother. He lies about paying an unreasonable amount for the food and "it made him angry that his mother doesn't question it." (184). Fereiba, foolishly believes that her son had earned their food the right way. The trauma of taking things which don't belong to one, expecting to hear whistle blow at any time, with legs ready to take flight anytime is heart wrenching to say the least. The novel takes one through the traumatic experiences faced by the people, the so called refugees, who belong nowhere, in their journey to a safe land.

Mariam, a child born out of wedlock, in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, doesn't understand the pain of her mother for a long time. Only when her mother utters the word 'harami' in particular way, does it affect her. The reader understands that, "It was the way Nana uttered it that made Mariam feels the full sting of it." (4). Mariam is more of a girl bride when she gets packed off to a distant land in the name of marriage, far away from all that all knew and understood. And that includes language as she has to struggle with a relatively new dialect. Her only fault was that she believed that her father's affection was real and much more true than her mother's care. The result was that she finds herself in no-man's land, with her father firmly refusing to own her up and a mother who gives up on her by committing suicide. It is then that she understands how her mother had been right all the way. She also realizes how her mother had tried hard to teach her from her own experiences. Nana would say, "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always points to a woman." (7). The trauma caused by those twin blows stays with her throughout her life that when she ends up barren she feels that it is due to her mother's curse.

The feeling of neglect, the pain of non-acceptance which Mariam feels stranded in front of her father's house brings her face to face with reality. She begins to feel the futility of "how she had fretted over what dress to wear, over the mismatching *hijab*, walking all the way here, refusing to leave, sleeping on the street like a stray dog." (35). The trauma of being disowned by the father gets transformed into anger that

she refuses to say good bye when she leaves home after marriage. Even when Mariam's father comes to distant Kabul to talk to her, what seems one last time, she refuses to open the door. The trauma of being made to wait at the doorstep throughout the night haunts Mariam. Even though the guards try to console saying that her father is out of house, Mariam understands that he is very much inside and doesn't have the courage to own her and take her inside in front of his family. That hurts her no end. The difference in treatment and facilities offered to her sisters is so glaring that she begins to understand that what her mother had kept saying was true indeed.

Laila's condition is also noteworthy. She experiences the trauma of losing her two brothers to the war in Afghanistan through the self-imposed suffering and withdrawn nature of her mother. Laila's mother locks herself in a room and lets Laila and her father shoulder all responsibilities. Laila finds it very difficult when she cannot expect her mother to come to her aid when she is in trouble in the street, on the way from the school. In spite of having being brought up by freedom loving parents, Laila ends up in a life where she has little choice. Laila doesn't rue much but tries to adapt to her new life as a wife to a man who is more than double her age, in the hope that things would take a better turn.

The traumatic past comes to haunt children in different unimaginable ways, that an ordinary, happy and carefree childhood becomes an illusion. It changes the very character of children and makes them move in hitherto unthought-of ways. The children are at the receiving end of actions and thoughts of elders and suffer for no fault of theirs. As a result, the children suffer and plough on with their life, sometimes looking up in hope but many a time in despair-not knowing what the next turn would spring to them.

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