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THE REPRESENTATION OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN THE NOVEL
A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS BY KHALED HOSSEINI

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Abstract

Afghan women are the most suffering community in the world for a long period of time. It will be interesting to study how the writers have portrayed them in their works. Khaled Hosseini has portrayed a realistic picture of Afghan women in his works. In his novel, *A Thousand Splended Suns*, he gives a true picture of the plight of Afghan women. Mariam and Laila are examples of Afghan Women whose life is described in detail in the novel.

Keywords: Khaled Hosseini, Afghanistan, Afghan Women, Mariam, Laila, Jalil, Rasheed.

"Afghan women, as a group, I think their suffering has been equalled by very few other groups in recent world history."-Khaled Hosseini

Khaled Hosseini once said about the plight of Afghan women that, many women in Afghanistan experience at least one form of abuse every day in their life. The World Health Organization reported that 90% of women in Afghanistan had experienced at least one form of domestic violence. Violence against women is widely tolerated by the community, and it is widely practised in Afghanistan. Violence against women in Afghanistan ranges from verbal abuse and psychological abuse to physical abuse and unlawful killing.

From infancy, girls and women are under the authority of their fathers or husbands. Their freedom is restricted since they are children and their choice of husbands is also restricted. Women

and girls are deprived of education and denied economic liberty. In their pre-marriage and post-marriage relationships, their ability to assert their economic and social independence is limited by their families. Most married Afghan females are faced with the stark reality that they are forced to endure abuse. If they try to extricate themselves from the situation of abuse, they invariably face social stigma, social isolation, persecution for leaving their homes by the authorities and honour killings by their relatives. Customs and traditions which are influenced by centuries-old patriarchal rules prevail, and the issue of violence against women becomes pronounced. The high illiteracy rate among the population further perpetuates the problem. Many women across Afghanistan believe that it is acceptable for their husbands to abuse them.

From the age of eight onward, girls in Afghanistan were not allowed to be in direct contact with males other than a close "blood relative",

husband, or in-law. Other restrictions for women were women should not appear in the streets without a blood relative or without wearing a burqa. They should not wear high-heeled shoes as no man should hear a woman's footsteps lest it excite him. They must not speak loudly in public as no stranger should hear a woman's voice. All ground and first-floor residential windows should be painted over or screened to prevent women from being visible from the street. Photographing, filming and displaying pictures of females in newspapers, books, shops or the home was banned. The modification of any place names that included the word "women"; For example, "women's garden" was renamed "spring garden". They were forbidden to appear on the balconies of their apartments or houses.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is an extraordinary novel made by Khaled Hosseini. The story narrates the lives of Afghan women, their families, and hopes for the future, set against a backdrop of three decades of political strife. The novel covers the Soviet invasion, Mujahedeen, the rise of the Taliban and the post-Taliban efforts to rebuild the country. Hosseini uses simple language to tell a heartbreaking lyrical story of an unlikely friendship and love.

The novel is divided into four parts. The first part focuses on Mariam, the second and fourth parts focus on Laila, and the third part switches focus between Mariam and Laila with each chapter Mariam and Laila differ in age, ethnicity, education and social class. The two women had quite different experiences of youth, and demonstrate quite different capacities to relate to others and even to life. Mariam lives in a Kolba on the outskirts of Herat with her mother. Jalil, Her father, is a wealthy man who lives in town with three wives and several children. Mariam is his illegitimate daughter, so therefore she cannot live with them, but Jalil visits her every Thursday. On her 15th birthday, Mariam wants her father to take her to see Pinocchio at his movie theatre. Nana, her mother doesn't permit her but she keeps visiting Jalil's house. When she comes to Jalil's house, he refuses to see her, and finally, she ends up sleeping on his Veranda. In the morning Mariam returns home, and she finds her mother has hanged herself. Then, Mariam is taken to live in her father's house. Jalil asks her to marry Rasheed, a

shoemaker from Kabul who is almost forty years old, twenty-five years older than Mariam. In their marriage, Mariam becomes pregnant several times but is never able to have a child, so it makes Rasheed more abusive.

