



## Collective Memory and Women Solidarity in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini

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### Abstract

Women studies have always studied issues of women related violence, assaults, rights of women's body etc. Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has underlined such themes using the backdrop of Afghanistan war. Hosseini, through his characters, have given Afghan women hope against hope because in a war-struck state, women issues become multifold. Such circumstances have profound psycho-social consequences on women. In such a society, women studies become exceedingly important because women's suffering becomes common leading to shared collective memories. This article is called "Collective Memory and Women Solidarity in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini" and it proves how women obtain solidarity and sisterhood from other women, offer emotional and physical protection and moral encouragement to one another using Hosseini's narrative. For an in depth understanding, it shall use theoretical support from Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak". The concepts of woman solidarity and sisterhood shall be used to understand the relation between Laila and Mariam and their subsequent emancipation.

Keywords: Sisterhood, Collective Memory, Women, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini, Afghanistan

Khaled Hosseini dedicates *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to the women of Afghanistan in the very epigraph of the novel. The primary theme of the narrative is the way two women brave the patriarchal conditions in their household in a country like Afghanistan (which is already massively politically and socially

oppressive) by staying united. It demonstrates how the Taliban uses fear and violence to keep the Afghanistan women under their feet like a doormat. Khaled Hosseini has given through his characters hope against hope because in a war-struck state, women issues become multifold in countries like Afghanistan. Such circumstances

have profound psycho-social consequences on women. In such a society, women studies become important because of three reasons, firstly, it lends voice and offers moral encouragement to women, secondly, it inspires women to be resilient, strong and empowered at individual level, and thirdly, women realize the need for solidarity and sisterhood.

Even though the novel highlights the resilience of its women protagonists Laila and Mariam, it focuses mainly on how the women in a terror prone country like Afghanistan struggle to get basic rights. Men, like Laila's brother fight the war but women stay at home and bear the brunt. This research paper discusses women's plight as depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* on both social and domestic levels. On the social level they battle the Taliban and on the personal level, they battle patriarchy. In the book *Women, War and Peace* (2002) writers Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf discuss various issues related to women, especially war, trauma and oppression involving violence. The book is an independent assessment done under United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). The Foreword of the book says "Women have become the worst victims of war - and the biggest stakeholders of peace" (i). But it is during these times women perceive sisterhood and feel a shared/collective trauma in society. Hosseini's women in the selected narrative seek their way out of patriarchy at an individual level and have their quest for emancipation.

Sisterhood means creating strong connections with other women, the connections that last forever. At the same time, the purpose of sisterhood is to create solidarity, i.e. to bring together the women who feel alone, isolated, oppressed and thereby, secluded. Women's solidarity is also important in society because they share collective memory of social and domestic oppression. The concept of feminist sisterhood encourages women to perceive the presence of a shared experience and the need to support one another in order to end sexism. It is

a concept developed by Bell Hooks in 1986 to strengthen amicability between women based on their gender. Though Hooks's idea was to bring about a political change and transform their consciousness, in Hosseini's narrative, the idea of sisterhood can be used in a more general and less political way through scrutinizing the characters of Laila and Mariam. The term "collective memory" was coined by Maurice Halbwachs in her famous book *Social Frameworks of Memory* (1925). The fact that women share the same gender, they face similar acts of oppression all throughout their lives. The characters of Laila and Mariam are such examples.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* shows the women's treatment as slaves and objects only to discharge certain fixed functions that are decided by Taliban, and men in general also. The main oppressors in the story are Rasheed and Taliban. Afghanistan is shown in a state of internal war - its original culture and prosperity against the barbaric and tyrannical Taliban. As a result of Taliban, the women are maltreated at a social level; and on a particular and domestic level, Laila and Mariam are tortured by Rasheed. They find their way to emancipation only after Mariam sacrifices her life in order to free Laila from the clutches of Rasheed, and to some extent, patriarchy. The novel ends on a hopeful note.

Rosemarie Skaine, an American author, in her book *The Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban* (2008) says that the Taliban have tormented the lives of both men and women, but the latter have suffered to a greater degree. They have endured terrible hardships under the rule of the Taliban. They have been forced to lead a secluded- lives and observe unimaginably strict rules. In one of the episodes, Mariam finds a flyer in the yard. It is about the message being circulated across Afghanistan by the Taliban who would send their "armed bearded men in black turbans" and announced the flowing message to the men and women of

Afghanistan (269). The same message is also printed in the flyer that Mariam reads:

Attention Women:

You will stay inside your homes at all times [...] If you go outside, you must always be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you're caught on the street, you'll be beaten and sent home.

