

A thousand Splendid Suns: Reimagined through a legal Lens

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Abstract—*In the present script we have tried exploring certain themes of law, set in nearly three decades old Afghanistan with special emphasis on the female perspective and their treatment under sharia law. The story involves several legal themes centered around how Sharia law is practiced in Afghanistan, starting from child marriage, polygamy, the concept of contractual marriage to stern changes in the legal system under a violent regime, domestic violence, crime and punishment and ends with a debate on law and morality. Here, we have analyzed the major themes, central to the plot of the script.*

Keywords— *Law and Morality, Patriarchy, Practice of Sharia, Reimagined Legal Script, Treatment of Women.*

I. INTRODUCTION

While writing the script for this play, we referred to the book titled “A Thousand Splendid Suns” by Khaled Hosseini. The story revolves around the life of people in Afghanistan and how the transition took place from pre-Mujahedeen period to post- Taliban. Inspired by his book and the ideas revolving around it, this story takes place during the same timeline. The plot of the book has been slightly tweaked to fit the narrative of our script, keeping the original story, themes and characters alive.

The story revolves around a young girl from Herat, Mariam. She was born out of wedlock to Nana, her mother who worked as a housemaid in her father, Jalil’s home. She never lived in Herat during her childhood. The three different Acts in the present script mark the transition in Mariam’s life and how it changes due to the actions of people around her; how it causes her to undergo an emotional and mental transformation of her own. History suggests us that Central Asia has had a rich and vibrant culture, but the present script highlights the unseen side of this culture that has often been ignored on the pretext of it being conventional. Prior to the fall of communism in Afghanistan, situation of people especially women, wasn’t as distorted as it became post the Mujahedeen coming to power and the rise of Taliban, a vicious group of non-state actors. Misinterpretation of religious texts and enforcing written drafts by religious scholars as law of the land, has only resulted in depriving people of their rights. In the present script, while Mariam grew up to believe she was supposed subjugate herself to the dominance by men,

Laila, to the contrary, rebelled against this unjust patriarchy. Two women harboring different perspectives unite during the rise of a violent group in their country, to fight their common battle.

The epilogue marks where this script ends and the narrator ties all the loose ends for the reader.

II. SYNOPSIS

The story revolves around a young girl from Herat, Mariam. She was born out of wedlock to Nana, her mother who worked as a housemaid in her father, Jalil’s home. She never lived in Herat in her childhood. Rather, she lived a few miles away from Herat alongside the river of Kolba. Nana lived with her daughter in a kuccha house with few utensils. She was a weak lady, suffering from illness. Since childhood itself, she had always taught Mariam that there was no one else who she could call her own besides her mother because she was an illegitimate child. Her father would never love her the same way as he loved his other children and this fact should always remain in her mind. Jalil used to come visit Mariam and Nana on the Thursday of every week and would take Mariam to the riverside to spend some time with her. It was a bright sunny day, when Jalil took Mariam to the riverside and gave her a few presents and took her to eat an ice cream. Meanwhile, Nana was calling for Mariam to help her climb the pear tree near their hut to pluck some fruits but, her calls were in vain as Jalil and Mariam had already left. She climbed the weak branches of the tree with her fragile legs and unfortunately, fell down and passed away. When Jalil

returned with Mariam, he found Nana lying lifeless on the ground. Jalil arranged for the burial of Nana that evening and took Mariam with him to his house in Herat.

Jalil lived with his three wives and nine children in a big house in Herat. The wives did not like Mariam staying with them so they made her live in a damp and discarded room. They used to treat her very badly and make her do all the chores in the house in Jalil's absence. Mariam used to feel nothing when she saw Jalil's wives bringing good food, clothes and presents for their children because her Ammi had always told her that she was an illegitimate child who could never rightfully claim all those luxuries as her step siblings. When Mariam turned 16, Sofia, the eldest wife of Jalil insisted on getting her married to an elder man. Though Jalil did not approve of this initially, he eventually agreed after being persuaded by his wives about the good lifestyle that she would enjoy in Kabul.

The man marrying Mariam was a 40-year-old businessman from Kabul, Rasheed. The marriage took place as per Sharia Law where a legal contract was drawn between the bride and the groom. After Mariam uttered 'quboolhai' three times, the marriage contract was concluded and she was married off to Rasheed, a man she had never seen till after their wedding. They left for Kabul the very same day in the bus from Herat.

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It was a busy evening when Mariam reached the streets of Kabul along with Rasheed. His house was big and empty. Rasheed took her suitcase upstairs and she got settled. Rasheed treated her very kindly in the initial few days; he would take her out for shopping, a stroll in the park and eating food. After a few months, he consummated their marriage. For the next few months, he desperately tried to get her pregnant but to no avail. When he finally took her to the doctor, he was shattered when told that his wife didn't have a hospitable environment in her womb to carry a baby. The kind treatment that Mariam used to receive stopped. Rasheed would now come home drunk, beat her up, shout at her, throw the food sometimes and go to sleep.

After some years, he came home one day with a 13-year-old bride, Laila. Mariam was stunned when Rasheed asked her to ensure that proper care was taken of his new begum. He treated Laila with the same love and affection that he

once offered to Mariam. He did not consummate the marriage until Laila was 15 years old. Laila was about to marry her childhood sweetheart Tariq but before anything could happen, he left to fight in the war and his family moved away. On this pretext, her mother gave her hand in marriage to Rasheed, while Laila's dotting father himself was away for the war. After her wedding, one day Tariq came back for Laila and she once again started spending time with him. Meanwhile, the relationship between Laila and Mariam became more and more loving. It happened one day that the young couple were engaged in a moment of passion which resulted in Laila getting pregnant. Soon after a few days, Rasheed bought gifts for Laila and went to bed early in order to finally consummate their marriage. When he became aware of her pregnancy, he ensured that she was well taken care of, believing that the child was his. Mariam, though she did not smile much these days, took care of Laila like her own daughter.

It was during this time that the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union had increased in Afghanistan. There was political instability and foreign intervention led to more destabilization in the already war-torn situation in Afghanistan. Regional extremist groups such as Taliban, were born and a reign of terror was unleashed with frequent ruckus and bombings in every neighborhood. Fatwas were released which detailed extreme measures such as public execution, to be taken for 'lawless and immoral actions' like adultery, theft, blasphemy etc.

With the birth of Laila's daughter, doomsday came upon the entire family. Rasheed was so disappointed when he saw that Laila gave birth to a girl that he resorted to drinking and violence once again. After few months, a neighbor happened to tell Rasheed about Laila and Tariq's growing relationship. He threatened Laila to not meet him otherwise he would get her publicly executed by the Taliban for committing the sin of adultery. Mariam started getting afraid of Rasheed's behavior and so, she planned to help Laila and Tariq elope with their daughter to a safer place. Since Tariq was away helping his family get settled in a new country, in his absence, Laila and Mariam tried to make the escape themselves but were unfortunately caught. Rasheed got them home from the police station. What followed was one of the most brutal and violent beatings of Mariam and Laila and ultimately, Rasheed locked them in separate rooms.

The day he finally released them from their banishment, he went out for work. In his absence, while Laila and Mariam had only begun to conjure up a new plan, Tariq knocked on the front door. He was finally home to take them away. But in a climactic moment, the happy reunion was short lived as Rasheed came home bearing a gun. He was ready to kill

them when Mariam swooped in to save the day by hitting him with a shovel.

In the emotional moment that followed, Mariam didn't let Tariq take the blame of her crime and asked Laila to leave with her new family while she would stay behind so that they could leave safely. After internally debating law, morality and norms with herself, Mariam hit Rasheed again so that no breath was left in him. She realized that she would rather die suffering at the hands of the Taliban, than live to endure suffering at the hands of Rasheed.