In the same neighbourhood, a girl named Laila and a boy named Tariq lived happily, they are close friends and become lovers over time. During this period Afghanistan witnessed war and Kabul is bombarded by rocket attacks. Tariq's family decides to leave the city, and Laila's family also decides to leave Kabul, but when they are about to escape, a rocket destroys the house, kills her parents, and injures Laila severely. Laila is then taken care of by Rasheed and Mariam. After recovering from her injuries, Laila gets to know that she is pregnant with Tariq's child. Rasheed says that Tariq is dead and asks for Laila to marry him. Directly, Rasheed has a second wife and hopes to have a son with her. Laila gives birth to a daughter named Aziza. Rasheed hates having a daughter; he is displeased and suspicious even though he becomes more abusive to Laila. Mariam and Laila eventually become best friends. They plan to run away from Rasheed and leave Kabul. Unfortunately, they are caught by police at the bus station and they are brought back to their house. When they reached, Rasheed beats them. A few years later, Laila gives birth to a son named Zalmai. This is the period of the Taliban who got power in Afghanistan. Rasheed's workshop is bankrupt during that time. One day, Tariq appears outside the house. He and Laila are met when Rasheed returns home from work, and Zalmai tells his father about Tariq. Rasheed is very angry; he beats Laila and suddenly Mariam kills Rasheed with a shovel. Mariam asks for Laila to leave Kabul and go to Pakistan with Tariq and Mariam says that she goes with Laila. Laila doesn't agree at first, but finally, she does it.

The novel is told from a third-person point of view, alternating between Mariam's and Laila's points of view as reflecting female Afghans' lifestyles within their culture and communities. It presents in detail the conditions of women and how they live their lives during the harsh time when the country is ruled by the Taliban. At the beginning of the novel, Mariam is portrayed as the harami, meaning "an

illegitimate person who would never have a legitimate claim to be the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance"(4). It is revealed that Mariam is the daughter of Jalil, a wealthy businessman in Herat and Nana, a housekeeper working in Jalil's house. Having a child with his housekeeper, Jalil recognizes that this will bring him a bad reputation. As a consequence, when Mariam was born, she was sent off to stay in Kolba with her mother. When Mariam was a child, Jalil would visit Mariam every weekend, but Mariam is not allowed to see Jalil and the rest of the family in Herat. This situation has reflected the notions of the so-called patriarchal society in Afghanistan where Mariam, a girl is in an inferior position and she must be taken control of her protector who is her father. This leads to the assertion that Afghan women are always treated as second-class citizens because of their gender.

After Nana, her mother commits suicide, Jalil and his wife, Khadija forces her to marry Rasheed, a friend of Jalil. So here Mariam is forced by her father to marry Rasheed. This demonstrates that Mariam has no choice but to accept because her options are very restricted and she must depend on her protector. Even though Mariam refuses that "I don't want to, I don't want this. Don't make me." Rasheed and her family continue to arrange the marriage. According to Mariam, this forced marriage probably will become full of disgust because she has to spend her entire life with Rasheed whom she does not love. Mariam's family, as presented by Hosseini, is identical to the traditional and conservative model. Marriage is always a topic in Afghan society. This situation shows the aspect of the family's power over their children that in any situation, parents are the decision-makers. In addition, Mariam is an illegitimate child here, so therefore she does not have the opportunity to study, to go to school, and like her half-sisters and she is obliged to obey everything imposed on her by her father. This situation also reflects how the dominant group or upper-class people such as Jalil and Rasheed control women like Mariam since they are considered powerless and inferior in society.

Mariam's portrayal after her marriage is that of a wife who is submissive and obedient reflects the

status of women in Afghanistan. An Afghan woman is groomed to become a perfect wife who must satisfy her husband. To maintain the role of a perfect wife, an Afghan woman is expected to devote her whole life to her husband's needs and pleasure. Besides, the woman's role is here merely to reproduce children. The position of women in Afghanistan has traditionally been inferior to that of men. This position has varied according to age, socio-cultural norms, and ethnicity. Afghan women, even until the beginning of the 20th century were the slaves of their father, husband, father-in-law, and elder brother. Her most valued characteristic was silence and obedience. In addition, Afghan women have been socially constructed to rely on men and obey their commands.

