

Södertörns Högskola | Institutionen för engelska med didaktisk
inriktning

Kandidatuppsats 15 hp | Engelsk Litteratur | Vårterminen 2008

What is Freedom?

– Perceptions of Freedom of Women in Two
Novels from Afghanistan; *A Thousand Splendid
Suns* and *Behind the Burqa*

Av: Palmina Pepelar

Handledare: Kerstin Shands

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Introduction to <i>A Thousand Splendid Suns</i> and <i>Behind the Burqa</i>	4
Freedom and Oppression: Definition of Terms	5
Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective on the novels:	6
The image of 'First World' Women and 'Third World' Women	7
Causes of oppression:	9
Afghanistan during the Taliban Regime	10
A Comparison of the studied novels	11
Restoring Women back to History	13
Ending Oppression	14
Conclusion	15
Works Cited	17

Introduction

Women have always fought for their rights in the matter of equality between women and men. There has always been a struggle for women to be able to have the same job as men, the same salaries as men and permission to vote and affect society.

The main theme of this essay will include female struggle for freedom but also the struggle against oppression in two novels from Afghanistan. I have studied two novels in which the female gender is seen as a negative feature and where women fight for their right to express themselves without much success.

Behind the Burqa, written by Batya Swift Yasgur, is the story of two sisters and their journey from horrible oppression in the home towards the goal of freedom. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, written by Khaled Hosseini, also deals with oppression of women and the struggle against male domination. The New York Times has found his book powerful and haunting, and it certainly is. Michiko Kakutani has written in The New York Times that:

“In the case of ‘Splendid Suns’, Mr. Hosseini quickly makes it clear that he intends to deal with the plight of women in Afghanistan, and in the opening pages the mother of one of the novel’s two heroines talks portentously about ‘our lot in life’, ‘the lot of poor, uneducated ‘women like us’ who have to endure the hardships of life, the slights of men, the disdain of society.’” (Kakutani)

This quote from Kakutani is a rather good way of describing both *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Behind the Burqa*, since all female characters are dealing with the “hardships of life” such as men, politics, society and injustice. Both novels take place in Kabul, Afghanistan and the stories deal with women who are constantly exposed to oppression from the opposite sex but who struggle for human rights and freedom.

By using the novels and analyzing them with the help of postcolonial and feminist theory I hope to find out what freedom and oppression mean to these women in the studied novels. Some questions that will be discussed are: Does their image of freedom and oppression differ from a Western point of view and which factors cause female oppression? Are there any similarities between the characters in the two studied novels and a Western woman? What is a ‘third world’/ ‘first world’ woman?

An introduction to *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Behind the Burqa*

Freedom and oppression are central concepts in both of the novels I have studied, and that explains the topic chosen for this essay. Both novels have the oppression of the female gender and the search for freedom in common. The female characters in the novels depend on the opposite sex, regardless if it is their younger brother, father, or husband. The novels could be seen as postcolonial writing where the women in once colonized countries are under oppression and fight for freedom.

The first novel, *Behind the Burqa*, is written by Batya Swift Yasgur, who is a freelance writer. Yasgur wrote *America: A Freedom Country*, and it was through this project that she met a woman who became the model for one of her main characters in *Behind the Burqa*. The novel is divided in two parts, one part where Sulima, the older sister, tells her story about growing up in a home marked by fear, oppression and abuse. Sulima grows up during the communist period in Afghanistan and becomes an important member of the first women's rights movement in 1970. During her fight for women's rights she experiences betrayal from her own brother and is forced to make a choice between going to prison and leaving Afghanistan forever. Sulima leaves Afghanistan in 1979.

Hala is sixteen years younger than Sulima and grows up during a period when the Taliban regime was in power. Hala manages to escape to her sister in 1999. One cannot escape from the fact that it is a terrifying story about two young women living in fear of practically everything. Their own father, brother and uncles are controlling almost every minute of their lives, and freedom is certainly something they both long for.