III. DESCRIPTION OF THE CHARACTERS

1. Mariam: (Protagonist) Beginning the story as a fifteen-year-old young girl, Mariam lives in Herat, Afghanistan. She is the daughter of Nana and Jalil, born out of wedlock. She is an uneducated, shy and young afghan woman. Having grown up with Nana, she believes that her fate is destined to humiliation and living in poverty. She is made to believe that serving men is the role of a woman in the afghan society and being an illegitimate child, she has no right to enjoy the luxuries of life. As she grows older with the progress of the story, she endures more suffering in life but that does not stop her from showing care and affection to her husband's young child bride. Towards the end, she grows much wiser than as she had started out.

2. Nana: (Minor Character) An old, sickly lady, Nana is the mother of Mariam. She has a fragile body and is suffering from various diseases. Being poor, she lives in an old hut along with her daughter, by the riverside of Herat. She used to work as a maid at Jalil's house. Having given birth to a daughter, out of wedlock with Jalil, she was forced out of work from his house by his wives. She is a stereotypical woman who has grown up believing that men dominate the society, and education has no meaning. Despite all her love for her daughter, she has conditioned Mariam to believe that she would never be loved by anyone because she was an illegitimate daughter. This stems from her defeatist and negative outlook towards life.

3. Jalil: (Primary Major Character) A 50-year-old, handsome Afghan who owned a big bungalow in Herat. He has three wives and nine children. He was engaged in a relationship with Nana, a woman who worked as a maid at his house. Out of this, his daughter Mariam was born whom he could never love as expressly as his other children. Contrary to traditional views held in Afghan society regarding men's role in household, he was a kind, soft-spoken man who could not go against his wives in keeping Nana and his daughter in his home. Surprisingly, he holds different views from Nana regarding his daughter and he fulfils his fatherly duties by visiting them

frequently, bearing gifts. Yet, his submission at the hands of his wives often overcomes him including when taking crucial decisions about Mariam's future.

4. Sadia: (Minor Character) She is 40 years old and Jalil's eldest wife and also the most dominant among the three. She instigates Jalil to get Mariam married. She can't bear the presence of Mariam in the house, who is a stark reminder of her husband's affair with the housemaid and treats Mariam poorly. She has 4 children whom she dotes on. She is amiable with the other wives but has some resentment towards Jalil for having an affair with a low caste, poor woman. A very arrogant, rude personality, she has a very dominating attitude.

5. Sofia: (Minor Character) She is 38 years old and Jalil's second wife and has 3 children with him. She had just given birth to her second child when Mariam was born and she cannot bare her sight. Although she has a reserved attitude, she does not shirk from making her reservations about Mariam evident.

6. Parveen: (Minor Character) She is 30 years old and Jalil's youngest wife. She shadows his other two wives, mirroring their thoughts and actions. Like them, she also detests Mariam. She has 2 children but she takes care of her stepchildren with equal care, relying on the guidance of the other wives on how to be a good mother.

7. Rasheed: (Antagonist) A forty-year-old man, Rasheed lives in Kabul. He is a tall, broad-shouldered afghan. He runs a business in woman's clothing in Kabul. A stereotypical man, he believes in the orthodox view of women being under the subjugation of men. He does not hesitate marrying a girl who is almost less than half his age, portraying the local practice of men marrying young brides. He is of the notion that it is the duty of a man in Islam to correct his wife, even if it means beating her up. He is violent and short tempered.

8. Laila: (Deuteragonist) She is a bright, young girl who lives in Kabul. She has grown up in a family that supports women education. Unlike other parts of Afghanistan, she visits a co-ed school during a time when western influence was much vibrant in most parts of Afghanistan. Being educated, she does not believe a man to be superior to her. She is a fierce lady who is very outspoken and fights for her rights. She is undaunted and has the courage to pursue her lover despite being married to an older man. She is a doting mother to her daughter.

11. Tariq: (Secondary Major Character) He is a young, handsome boy who is Laila's lover. He loves his country and fights in the war but does not hesitate to move away when the circumstances become dire. He comes back for her even though he knows it is neither right nor possible

for them to be together. He is an important character in the plot, yet the impact of his presence is limited to affecting only Laila's character. He does not shirk from taking the bullet in order to protect his lover and his daughter.

10. Fariba: (Minor Character) She is the mother Laila and wife of Babi. Different from the local women, she supports and brags about her daughter's academic achievements. Her two sons have died in the war and her husband is also fighting in the war. In his absence she becomes weak and decides to marry Laila off to Rasheed, without thinking about the consequences.

IV. CHARACTERIZATIONS

Mariam: She is the protagonist. Starting out as a young girl living in a mud house with her mother, she has been conditioned to believe that she doesn't deserve either an education because it is of no use to women or the luxuries of life because she was born out of wedlock. Jalil, along with Nana, shaped her childhood as what she believed were two opposing forces in terms of what they taught her and how they thought of her [Nana and Jalil], but both failed to protect her. With age she grows wiser but retains her submissive attitude and lack of self-esteem, arising out of years of subjugation. Despite her mother's attempts, she continues to dote on her estranged father. After falling into deep despair following her mother's death, Mariam is abandoned by Jalil, who marries her off to Rasheed, despite her attempts to remain single. Her childless marriage to Rasheed eventually forces her into a life of submission and misery at the hands of her husband's domestic violence until close to the end of her life, when Laila provides her with a renewed sense of hope. Mariam served as a support for everyone else, she would always assist someone else instead of doing something on her own, and she rarely made decisions for herself, until the very end. Yet her resilience cannot be questioned as she never complained about anything that life dealt her with. At the same time, her meekness cannot be denied as it took her a lot of time before finally standing up for herself. She faces a mental dilemma towards the end, a conflict of law and morality. She questions the value of law and the norm of being a good wife, if it comes at the cost of constant suffering. Ultimately, she decided that she would rather suffer the consequences of the Taliban for her actions than continue to suffer at the hands of Rasheed. She started her life as an unwanted child, who was neglected like a weed, but she ended her life as someone who had loved and been loved back.

Jalil: Jalil was another character who had a large influence on Mariam's childhood as he was the light of her

life. To Mariam, Jalil is an amazing father - and a paragon of virtue - but to Mariam's mother he has neglected his obligations to his family. He tried to love her but never expressly showed his affection to her in front of others by publicly accepting her and Nana. He was soft spoken and genial. He has three legitimate wives and nine other children in addition to Mariam. When Nana dies, Mariam is sent to his house, but his other wives refuse to keep her in the house. He then decides to cast Mariam off, giving her up to marry Rasheed. Jalil was the first man to do Mariam wrong in 'A Thousand Splendid Suns', not by failing to accept her publicly, but by getting her married against his instincts. He was aware of how easily he let himself be influenced by his wives and this realization becomes apparent to the reader towards the end when his guilt is revealed.

Rasheed: Rasheed is a 40-year-old man living in Kabul. He runs a shop selling women's clothing. He is a very tall man with brown eyes and broad shoulders: like a typical Afghani man. He is very stern, has a hot temper, and has high hopes for having sons. He has very particular hypocrisies for his observance for Islam. For instance, he requires the women in his household to wear burkhas when appearing in public, he cares about how other people perceive him, through his wives and yet, he does not shirk from abusing them physically within the confines of four walls. He has been portrayed as a man with a patriarchal mindset, belonging to a society where men do not allow women to enjoy their freedom. He despises women who follow western culture. To him, education does no good to a woman and she has no right to speak up against men in their house. Prior to communist regime collapsing in Afghanistan, women enjoyed comparative freedom in all sorts of fields, ranging from home to education and freedom of expression but to the contrary, Rasheed is a man who still believed at that time that it is immoral for a woman to step out of the house without a male member or without a burkha. Domestic violence wasn't a crime for him as according to him, 'correcting the women' by any means is the duty and right of her husband or father. This can be well reflected from the fact that Rasheed actually followed and respected the Taliban who laid down rules and implemented Sharia law to ensure women are punished. Women were nothing but objects in his eyes. His rage gets out of control when ends up locking his wives, to the point of death and leaves his young daughter separated from her mother.