The excerpt below shows another aspect of the husband's power over his wife. In any situation, husbands can naturally control every part of their wives' life, for example, the husband has control over his wife's dress code. Here Rasheed forces Mariam to wear a burqa, a garment that covers the whole female body including the face and shoulders and this incident reiterates that it is inappropriate for women without the burqa in public. Rasheed forces Mariam to wear a burqa after he observes his female customers are uncovered by burqas when they come to his shop. Some of them wear makeup and short skirts showing their knees. Rasheed tells Mariam that these women are "spoiling their nang and namoos, their honour and pride"(69). "Mostly, they live in the richer parts of Kabul. I'll take you there. You'll see. But they're here too, Mariam, in this very neighbourhood, these soft men. There's a teacher living down the street, Hakim is his name, and I see his wife Fariba all the time walking the streets alone with nothing on her head but a scarf. It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife" (69). It also shows Rasheed's point of view about men who lose control of their wives, and he, therefore, feels embarrassed. This indicates that men are supposed to control their wives and women are supposed to obey them, as Rasheed reminds Mariam, "But I'm a different breed of man, Mariam [...] Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand?" (69).

Wives, on the other hand, would feel they are unconditionally inferior to their husbands. In a patriarchal society, women's stereotypes influence how women view themselves and their world. Most women make an effort to fulfil what society expects because they believe that living a life is based on societal concepts of what it means to be a woman. It is clear that under the institution of marriage, Afghan women live like prisoners. They are unable to leave the house except under the guardianship of a mahram or a male guardian. The Taliban consider women walking alone in the street improper. Taliban's rule over Afghanistan limits women from getting what they need and from pursuing a career outside the house. This preserves women's dependence on men and at the same time maintains men's control over women's lives. Here Mariam is physically abused and controlled by her husband because of her inability to have a child. This case shows that the patriarchal structure of Afghan society is a source of violence and suffering.

A woman's value in Afghanistan has often been measured by her ability to bear children, especially boys. Mariam's life with her husband is truly miserable because she fails to give birth to a son which results in domestic violence. In the novel, Mariam becomes pregnant seven successive times but unfortunately suffers repeated miscarriages. Once a woman has suffered a series of miscarriages, her marriage becomes a prison. Mariam is impregnated at the age of sixteen as she is raped on her wedding night. The practice of oppression, as portrayed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, seems to commonly happen in Afghan society. The harsh life and forms of oppression are a threat to most Afghan women, and they are also the prime targets of oppression imposed by the Taliban regime.

Laila is another female protagonist of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, whose story is parallel to that of Mariam. Laila is first portrayed as a beautiful and intelligent girl who grew up in an educated family in Kabul. Since her father is a school teacher, Laila lives a life filled with books, schooling, and hope for a promising future. Though Laila is represented as a curious girl, who craves knowledge and learning, she does not have complete authority to determine her life. Laila's life is forever changed

once her family has been destroyed by a bomb fired by one of the warlord groups that are battling one another to rule Kabul. Laila, too, is injured by the bomb. She, therefore, is unable to live up to her full potential. Like her country, Afghanistan, Laila's life is shattered. Mariam and Rasheed nurse her back to health. However, this new life is just the beginning of a tragic one, making her not much different from Mariam. Like Mariam, who is much older than she is, Laila experiences victimization once she agrees to become Rasheed's second wife. Laila makes such a decision simply because she does not have a better choice. She is not only an orphan, but she is also pregnant by Tariq, her lover whom she learns has died. A woman living alone is not an option in Afghanistan. Mariam and Laila are alike. Both of them is put in a situation in which they are forced to marry Rasheed who is much older than they are. Mariam and Laila then become slaves in Rasheed's household. In Laila's case, the forced marriage completely takes away her independence. That is, the forced marriage becomes the beginning of Laila's severe life with a very domestically violent husband, forcing her not to have any power to make her own decisions. For example, she does not have an opportunity to continue her education because Rasheed does not allow her to do so. This makes Laila have no hope of having an income and a better financial and social status in her future life.