The second book I have studied is *A Thousand Splendid Suns* written by Khaled Hosseini. His novel is a story about Mariam and Laila, both wives of Rasheed, a man who constantly abuses and brutalizes them. Mariam is Rasheed's first wife. As a girl she lived with her mother since her father left them. Mariam suffers from that and decides to leave her mother to live with her father and his wives. The hope for a better home disappoints her when her father and his wives arrange a wedding for Mariam with Rasheed, an old man she barely knows. Life with him is far from simple. Mariam tries to give birth to a child but unfortunately she has a miscarriage every time she becomes pregnant. Rasheed becomes furious and beats her up for every miscarriage Mariam has and he abuses her both mentally and physically.

Laila is a beautiful girl from a wealthy family. She has grown up in a home with possibilities to get an education, but the Civil War started in Afghanistan. Her family decides

to leave Kabul, but unfortunately her father and mother die from a rocket that hits their house, after which Laila ends up getting married to Rasheed. Unlike Mariam, Laila manages to get pregnant and gives birth to a girl. Instead of being happy, however, Rasheed becomes furious since Laila did not give birth to a son, and he almost kills his own daughter.

Definition of Freedom and Oppression

The General Assembly of the United Nations announced the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and wanted it to be valid for all human beings. The General Assembly clarifies the significance of the Declaration thus: “The General Assembly proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms” (Universal Declarations of Human Rights).

The Declaration includes articles about what freedom is, one example is Article 1 which states: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (Universal Declarations of Human Rights). In general, all articles are pointing in the same direction, that is, the freedom of speech, practicing one’s religion and conscience. Oppression is a difficult term to explain. It could be described as: “A feeling of being heavily weighed down in mind or body” (American Heritage Dictionary). The characters in both novels are certainly being weighed down in mind and body, which can be stated in a passage from *Behind the Burqa*:

I have no freedom. I cannot go out. I cannot attend a meeting, a party, or a movie. I cannot go to a concert or go to work. I must ask my father or older brother, both of whom would be violently opposed to what I’m doing if they found out about it. Luckily, they don’t know, which is why I am able to give this speech. But if I am married to a supportive partner, he will “let” me work. He is my ticket to freedom.” In order to be free, I need the permission of a man. Do you think this is right? Do you think this is fair? (Yasgur 29)

Yasgur’s first character in the novel, Sulima introduces the hidden concept of oppression by explaining the role of a man but also the concept of freedom. The individual man is seen as a ticket to freedom for women. By getting married, a woman can work and attend meetings, that is, if she is “lucky” enough to find a supportive man. Freedom for Sulima is being able to work, to attend a simple party and go out by herself. An interesting question to discuss is if a ‘third world’ woman, would move to a Western country, would she still be oppressed?

Someone is praising me. A neighbor. "Your wife speaks such good German. You must be proud. "Later, a fist. Another black eye. Another lie to Gretchen, my friend who works with me at the lab. This time, I have bumped into the dresser corner. She looks at me, and I know she has figured out the truth. I hide my face in shame. (Yasgur 122)

The passage is taken from *Behind the Burqa*, where Sulima has moved from Afghanistan and lives with her husband and daughter in Germany. It did not matter that Germany is a country in Europe where women have equal rights. To the contrary, oppression for Sulima did not end in Germany, it still remained. It did not matter if Sulima ran away from Afghanistan, her fight against male domination and female oppression continued in her home.

I believe that oppression comes from a specific culture or family situation. If one is taught that female oppression is acceptable, it does not really matter where one lives, the wrong treatment of women will remain. At least it did for Sulima; her husband abused her regarding where they lived. Thus, I think a woman living in the West could be treated just like Sulima if she has a husband, father or brother who are taught that abusing women is acceptable within their culture or home.

Oppression for Western women may not be in the form of physical abuse but it may occur as mental oppression. There may be women in the West who are fighting for equal rights in the matter of directorship at work or having the same wages as men. A female director may not be taken as seriously as a male, which in turn is one kind of mental female oppression.

Feminist Postcolonial Perspective on the novels

Feminist Postcolonial Theory is an anthology of essays focusing on some main issues concerning subjects such as gender, sexuality and political activism. The first essay I have chosen to rely on is "The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries" written by Fatima Mernissi, where she discusses female sexuality and how it affects the male gender. She explores issues such as why women are excluded from the streets, from working areas and in public life. The second essay is "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", written by Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Mernissi and Mohanty discuss the situation of women in the Middle East and why women there are oppressed.

