

Subalternity: An Enduring Force in the Quest for Atonement in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*

4.1 Post-Colonial Intervention and Subalternity

It has already been established in the previous chapter that subaltern undercurrents prevail in the works of Khaled Hosseini. In this chapter, it will be further explored that owing to their subaltern nature, the varied characters of Hosseini struggle to attain redemption. One atones himself/herself when he/she is able to make amends for a transgression. But there are many hindrances in the path to atonement. The subaltern nature cripples an individual as it pushes one to the peripheries. Post-colonial scholars have delved into the concept of subalternity and brought forth how it stumps the growth of a person. The right intervention by post-colonial thinkers brought to light the travesties of the subalterns. It highlighted that being a subaltern was obstructive. It was bound to limit one's progress and stagnate him/her. Subalternity has been often explored in literature to make up for the under-representation of the voiceless individuals. Subalterns have also been a subject of post-colonial literature to bring out their authentic voice amidst the world at large. Most often these subalterns are put in front of the world through the skewed eyes of colonizers and hegemonic powers. Thus, such literature is important as it stops the trivialization of a class which is pushed to the background. As is reiterated in the paper, *Subalternity as Event in History and Literature*- "The postcolonial intervention in culture and ideology is often enacted through reclaiming certain lost, elided over, previously unrepresented subjects of history. The site of this transformative endeavor, which seeks to put new subjects on the discursive map of nations is often the act of revisionist historiography in both history and literature." (Mukherjee)

In all three novels of Khaled Hosseini, we have characters who struggle to atone themselves. They face many hurdles while absolving themselves of their past. But the biggest impediment is their subaltern identity. Hosseini has done liberal and realistic depictions of subaltern characters in his works because he wanted to put forth their fears and struggles. Be it Hassan from *The Kite Runner*, Mariam from *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, or Saboor from *And the Mountains Echoed*, each character is stuck in a

quagmire that only deepens owing to their subalternity. Hosseini has therefore shown his solidarity with these realistic subaltern characters by showing their plight through his fictional representation. Through these characters, he had delved into gender subalternity and other elements of subaltern theory. In the paper *Rethinking the subaltern and the question of censorship in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks*, the researcher purports how, "Gramsci never reduces subordination to a single relation, but rather conceives subalternity as an intersectionality of the variations of race, class, gender, culture, religion, nationalism, and colonialism functioning within an ensemble of socio-political and economic relations." (Green 400). One can see this aspect being mirrored in Hosseini's depiction of subalternity in his works. After Gramsci sowed the seeds of the concept of the subaltern, it was the Subaltern Studies Group that further analyzed it and added new facets to it. The group which comprised thinkers like Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty, Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, Dipesh Chakravorty, amongst others, dealt with the concept of subaltern with South Asian history as a backdrop. But with time the notion of subaltern became a bigger phenomenon which came to be correlated in other branches as well. The methodology adopted by the Subaltern Studies Group has been extensively applied to study the politics and culture of nations across the world. It has rightly been pointed out that, "the concept of the subaltern has expanded in interpretation from the original configuration to apply to any population that is disenfranchised and unreachable due to hegemonic oppression. Subaltern turns in other fields, specifically literature, anthropology, and women's, gender, and sexuality studies, have been made by scholars across the globe." (Betik)

Subaltern studies have since then become an integral part of post-colonialism. It would not be erroneous to say that the idea of subalternity has been an intervention of sorts by the post-colonial philosophy. The two more often than not overlap as their end objective is to amplify marginalized voices suppressed by the colonial or hegemonic powers. Subaltern studies were instrumental in initiating dialogue and bringing marginalized sections to the forefront. This thought is echoed in the paper titled, *Dialog Theory in Marginalized Settings: A Subaltern Studies Approach*:

Dialog with the subaltern is constituted as a mediation that brings subaltern narratives into mainstream structures/sites of knowledge. Such dialog is founded on consistent skepticism toward the co-optive politics of dialog that serves neoliberal agendas. Of particular relevance for subaltern studies scholars are the ways in which dialog is constituted in the realm of power, difference, inequality, marginalization, and resistance. (Dutta and Pal 364)

It is intriguing to gauge that we can find a long trail of subaltern characters in Hosseini's books and even in the context of Afghan politics one can find traces of subaltern ethos. Khaled Hosseini's books are familial sagas on the surface but they also capture the political and social upheavals of erstwhile Afghanistan with studied authenticity. Most of the characters yearn to atone themselves and seek true happiness. But there are many roadblocks in their way. The warring Afghan milieu is one of the biggest foes on the road to atonement. But being a subaltern is what becomes obstructive and makes their journey toward happiness an indomitable one.

4.2 Hassan's Subalternity: A Barrier to Amir's Atonement

The most significant relationship that forms the edifice of the novel *The Kite Runner* is the relationship between Amir and Hassan. Amir who is an affluent Pashtun boy forges a bond of love and amity with Hassan, a subservient Hazara boy. Hassan is portrayed by Hosseini as someone who belongs to the marginalized Hazara clan of the erstwhile Afghanistan. The Hazara clan was prey to institutionalized suppression and they were pushed to primarily work under the servitude of the elite upper class. Amir and his Baba are Pashtuns who live in the Wazir Akbar district of Kabul. Ali and his son Hassan are servants in Amir's house and while both Baba and Amir treat them with love, there is a thin line of demarcation that segregates them as inferiors. Amir is conditioned to treat the Hazara servant as someone who could be played with but could not be accorded the title of a friend. Hassan is also aware of his stature and serves Amir with utmost loyalty. He passively accepts his status and follows the diktats laid down by the elite Pashtuns as well as the warring forces of the Soviet Union and later the Talibs. Hazaras went through a process of dehumanization which eventually turned them into subalterns. Dehumanization occurs when an individual or class is robbed of the basic right to live a dignified life and is mistreated. This act of

dehumanization can be exercised in multiple ways, primarily amongst them being, genocide, objectification, and systemic oppression. Amir realizes this act of dehumanization against the Hazaras when he discovers that they are massacred and ousted from their homes. But rarely does any book mention the injustice meted out to Hazaras. Their sufferings were erased and it was on rare occasions when Amir could read how the Pashtuns had “quelled them with unspeakable violence.” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 9)

Racism was a silent evil that led to the gradual dehumanization of the Hazaras. In the 19th century, racism was rampant in America and if reports are to be believed discrimination against Blacks still happens. As per this fairly recent report, “Black adults report personally experiencing widespread discrimination across social institutions and interpersonally, including in seeking health care, unfair treatment in by the police, and being targets of racial slurs or microaggressions. Blacks report experiencing racial discrimination at significantly higher levels than whites, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, or the racial composition of their neighbourhood.” (Bleich et al.) Blacks were discriminated based on their appearance and were largely given menial jobs in the social structure. Similarly, Hazaras too were subjected to work as servants, were exempted from education, and were denied a place in the decision-making bodies. What is sad is that owing to this long chain of dehumanization the Hazara clan were conditioned to accept this status. As is mentioned in the paper which focuses on the dehumanization of Hazaras:

We can simply assume that dehumanization is the denial of humanness. In *The Kite Runner* dehumanization in an intergroup context is highlighted. Pashtuns dehumanize Hazaras because of their poor status and similarity with Mongols in their physical appearance. Dehumanization is a strategy of racial discrimination. It is usually related to ethnicity, race, immigration, and genocide. In this case, intergroup conflict arise as a result of which one group dehumanizes another. In the novel, the Pashtuns dehumanize the Hazaras because they are immigrants who had migrated from Iran. (Mujeebullah Shah et al.)