Therefore, forced marriage results in women's complete subordination to men. Under the Taliban regime, as a married woman, Laila is not allowed to go outside, unless Amahram or a male guardian goes with her. The hardships that both Mariam and Laila undergo in their married lives happen under the Taliban's rule. Hosseini clearly portrays how Afghan cultural beliefs and social norms are elaborately intertwined with the Taliban's power in restricting Afghan women's freedom. The following excerpt illustrates how Laila's space is limited and monitored by Rasheed, who insists that Laila must not go outside the house alone, "There is another option," scratching the sole of one foot with the Calloused heel of the other. "She can leave. I won't stand in her way. But I suspect she won't get far. No food, no water, not a rupiah in her pockets, bullets and rockets flying everywhere. How many

days do you suppose She'll last before she's abducted, raped, or tossed into some roadside ditch With her throat slit?"

Rasheed takes advantage of Laila's situation. Even though Rasheed allows Laila to go outside, it is dangerous for Laila to stay outside without her Protector. As a consequence, her decision is only made by Rasheed, enforcing the limitations on her activities. In the novel, Laila feels distressed to wear a burqa because she feels uncomfortable and the burqa limits her movement and gives her difficulties when she is eating. It is also heavy, strange, and unnerving, for her as Mariam narrates Laila's feelings after she is forced to wear a burqa, "for Laila, being out in the streets had become an exercise in avoiding injury. Her eyes were still adjusting to the limited, grid-like visibility of the burqa, her feet still stumbling over the hem. She walked in perpetual fear of tripping and falling, of breaking an ankle and stepping into a pothole. Still, she found some comfort in the anonymity that the burqa provided. She wouldn't have to watch the surprise in their eyes, or the pity or the glee, at how far she had fallen, at how her lofty aspirations had been dashed". (Hosseini, 225-226)

First, she feels weird in the limitation of her sight and her feet stumble over the hem. She also feels uncomfortable walking under the burqa. Despite the sufferings that she has to go through, Rasheed forces her to wear them. This is because, from Rasheed's standpoint, a husband can control his wife concerning her activities and even ideas. A good wife should keep her honour and pride for her husband by wearing a burqa. Just like Mariam, Laila suffers Rasheed's abuses both physically and psychologically. Here, Hosseini presents Laila's portrayal as that of an Afghan woman who is a victim of physical and mental abuse. Rasheed's violence makes Laila full of wounds in her body and her mind. This can be seen through the following excerpt; "Laila said. It hurt to talk. Her jaw was still sore, and her back and neck ached. Her lip was swollen, and her tongue kept poking the empty pocket of the lower incisor Rasheed had knocked loose two days before Laila never would have believed that a human body could stand this much beating, this

viciously, this regularly, and keep functioning". (Hosseini, 315)

When the country is ruled by the Taliban, it becomes a legal command from the Taliban that all women in Afghanistan must wear the burqa when they are not only in the house but also in public places. In addition, Afghan women are prohibited from wearing makeup and painting their nails. The Taliban also rule over women's rights in how to dress. Not only do the Taliban limit women's clothes or the way they dress, but they also enforce the punishment if a woman breaks the rule. As shown in the novel, when Laila is caught wandering alone on her way to visit her daughter in an orphanage without her protector accompanying her, a young Taliban beats her "with a radio antenna" (Hosseini,313) When he is done, he gives "a final whack to the back of her neck" and threatens her, "I see you again, I'll beat you until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones" (Hosseini,313). Here, the violence inflicted upon Laila reflects the Taliban's exercise of power over Afghan women which were widely believed to be justifiable in controlling women's lives.