Beginning Postcolonialism is the second source I found useful where John McLeod explains that postcolonial feminist critics are dealing with "conceptual, methodological and political problems involved in the study of representations of gender" (172). McLeod also writes: "some feminist critics have pointed out that postcolonialism can appear a male-

centred field” (173). Since the characters in both novels grow up during a period where the male domination was a fact, McLeod’s statement about postcolonialism is interesting for one to discuss. The male characters do appear to be bullies in both novels, they abuse, threaten and silence the female characters while they, on the other hand, are struggling for their lives.

The image of ‘First World’ Women and ‘Third World’ Women

McLeod states that ‘First World’ women are those who live in Western nations like Europe and America. These women are often portrayed as wealthy, free, and independent, while ‘Third World’ women are those who are seen as underdeveloped. ‘Third World’ women are those who live in less wealthy countries, they are often portrayed as underdeveloped in terms of independence, wealth and freedom, they are women who depend on their men and who are victims of oppression. But the question is, how does one know what a ‘Third World’ woman is, and who declares these groups? Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes in “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” that women are being put in different groups. She writes:

The ‘third-world difference’ includes a paternalistic attitude towards women in the third world. Since discussions of the various themes identified earlier (e.g., kinship, education, religion, etc.) are conducted in the context of the relative ‘underdevelopment’ of the third world (which is nothing less than unjustifiably confusing development with the separate path taken by the west in its development, as well as ignoring the unidirectionality of the first/third- world power relationship), third-world women as a group or a category are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious (read ‘not progressive’), family oriented (read ‘traditional’), legal minors (read ‘they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights’), illiterate (read ‘ignorant’), domestic (read ‘backward’) and sometimes revolutionary (read ‘their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war-they-must-fight!’). This is how the ‘third-world difference’ is produced (Mohanty 67-68).

Mohanty states that ‘Third World’ women are seen as a group within which women are thought to be religious, family-oriented, and sometimes even revolutionary. It is important to know that the picture Mohanty presents is not Mohanty’s own view of the ‘Third World’ woman. Instead, Mohanty explains how the alleged characteristics of the ‘Third World’ woman are constructed in comparison to a ‘First World’ woman. This comparison suggests that women within the ‘Third World’ category are traditional, backward and not progressive. Does this image of ‘Third World’ women correspond to how women in West view women from the ‘Third World’? Furthermore, if a ‘Third World’ woman would move to a Western country, would she still be a ‘Third World’ woman? Mohanty’s theory about ‘Third World’ women sheds light on the characters in the novels

Behind the Burqa and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. In what way could these characters be said to be 'Third World' women?

So my early childhood was a mixture of fear and pride, resentment of the subservient role of women, and grudging acceptance of that role because Madarjan, whom I loved and respected, modeled quiet acceptance of that role. And also because my daddy, my Abajani, who adored me and whom I adored in return, also accepted that this was the role of women and lived his life accordingly, as the unchallenged Male Head of the Household. Inequity was the price of love, and Abajan's love was the most important of all. (Yasgur 14)

Sulima underlines the importance of family in the quotation above. Women who respected and accepted their role in the household contributed to a serene atmosphere in the family, and according to Sulima, her father's love was all that mattered. Another term Mohanty uses as an example to explain the 'third world difference' is the 'religious' 'Third World' woman:

This was why God had brought her here, all the way across the country. She knew this now. She remembered a verse from the Koran that Mullah Faizullah had taught her: *And Allah is the East and the West, therefore whenever you turn there is Allah's purpose...* She laid down her prayer rug and did *namaz*. When she was done, she cupped her hands before her face and asked God not to let all this good fortune slip away from her. (Hosseini 81)

The quote above informs the reader that the character, Mariam, is a religious woman. Mariam relies on God and asks him to maintain her fortune which is an clear example of being religious, but does this mean that Mariam is 'not progressive' as Mohanty writes?

In Mohanty's defence, I would like to point out that Mohanty only describes how the difference between a 'third world' woman and a 'first world' woman is created. However, it does not mean that a woman who practices her religion is non progressive, but there is a possibility that religion can become an excuse for oppressing women.