It is owing to Hassan's subalternity and his passive acceptance of this treatment, that he is subjected to everyday contempt. Amir witnesses Hassan being berated by people around him and even he is conditioned to take the ill-treatment of the Hazaras as something which is a part and parcel of Hazara life. When Assef the neighbourhood bully jeers at him calling him names like 'Flat-Nose' (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 34), Amir hardly stands up for Hassan. He is mostly a mute spectator to the insinuations hurled at Hassan. For Amir, Hassan was always the one standing up for him. When Assef instigates him, asking him with contempt, "How can you talk to him, play with him, let him touch you...How can you call him your friend?" (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 36) even then Amir is unable to speak up for himself. It is Hassan who comes to his friend's rescue:

"But perhaps you didn't notice that I am the one holding the slingshot. If you make a move, they'll have to change your nickname from Assef 'the Ear Eater' to 'One-Eyed Assef,' because I have this rock pointed at your left eye." (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 37).

Little does Hassan know that Assef would come back with vengeance and turn his life upside down. Assef who has always subjected both Hassan and his father Ali to derision because of their ethnicity, goes a step ahead when he molests Hassan. Hassan is raped when he is happily kite-running for his friend. While the abuse happens, Amir watches from a distance too shocked and afraid to move. But this incident changes everything between the two boys. Amir is filled with remorse owing to his cowardice and inability to save someone who always saved him. Hassan on the other hand does not open up about his abuse as he is conditioned to bear the atrocities often meted out to his clan. Had there been a dialogue between the two boys, Amir would not have harboured the guilt of betraying his friend and half-brother Hassan. But it is Hassan's subaltern nature that makes him meek. His subalternity stops him from sharing his pain with his Amir. He goes on with life as if nothing ever happened. This further fills Amir with guilt and he suppresses his anguish while internally yearning to atone himself. Hassan's subaltern helplessness is depicted when he serves Assef at a party a few days after the incident of molestation. Amir is infuriated to see Hassan serve food to Assef. But Hassan is not conditioned to stand up against the elite, a trait

which underlines subalternity- "In one of those brief bursts of light, I saw something I'll never forget: Hassan serving drinks to Assef and Wali from a silver platter. The light winked out, a hiss, a crackle, then another flicker of orange light: Assef grinning, kneading Hassan in the chest with a knuckle." (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 87).

Amir realizes that his guilt would be aggravated if he has to see Hassan every day. Seeing Hassan doing the usual chores as if nothing had shifted was something Amir could not long endure. He also understands that Hassan would have to see Assef and his friends now and then. He would have to go on seeing the perpetrators of such a heinous crime and go on with his life as if nothing had happened. This thought was unbearable for him. And thus, he comes to a resolve that Hassan must go. He must go not only because the mere sight of Hassan filled him with remorse, but also because Amir could not see Hassan exposed to those who molested him. Amir did not want Hassan to suffer. Rahim Khan let go of his beloved Homaira because she would have had to suffer as she was a mere Hazara- "My family would have never accepted her as an equal. You don't order someone to polish your shoes one day and call them "sister" the next." (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 87) Similarly, Amir also felt that the only solution to lessen both Hassan's suffering and his helplessness was to send Hassan away:

I sat on the edge of the bed, turned the notebook in my hands, thought about what Rahim Khan had said about Homaira, how his father's dismissing her had been for the best in the end. She would have suffered. Like the times Kaka Homayoun's projector got stuck on the same slide, the same image kept flashing in my mind over and over: Hassan, his head downcast, serving drinks to Assef and Wali. Maybe it would be for the best. Lessen his suffering. And mine too. Either way, this much had become clear: One of us had to go. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 89)

Amir's actions after he witnesses the molestation of Hassan are to a great extent determined by the fact that Hassan was a Hazara subaltern. On a subconscious level, Amir had grown up being fed the notion that a Hazara's lot is to be at the lowest rung of the Afghan society. He was made to believe that the Pashtuns had privilege and the Hazaras were supposed to serve them and be at their mercy. It was how things stood

since the time Amir came to his senses and as a young boy, he did not have the sensibility to question the status quo. The paper, *The Kite Runner: A Psychological Analysis of Amir*, employs Ben's Self-Perception Theory ("Self-Perception Theory in Social Psychology - IResearchNet") to throw light on the aspect that Amir judges his perception of Hassan, a Hazara through his actions. The following lines exemplify his conundrum:

I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That's what I told myself as I turned my back to the alley, to Hassan. That's what I made myself believe. I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay to win Baba. Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscience mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he? (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 68)

The above-mentioned research paper thus emphasizes that "In the eyes of Amir one's self should be prioritized over Hassan, who is considered lowly based on the social categorization in which the value of a person is determined by the category that one belongs to...Ben's Self Perception theory then infers that the attitude Amir is showing is still a deception of one's morality as one still tries to justify one's decision and behaviour made in one's moral dilemma." (Aruta et al. 84)

It is evident from the above discussion that Hassan's subalternity acts as a barrier to Amir's atonement. The class dynamics play a vital role in creating a fissure between the two boys. Though inseparable, the two boys could not open up to each other owing to the master-servant equation being laid out to them since the beginning. If not for Hassan's subalternity, Amir could have mustered up the courage to reconcile with him.

Hassan too would have openly talked about the molestation faced by him. However, the subsequent guilt and subtle conditioning led to the separation of the two boys. A strong sense of guilt never lets go of Amir and it is decades before he is able to atone himself when he becomes a saviour for Hassan's son. It is only when he adopts

Sohrab and brings him to America, is he free of the years of bottled-up feelings of guilt and self-hatred. Sohrab who is a victim of sexual assault and molestation, is numb when he reaches America. His subaltern background as well as the wounds of maltreatment in the hands of Pashtun men, make him forlorn. But Amir and his wife Soraya treat him with love and patience and one fine day he lightens up thereby purging Amir of his past sins:

“Do you want me to run that kite for you?”