In addition, the portrayal of Afghan women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is that of women who are unjustly treated in a polygamous marriage. Knowing that Laila has just lost her parents in the bombing, Rasheed takes the opportunity to tell Mariam that he is going to marry Laila. He tries to reason with Mariam, "We need to legitimize this situation". "People will talk. It looks dishonourable, an unmarried young woman living here. It's bad for my reputation. And hers, and yours, I might add"(Hosseini, 208). However, Mariam disagrees, she begs, "Eighteen years". And I never asked you for a thing. Not one thing. "I'm asking now"(Hosseini, 208). Of course, Rasheed ignores her plea. He does not follow the traditional Afghan rule that requires a husband to "firstly get approval from his wife when doing polygamy" (Rahimi). Hosseini's characterization of Rasheed implies that polygamy condones women's oppression.

However, Laila's decision to marry Rasheed has various implications. First of all, after she lost her parents to a stray rocket and learns that her beloved

Tariq died in the bombing, Laila feels that it is inappropriate for a young unmarried woman to stay without a lawful spouse. Secondly, Laila attempts to take advantage of Rasheed. The determination and hastiness of Laila to marry Rasheed is revealed when she realizes that she is pregnant. Within the unsafe, chaotic, and violent situation in the city, the only way to support her child and make herself safe is to marry Rasheed. Unfortunately, after marrying Laila, Rasheed disrespects his two wives, Mariam and Laila, even though it is required that the husband in a polygamous marriage "equally treat his wives and limit the number of his wives with no more than four" (Pandey, 218) For example, Rasheed often insults Mariam for being a "harami" (Hosseini, 216) or a bastard, while he praises Laila as the "Malika" (Hosseini,217) or queen, in their house. In addition, there is a scene in which both Mariam and Laila are unequally treated by Rasheed. He insists that Mariam should take care of Laila. In case Laila wants to go outside, it is Mariam's responsibility to accompany and take care of Laila. Rasheed also threatens Mariam that if she does not follow his guidelines, she will be beaten. Also, he compares Mariam and Laila to two different types of cars. Mariam is like the Volga whereas Laila is like a new, first-class shiny Benz. Here, the two women are objectified with the implication that the younger one is preferable to the older one. For men, women are like disposable objects, not at all human. The following excerpt shows the aforementioned situation in which Mariam and Laila's experience being unfairly treated by Rasheed:

"All I [Rasheed] ask in return, well, it is a simple thing. I ask that you [Laila] avoid leaving this house without my company. That's all. Simple, no? If I am away and you need something urgently, I mean absolutely need it and it cannot wait for me, then you can send Mariam and she will go out and get it for you. You've noticed a discrepancy, surely. Well, one does not drive the Volga and a Benz in the same manner. That would be foolish, wouldn't it? Oh, I also ask that when we are out together, that you wear a burqa. It's for your own protection, naturally. It is best. There are so many lewd men in this town now. Such vile intentions are so eager to dishonour even a married woman. So that's all"(Hosseini, 217).

In a strongly patriarchal society like Afghanistan, it is a common phenomenon that women are considered powerless and subjugated. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam and Laila are mostly portrayed as the victims of gender inequality, who always accept unfair treatment. Unlike Mariam and her mother, Nana, who both accepts gender discrimination, Laila is a female character who is resistant and fights against the gender inequality within patriarchal Afghan society. By fighting against gender inequality, Laila uses her education as a tool to fight against the inequality of women. Even though Mariam and Laila are Afghan women living in the same Afghan culture, they are different in terms of their ethnicity, upbringing, family, and class. Laila, a beautiful and intelligent girl, is a daughter of a well-educated father who motivates her to engage in acquiring knowledge and learning. As he tells Laila, "I know you're still young, but I want you to understand and learn this "Now Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very, very bright Girl. Truly, you are. You can be anything you want, Laila, I 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, 114).