McLeod mentions Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian professor and feminist critic and the author of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" an essay in which she looks at muted female voices. McLeod writes: "Spivak complicates the extent to which women's voices can be easily retrieved and restored to history. Rather than making the subaltern as female to speak, intellectuals must bring to crisis the representational systems which rendered her mute in the first place" (McLeod 194). Spivak focuses on restoring women and their voices back to history and I do believe that is important since Spivak encourages women in some way to dare to "speak" again after being silenced. But I agree with McLeod even more, since I think that many intellectuals should focus on the systems that rendered women's muted status and question the cause for female oppression.

Causes of oppression

Hosseini and Yasgur, the authors of the novels studied, mention several situations where women are abused and oppressed. The present focus is on what was earlier mentioned, the quotation from McLeod who stated that intellectuals should focus on what muted women's voices: what is the cause for female oppression?

According to Article 18, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right of religion and the right to change their religion. In *Behind the Burqa* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, religion can be interpreted as something that is being used as an excuse for oppressing and abusing women. Yasgur's passage below is a perfect example of how religion is being incorrectly taught:

Never again would I ask Madarjan meekly, "Why do I have to do the laundry and Karim doesn't?" Or "Aunt Layla has sweated over the stove all day but when Uncle Daoud comes home, he's served like a king." There was no point in asking these questions because I was no longer willing to accept--or even try to accept -- the answer that "it's because the Qur'an says so" or "It has always been this way. It is the will of God." (Yasgur 18).

This passage from *Behind the Burqa* does not correspond to the previous statement from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, since the passage above is using religion and God for personal gain in order to suppress women. This leads to women being taught the extremist version of religion; they are taught that religion is God's permission of female oppression in some way. In both novels, many male characters use religion as an excuse to beat women, pointing to the words of the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. How can women have any freedom of religion if they are taught that religion allows men to beat them?

There are also countless men in Islamic countries who use the Qur'an as an excuse to veil women, since women appear to be attractive if they are not veiled. Women are seen as an object of sexuality if they are unveiling the exotic parts of their body, such as the cleavage, neck and anklets. What is not known is that many Islamic men have misunderstood the message in the Qur'an and interpreted it the wrong way. In *Feminist Postcolonial Theory* by Lewis and Mills, Fadwa El Guindi writes in her essay "Veiling Resistance" about women and veiling, she brings up a passage from the Qur'an about women and men:

And say to the believing that they should lower their gaze and guard their genitals [and] say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their genitals, draw their *khimar* to cover their cleavage [breasts], and not to display their beauty, except that which has to appear, except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or sisters' sons, or their women, or the slave, or eunuchs or children under age; and they should not strike their feet to draw attention to their hidden beauty. O ye believers turn to God, that ye may attain bliss" - Qur'an 24:30,31 (El Guindi 589).

This passage from the Qur'an is discussed by El-Guindi. It states that women should cover their cleavage since it is seen as inappropriate to flaunt one's cleavage in front of men. By hiding the cleavage, a woman is said to show respect for men. The Qur'an states that women should hide and guard their genitals and cleavage and only display what is appropriate.

El Guindi's response to this passage from the Quran is that Islam allows sexuality, but only within a marriage. If a man and a woman are not married, their behaviour must be desexualized, so that their bodies are disciplined, in which case they can be on friendly terms. El Guindi does not say if she agrees with the request for desexualization or not, she only analyses the passage from the Qur'an with the aim of defending Islam. I do not agree with her analysis of desexualization since I think that flaunting one's cleavage does not necessarily lead to sexual interaction. Whether the recommendation of desexualization is right or not, the problem in the novels *Behind the Burqa* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is that men use religion for the purposes of oppressing women.

Afghanistan during the Taliban Regime

Hosseini and Yasgur writes about the Taliban regime, when Afghanistan exterminated and banned everything marked by Western influence. The situation in Afghanistan was horrible as the Mujihaddin ruled the country. They tortured men and they murdered and raped women. Afghanistan became a country where the population starved and lived in poverty.