His Adam’s apple rose and fell as he swallowed. The wind lifted his hair. I thought I saw him nod.

“For you, a thousand times over,” I heard myself say.

Then I turned and ran.

It was only a smile, nothing more. It didn’t make anything all right...But I’ll take it. With open arms. Because when spring comes, it melts the snow one flake at a time, and maybe I just witnessed the first flake melting. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 323-324)

4.3 Subaltern and Patriarchal Elements: Baba’s Failure to Atone

On the surface, *The Kite Runner* appears to be the story of two friends and half-brothers who are drawn apart when a horrible incident occurs. One of the boys is molested and the other finds guilt rankling at him as he did nothing to stand up for his friend. But it is also important that one delves into the other characters in the book as each character is instrumental in shaping both Amir and Hassan’s life journey. Moreover, *The Kite Runner* has primarily been seen as a bildungsroman which traces Amir’s journey towards redemption. Yet a closer look would reveal that not just Amir, Baba had also committed transgressions which made him guilty. Baba never overtly showed elements of remorse or the fact that he wanted to atone himself. But there were several factors which prevented him to walk on the road to atonement. Patriarchy and subaltern elements were the pivotal aspects which acted as impediments in Baba’s atonement journey.

Baba has been depicted as a steely figure who is revered by all. Even his son is intimidated by his presence. Baba appears to be a humanitarian and is kind enough to

treat his servant Ali and his son Hassan with benevolence. Hassan who had a cleft lip is treated only because Baba arranges for a corrective surgery. Baba never misses Hassan's birthday and tries his best to keep him happy:

Baba never missed Hassan's birthday. For a while, he used to ask Hassan what he wanted, but he gave up doing that because Hassan was always too modest to actually suggest a present. So, every winter Baba picked something out himself. He bought him a Japanese toy truck one year, an electric locomotive and train track set another year. The previous year, Baba had surprised Hassan with a cowboy hat just like the one Clint Eastwood wore in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*... I have summoned Dr. Kumar from New Delhi. Dr. Kumar is a plastic surgeon... It's an unusual present, I know, Baba said. And probably what you had in mind, but this present will last you forever. (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 39-40)

Baba cared for Hassan who was a Hazara servant. His kindness towards Hassan made his son envious. One would think that Baba was doing it as he was above treating people based on their ethnicity and social stature. But later it is revealed that Baba performed such acts of kindness because he too was harbouring a heavy guilt. Hassan was his own flesh and blood. He was his son and so Baba tried his best to give him whatever he could. Opening an orphanage, and caring for the poor on the streets, 'it was all his way of redeeming himself' (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 263). Though Baba made an attempt to overcome his remorse through these acts of benevolence, he could not truly redeem himself as he was stuck in a patriarchal Afghan society. He could have proclaimed that Hassan was his son and both Hassan and Amir could have lived as brothers. But the kind of environment he belonged to and the social conditioning that molded him, prevented him from opening up and accepting his mistakes. After all, he was a rich Pashtun businessman and his illegitimate son was born out of a fling with a mere Hazara woman. Society would have named and shamed him. The fact that Hassan was a subaltern did not make it any easier for Baba to give him his name and a rightful place. There was an unequivocal line between the elite Pashtuns and the marginalized Hazaras. Baba was conditioned to see the subaltern Hazaras as people who were meant to be on the fringes. He could therefore never conceive the idea that

Hassan could be given his rightful place. Guilt overpowered him though and all through his life, he kept compensating for the betrayal towards Hassan by keeping him close and showering him with gifts. To his Pashtun mind, he was doing enough. But it was not atonement in the true sense of the word.

Hassan's subalternity and his own patriarchal upbringing made him live a lie. He could never tell his son Amir as well as his illegitimate son Hassan the truth. The invisible line between Hazaras and Pashtuns had to be maintained. But when Ali and Hassan leave his home, Baba is crestfallen. He could not tell him to stop as he was his son. Baba did not have the courage to own up to the fact that he had impregnated a lowly Hazara woman. He is never able to atone himself completely and when Hassan leaves for good, Baba knows that he is seeing Hassan, his son for the last time. Despite that Baba could not stop Hassan and tell him that he was his son. He had by then surrendered to the bitter lie that Hassan was a mere Hazara. He was born out of the womb of a Hazara woman through an illicit act which was not acceptable in the staunch Afghan society. Baba had broken the norms of the parochial Afghan land and he needed to suffer in silence for his sin. Hassan now belonged to Hazarajat and it was not possible for him to keep Hassan close to him any longer. His strong exterior breaks at the loss of his son and Amir is taken aback to see Baba, who was an embodiment of masculinity, break down- "Then I saw Baba do something I had never seen him do before. He cried. It scared me a little, seeing a grown man sob. Fathers weren't supposed to cry. "Please," Baba was saying, but Ali had already turned to the door, Hassan trailing him. I'll never forget the way Baba said that, the pain in his plea, the fear". (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 93).

Gloria Jean Watkins, better known by her pen name Bell Hooks, talks about how men are also victims of patriarchy in her book, *The Will To Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*:

Patriarchal mores teach a form of emotional stoicism to men that says they are more manly if they do not feel, but if by chance they should feel and the feelings hurt, the manly response is to stuff them down, to forget about them, to hope they go away...Patriarchy demands of men that they become and remain emotional cripples. Since it is a system that denies men full access to

their freedom of will, it is difficult for any man of any class to rebel against patriarchy. (Hooks 27)

Baba too was a victim of patriarchy. Hassan's subalternity and the chain of patriarchy that was ingrained in him since forever, prevented him from realizing the need for atonement. He suffered yet he was not conditioned to own up to the truth that he had impregnated a Hazara woman and Hassan was his son. He engaged in philanthropic activities and though he didn't realize it, subconsciously it was to make up for his sin. Building an orphanage and offering help to the needy was his way to atone himself. Though he would have attained atonement in the real sense if only he had accepted Hassan as his son and had bridged the Hazara-Pashtun gap. It is evident from his friend and confidante Rahim Khan's letter which he writes to Amir:

But your father was a man torn between two halves, Amir jan: you and Hassan. He loved you both, but he could not love Hassan the way he longed to, openly, and as a father. So, he took it out on you instead- Amir, the socially legitimate half, the half that represented the riches he had inherited and the sin-with-impunity privileges that came with them. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 263)