Laila: Laila is the second of the two primary characters in 'A Thousand Splendid Suns'. Laila is a girl who is young and cheerful, living with her mother Fariba in Kabul. She was much more ambitious than Mariam, and always

exuded an air of youth. Her father, Babi is a military soldier who had a great role in reforming the character of Laila at a time when women enjoyed limited freedom in Afghanistan. As a young girl, she was good with academics and always happened to make everyone proud. She fell in love with a guy in her school, Tariq. This shows that prior to Taliban coming into power, co-ed institutions existed in Afghanistan. As it widely known, and rightly told to Laila by her father, Babi that a nation is no good with its women staying uneducated; they must learn when the opportunity knocks at the door because they form the backbone of this country. This is the reason why Laila was so daring to fight against injustice, when she faced the horror of male dominance in the form of domestic violence, she rose up against Rasheed, time and again even when she was suppressed. Laila brought inspiration to everyone who wanted Afghanistan to be more modern and progressive, while her resilience struck fear into the hearts of those who valued the patriarchal society. She is portrayed as a woman in the Afghan society who dared to take a step to run away from a misogynistic society even when she is made to be at the edge of death.

V. SCRIPT

5.1 ACT I

Scene 1

{It was a bright sunny morning in the city of Herat. A few miles away near Kolba, a young girl walks with her father to the edge of the river. Just before reaching her house, they near a clearing beside the riverbed. There, beside a large pear tree lay the lifeless body of a frail woman. They both swiftly run towards it.}

Mariam: [Tears started swelling up in her eyes] Ammi! Open your eyes Ammi!

{She drops the half melted ice-cream in her hand on the ground and starts violently shaking her mother's body.}

{Mariam's father, much older than her mother, Nana proceeds to inspect the body and checks her pulse.}

Jalil: [Realized that she is no more] Oh my dear Mariam. I'm..afraid she fell down this tree. Her weak body and brittle bones could not sustain the impact. [With a solemn look in his eyes] I'm sorry Mariam. Nana has left us.

{With tears streaming down her face, Mariam hugs her mother and embraces her as tight as she can.}

Mariam: No Ammi! You can't leave me alone in this dreaded world! I will be left all alone without you my dear Ammi! [Still unable to process the reality of the situation] Wake up Ammi!

{Jalil tries to pull Mariam closer into his arms and moves to hold Nana's pale hand.}

Jalil: Oh Mariam! My child! She has gone to a better place. Allah will take care of her.

{A grief-stricken Mariam notices a small tear roll down her father's cheek. She never mentions it again.}

{The funeral processions were completed over the next few days and Nana was buried under the same pear tree near her mud-house.}

Jalil: Mariam, it is time for you to come and start living with me in Herat with your half-brothers and sisters.

Scene 2

{Mariam arrives at Herat with Jalil. She starts living in his big Herat house with his three wives and nine legitimate children. One day, Jalil was not home and the wives had gone to the market. They came back bearing gifts for their children but nothing for Mariam.}

Sadia: Afreen, Zain! Come here and call your brothers and sisters too! Look what we have got for you all.

{The children come running. Mariam stands outside the room, her head leaning on the door.}

Sofia: Mariam! Now did you finish the work I asked you to do, like a good girl?

Mariam: [Impassively] Yes, bibiJaam.

Parveen: Good girl! Now mop the floor and wash the clothes while I sit with the children to make them finish their homework.

Mariam: Yes, bibiJaam.

{Nana had conditioned Mariam to understand that she would never be treated in the same manner and with the same love and attention as her half-siblings because she was born out of wedlock. She was now used to such behaviour and didn't mind it anymore.}

Mariam: Bibijaam? I wanted to ask if I could also sit and listen to them reciting the alphabets. I promise... I will be silent and I've finished all my other chores.

Sadia: Oh Mariam! Don't you know? It is of no use for a girl like you! What is the point in even listening? You won't understand anything, you see.

Sofia: Besides, you're far too old to even begin learning anything now. You should focus your attention elsewhere, like in the kitchen or house.

Parveen: Yes! Someday you will be someone's wife. [Mutters to herself] Someday very soon I hope.

Sadia: Yes, this is not your place anyway. By making you do these chores, we are actually preparing you for your future. Go now!

{Mariam silently walks to her damp, dark room. There, on the bed lay a tattered copy of the Quran which Mariam had found in her mother's belongings. She picks it up and wonders if she will ever be able to understand what the words inside mean.}

Scene 3

{Over time the wives' utter disgust for Mariam became more apparent. Jalil became aware of such behaviour yet he continued to turn a blind eye.}

Sofia: [Enters with Sadia and Parveen, to Jalil] We think it is time for Mariam to leave?

Jalil: Leave? What do you mean Sofia begum?

Parveen: She has turned 16 already. The time is ripe for her to get married and move on in her life.

Jalil: Married? She is still a child! She is far too young to be a wife!

Sadia: Think of how good a life she will have!

Sofia: You remember Rasooljaan? The big businessman from Kabul who came to meet us a few days ago? His brother Rasheed jaan is looking for a young wife. Seeing his condition, I can assure that he would happily take Mariam as his wife.

Jalil: Do you not hear yourselves? Rasheed is 40 years old!

Parveen: His age only adds to his wisdom. He will be able to take care of Mariam. He has his own house and business. H will provide her with a good life.

Sofia: It is only right to do so. Besides, the law of the land gives you the right to choose a suitable husband for Mariam. [1] I don't think we can find a better man than Rasheed.

Jalil: I will not hear any more of this.

{Jalil storms out of the room.}

{His wives continued to persuade him over the next few weeks till he is finally convinced.}

Scene 4

{Jalil stands in his room by himself}

Jalil: All my life I kept Mariam away from me. I banished her mother and as a consequence I could never love her the way I love all my other children. Why? What was her fault...? Just that she was born out of wedlock? [anguished at himself]

Jalil: [Thinks to himself, smiles] But... now that she's here, I can try to make amends. Amends for the time that we lost together. I will shower her with the simple luxuries of life, even if my wives refuse to accept her.

Jalil: [Realization hits] But why should they accept her in the first place? She is a stark reminder of my unfaithfulness to our marriage, her face a mirror image of her mother. Sadia, Parveen and Sofia will always resent her for what I did. And what will happen once I'm no longer alive to look after her? They will never let her live in peace.

Jalil: Then I guess it is decided. She will anyhow have to become a wife one day. It is only by God's will that this day has come upon us so soon. A worthy husband will look after her. He will provide for her and protect her

Jalil: [Hands raised, praying]La Ilahailla Allah ("There is no God but the God").

{Jalil finally convinces himself to marry Mariam off to Rasheed.}

{Mariam tried to resist the marriage but after seeing her pleas constantly being defeated, she gave up and convinced herself for it.}

Scene 5

{The preparations begin as the marriage is scheduled in a week. Rasheed comes to Herat alone for his marriage. A small gathering of Jalil's family and immediate neighbours are in attendance. Rasheed had bought new furniture for his house in Kabul and given Sadia 50,000 afghani as Mahr for Mariam. Mariam never received this amount which is supposed to be for her upkeep.}

{Mariam has never seen these people before.}

Imam: It is time.