You will not, under any circumstance, show your face [...] If you do not, you will be severely beaten.

Cosmetics [...] Jewellery is forbidden. If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death.

Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-Akbar (271)

Later in the narrative, Taliban announced that the men and women will not be treated together in the same hospital. There will be different hospitals for women. It is the part of the story where Laila is in labour-pain and needs to be attended to immediately. When they reach the Malalai Hospital, they learn that "this hospital no longer treats women ... not anymore" (278). The guard asks them to go to some other hospital, Rabia Balkhi for example, but that conditions of the women-only hospitable was despicable. It is only after the Taliban goons shoot up a few rounds of bullets into the air, the crowd of women patients disperse - "The Talib lifted his Kalashnikov and fired rounds into the air. Another Talib behind brandished a whip. The crowd dispersed quickly" (279). An article by the National Library of Medicine, Canada, written by Jessica Mendes, called "Taliban Rulers Curtail Women's Freedom, Health care" (Nov 13, 2001) believes that such plight of women is normal in Afghanistan, "Policies confining care for men and women to separate hospitals were first announced by Taliban officials in January 1997. Later that year, the Ministry of Public Health forced all but one hospital to cut off medical

services for Kabul's half million women (Mendes).

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam and Rasheed are a childless couple. The resentment of childlessness is vented out in every possible manner on Mariam every day - she is humiliated physically and tortured mentally. Even though Mariam charges Rasheed with her miscarriages, she has to suffer with no fault of hers. His bitterness grows with each passing day and his brutal atrocity towards Mariam can be seen in an episode when Mariam's rice is a little undercooked. As a punishment of making an un-perfect food, Rasheed makes her eat rocks. Mariam says, "His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in" (104). Mariam is hopeless that she will ever find solace and happiness in her life. For her, burqa is a way to hide from the judgemental and scary society of Afghanistan. In the novel, burqa is a symbol of women subjection and control. Rasheed forces Mariam to wear it, reflecting on woman as an object of possession and object.

Rasheed marries Laila who is very young and in a vulnerable position. His purpose is to enjoy the happiness of an heir and to be a father to a son. Laila is already pregnant in an early stage from her beloved Tariq when she marries Rasheed. Much to Rasheed's dismay, she gives birth to a beautiful girl, Aziza. As a result, Rasheed's bitterness increases and he becomes abusive to both her wives for not bearing him any son. For the atrocious treatment both the women receive, they develop sisterhood and solidarity. They plan to run away to Pakistan but are arrested and returned to Rasheed who gets more violent towards them, to the point of killing the innocent Aziza. The story proceeds with Tariq, Laila's beloved coming back in her life after years. Rasheed learns about Tariq's meeting Laila and this infuriates him. The scene builds up to the climax of the narrative and it shows the power of solidarity. He locks up

Aziza in a room and beastly hits Laila. Upon Mariam's interference and protection, he beats Mariam also and tries to lock her in the tool shed. Mariam picks up a shovel and hits Rasheed very hard on his head, killing him in an instant. In an act of saving Laila and gifting her freedom, she becomes her surrogate mother. A. Jana in her article "Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns: A Tale of Endurance and Emancipation" (2013) says the story is "the tragedy of Mariam's life. Rather it is better to say that this is the unavoidable destiny of many women. A woman is exploited everywhere" (7). Hosseini gives them the spirit to unite and not be voiceless in their own tiny manner. Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" (2019), says that women have this knowledge that they are subaltern and they try their best to break free the patriarchal shackles, like Mariam and Laila in Hosseini's narrative. They, as subaltern, overthrew the patriarchal suppression successfully.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays the lives of women in a war-torn country and they live in a constant fear. But despite fear, they brave against all odds and make a small world of safety and happiness. Hosseini depicts their lives devoid of happiness and tortured for petty reasons, but when they realise sisterhood, they develop a strong solidarity. Mariam's death is presented to promote hope against hope and victory of goodness over evil. She has the healing power of love and sacrifice and adopts the form of an omnipotent deity who shall go to any extent to avenge the victim. Although the ways of their emancipation may be debatable, but given the situation of standing between devil and the deep sea, they choose the better – killing Rasheed. The narrative ends on an optimistic note and presents a lesson for women who must be united to brave all sorts of adversities.

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