Thus, it is evident that Hassan's subalternity owing to his Hazara ethnicity is a roadblock towards Baba's atonement. Subaltern undercurrents in the novel play a pivotal role in how the characters act and react. The class dynamics in the Afghan community propel the protagonists to behave in a certain way. In this case, we can gauge that had it not been for the class divide and clear demarcation between the elite and the poor, things would have been different for Baba, Amir, Hassan, and even Ali. And what is noteworthy is that this is due to years of institutionalised conditioning wherein one class establishes an upper hand over another class leading to the generational norm of subjugation. This class conflict in terms of subalternity is discussed in depth in the chapter titled, Race, Class and, Religion- Gramsci's conception of Subalternity from the book, *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar: Itineraries of Dalits and Subalterns*:

In contrast to current interpretations, the 'subaltern' is not simply a code word devised out of prison censorship. When Gramsci's notes in *Notebook 25* are understood in relation to the recurring themes in the *Prison Notebooks*, it becomes apparent that race, class, and religion are central to his understanding of subalternity...His analysis of subalternity initiates a line of investigation that examines the political function intellectuals perform in perpetuating, legitimizing, and reinforcement the subordination of one social group by another through the dissemination of national, colonial, racial and religious narratives. (Zene 116–28)

Class segregation is a significant factor which leads to the creation of a subaltern psyche. In *The Kite Runner* too it defines the subtle divide between the Pashtun and Hazara protagonists. It is this gap which is difficult to bridge and which leads to the conscious and subconscious alienation of the lower class, thereby forming a subaltern group. In *The Kite Runner*, subalternity is an enduring force in the quest for atonement. Hassan's subalternity makes the estrangement between him and Amir possible and eventually, it is his subaltern nature which leads to his untimely death.

4.4 Nana's Subalternity and Jalil's Atonement

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini has delineated the plight of the marginalized women of Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been in a state of perpetual internal and external conflict. Belligerent forces (be it the Soviet conquest or the Taliban reign) made the people of Afghanistan face turbulence and terror. In a patriarchal society like Afghanistan, women were the ones who had to suffer the wrath of the militant forces. Unfair and despotic rules were imposed on them and they were robbed of their basic rights. Hosseini has tried to capture this deplorable state of Afghanistan through the story of two Afghan women Mariam and Laila. The story spans through almost thirty years wherein we are exposed to the state of affairs during the Soviet reign, years of civil wars, and finally the tyrannical rule of the Taliban. While the story is told through the voices of Mariam and Laila, there are other women characters as well who show elements of subalternity. Mariam's mother Nana is depicted as a scorned woman who suffers owing to the stigma around her social stature which is further accentuated by the birth of her illegitimate daughter. Her

subalternity plays a vital role in how Mariam's life turns out. Pushed to a small hut on the outskirts of the city, she lives literally and figuratively at the fringes of society. Hosseini does not shy away from drawing the true picture of women's subjugation and harassment during the Soviet reign only to be followed by the Taliban's staunch establishment.

Author Wali M. Rahimi in *Status of Women: Afghanistan*, offers substantial evidence to portray how the stature of women in erstwhile Afghan society was appalling:

The position of women in Afghanistan has traditionally been inferior to that of men. This position has varied according to age, socio-cultural norms, and ethnicity. In fact, Afghan women, even until the beginning of the 20th century were the slaves of their father, husband, father-in-law, and elder brother. Her most valued characteristic was silence and obedience...Girls were usually raised to be good mothers and tolerant housewives. Thus no one paid any attention to their education, except in very rare cases in some well-to-do families. They were married to young and even very old men in most cases, wealthy ones between the ages of 13 and 16, and in certain cases, between the ages of 10 and 12, if their parents desired. (Rahimi 6)

The persistent aggression and the patriarchy that was embedded in the Afghan culture made the people especially women easy prey for subalternity. Women were already under the clutches of a patriarchal society. And when external forces emerged, they were further subjugated. Nana is one such woman portrayed by Hosseini in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* who suffers owing to her inferior status. When she is impregnated by a rich businessman Jalil Khan, she is the one who bears the brunt of giving birth to a bastard child. Gender subalternity is what makes her a victim. Moreover, social stratification which was clearly defined in the Afghan social structure leads to further alienation of Nana. In the thesis titled, *Social Stratification in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns* the researcher throws light on how social classification draws boundaries separating one class from another. Employing social stratification theory, it is established:

The social stratification in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, has three dimensions: class, status, and power. The class is based on the wealth and ownership of economic resources, the status is based on the social prestige of lifestyle, and the power is based on the ability to dominate and control others. The characters in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* can be divided into three classes. In the upper class, a character named Jalil owns vast lands, companies, properties, cinema, and much money. In the middle class are Rasheed, Hakim, and Tariq who earn enough but only own a small amount of wealth to live. In the lower class are Nana...they do not have any wealth and skills that can help them survive during the economic crisis of Afghanistan. (Rizki)

It is thus evident that Nana lacked in class, status, and power. She therefore lives an impoverished life in a *kolba* away from the main city. On the surface, Jalil is depicted as an affluent man who impregnates and abandons his child's mother. But on a closer look, we gauge that he was a slave of patriarchy. He could never muster up the courage to defy the generational norms of the Afghan society. Yet he shows traces of guilt and attempts to atone himself. The biggest hurdle to his atonement is Nana's angst and her subalternity. Someone who is alienated and made a subaltern on account of her gender, ethnicity, and status is bound to be disgruntled. Nana became a subaltern quite early on when she was shamed for her disease. She had Epilepsy and she was cornered by people owing to her disease. The stigma around her disease was the cause of her abandonment by her prospective groom. Her struggle with the disease is shown in the following lines:

Then a week before a wedding date, a *jinn* had entered Nana's body...Nana collapsing suddenly, her body tightening, becoming rigid, her eyes rolling back, her arms and leg shaking as if something was throttling her from the inside, the froth at the corners of her mouth, white, sometimes pink with blood. Then the drowsiness, the frightening disorientation, the incoherent mumbling. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 10)

Nana's debilitating disease pushes her to the fringe quite early on. The taboo around the disease was so strong that Nana was treated with contempt owing to her symptoms. As a report by the National Library of Medicine mentions:

The stigma associated with epilepsy includes both the stigma experienced by epilepsy patients and the community's attitudes and beliefs about them. Patients with epilepsy may feel ashamed and embarrassed if they have a seizure in public due to symptoms such as limb shaking, staring spells, chewing, and urinary/bowel incontinence. Unfortunately, they face prejudice and stigma from others as well because they are perceived as insane, possessed by evil spirits, and having weak minds. The word "epilepsy" conjures up images of a person having fits (seizures) at any time, which has a negative impact on their social relations and quality of life. People with epilepsy (PWE) who live in underprivileged areas, unfortunately, do not receive appropriate care, which often results in their illness remaining untreated, affecting both their physical and psychological health. (Malik et al.)