Hosseini portays an image of Afghanistan during the Taliban regime in his novel: "The university was shut down and its students sent home. Paintings were ripped from walls, shredded with blades. Television screens were kicked in. Books, except the Koran, were burned in heaps, the stores that sold them closed down" (Hosseini 250).

The passage gives an insight about how the Taliban ruled the country and forbade entertainment. These rules were valid for all inhabitants of Kabul but yet, women suffered more from it than men.

Political problems can be another cause of female oppression since the government of the country has a great involvement of setting up rules for women and men. According to the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there should not be any distinctions made between the female and male gender. Article 2 declares that:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it is independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty (Universal Declarations of Human Rights).

Departing from the selected passage it is clear that women are not equal as men in the studied novels. Hosseini writes about rules concerning women: *“Attention women: You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home”* (Hosseini 248).

Hosseini, like Yasgur, mentions several situations where women are forbidden to go outside alone, and if they do, they will be beaten. It is difficult not to state that women unfortunately are oppressed, since it is so wrong for a woman to go outside the house all by herself according to the Taliban.

Fatima Mernissi, the author of the essay “The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries”, writes about female sexuality and how it affects the male gender. She explores issues such as why women are excluded from the streets, from working areas and in public life, Mernissi writes: “Women in male spaces are considered both provocative and offensive” (Mernissi 494), which can be taken as another cause to forbid women to leave the house. If a woman should wander alone in the street, she is seen as a loose woman and no man would let his wife, daughter or any female in his family, be seen as a loose woman. His pride and honour would not let him allow such behaviour for a woman.

A Comparison of the studied novels

Hosseini and Yasgur portray the lives of four young women during a period when women were excluded from jobs, schools and the public world. They all have oppression and longing for freedom in common, they are all ‘third world’ women since men dominate them. What is the difference between a ‘first world’ and a ‘third world’ woman in the matter of freedom and oppression then? Are Western women more free than a woman living in Afghanistan?

Mohanty mentions the comparison between western feminist self-presentation and the western feminist representation of the ‘third world’ woman. She [Mohanty] writes:

Universal images of ‘the third-world woman’ (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the ‘third-world difference’ to ‘sexual difference’, are predicated on

(and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about western women as secular, liberated and having control over their own lives. This is not to suggest that western women *are* secular and liberated and have control over their own lives. (Mohanty 68)

I agree with Mohanty, since I think that the difference between 'third world' and 'first world' women derives from assumptions about women in the 'third world'. The attitude towards freedom and oppression is individual; the definitions of the terms are not the same for every human being. A woman living in the third world may picture freedom as the ability to have her own opinion while a woman living in a Western country may take that for granted. The same attitude concerns oppression, one could feel oppressed if she/he are not allowed to listen to music while that can be someone else's everyday life.

The characters in *Behind the Burqa* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* can be seen as 'third world' women since they are somehow oppressed while the men are portrayed as superiors although in a negative sense which leads to the conclusion that they [the female characters] are 'third world' women in the matter of independence and freedom. All women in the novels studied are depending on their men when it comes to the ability to make their own choice. Women were not allowed to have their own thoughts, opinions and beliefs. To be seen in public as a woman, without a man, was strictly forbidden.

It is difficult to pick out the differences between third world and first world women, since as earlier mentioned; the attitude towards the concept of freedom and oppression is different for every individual. But despite the differences, one can conclude that a 'first world' woman may have more similarities with a 'third world' woman than differences. Mohanty's earlier explanation of 'First World' women's categorization of the 'third world' woman as being 'religious', 'non progressive' etc. does not correspond in this sense, since almost all women share the same goal. 'First world' women may be freer when it comes to possibilities as work, making one's own decision or wearing the clothes one like. However, 'first world' women like the 'third world' women is striving for individual independence, their goal is to be emancipated from the male gender.

Sulima, one of Yasgur's brave heroines, is fighting against male domination. Her wish is to be able to attend meetings, parties and leaving her house without the permission of a man, which can be connected to the characters in Hosseini's novel. The female characters in both novels want to break free from the male-dominated society and be able to have their own rights, they want to be independent women just like the vision of the 'first world' woman. 'First world' women are also struggling for an equal society, they are struggling for women's rights concerning managerial positions and same salaries as mentioned.