{Jalil's wives enter the lightly decorated living room with Mariam. She is wearing a lightly embroidered, green-colouredsalwarkameez with a translucent veil. She is made to sit on one side of a cloth partition, which separated her from Rasheed. Jalil sits near the Imam.}

Imam: [Proceeds to recite a verse] "And among His Signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and compassion between your hearts: verily in that are Signs for those who reflect." [2]

{The ceremony takes place to bind Rasheed and Mariam in holy matrimony, a contract for each other's' company}

Rasheed: Quboolhai

Mariam: [a painful confused tone] Quboolhai

Rasheed and Mariam: [together] Quboolhai. Quboolhai.

{A velvet register is passed and the marriage contract is signed by both of them. Mariam does not know how to sign; she simply puts her thumb impression.}

Everyone: Wallah! Wallah!

{The partition is dropped and the two are made to sit next to each other. Mariam's head is still covered by a veil. The two are given a mirror and they see each other for the first time}

{Rasheed sees a nervous young girl. Mariam sees a man, only a little younger than her father. His face does not seem so kind to her.}

5.2 ACT II

Scene 1

{It was a chilly evening in Kabul. Mariam reaches Kabul in a bus ferry along with Rasheed. Since the bus stop was closer to their house, Rasheed proposed to walk her to their house.}

Rasheed: This is the street of Kabul. It is always busy during the day and night. These vendors sell all kinds of things one might need, from food to clothing and all essentials of daily life!

Mariam: Hmm... this is so different from Herat... a lot of people live here.

{Mariam kept staring at the people and the vendor. Children were playing, women of the neighbourhood were gossiping about something and vendors were calling out to people to come buy their products.}

Vendor: Bibijan, come to my stall, I have fresh fruits plucked from the tree this morning.

Rasheed: Don't look to that side, Mariam. These people keep trying to get customers in order to sell their products.

{They reach the doorsteps of Rasheed's house. Hustle-bustle of cars and people on the streets; lights were not that bright so Mariam couldn't get a proper look of the house from outside.}

Mariam: Is this your house? Why are the neighbours staring at me?

Rasheed: Haha, you are new to this street and nobody has seen you before. Hence, women, as always, are curious to look at some new neighbour and gossip about them. Everyone is very friendly here though.

{They enter the home.}

Rasheed: Let me get the luggage to your room. It's upstairs. I will get freshened up. You too take bath and get ready for dinner.

Mariam: [In a submissive tone] Alright.

Rasheed: I smell something good. What is it?

Mariam: I cooked rice and daal for you. You must be hungry.

Rasheed: Ah, yes! I've been starving. I need to sleep early since I've to run to my shop tomorrow early morning.

{Dinner is over. Everyone goes up to their room.}

Rasheed: Mariam, this will be your room. I will be in the next room. Make yourself comfortable. I don't want to make you uncomfortable. We will sleep together in the same room after a while. If you need anything, call me.

{Mariam nods her head and goes to her bed to sleep. She finds it a bit strange to fall asleep that night in a new house, all alone. She was thinking of Jalil, her Ammi, how her childhood was. To all these thoughts she fell asleep into the night.}

{Early morning of the next day, Rasheed left for work and did not wake up Mariam as she was sound asleep.}

Mariam: I need to buy some flour for lunch and dinner. I must go and get them from the Bazaar.

{Mariam hesitates going out all alone on her own in a new town. She left home in the broad daylight. She meets a few neighbours on her way back home.}

Fariba: You are Rasheed Jan's new wife, aren't you? You're very young.

Mariam: Yes, I'm his wife. My name is Mariam. I am from Herat.

Fariba: My name is Fariba; I live five houses left to your house on your street. I have two sons back at home and a husband to take care of. How are you finding Kabul to be?

Mariam: Kabul seems to be very vibrant. It has only been a day since I have been here. It is very different from Herat. Not many people lived there. Everything was very calm. Here I see a lot of hustle-bustle on the streets for most part of the day.

Fariba: By the way, do you want a boy or a girl first? It is never too soon to ask, you know.

Noor: Bah! Boys get married and run off. Girls stay behind and take care.

{Mariam is hyperventilating due to the crowd in the market and the ease with which some strangers just happen to come by and ask all sorts of awkward questions to her.}

Mariam: I have to leave because I need to get back to my home quickly and prepare food for lunch and dinner. I have a lot of chores to do as well. I bid you farewell.

{Mariam finds it confusing at first to get back to her house due to the confusion but she finally reaches home. She}

cooks her meals and cleans all the windows and furniture at home, hoping Rasheed would appreciate it when he gets back home.}

Rasheed: I am back home. Very hungry. Could you serve the dinner early today?

Mariam: yes, let me serve you the food; you can go and get freshened up.

Rasheed: what did you do today? Something smells very nice.

{Rasheed dips his spoon and gulps down the food in a manner unusually faster than ever}

Mariam: Careful! The daal is very hot. I stayed home for most part of the day. Went out to fetch some flour when some neighbours happened to encounter me.

Rasheed: Hope you had a good time with the women. Do not share anything with those women. They all gossip about others houses. Did you wear a burkha while going out? Though a lot of women don't wear it to show their independency, I do not want you to act immorally.

{Mariam looked numb and startled at Rasheed as she had never worn a burkha before or expected him to be so serious about a body covering.}

{Few days went by; Rasheed would bring gifts for Mariam, take her out for food sometimes. this time he planned to take her out for a tour of Kabul.}

Rasheed: Today is Friday. How about I show you around and then we can have dinner at some good place?

Mariam: Certainly. Let me get dressed.

Rasheed: [In an assertive tone] I have bought a Burkha for you. Put this on. This is only to make sure you appear as a morally abiding woman. I wouldn't want to give anyone the right to comment about my wife.

{They returned home at night. It was 11 already. Rasheed got freshened up and decided to sleep with Mariam this time.}

Rasheed: I was thinking of sleeping in your room today. It has been weeks now, and I suppose we are much more comfortable in each other's presence. It is important that we physically connect with each other; that would only help you become a woman and take this relationship further.

{Mariam didn't say a word. She lay on her bed while Rasheed came and slept beside her. She felt a bit uncomfortable at first when Rasheed touched her... but as the night progressed, they finally came close and consummated their relationship. Mariam was a woman now.}

Scene 2

{After a month with no signs of pregnancy, Rasheed decided to take Mariam to the hospital. What followed after that would not have been dreamt by Mariam.}

Doctor: [Gravely] Rasheed, I have a sad news for you. I want you and your wife to hold up together in this moment of crisis.

Rasheed: Could you please tell me immediately as to what could be the bad news?

Doctor: Well, your wife seems to have some complications getting pregnant. She does not carry a hospitable environment in her womb to carry a baby.

Rasheed: [Responding instantly] Does that mean she can never get pregnant?

Doctor: I won't say 'never', but the chances are minimal to zero.

{Rasheed gets back home with his wife, all devastated and feeling low. He left Mariam at the house and left for some place. For quite a few days Rasheed would come home drunk at night, beat Mariam up, would throw the food away. This continued for months and then years. Those good old days of Mariam getting treated well were far from sight.}

{One night Rasheed returns home heavily drunk, asks Mariam to serve him food}

Rasheed: [Angrily] What is the matter with this food?

Mariam: I have boiled the rice for five mins....

Rasheed: That's a bold lie.