Clearly, a woman like Nana who belonged to the lower rung of society, was made into a subaltern not just due to her ethnicity but also due to her ailment. As a woman suffering from a chronic disease, she was marginalized further. In Post-Colonial Studies, disability and disease are regarded and investigated with respect to marginalization. Spivak's theory of subalternity which is the theoretical edifice of this research is also employed to study the same and draw parallels between the two. Subalterns are defined as those who do not get a representation and a voice in the society. Disabled and diseased sections of the society too are rendered subaltern as they are excluded and looked at with derision thereby robbing them of an agency. The Research article, *Spivak and Rethinking the Agency of Disabled Children* probes into this aspect:

From a critical disability studies perspective, disabled people have been historically absent from the narrative – physically and metaphorically. If present at all, they are representative of the grotesque, and in the light of the tragic, of the horrors of a life that is less than that of the normative 'other'...

Within postcolonial studies, the non-representation of disability continues to

hold space, and therein exists a gap of theoretical understandings with this clear lack of critical understanding. In itself disability is viewed as a 'master metaphor for social ills'... What the study of *subalternity* offers us from a critical disability studies perspective is that both the disabled person in everyday life and the colonised in Spivak's essay occupy similar spaces in both the political sense and in the sense of subject formation that is characterised as that of a marginalised subject position. (Kowitz)

Thus, Nana was made a subaltern in Afghan society when she was a young girl. Consequently, she was forever embittered. Destiny does not offer her any consolation when she is pushed to a small hut to live as a single mother of an illegitimate child. Nana vents out her angst on both Mariam and Jalil. Jalil is crippled by the Afghani patriarchy to accept Nana and Mariam. But he tries to make amends by sending regular supplies and visiting Mariam frequently. Nana realizes that he is seeking atonement for his transgressions when she says, "His idea of penance." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 11). But her subaltern angst- wherein she did not have an agency and could not voice out against the injustice meted out to her- makes her a cynic. This becomes a roadblock to Jalil's redemption. Eventually, Nana takes her life when Mariam goes to Herat to visit Jalil. Her insecurity and the fact that she could lose her only daughter makes her take the drastic step. With her demise, Jalil's sins are left unatoned. It is much later after leading a hard life amidst wars and bloodshed, that he tries to ask forgiveness from his daughter and redeem himself for good.

4.5 Mariam's Subalternity: An Impediment to her Final Atonement

Mariam is one of the protagonists in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* who is a subaltern. She is put down constantly as a child owing to her illegitimate birth. Her own mother contributes to her alienation by calling her names like 'harami.' It is already been established above as to how Mariam's mother Nana behaves in that way as she is a victim of marginalization herself. Nevertheless, her behaviour negatively affects Mariam and makes her guilt-ridden. Mariam subconsciously considers herself the reason for all that befell her mother. This thought torments her to no end and pushes her towards subalternity. Being a woman in a country with patriarchal under currents, she is deprived of a life that was her right. Her biological father is a rich businessman

who lives in luxury with his other wives and children. He visits her regularly and she adores him. Yet he is not courageous enough to accept her as his daughter due to societal norms. Polygamy, which was a rampant practise in Afghanistan enables him to keep more than one wife. Later, the practise of polygamy makes Mariam suffer too when her husband marries another woman, Laila. His actions are justifiable in the Afghan society. But it corners women and leave them agonized.

Mariam's woes begin quite early in life and just when one thinks her life might get better, her condition is deteriorated by the twist of fate. Her father whom she reveres, marries her off to a much older man because after Nana's demise, he is unable to muster up the courage to give refuge to his illegitimate daughter. It is evident that in the male-dominated Afghan society women are treated as mere commodities. Once Mariam is married off to a much older man her life deteriorates and she is treated in an inhumanly manner. Her father and his wives do not think twice before sending a fifteen- year- old Mariam with Rashid, a man in his forties.

Life with Rashid becomes unbearable for Mariam. Drunk in patriarchy, Rashid lays down staunch rules for a naïve Mariam. Thereafter, he indulges in marital rape by enforcing himself upon Mariam who is not even old enough to understand the nitty gritty of a marital relationship:

“There is no shame in this, Mariam,” he said, slurring a little. “It’s what married people do. It’s what the Prophet himself and his wives did. There is no shame.” A few moments later, he pushed back the blanket and left the room, leaving her with the impression of his head on her pillow, leaving her to wait out the pain down below, to look at the frozen stars in the sky and a cloud that draped the face of the moon like a wedding veil. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 76)

Thereafter, she is expected to ‘start performing like a wife’ (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 63). She is expected to procreate and preferably a male progeny as a male heir would be able to carry forward the family name. But when Mariam loses a child and eventually fails to conceive, Rashid's behaviour becomes further more indifferent. He treats her with contempt and becomes oblivious to her presence.

Mariam's position in the house gradually becomes akin to a house cat. She also tolerates Rashid's short-tempered behaviour and his violent outbursts. She bears his physical abuse silently as she has no one for support. Lack of agency makes her a subaltern and prevents her from retaliation and retribution. One needs to have a voice and be at peace with oneself to atone oneself. But Mariam was perpetually living under the shadow of fear. She was also not educated enough which further hinders her growth and makes her voiceless. All these factors which push her towards subalternity act as roadblocks in her journey towards redemption.

Later when Rashid marries a much younger girl, Mariam is infuriated. She tries to voice out her disapproval. But her opinion is quashed. A subaltern who is never accorded an agency, Mariam's rights are opinions are trampled:

“She's too young. You're too old. This is nonsense.”

I am too old. Too old for you to do this to me,” Mariam said, balling up fistfuls of her dress so tightly her hands shook. “For you, after all these years, to make me an ambagh.”

“Don't be so dramatic. It's a common thing and you know it. I have friends who have two, three, four wives. Your own father had three. Besides, what I am doing now most men I know would have done long ago. You know it's true.” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 134)

Thus, it is not that Mariam does not attempt to break the shackles of her subaltern status. But, as Spivak also mentions in an argument about subalternity if a subaltern is able to speak up and her voice is heard then he/she would cease to be a subaltern. In the same vein, had Rasheed respected Mariam and paid heed to her choices and decisions, she would have been free of her subaltern nature. But he continues to be a husband who gaslights and jeers at his wife as he is conditioned to do the same in the parochial Aghan society. Thereafter Mariam continues to live in the same house with her husband's new young wife Laila. In the thesis titled, *Rasheed's aggression over his wives in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the researcher explores the reasons behind Rasheed's aggressive behaviour, by taking the aid of three theories namely Ethological Theory, Drive Theory, and Social Learning Theory. According to

the thesis, Ethological Theory is based on the physiological aspect of the aggressor. In this case, Ethological Theory would imply that Rasheed's physical appearance and biological influence would impact his behaviour. His burly structure and the presence of a gun in his house act as influencing factors towards his aggressive attitude. The Drive Theory proposes that Rasheed's aggression would have been an outcome of his frustration which stemmed out of the loss of his son and the lack of resources and financial stability in the later years. The Social Learning Theory reveals that aggression more often than not stems out of the surroundings. When the environment around the aggressor is steeped in domination it is bound to affect the behavioural aspect of the people. In this case, the male-dominated Afghan society of which Rasheed was a part, led him to imbibe the same violent temperament which he witnessed around him. (Pangarsa Andreas)