In contrast, Mariam stays with her mother, Nana, who does not allow Mariam to go to school because she thinks that women do not have to go to school. As Nana tells her daughter, "What's the sense schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon and you'll learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school. Look at me" (Hosseini,18)

In this case, Laila's and Mariam's class, family background, and ethnicity should be considered to show that Afghan women are not a homogenous category. In the novel, each female character has a different consciousness of her life. Laila is portrayed as a girl who is aware of gender equality. When Laila is young, she talks with a friend who thinks that women are incapable of getting an education. Thinking differently, Laila affirms that women should have equal rights with men in terms of getting an education. This implies that Laila's consciousness of

education directly reflects her awareness of women's rights and equality. Therefore, her consciousness of women's rights is manifested when she faces problems. There is a scene in the novel where Laila is aware of her equality. Marrying Rasheed and living together with Mariam, Laila asks Mariam to go outside with her. Mariam, who has never been concerned about gender equality and is always submissive to her husband due to her strong beliefs, refuses to allow Laila to go outside. However, Laila thinks that women have the right to live free from subordination and limitation as she asks Mariam, "We're leaving this spring, Aziza and I. Come with us, Mariam" (Hosseini, 250).

In Afghanistan, the topic of female domestication is very important and powerful due to the power of familial control. According to traditional Afghan society, the family is the fundamental institution, playing the most important role and is prioritized above everything. The institution of marriage, in the same way, is a vital part of Afghan people's lives as "marriages normally last for life, contributing to the stability of families and ultimately of society". During the invasion by the Soviet Union, the political condition of Afghanistan was unstable, and Afghan women were the targets of repression and oppression. However, after Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan, the country was then ruled by the Taliban who set back the cause of women's freedom. The coming of the Taliban bears a strong similarity to the invasion by the Soviet Union. That is, women were the prime targets of sexual and physical abuse. The Taliban imposed strict rules and restrictions on Afghan women.

Here Mariam's character is first portrayed as that of a traditional Afghan woman who is always passive, obedient, and uneducated. Before knowing Laila, Mariam has no awareness and consciousness of equality and subordination. However, Laila's sharing of her education and knowledge with Mariam leads her to become aware of the possibility of gender equality. Also, Laila and Mariam share their feelings and emotions. Their caring and moral support eventually creates a mutual understanding between them. This form of a relationship enables Mariam and Laila to help each other, especially in difficult situations. When Mariam sees Laila who is

cruelly beaten by Rasheed, her empathy for Laila leads her to kill Rasheed. Their bonding, therefore, proves that during such a chaotic situation also there is a way for women to fight against the patriarchal power. The murder of Rasheed at the hands of Mariam is considered an act of emancipation and retaliation. This action demonstrates that Mariam has a strong will and desire to liberate her from the patriarchal power represented by Rasheed.

For Hosseini, it is a crucial task to shed light on the diverse cultural experiences of Afghan women to identify their status. In other words, Hosseini rejects the western representation of Afghan women as a homogeneous group bound by permanent weaknesses and oppressions. This is evident in his portrayal of Laila, the free-spirited woman whose liberal upbringing, education and consciousness reinforce her desire to rebel against the rigid gender stereotypes of society. As mentioned in earlier discussions, Laila was not born into subalternity rather she was forced into it by circumstance. Mariam and Nana on the other hand cannot detach themselves from their cultural roots because the repressive environment in which they grew up teaches women to be passive rather than rebellious. In addition, the novelist plainly expresses his sense of discomfort towards the cultural traditions that he deems as damaging rather than beneficial to the overall progress of his country.

Hosseini's representation of the Afghan female body elucidates that this bordered whole is more than just a place of negation as portrayed in western representations. The female body in Hosseini's text can transform into a zone of liberation and sanctuary for the weak and the oppressed. It manifests perfectly in the reactions of Laila and Mariam whenever Rasheed's toxic masculinity threatens their unity and mother-daughter bonding. Hence, this portrayal can be read as Hosseini's contribution to the deconstruction of stereotypical notions attached to women in the third world. The remarkable journey of Laila and Mariam from passive silence to resilient rebellion can be considered the novelist's genuine attempt to redraw the human face of third world women; the face that has been lost within the essentialist, ethnocentric western representations. Through their female

bonding, selflessness, sacrifice, consciousness and courage, Laila and Mariam could overcome the barriers and limitations of gender. Eventually, they emerge as victorious heroines. All in all, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* narrates a journey that starts with patriarchal domination and gendered violence but ends as a moving account of courage and meaningful resistance. Although each character stood against prejudice and gender inequality in her way, the empowerment that Laila and Mariam gain eliminates a long history of bondage and marginalization.

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