{He shook the rice angrily from his fingers and pushed the plate away, spilling everything down. He stormed out of the living room, slamming the door on his way out. After a few minutes, Mariam heard the door open and Rasheed was back in the living room.}

Rasheed: Get up. Come here. Get up!

{He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it.}

Rasheed: Put these in your mouth.

Mariam: What? No, I wouldn't ... stop it Rasheed...

{Rasheed's powerful hands clasped her jaw and he held her mouth wide open; he then put those pebbles into her mouth.}

Rasheed: [Forcing his arms against her jaw] Now chew them. Chew!

{Mariam chewed them while tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes.}

Rasheed: Good. Now you know what your rice tastes likes. Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Terrible food, and nothing else.

{Mariam was crying her eyes out while Rasheed stormed out of the house. She had never imagined her life would become this miserable. For many years to come Mariam had to face this brutal torture because she had no other place to go to.}

Scene 3

{Tension was growing in Afghanistan. Revolution was taking place as Soviet Union was backing up the local forces to fight against the capitalist regime of America who had tried ruining the lives of people, as many said. People were of the hope that Afghanistan would soon become like Soviet Union where everyone was equal and everyone was happy because of the socialist movements.}

Laila: When are you going to return, Tariq?

Tariq: My parents are taking me to the south; I would soon return after the war is over between the government and the super powers.

Laila: I will be here in Kabul; I will be waiting for you.

{Meanwhile, Laila's parents were looking for her marriage since she was already 13 years old. Amidst the tension they didn't want to leave their daughter homeless and unmarried. Rasheed saw Laila passing by his home. He decided to go to her house and ask for her hand because he found her to be very pretty and young for her age.}

Fariba: Please come inside. Make yourself comfortable.

Rasheed: Thank you. So, can we start the business for which I've come here today. Is your husband at home?

Fariba: No. my husband is out for the war. He is fighting from the government side. We don't know when he will return. That is why I think its best we get our daughter married off to a well-settled man as soon as possible. She is a very bright student at school. She will also be a good wife.

Rasheed: I am afraid I might not allow her to continue with her schooling. What will she do with so much knowledge? And amidst the war tension going on, it is best for a woman to be indoors and serve his man.

Fariba: Yes, of course. That is not an issue. We can fix the date for nikah sometime next week then. Why delay?

Rasheed: Absolutely. With no further delay, I must get going. I have errands to attend.

{Laila returns home from school and gets to know from her mother, Babi that her marriage has been fixed. She throws her bag away and goes into her room. As helpless as she

could be, her educational freedom could not free her from the obligations her family tied her to.}

{Laila recalled what her father, Babi had told her once:

"I know you are still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now that marriage can wait, education cannot. You are a very bright, young girl. You can be anything you want Laila. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated Laila. No chance." [3]

Babi had told this to her a long time back when he came to realise Laila was in love with Tariq and was deeply aghast by the news of his family temporarily moving.}

Scene 4

{Laila got married to Rasheed on a Sunday. After the ceremony was over and guests left, Rasheed left for his home along with Laila and her luggage. On reaching their house, Mariam was startled on seeing a young girl, all dressed up as a bride with a man almost thrice her age standing next to her.}

Rasheed: Mariam, this is Laila. She is my new begum. I want you to ensure proper care is taken of hers. Take her luggage to my room.

{Mariam, still astounded by the fact and taking time to accept the reality, couldn't believe Rasheed letting his new bride sleep in his room while she was made to sleep in a different room when she came as a newly wed.}

{Mariam was initially very cold towards Laila but gradually, she started warming up to her. It was as if she was reliving her younger days through her; only, Laila was much more outspoken and spirited.}

Laila: What should I call you since you are elder to me?

Mariam: You can call me Ami. I am like your mother only.

Laila: Should I help you in the kitchen?

Mariam: No. I will take care of it. How old are you?

Laila: I am 13 years old right now. I will be turning 14 soon.

Mariam: Do you go to school?

Laila: [In a dull voice] I used to. But my mom informed me that Rasheed has said he won't let me continue with my education as it won't be of any use.

Mariam: I wouldn't know much of it since I never attended any school myself.

{They all sat for dinner that night. In quite some years, Rasheed did not complain of the food made by Mariam. Then they went to sleep. Though Rasheed shared the same room with Laila, he did not consummate their marriage until she turned 15.}

{In the meantime, Mariam used to take care of the household chores, while Laila used to go out and roam with other teenagers of her age. Mariam didn't let her do the work as she was quite young but she would allow her at times to help her with peeling vegetables and other small chores. One day when Rasheed was out and Mariam was busy with work, Laila saw someone waiting outside their house. It was Tariq.}

Laila: [In shock] What are you doing here? How did you know I would be here? This can't be... Rasheed told me you were dead... that you died while fighting in the war!

Tariq: [With love in his eyes] I returned a week ago. I hid from my family and took a bus. When I reached here, one of our classmates told me that you got married to some older man named Rasheed. He is more than 40 years old. I tracked the address and rushed to see you.

Laila: [On the verge of tears] I waited for you for three years. Since my father was away at war, my mother got me married to Rasheed. I had no choice. I have missed you so much.

{They embraced each other. Laila informed Mariam of her whereabouts and went out with Tariq.}

{A neighbour was watching them as they strolled out of their house to eat ice crême. Like this, Laila and Tariq would often go out to spend time together; once when they went to a hillside and in a moment of passion, they engaged in coitus. Laila has turned 15 years old. She did not tell this to anyone. Mariam used to closely watch her. She knew something was going on.}

Rasheed: Laila, how about I take you out for dinner. We can roam the bazaars and then eat something there. It would be fun.

Laila: Okay. Let me get dressed up.

{That night after they returned home, Rasheed planned on finally consummating their relationship. It was few days after she had gotten involved with Tariq physically. She was confirmed pregnant after two weeks. Rasheed ensured that proper care is taken of hers for the next 9 months.}

Rasheed: Mariam, I need you to take proper care of my begum. She has given me so much love and happiness in this marriage. You could never give anything to me. You are not even attractive to me anymore. Don't make Laila

do any labour during this period. Her due date is next week.

{Mariam nods her head in response.}

{When Laila gave birth to a girl at the hospital, Mariam had gone with her because Rasheed was out of town and was going to return on the same night of the delivery.}

Rasheed: I am finally home. Where's my lovely begum and my handsome son?

Mariam: It is a girl. Laila has given birth to a daughter.

Rasheed: [Angrily] What? How could have this happened? I did not expect this!

Mariam: [In frightened tone] What is the problem? Daughter is as good as a son.

Rasheed: Shut your mouth! Daughter is not even close to being as good as a son. What good is a daughter? Now I have to spend my income on feeding three women in this house. A son would have carried my lineage forward. He would have brought income to this house. Such a shame!

{Rasheed started ignoring his wife, Laila. He wouldn't bring her gifts or take her out to eat or roam anymore. He would look at her with disgust and the child as if she were a curse for him.}

Scene 5

{The freedoms and opportunities that women had enjoyed between 1978 and 1992 were a thing of the past now. Laila could still remember Babi saying of those years of communist rule- "it was a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan, Laila." [4] Since the Mujahedeen takeover in April 1992, Afghanistan's name had been changed to the Islamic State of Afghanistan. The Supreme Court was now in the charge of hardliner mullahs who did away with the communist regime's policies and strictly adhered to Sharia Law's dictum where women were punished for adultery, travelling alone etc. Gone were those days of freedom for women.}

{Rasheed had become less aggressive towards Mariam with age. It was now not unusual for them to have a regular conversation, yet if Mariam ever crossed the line Rasheed didn't hesitate to make it apparent.}

Rasheed: Mariam, bring me some Pakodas. I need to listen to the news.