Thus, Rasheed's behaviour pushes Mariam towards subalternity and she leads a sad life. It is only much later when Rasheed marries a young Laila that Mariam finds a purpose in life. It is interesting that though initially, she looks at Laila with disbelief, it is this young girl who gives her a purpose to live. Her unadulterated love offers respite to Mariam who had been ridiculed and made to believe that she is of no value to anyone. Laila's daughter Aziza makes her a mother figure and she realizes for the first time in her life that she could be loved by someone sans any vested interest. A subaltern is made to feel that he/she deserves to live a life charted out by the elite suppressor. But this is not enough to break her subalternity which is a hurdle on her path to happiness. While Mariam and Laila form a sisterhood of sorts, the political environment of Afghanistan shifts. With the advent of the Taliban government, Mariam is further entrenched in subalternity. Though both men and women are deeply affected by the laws enforced by the government, women get the short end of the stick. Mariam had by then gotten used to Rasheed's abuse and had become adept at walking around eggshells when he was around. She had found a confidante in Laila and they had become a family. But the Taliban reign deteriorates her state further. The despotic regime imposes unfair rules on women. This makes Mariam's life even more difficult. The Talib hegemony corners her further robbing her from doing away with her subalternity.

Owing to the changing political scene, Rasheed becomes financially unstable. He is unable to provide for all the members of the house. As per the new law, women are not allowed to work outdoors. Hence, he sends the young Aziza to an orphanage to both Mariam and Laila's dismay. His frustration peaks and his atrocities against both the women heighten too. Mariam who had hitherto been a picture of endurance, finds herself moved by the sufferings of Laila and her children. Silence is the hallmark of a subaltern. And Mariam had been one throughout her difficult life. Yet when Laila who has had a different upbringing exemplifies resistance, something in Mariam shifts. While patriarchy and Talib hegemony made her a subaltern, sisterhood, and love steered her towards breaking the shackles of subalternity. Mariam remains a victim all through her life and gender subalternity shapes her life and corners her. But, towards the end when she realizes that Rasheed would not stop before taking Laila's life, she takes the extreme step:

Had Mariam been certain that he would be satisfied with shooting only her, that there was a chance he would spare Laila, she might have dropped the shovel. But in Rasheed's eyes, she saw murder for them both. And so, Mariam raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could, arching it so it touched the small of her back. She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that *she* was deciding the course of her own life. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 340-341)

While Laila is someone who is depicted as spirited and as someone who constantly questions Rasheed's ideals, in the end, one is taken by surprise to see Mariam emerge as someone who breaks the cycle of patriarchy and gender subalternity. While in prison, Mariam is almost revered by her cell-mates as most of them were serving sentences for petty crimes like 'running away from home.' They see Mariam as a woman who dares to stand against systemic oppression and marginalization.

We can therefore conclude that subalternity is an enduring force in the life of Mariam which prevents her from atoning herself and making her life worthwhile. Yet in the end, when she breaks free of her subaltern nature and takes things in her hand, she attains redemption in the true sense. It is also important to note here that though Hosseini draws the character of Mariam to exhibit the plight of Afghan women and

how subalternity had rendered them voiceless, he also aimed to portray that these 'third world women' attempted to raise their heads too. They were victims of their dire circumstances but they wanted an agency. In the paper, *Post Colonial Feminist Reading of Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns* it is argued as to how Western feminists have stereotyped the portrayal of women in the third world countries. They are assumed to be docile and muted. But the researcher in the above-mentioned paper through the works of Spivak asserts that the inability of subalterns to voice out their stand does not imply that they do not speak. It means that despite speaking they are not heard and their voice is belittled and ignored by the hegemonic powers. (Seifi)

Through Mariam's portrayal, Hosseini defies the notion that subaltern women do not resist. They may remain, subalterns, because the oppressor chooses to not pay heed to their opinions. Subalternity hampers their sense of atonement which in Mariam's case was the ultimate sacrifice to ensure a better life for Laila and her family. In giving away her life Mariam finds atonement which had hitherto been roadblocked by her gender subalternity.

4.6 Laila's Subalternity: An Enduring Force in her Quest for Atonement

Laila is another pivotal protagonist who yearns for to atone herself but is suppressed owing to gender subalternity. She is depicted as a courageous woman who finds it hard to succumb to Rasheed's ideologies and patriarchal outlook as she was raised by a liberal father. Unlike Mariam, she had a happy childhood and she never witnessed patriarchy in her home. Her father was an educationist who instilled in her a free spirit and told her the importance of being educated and opinionated. But when her parents are killed, her fate takes her towards a thorny road. Political upheaval disintegrates her life and she soon finds herself married to a much older married man. Though Laila always spoke her mind, she too is eventually made to bow down to subalternity in a country reeling with subjugation. As if she was already not suppressed enough, under the four walls of her home, Taliban rules further worsened her situation.

Hosseini draws Laila's character to portray how she is not a silent sufferer and is someone who has her share of opinions. She is appalled when women are exempted from working outside. She speaks her mind, being fully aware of her husband

Rasheed's ideologies. Yet there is so much she could do to thwart the gender subalternity faced by her. The socio-political scene of erstwhile Afghanistan was not conducive enough for a lone woman to raise her voice. And so, her subalternity acts as an obstacle which prevents her ultimate atonement. It is not that Laila does not strive to atone herself but she fails owing to the extreme circumstances she is faced with. The only reason she agrees to marry and stay with Rasheed is because she finds out that she is carrying Tariq's child. And later she hatches a plan to run away from Rasheed's house which is a remarkable act of resistance. She had the guts to walk away from her subaltern status and leave her abusive house. She also wanted to take Mariam along and give her a better life. Yet patriarchy and gender subalternity stop her from breaking free. She is caught by the Afghan authorities. The following conversation gives us a peek into how Taliban had imposed unfair laws on women. Women were left with no free-will and were treated as mere commodities who were supposed to live under the stranglehold of their male guardians:

"Let us go, Officer..." She read the name on his lapel tag. "Officer Rahman. Honor the meaning of your name and show compassion. What does it matter to you to let a mere two women go? What's the harm in releasing us. We are not criminals."

"I can't."

"I beg you, please."

"It's a matter of qanoon, *hamshira*, a matter of law."