Restoring Women back to History

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1965. He and his family lived in Kabul until the invasion of the Soviet army and left Afghanistan to live in the United States in 1980. Hosseini has also written *The Kite Runner*, which also deals with the situation of Afghanistan during the 1970s. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is his latest novel where he portrays the everyday life of two women who became victims of oppression.

As earlier mentioned, Spivak focuses on restoring women back to history after many years of silence and she encourages women in some way to speak up again. Is this what Hosseini is trying to do himself? Since he is a man, writing from two women's points of view, is he trying to restore their voices or does he speak for them? One can wonder where Hosseini got his inspiration from since it cannot be easy to write from a woman's point of view while being a man besides, but Hosseini explains that:

In the spring of 2003, I went to Kabul, and I recall seeing these burqa-clad women sitting at street corners, with four, five, six children, begging for change. I remember watching them walking in pairs up the street, trailed by their children in ragged clothes, and wondering how life had brought them to that point. What were their dreams, hopes, longings? Had they been in love? Who were their husbands? What had they lost, whom had they lost, in the wars that plagued Afghanistan for two decades?

....

When I began writing *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, I found myself thinking about those resilient women over and over. Though no one woman that I met in Kabul inspired either Laila or Mariam, their voices, faces, and their incredible stories of survival were always with me, and a good part of my inspiration for this novel came from their collective spirit. (Khaled Hosseini Website)

One can draw the conclusion that Hosseini did not want to speak for these women; instead he wanted to evoke sympathy for women in Afghanistan. He continues explaining his intention with *A Thousand Splendid Suns* on his website, where he writes:

As an Afghan, I would like readers to walk away with a sense of empathy for Afghans, and more specifically for Afghan women, on whom the effects of war and extremism have been devastating. I hope this novel brings depth, nuance, and emotional subtext to the familiar image of the burqa-clad woman walking down a dusty street. (Khaled Hosseini)

Yasgur's novel is more of a memoir than a novel, since it is not she who writes from her own point of view. Still, I think that Hosseini does a brilliant job with *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, since one cannot feel anything else but what Hosseini wanted the reader to feel, empathy for women in Afghanistan.

Even though the novels differ in the matter of narrator style, the message within the novels is the same. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Behind the Burqa* are novels with many terrifying situations where women are abused so horribly, that it nearly cost them their lives.

But despite the horrible situations, one can feel the slightest glimmer of hope for these women. Somehow, the female characters manage to stand up for themselves and struggle for their rights, even though it can lead to difficulties.

Ending Oppression

John McLeod writes that postcolonialism and feminism share the same goal, that is, “challenging forms of oppression” (McLeod 174). Postcolonialism appeared to be a male-centred field which now is obvious when discussing the studied novels and feministic struggle against the male-centred field. But how can one help put female oppression to an end? Will female oppression ever be over?

I know you're still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now, he said. Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very, very bright girl. Truly, you are. 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. (Hosseini 103)

Yasgur continues on the same track as Hosseini: “My approach to women’s rights began—and has continued to this day—with education. I passionately believe that unless women have the same educational opportunities as men, they will never be free of male oppression” (Yasgur 44). Both passages from both novels inform one that women need to get an education to be free from oppression. With education, women can get a position in society and therefore become more independent and allowed to have more opinions. Hosseini and Yasgur may have included education as a golden ticket to freedom for women in similar situations.

Education could restore women’s voices back in society as Spivak would manifest it. If one woman would educate herself and educate other women and encourage them to get an education, I believe that women would be in the limelight. Then, Spivak’s theory would be confirmed, women like the characters in the novels would have courage to speak up and have own opinions.

Conclusion

The main common theme of the studied novels is female oppression and the long way towards freedom. The main characters are four females who are constantly suffering

physically and mentally because they are women. Not only the main characters, but all women in Afghanistan who are portrayed in these novels, do not have the possibility to express themselves and are being kept in silence. *Behind the Burqa* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* can be interpreted as postcolonial writing, with the “powerful” man and the oppressed woman, something that some feminist critics have reacted to and claimed that postcolonial writing may appear as a male-centred field.