Mariam: Here.

{She tries to listen to the news to hear about the latest updates on the current political situation.}

Newsreader: [On the television] The erstwhile Communist has fallen. This is a public announcement to make our listeners aware that, the government is putting everyone

who is a supporter of communism behind bars. A local militia group by the name of Taliban has come effectively into power. It seems that even though the leader of Taliban isn't actually ruling from an official seat, it is fighting against the Mujahedeen to stop any western forces from interfering in our state.

{Rasheed increases the volume of the television. He hears the political statement by the President where he says that they won't be supporting any communist policies or parties. Subsequently, the general of Taliban comes on-air and declares before the public that anyone who does not follow the strict Sharia law or tries defying the fatwa released by it, shall be publicly executed.}

Mariam: [Concernedly] I haven't heard from my father since a long time. I am afraid if they have put him behind bars as he was an ardent supporter of the communist regime.

Rasheed: Perhaps. Taliban seems to have overtaken the region of Herat too. Most likely every communist supporter is either jailed or publicly executed. The fight between the government and the Taliban is getting fiercer.

{A loud bullet explosion is heard from outside. Rasheed, Mariam and Laila rush outside.}

Taliban General: We are going to read out the Fatwa for the public.

{Reads the Fatwa citing Sharia Law with certain amendments of their own to the public.}

Taliban General: [Authoritatively] As you all must have seen on your television; the communist regime has fallen. It is time we took the governance of our State into our own hands. We will not let immorality pervade into our culture. There is no place for any western influence in our society. Sharia Law is going to the law of our land. Any person, especially women, need to realise this that this is the land where we worship Allah. There is no place for sins. Anyone who defies our fatwa or goes against the law, shall be hanged to death while the whole public is made to watch the sinner.

Taliban General: I want everyone to follow us to the centre field. This man, who has been tied up behind the car and has been dragged up on the road, has committed adultery and theft. There is no place for sins. Absolutely none!

{The crowd follows the car while the General's car marches forward while dragging the body of the poor man through the streets of Kabul. He is finally executed in the public}

Taliban General: This must be a lesson for all of you that if anyone tries defying the law or commits immorality, you will face the same consequences.

{The car leaves with a big black flag quoted, "Allahu Akbar"}

Scene 6

{Laila's daughter was named Aziza. Post the Mujahedeen taking over Afghanistan, rules had become stricter for women especially; they had to be in burkha every time they stepped out of their house. They needed to be accompanied by a male member while going out. Laila continued meeting Tariq whenever it was possible, but Mariam was very watchful of the same since she was aware that Rasheed could become violent if he ever came to know.}

Mariam: Laila, could you wash the clothes? I will cook food for dinner by that time. I need to scratch the window panes and furniture. Put Aziza in the crib and keep it near us so she wouldn't go out of our sight.

Laila: Okay. But Mariam jaan, is it okay if I go out for some time to meet Tariq today? His family is moving to Peshawar. It can take a few months before he comes back.

Mariam: umm... alright, but make sure no one sees you. Cover yourself properly. Return home before Rasheed is home in the evening.

{The Taliban is against the Mujahedeen who is ruling Afghanistan. The difference between them was that the former was united while the latter was not. The Mujahedeen commander was somewhat on the side of United States while the Taliban was trying to get establish a moral society where people weren't exploited by the rich. Rasheed worshiped the Taliban}

Laila: Tariq, do you want to go to the hillside?

Tariq: Surely. But make sure you cover yourself up because the Taliban militias will make our life miserable if they become suspicious of you being someone else's wife.

{They bid each other goodbye and Tariq promises to come back for her and Aziza. He promises to take them to Peshawar, away from Rasheed where they could start a new life.}

{A neighbour saw Laila leaving in the daylight with Tariq. She knew it wasn't Rasheed. She was eager to inform Rasheed about his wife's immoral activities. When Rasheed returned that evening, the neighbour calls him out and tells him that she saw Laila going out with an unknown man to the Bazaar and giving him a hug.}

Rasheed: [With blood shot eyes] Laila, come down you treacherous woman!

Mariam: [Worriedly] What happened? Why are you yelling at her? Aziza just fell asleep.

{Rasheed kicked Mariam and kept calling out Laila's name}

Laila: [Rushes down] What happened? I heard you were calling out my name.

Rasheed: Who was that man with whom you went out and hugged in the middle of the daylight? Are you not aware of what that indicates? What image it portrays of me before others?!

Laila: [Denying the accusation] What man? He is my old school friend that's all.

Rasheed: You do not get the right to go out of this house and meet other men. Have some shame and stay indoors. I will rob the life out of your body if you are ever seen again roaming outside with any other man. Do you understand that?

{Rasheed slaps Laila and goes into her room. Laila is filled with tears. Mariam helps her get up.}

Laila: [In between sobs] I wanted to tell you something, Mariam jo! Please promise me you won't tell Rasheed or anyone else?

Mariam: No. tell me what is it about?

Laila: [In an afraid tone] My daughter... Aziza... she is not Rasheed's daughter. Once when I happened to have gone out with Tariq, we got close to each other... and I am afraid to say this but this child is his. When we met today, he told me it would be safer for us to leave for Peshawar, in Pakistan. We can raise our child in an environment where there is no terror. She can get her education and a better life.

Mariam: [Calmly] I knew about this. But I suppose you know how risky it would be if Rasheed gets to know. He is an ardent supporter of Taliban's ideologies and without much due, he will hand you over along with your lover and child to those monsters and get you executed. We have to think before we act from now on.

Scene 7

{Laila forced Mariam to go to the administrative office so that they could get a visa for travelling to Peshawar.}

Laila: Drape the baby properly, Mariam. We will have to find a family to ensure no eyes are on us at the bus stand.

Mariam: Yes, I am aware. Take the bag. It has the requisite documents. I am not as qualified as you are so you will have to take the lead there.

{Laila and Mariam try to find a family to pretend they were with them. The Taliban militias were very active those

days. It was a bad day for them because when the conductor verified with the old man that Laila and had Mariam followed, he refused to know them. He then called the police.}

Police: So, are you both related?

Mariam: Yes, I am her mother. This is the child, Aziza of my daughter Laila.

Police: I will interrogate you first, the one with the baby.

Laila: Okay. Ammi...hold the baby until I get back.

{Inside the chamber}

Police: Mohotarma, where were you heading exactly?

Laila: We were leaving for Peshawar, where my uncle lives. I don't have a husband, so, we were trying to reach out to him for some help.

Police: Hamsira, do you know the street on which he lives there? What is the address? Do you have his name or phone number?

Laila: Bhaijan, his name is Rasul. I don't know the exact street name. It's on the list. His number too.

Police: I would like to interrogate the other woman before I decide something.

{Enters Mariam. After a long hour conversation, Mariam finally comes out. She apologies to Laila saying that she isn't as educated as she is. So, she answered the police from whatever she knew. The Police had called Rasheed to pick them up from the station. He was very furious. On reaching home, he bashed the door and kicked Laila.}

Mariam: Please don't do this to her. She has a child.

Rasheed: What were you thinking when you left this house? Today I will teach you what happens when you betray your man. This is the reason why women should never be educated.

{Rasheed slapped Laila and dragged her by her hair to her room upstairs and then came running down towards Mariam.}

Rasheed: I will teach you how to be a woman. You are evil. You are nothing but a curse in my life.

{Rasheed beats Mariam up. Punched her face and blood was all over her dress and his fist. Laila came out with her child and she was shocked. She ran to help Mariam. Meanwhile, Rasheed ran upstairs and took Aziza in his hands and came downstairs.}

Rasheed: If someone killed Aziza, wouldn't you want the chance to avenge her? It's an interesting eye colour she has. It's neither mine nor yours.