"If you send us back," she said instead, slowly, "there is no saying what he will do to us."

She could see the effort it took him to keep his eyes from shifting. "What a man does in his home is his business."

"What about the law then, Officer Rahman?" Tears of rage strung her eyes.

"Will you be there to maintain order?"

"As a matter of policy, we do not interfere with private family matters, *hamshira*."

“Of course you don’t. When it benefits the man. And isn’t this a ‘private family matter’, as you say isn’t it?” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 259-260)

Through the above extract one gets a clear picture of the plight of women in Afghanistan. The authorities too turned a deaf ear to the troubles that befell women. Owing to this, Laila who tries tooth and nail to defy the oppression, is also made a victim due to her gender subalternity. The research paper, *Gender Subalternity in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns*, also delves in the same aspect and talks about how gender subalternity is entrenched in the very fabric of Afghan society leaving women voiceless:

Overall, Gender Subalternity begins when the interpersonal communication fails to achieve its objective. This is due to the presence of element of noise in the shape of social, cultural, and socio-economic factors. The distortion of communication by noise results in the failure of interpretation of the message that is being conveyed by the speaker. Ultimately, the sexed subalterns lose their voice and cannot speak. (Kenas* and Lin)

Laila suffers abuse and misogyny as she is left with no option. Not just her husband Rasheed, she and the other Afghan women are made subalterns by the entire Afghan regime. With the advent of the Taliban, Laila’s situation becomes even more deplorable. Her daughter is put into a dilapidated orphanage to make ends meet. Something as simple as paying a visit to her daughter becomes an ordeal for her in the Afghan society. Owing to the new laws, she could not roam around the city without a male companion. As valiant as Laila is, she is unable to push away the violence meted out to her due to her subalternity:

One day, a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna. When he was done, he gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said, “I see you again, I’ll beat you until your mother’s milk leaks out of your bones....” Sometimes she was caught, questioned, scolded—two, three, even four times in a single day. Then the whips came down and the antennas sliced through the air, and she trudged home, bloodied, without so much as a glimpse of Aziza. Soon Laila took to

wearing extra layers, even in the heat, two, three sweaters beneath the burqa for padding against the beatings. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 313-314)

A 2009 report by UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) also delves into the dire state of women in Afghanistan. Though the report focuses on how the condition of women did not drastically improve even after the end of Taliban reign, it reiterates as to how the extent of atrocities on women during the Talib rule were unimaginable. The report goes on to delve into the abominable state of Afghan women and how the socio-cultural scenario of Afghanistan coupled with the despotic regime robbed women of their basic rights. Gender subalternity not only resulted in pushing the women away from participating in public life but it also led to heinous crimes against women. Hosseini has vividly put this grim reality in the book through the lives of the women characters. The report states:

Taliban understanding or interpretation of Islam, however, further institutionalized the marginalization of women. Throughout its harsh, five-year rule, the Taliban's extreme interpretation of Sharia, based on a distorted and oppressive version of Islam, attempted to change the essence of Afghan society to that of a fundamentalist and repressive system of governance where Taliban edicts reigned supreme. Taliban rule was particularly harsh in urban centres where women, in particular, were victimized and were reduced to a shadowy existence. Women and girls were subjected to systematic discrimination that, effectively, confined most females to their homes. Females were not permitted out in public unless accompanied by a mahram. The contemporary situation of Afghan women is shaped by harmful traditional practices, many of which precede Islam. Such practices and related perspectives contradict the fundamental tenets of Islam but have served to suppress women, restrict their movements outside the home, leave them vulnerable in the face of violence, and violate their basic human rights. (Imran and Ismail)

Laila becomes a victim to the above stated misogyny and suffers assault both at the hands of Rasheed and the Talibs. Her subaltern status keeps her away from her

daughter. Yet she tries tooth and nail to meet her daughter even at the cost of being thrashed inhumanly. Subalternity therefore becomes an enduring force in this regard. But Hosseini does not merely show the atrocities Afghan women had to bear during the repressive reign of Taliban, he also portrays the spirit of the Afghan women who despite of being marginalized make an effort to fight back. Laila too displays exemplary courage and it is because of Laila's support that Mariam too musters up the courage to take the extreme step. The sisterhood formed by the two women- both stuck in the vicious circle of subalternity- steers them forward amidst the not so conducive socio-political environment of erstwhile Afghanistan. Laila walks on the road to atonement when she is freed from the clutches of Taliban despotism. Later she comes back to Afghanistan and works for the reconstruction of her homeland. She could have led a comfortable life away from Afghanistan. Yet she chooses to come back as she realizes that she ought to make a difference and should not let Mariam's ultimate sacrifice go in vain. By working for the upliftment of Afghan society which was in shambles post- Taliban rule, she finds true atonement. Laila was raised by a feminist father who instilled in her a sense of duty towards her motherland. She could not turn away from her country and so she goes on to relinquish subalternity and is able to find fulfilment in working towards making Afghanistan a better place for the future generation.

Yet Hosseini drives home the fact that subalternity proved disastrous for Afghan women who were crippled and subjugated to no end. Laila's journey too gives us a vivid peek into the life of an Afghan woman marred by constant wars and political turmoil. Therefore, we can deduce that subalternity was an enduring force in the life of not just Laila but most Afghan women living under the shadow of patriarchy and colonization. Hosseini thus successfully depicts not just the struggles of women in a war-ravaged country but also breaks the stereotypical Western image of women of the third world as being submissive. Laila displays resistance and though after years of suffering owing to her subalternity, she is able to atone herself by working for the upliftment of Afghanistan. "Hosseini's females represent the life of ordinary women who are subjected to and suffer from various forms of violence, oppression, and

subservience, and at last break the manmade skeleton of sociocultural and sociopolitical hegemonic control over their bodies and soul.” (Imran and Ismail)

4.7 Saboor’s Subalternity and his inability to find Atonement

Hosseini has yet again portrayed an array of characters in his third novel *And the Mountains Echoed*. Like his previous novels here too we find multiple characters steeped in subalternity. The novel begins with a story and at once we are made privy to the dilemma of a poor subaltern man Saboor, who is so desperate that he has to unwillingly give away his daughter so that the rest of his family can survive. The constant scuffles and the reign of colonial powers had made the financial condition of the people of Afghanistan bleak. Amidst such circumstances, Saboor gives away his daughter Pari to the rich Wahdati family. But he never recovers from the guilt of abandoning his little girl. He suffers till the time he is alive, breaking all ties with his brother-in-law Nabi who was in a way instrumental in Pari’s adoption. Through Saboor, Hosseini wished to represent an average Afghan citizen belonging to the lower strata of the erstwhile Afghan society who to grapple with the severe winter and poverty, is forced to take the extreme step of selling away his own flesh and blood. Hosseini shares the same in an interview wherein he shares his intention and idea behind the story of Saboor and his children:

