

Beth Carpenter - A Thousand Splendid Suns Paper

Life in Afghanistan for women has always been one of inequality and suppression, especially during the time period before and after the years of Communist rule. Women prior to the communist takeover of the country were always subjugated to the men in their lives and regardless of their feelings or opinions they were required to live as their fathers, brothers, and husbands demanded. Some women broke away from the tradition, but often they were ostracized and looked down upon. Those that allowed men to rule their every move suffered, for the most part, in silence.

The novel A Thousand Splendid Suns is an excellent representation of the lives of women in Afghanistan from the late 1960s to today. We witness that ostracization in the life of Nana, Mariam's mother, a woman who started out as maid in a wealthy Afghani household. Nana and Jalil, the master of the household, had an illicit affair that produced a child and in an effort to save his own face, Jalil was forced to remove Nana from the household (p. 6). Not only was Nana looked down upon by Jalil's family, she was disowned by her own father for what she had done.

This type of treatment of women is reflected elsewhere in the book. During the fighting between rival warlords after the communists pulled out of Afghanistan, women were once again looked up as nothing more than property. They were raped by militia men regardless of who they were, who they were married to or how old they were. Afghani men took up arms against their wives or daughters who were the victims of rape, killing the women themselves because they had been so defiled (p. 227). Many women even committed suicide to ensure that they would not be raped by the same men that were supposedly protecting the country.

The emergence of the Taliban into Afghanistan in September 1996 was actually welcomed by the people of Afghanistan. The country had been suffering from internal strife for almost ten years and many innocent Afghani men, women and children died in mortar fire between warlords. Sons who went to fight for one side or another in these skirmishes were lost, such as Ahmad and Noor (p. 126), the older brothers of Laila. Families were ripped apart and simply walking down the streets at that time was dangerous, as Laila's friend Giti discovered when she was killed by a stray rocket on her way home (p. 160). The Taliban forces were a promise of peace in Afghanistan once again, and those that remained in the country – and especially in the city of Kabul – welcomed them with open arms (p. 245).

At this in 1996 that things for women return to the way they were prior to the communist rule of the country. Women during the communist regime had considerably more freedom than they had ever had. From the time the communists took over Afghanistan to 1996 when the Taliban invaded, women were able to walk through the streets unveiled, wearing make up, smoking, working, and living like a modern woman in any Western or European nation (p. 68). No longer were they bound to the house dutifully serving their husband's every whim. Instead they were now viable partners in the relationships and they had the opportunity to get an education – from elementary school through to college.

Some of the more traditionally minded men, like Rasheed, insisted that their wives wear the traditional burqa when they left the home (p. 63). There was a considerable age difference between Mariam and Rasheed and while she was curious about these women who walked around uncovered, she found a reluctant safety behind the mesh of the burqa (p. 68). Rasheed also followed the tradition of taking more than one wife, Laila, and forcing the burqa on her as well (p. 208). In contrast to Mariam who was raised in a kolba outside the city and never formally

educated, this requirement and the traditional way Rasheed treated his wives was more than upsetting to the formally educated Laila.

The Taliban enforced strict laws on the society of Afghanistan when they took over the country and every Westernized item was demolished if it was not hidden from view. Mariam and Laila are left to hide a television Rasheed brings into the house for his son Zalmai to keep from being discovered by the Taliban (p. 261). Women were no longer allowed to attend school, those that no longer wore the veil were forced to don burqa's, they were not allowed to leave their homes without a male relative, they were not allowed to work, they were not allowed to makeup or nail polish, speak unless spoken to, or meet the eyes of a man (p. 248). Essentially, women were reduced to less than chattel after being free from subservience for so long.

But this was not all women in Taliban controlled Afghanistan were to face. Hospitals that once treated men and women were now turning women away and sending them to inferior facilities where there were no medications and appalling conditions (p. 255). The female doctors in the country were allowed to treat female patients but they were required to do so while wearing the full burqa. This is one of the instances where we see Afghani women start to join together to protect one another, as is shown when Laila gives birth to Zalmai and her doctor sheds the burqa to assist in the delivery while the nurses stand lookout (p. 260). Taliban control of Afghanistan was literally sucking the life out of the country and the women who were forced to live under their rule.

Were women complicit in the ability of the Taliban to assume control of Afghanistan? No. The women of Afghanistan over the last forty years have made some strides towards equality, but they have consistently been under some form of rule that has kept them held back. This rule is not necessarily a governmental type of rule. It could be the rule of a father, such as

Jalil who forces his daughter Mariam to marry although she did not want to (p. 44). It could be the rule of a husband, such as Rasheed forcing his wives into the burqa and punishing them as he saw fit when they ‘misbehaved’ (p. 241) or forcing his ‘daughter’ into a orphanage and favoring his son (p. 281). It could be the rule of a mullah who, while understanding why a woman would kill her abusive husband as an issue of self-defense, still passed judgment in favor of the Islamic law and sentenced her to death (p. 325).

While the Taliban rule in Afghanistan is no longer in force thanks to help from the United Nations, women in Afghanistan are still struggling to gain the equality that many of their Western peers enjoy. It will be a slow process, but as long as leaders in the country are able to have an open mind even with Islamic rule, it is a process than can be positive for the future generation of women in the Middle East.