{Rasheed rolled over to face Laila, gently scratched her thigh with the crooked nail of his index finger.}

Rasheed: Let me explain. If the fancy should strike me, I would be within my rights to give Aziza away. How would you like that? Or I could go to the Taliban today, just walk in and say that I have my suspicions about you. That's all it would take. Whose words do you think they'll believe? What do you think they'd do to you?

Laila: You're despicable!

Rasheed: That's a big word. I've always disliked that about you. Even when you were little, you thought you were clever with your books. What good is all your smartness to you now? What's keeping you off the streets, your smarts or me? Half the women in this city would kill to have a husband like me.

{Rasheed went outside, blew a cigarette and did not return that night until 12. Laila got this urge to give him a blow and kill him for saying all that but everything he said then was nothing but true. She was helpless at the hands of a despicable, monstrous husband.}

5.3 ACT III

Scene 1

{Rasheed locked Mariam and Laila in separate rooms for a few days without food or water after the fiasco at the police station happened.}

Rasheed: [Angrily] This will serve you right. After everything that I did for you, this is how you pay me back for my generosity? You will rot in these rooms without food or water!

Laila: [Shouting, Banging the door] You cannot do this! Allah will make you pay for this.

Mariam: [Begging behind the door] Please let Laila out, Aziza needs her! I know there is some kindness in your heart.

Rasheed: [Cuts her off] Quiet! The neighbours will hear you! If you both don't stop your howling, I will drop your daughter off to an orphanage!

{Rasheed finally unlocks them after a few days, following several pleas from Laila to allow her to feed Aziza, whom Rasheed completely neglected. He was tired.}

{Rasheed goes to work and threatens Mariam and Laila that if they ever tried to pull such a stunt again, he wouldn't hesitate from executing them himself. He bars them from ever leaving the house ever again.}

Laila: [While cuddling Aziza with tears in her eyes] I'm sorry my jaan! I will never put you in such danger ever again. Rasheed will pay for this.

{Mariam enters}

Laila: I'm so sorry Mariam jo! It is all my fault. I endangered you and Aziza.

Mariam: Stop crying Laila. It is not your fault. You were simply trying to fight for a better life, a fight which I would never initiate on my own.

Laila: It is not too late; we can all still flee Kabul. [With a fierceness in her eyes] Rasheed is a devil. When people will hear about how his wives escaped from his own house, they will mock him. That mockery will murder all his pride!

Mariam: It will not be easy. We have to be more careful this time.

{Over the course of the next few days, Mariam and Laila tried to figure out all possible ways to escape without being caught.}

Scene 2

{One evening when Rasheed was late in coming back home, Laila heard a knock on the door. She was afraid as to who it could be because hardly anyone ever visited them. She opened the door and saw a young, handsome man with a huge bag on his shoulders. It was Tariq.}

Tariq: [Passionately] Oh Laila! I missed you so much! [He embraces her tightly]

{Laila was still in disbelief of her good fortune. In that moment, she felt that all would be well}

Tariq: What happened to your face? These bruises? I swear I will not let that rascal live!

Laila: Now that you are here, I'm sure we will come out of this alive. But first, come upstairs. It is time our daughter meets her real father.

{Mariam heard Tariq and Laila and was about to go meet them. Suddenly, she heard the thud of the iron door in their front yard. She rushed to her bedroom window and saw Rasheed. He was pacing towards the front door with a gun in his hand.}

{Mariam rushed downstairs at once.}

Scene 3

{Tariq and Laila were about to see Aziza when suddenly they heard the front door violently flung open. The two of them were startled as they saw Rasheed standing in the hallway with a big gun in his hand, pointed towards their direction.}

Rashid: You evil man! You are the reason that my dumb wife has made a fool of me. You will pay for this. But before I deal with you, I will kill this treacherous woman and her illegitimate daughter. [He positions the gun over

his chest] I will make sure you get a good view of the death of this woman that you claim to love.

{Tariq stays quiet but tries to look around to grab something he could hit Rasheed with. As Rasheed placed his finger on the trigger, he prepares to jump in front of Laila to protect her.}

{Before Tariq could make a move, a big shovel was smacked upon Rasheed's head. As Rasheed fell on the floor, Tariq and Laila saw Mariam standing behind him, holding a metal shovel.}

Laila: Mariam Jo!

Tariq: I can't tell you how thankful I..

Mariam: [Cutting him off mid-sentence] There is no time. You must hurry. Quickly take what valuables you can find and flee with Aziza.

Laila: You are right Mariam Jo! You get your things while I get Aziza.

Mariam: No! It is not safe for all of us to leave together. They must have seen Rashid entering the house with this big gun. There is no point in exchanging three lives for one.

Tariq: [Fiercely] Then I will stay behind Mariam jo. I cannot let you take the fall for this. The Taliban will not spare you. You have always been there for Laila and Aziza, even when I couldn't be there for them.

Mariam: No. She will not be able to make it to the border without a man by her side. Besides, I am old. I think it is time to meet my fate. When they come to take me, I will tell them that he was trying to kill me and so I acted in self-defense. [She tries to make her lie sound as convincing as she can, knowing very well that the Taliban would never spare a woman who tried to kill her own husband] We don't have much time. You must leave at once.

{Laila and Tariq quickly pack whatever they can. Tariq takes Aziza in his arms. Mariam accompanies them till the door.}

Tariq: I will forever be indebted to you. Those men outside may be waging warrior, but you Mariam jo, are the real warrior. May Allah protect you. [His eyes depict the massive gratitude he has for Mariam]

Laila: I never thought I will have to say goodbye to you like this. After everything that you have done for me! I hope I can be half the woman that you are. Thank you, Ami. [Sobbing]

Mariam: [The tears in the corner of her eyes say all the words that she couldn't utter. She musters up all her courage and says] For you, a thousand times over. Go now. Take care of her [while kissing Aziza's forehead]

{Laila hugs Mariam tightly.}

{Mariam watched as they ran into the distance, hand in hand.}

Scene 4

{Mariam goes back inside. After a closer inspection of his seemingly lifeless body, she realized that there was still some life left in Rasheed}

Mariam: [To herself] I can't believe his evil, old heart is still beating! It was never my intention to kill him in the first place. His fate was a devil of his own making, the consequences of his actions coming to bite him. Must I help him now?

Mariam: Is this the end? Oh Allah, guide me! How can it be fair to be ruled by people who believe it is my destiny to stay quiet, to continue to be tormented while staying mum? It is immoral and illegal to live with a man who is not your husband, even if all he does is shower you with love and attention. But, it is moral and legal to live with a man who is your husband, even if all he ever does is hurt and torture you. What kind of justice is this?

Mariam: In our lives, we all undergo a quantum of suffering. If this man lives, I will suffer. If he dies, then too I will suffer. Do I not have the right to choose which suffering I would rather endure?

{With that thought in mind, Mariam picked up the shovel that lay beside her husband's body. She mustered up all her courage and struck it, hard on her husband's head. Blood gushed out and surrounded his head in a red pool.}

VI. CURTAINS DROP

1. EPILOGUE

Two days after Rasheed's death, Mariam buried his body in the backyard. Once people started noticing Laila and Rasheed's absence, they started asking questions; Mariam remained silent. After a week, the Taliban General broke her front door open. She was startled by the sound but she did not panic, for she knew they were coming for her. Once they saw the unmarked grave in the backyard, they did not give her any chance to defend herself. They dragged Mariam to the town centre with a bag over her head. They murmured a few words which Mariam couldn't decipher. In her last moments she wished for a lot of things.