I went to Afghanistan with a UN Refugee Agency to visit with returning refugees in Afghanistan and visited a number of villages where I met people who were trying to make a living, restart their lives in Afghanistan. After being away for a long time, one particular aspect of that that struck me was the lengths to which people went to survive the winters which are so brutal and so cold in Afghanistan. And in every community, I went they would lose routinely five to ten-ten children every winter because of the really unforgiving elements. And so, when I came home after that trip I started thinking about what I have heard ..and an idea took place of a family living in a remote village in Afghanistan and having to make a decision, a decision that for most of us would be unbearable and almost unthinkable. And yet they have to make this decision for the survival of the family. (Canada)

Saboor's decision is what sets into motion the heartbreak and separation of two siblings. But, Saboor himself is burdened with guilt as he is unable to provide for his children. Here Saboor is a subaltern who is marginalized owing to his economic stature. A clear class difference is seen between Saboor's family and that of the affluent Wahdatis. This huge fissure between the rich and the poor is what makes Saboor a subaltern. He has no aid from the State and no means to participate in the functioning of the government as he is caught up struggling to make ends meet. Poverty and neglect by the State also push one towards subalternity. The paper titled *Introduction. "Learning to Learn from Below": Understanding Subalternity* talks about subalternity at length. Though it speaks about the concept of a subaltern in the Indian context wherein the researcher talks about the cast narrative, it also touches upon the aspect that lack of resources and absolute oblivion of the State too contributes remarkably to push people on the fringes. It states, "Subaltern citizens include those who are marginalized and live at the edge of marginality itself. The State has almost no interest in their welfare and there is no provision for their employment, food security, education, health care, or any form of livelihood except what they might garner themselves from meagre daily wage." (Thapan)

Saboor too has meagre resources and gets a paltry sum of money through daily wages depending upon the work he gets. It is evident from Abdullah's statement about how his father had perpetually been on the lookout for work trying to make a livelihood. "As long as Abdullah could remember, Father was out searching for work, knocking on doors for a day's labour. He had overheard Father one time tell the village elder, Mullah Shekib, *If I had been born an animal, Mullah Sahib, I swear I would have come out a mule.*" (Hosseini, *And The Mountains Echoed* 27)

Saboor's subalternity therefore not only propelled him to make a dire decision of selling his little daughter and separating the inseparable siblings, but it also prevented him from making peace with himself. After giving away Pari, Saboor's condition doesn't improve drastically. He is still stuck in the vicious circle of poverty. So much so that, he has to cut his favourite oak tree to get the wood for sustaining the tough Afghan winters. Had Saboor been supported by the State, things would have turned out differently for him. But all he could do was pine for his daughter. As a male in an

Afghan patriarchal society, he is not even expected to grieve openly. Thus, he dies without meeting his daughter, with a guilt-ridden heart, as a suffering subaltern.

4.8 Nila Wahdati's Gender Subalternity and her Failure to Redeem Herself

One of the most complex characters in *And the Mountains Echoed* is Nila Wahdati, the bold poetess who stands out like a sore thumb in the parochial Afghan land. Nila is depicted by Hosseini as a flawed woman. At no point, did Hosseini attempt to make a moral judgment of sorts. Yet it is evident that Nila is a victim of gender subalternity. In a society where women were expected to be hidden behind a veil, Nila had the courage to be passionate about her art. She did not shy away from defying all the rules set out for women in Afghanistan. Yet even someone as enlightened and self-assured as Nila feels that she is stuck in a narrow-minded society. Nila is never given due credit for her poetry in Afghanistan and she is shamed by her father for having a rebellious streak and for going against the norm. Gender subalternity hits her hard and it is much later when she moves to Paris with her adopted daughter, that she is acknowledged for her creative brilliance. But the harm had already been done by then. Living in a country where she had been constantly put down and shamed for her actions, she becomes scarred. The brunt of her complex persona is borne by her adoptive daughter Pari all through her life. Even after escaping from Afghanistan, Nila is unable to find happiness and is never truly able to atone herself. Having never gotten any validation from her country and family, she eventually dies by suicide in a foreign land.

Women were dual subalterns in countries like Afghanistan. Hosseini goes on to depict the intriguing facet that for a woman can be a subaltern even if she hails from the so-called elite class. Nila had an agency and she could speak her mind. Yet she was never heard in the patriarchal Afghan society. As a result, she has to leave her homeland. In France, she is acknowledged for her craft but the years of endurance and schooling in her homeland leave a bitter taste in her mouth. Here we can infer that had she not been a prey to subalternity, Nila would have been a different person. She would have lived a happy life and would in turn have given a normal childhood to her daughter Pari, in her own country. To run away from her subaltern status in Afghanistan, Nila adopts Pari and moves to France hoping that she will find

fulfillment and a purpose with Pari in tow. But her childhood demons and the scars given inadvertently by gender subalternity do not let her redeem herself. Pari is confounded by her eccentricity and she questions her:

What was I, Maman? Pari thinks. What was I supposed to be, growing in your womb- assuming it was even in your womb that I was conceived? A seed of hope? A ticket purchased to ferry you from the dark? A patch for that hole you carried in your heart? If so, then I wasn't enough. I wasn't nearly enough. I was no balm to your pain, only another dead end, another burden, and you must have seen that early on. (Hosseini *And the Mountains Echoed* 220-221)

4.9 Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that all three novels of Khaled Hosseini teem with characters who are not only fringing towards marginalization and subalternity, but their subalternity becomes a major roadblock thereby keeping them from atoning themselves. Atonement had different meanings for the myriad characters in Hosseini's novels. For Amir in *The Kite Runner*, it meant absolving his sins, for Mariam it meant saving Laila from oppression and patriarchy and doing something of purpose in her otherwise bleak life. For Laila, true atonement meant not ruining the second chance at life and making a difference by doing something for her homeland. For Saboor and Abdullah, atonement would have become possible by reuniting with Pari and making amends for abandoning her. Yet we see that the road to atonement is formidable for all these characters owing to their subalternity. As a matter of fact, more often than not, it is their lack of agency and subjugation that leads them to engage in such transgressions in the first place. By presenting such layered characters set in the volatile Afghan land, Khaled Hosseini brought forth the idea that subalterns could be anywhere. A country which saw perpetual wars and which was steeped in patriarchy, gave birth to subalternity which came in the way of true happiness for all of them. It also debunked the oft quoted myth that women in a third world country like Afghanistan were meek and probably suffered like silent subalterns. Though Hosseini's characters were fictional, they aided considerably in bringing to the Western world the true and humane picture of Afghanistan.

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