Mohanty offers an interesting definition of the ‘third world’ woman as non-progressive and traditional where she explains how the concept of ‘third world’ woman is created. Mohanty’s definition of the ‘third world’ woman corresponds to how McLeod defines the same category. According to McLeod, ‘third world’ women are less developed in the matter of wealth, independence and freedom and his definition of the typical ‘third world’ woman resembles the main characters in both novels since they are in some way “underdeveloped” and oppressed.

McLeod mentions Spivak’s theory about restoring women back to history, which he in some way doubts, focusing instead on what causes female oppression. The cause for oppression can be difficult to point out but I believe that there are several factors involved in oppressing women. One main factor is religion since it appears as if the male characters in the novels interpret religion and female sexuality in a wrong way. Instead of accepting female sexuality they veil women and use religion as an excuse. The real meaning of religion loses its value and instead becomes a cause for oppressing women.

Another issue concerning the cause for oppressing women may be the governmental rules of a society since women were excluded from streets and the society. Fatima Mernissi wrote that women among men, were seen as provocative and scandalous, which may have contributed to the exclusion of women. The female characters in *Behind the Burqa* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* were excluded from the streets, schools and other public spaces where men could wander free. The exclusion of women came from the Taliban regime, who forbid women to leave the house by themselves.

The characters in both novels long for freedom and emancipation from the male-dominated society. Their view of freedom is to be able to have their own opinions, beliefs and education which can differ from a Western woman’s view. The attitudes towards concepts of freedom and oppression are different for every human being. Therefore, I believe that ‘first world’ women [Western women] and ‘third world women’ have more similarities than differences. Mohanty’s earlier terms of the ‘third world’ woman are not “valid” anymore, yet,

Mohanty introduces the self-presentation of women where she explains that there are many assumptions of the Western woman. Just because one assumes that Western women have more freedom or independence, it does not have to correspond to the assumption. However, despite one is freer or not, the 'first world' and the 'third world' women are striving towards the same goal, that is, being emancipated from the male gender.

As mentioned earlier, Spivak places the focus on restoring women's voices back to history. I believe that Hosseini's and Yasgur's novels are an excellent first step towards Spivak's theory. Hosseini and Yasgur portray a horrible daily life of four women with abuse, brutal husbands, the horrible Taliban regime and the loss of their loved ones. Despite many terrifying events in the women's lives, the novels are also stories about friendship, love and hope for a better future. I do believe that the small glimmer of hope is there for a purpose, the authors of both novels want the reader to feel that there is hope for women in similar situations as the main characters in the novels. It is also one's individual and human ethics to know and be aware that all human beings, no matter what sex, race, ethnics or religion one belongs to, are equal, for the sake of women in a situation similar to that of the female characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Behind the Burqa*.

Works cited:

Primary Sources

Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. New York. Riverhead Books, 2007.

Yasgur Swift, Batya. *Behind the Burqa*. Hoboken, New Jersey. John Wiley & Sons, 2002.

Secondary Sources

El Guindi, Fadwa. 'Veiling Resistance.' *Feminist Postcolonial Theory – A Reader*. E.d. Reina Lewis & Sara Mills. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2003. 586-609

Lewis, Reina, and Sara Mills. *Feminist Postcolonial Theory – A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2003.

McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester UP, 2000.

Mernissi, Fatima. "The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries." *Feminist Postcolonial Theory – A Reader*. Ed. Reina Lewis & Sara Mills. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2003. 489-501

Mohanty Talpade, Chandra. 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.' *Feminist Postcolonial Theory – A Reader*. Ed. Reina Lewis & Sara Mills. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2003. 49-74

Electronic Secondary Sources

AuthorBytes.com. 2008. Khaled Hosseini Website. 2 September 2008

<<http://www.khaledhosseini.com/hosseini-books-splendidsons.html/>>

Bartleby.com. 2008. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 7 August 2008 <<http://www.bartleby.com/61/91/O0099100.html/>>

Kakutani, Michiko. "A Woman's Lot in Kabul, Lower Than a House Cat's." *The New York Times* 29 May 2007. 3 September 2008

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/29/books/29kaku.html/>>

UN.org. 2008. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 7 August 2008

<<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html/>>