"Mariam wished for so much in those final moments. "Yet as she closed her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the harami child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a

woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. It was not so bad, she thought, that she should die this way. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate belongings.”

Before long, a dark abyss washed over her as the Taliban mercilessly chopped her neck off.

10 years later, Laila and Tariq came to Herat with their two children, to visit the city that Mariam lived in. The situation in the country was still bad, but once the news of her death finally reached them in Peshawar, they thought of this as a befitting tribute. They visited Jalil’s old house and were greeted by his grandson. When they told him about Mariam, he handed them a small cloth bag, saying that they had tried contacting Mariam when Jalil fell sick but Rasheed never responded to their calls or letters. Laila opened the bag and found a letter signed with Jalil’s name:

“Regret... When it comes to you, Mariam jo, I have oceans of it.”

He had written about the remorse he had felt, every single day once Mariam had left and that it was the guilt that was killing him, not the disease. He was sorry that he could never stand up to his wives then and was looking forward to the day when they would once again be reunited in heaven. In the bag, Laila found about 50,000 Afghani worth of money. She and Tariq used the money to build a small school in Herat, where Laila taught as a teacher. They used the last of the money to repair Mariam’s mud house near the river, her childhood home which Laila now visited every Thursday with her family.

When talking about the indomitable courage of women, who endure with such resilience all kinds of challenges that life throws at them, it is rightly said; *“One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs; Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls.”*

VII. ANALYSIS OF LEGAL ELEMENTS

7.1 LEGAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN

If we read our ancient history, we find women playing an important role in the society. Often the biases made were on reasonable grounds to protect women, not to subjugate them to inferior status. Even if we fast-forward to 69 B.C., we find powerful women like Cleopatra, as the historical records suggest, ruling large dynasties. As the society progresses, we find inequality pervading into the lives of people. In the present script, since we are focusing on the treatment of women in Islam, we shall be restricting our

scope of analysis to Sharia law and international legal instruments safeguarding women rights.

In Islam, two documents that play an important role in religious practices are- the Quran and the Hadith; and a contemporary interpretation documented by the name of ‘Sharia Law’. Quran and Hadith are considered to be the original texts containing the direct verdicts of Prophet Mohammad. Sharia Law, on the other hand, is document that has been carved out as a treatise by few religious philosophers of Islam. The conflict that often arises is with respect to interpretation and application of these laws. Not all the Islamic countries adhere to Sharia law, for instance, Pakistan’s large population follows Quran and Hadith. But countries like Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia follow Sharia Law

It is often said that Islamic law aimed at empowering women but the interpretations of these documents has proven otherwise. The practice of Sharia law has legally, culturally and politically subjugated women in their societies. Be it with respect to marriage, education or the right to freedom. Sharia law requires women to cover themselves with a Burkha, every time they step out of their homes; they aren’t allowed to leave their houses without the company of a male member, who has to be either her husband, her brother, father or any related male member of the house. It enshrines public execution of women, often by pelting of stones, if engaged in adultery or any other crimes mentioned under the law. As per the practices in countries like Iran, and some traditional courts of Afghanistan, women’s testimony is not considered fully admissible in a court of law. It does not allow women to travel abroad without the company of a male member.

Article 16(1) of the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) aims at protecting women against discrimination faced in marriages and family relations.⁷ There is a need for transformation in the Islamic society for a two-fold reason: a) Sharia law is a drafted document by philosophers, derived from various sources, which is open to prejudiced opinions; b) and its interpretation not being uniform. If we look at the societies that existed back in 20th century and compare it with the current, we find negligible transformations- traditional ways seem to discriminate against women because of the patriarchal societies that have existed since time immemorial.

As the author has highlighted in his book, the society prior to Taliban period was not as atrocious toward women as it became post its rise. Fatwas released by orthodox groups are often subject to their prejudiced opinions, giving legal sanction to the same. These countries being theocratic

states, often don't interfere with the conventional-regional practices. As a result of this, women aren't allowed to represent themselves in politics, poor education facilities for girls and the practice of selling brides still continues. Although the government at the centre has signed treaties and conventions on various international platforms to uplift women, they seem to fail at defeating the local forces and the local thinking of families who continue to believe that women are supposed to be corrected by men in their societies. Since the law and its interpretation in these situations is itself murky and non-uniform, a positive change is difficult to be translated on ground.

7.2 THE LAW, CONSCIENCE AND MORALITY DEBATE, WHERE IT GETS BLURRED

As a society, we have debated whether the questions of the existence of law are categorically different from the moral acceptability of law or that the two are interrelated. Moreover, one of the primary objectives of, law by its very nature is to regulate society which may include an attempt to create a common or unanimous moral foundation for everyone. Yet, neither substantive law nor legal practice or institution can have an intrinsic claim to an individual's moral conscience. This is not to deny that at least in some respects, law is sourced in moral conscience. For instance, all crimes come with a quantum of punishment because it is morally wrong to commit a crime. If a thief steals a loaf of bread, it is both immoral and illegal but once we become aware of the fact that he did so to feed his starving children, we may continue to believe it's illegal but we still question our morality and conscience. It is at this point that our discourse is focused: when law, morality and conscience is blurred.

In the story, Mariam and Laila have faced Rasheed's wrath at multiple places but he is their husband. In the end, Mariam hits him with a shovel in order to save Tariq and Laila and allow them to escape. When she gets back, she finds that Rasheed's heart is still beating. She is faced with the dilemma of helping him live or letting him die. Letting him die would be immoral, for he was still alive and illegal, for she was the one who killed him. Yet, it would soothe her conscience and that of the reader because it would mark the victory of good over evil; it would mark the end of all her suffering. At the same time, helping him at that point would not be a crime. It would be moral in a way for she was helping a dying man live and then his blood wouldn't be on her hands.

However, it would not soothe her conscience as there was no telling what he would put her through. He could very well try to get her executed and that would also put Laila's family in danger. She chooses the first option and hits him

again, as if to mark revenge for all that he had subjected her, Laila and Aziza to. While what she did was illegal, she felt it was the only right thing to do. She would die anyway, this way her death would be a sacrifice and an act of valor and not a form of punishment for trying to stand up to what was wrong in the first place.

She is executed any which way because that is what the law and the rulers of the land deem fit but to the reader, Rasheed still does not seem a victim. In the story, towards the end, we are not left to decide what was moral or legal but rather what we perceive to be right or wrong in our private conscience.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Language is composed of symbols; made of different patterns to understand what it is that is being conveyed. Similarly, legal language is made of patterns that convey an understanding from a legal perspective. Meaning to emphasize on the symbolic pattern of conversation is to draw the attention of our audience to the fact that we perceive the world the way it is, based on symbolic language. The core theme of this script revolves around three important socio-legal aspects- law and morality, subjugation of Women (human rights), and the practice of sharia law (religion). As mentioned earlier, this script is a reference to the book- *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is one of the few theocratic states that follows the Sharia law. Unlike Quran and Hadith, which are considered to be the authentic religious textbooks of Islam, Sharia law is a document drafted by few religious scholars in the contemporary world; it is a fatwa that lays down what a Muslim man and woman are supposed to follow in their everyday life. There is a lack of uniformity in the practice of any law or traditional beliefs in the Islamic world because of various interpretations of their religious texts.

The applicability of this text lies in its approach to understand these themes through a novel and creative medium, which is by converting a revered book into a script to highlight these themes. Perspectives are unique to every individual. The purpose of this text is not to harm the sentiments of any person but to initiate a larger discourse on the subject matter.

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