



Silenced Splendour: Afghan Women's Struggle Against Patriarchal Forces in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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ABSTRACT

Feminist theory aims to achieve gender equality and challenge patriarchal structures in society. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a ground breaking work that portrays the conflicts and crises faced by Afghanistan, offering a nuanced perspective on the country's struggles. The novel provides a window into the lives of two female protagonists, Mariam and Laila, as they navigate the oppressive rules imposed by the Taliban and the broader societal challenges faced by women in Afghanistan. Through a feminist lens, the novel highlights the harsh realities of Taliban rule, including restrictions on women's freedom, education, and autonomy. The paper interprets the novel as a critique of the patriarchal social system and ideology prevalent in Afghanistan, shedding light on the ways in which women are marginalized and oppressed. It also examines how the female characters in the novel resist and attempt to break free from male dominance, showcasing their resilience and agency in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Feminist theory, Afghanistan, war, Taliban, separate spheres, structural violence, gender oppression, Afghan women.

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Feminist theory delves into gender inequality, exploring themes like discrimination, objectification, and patriarchy. It scrutinizes women's social roles, experiences, and interests across various disciplines, including anthropology, literature, and philosophy. Additionally, feminist analysis extends to contemporary art and art history, examining how aesthetics and stereotyping intersect with gender dynamics. From sociology to psychoanalysis, feminist scholarship interrogates the oppression faced by women, challenging traditional norms and advocating for equality. In fields like

education and communication, it illuminates the intersections of gender and power dynamics, paving the way for feminist politics and social change.

The portrayal of Afghanistan as a war-torn land underscores the immense challenges faced by its people, particularly women, who bear the brunt of violence and oppression. Throughout the Soviet and Taliban reigns, Afghan women have been disproportionately victimized, experiencing horrific physical violence such as assault, rape, and murder. Beyond the visible brutality, structural violence perpetuates gender



oppression in Afghanistan. This form of violence encompasses the systemic injustices that undermine women's lives, including limited access to education and healthcare, exploitative working conditions, and pervasive poverty. "Violence against them not merely... isolated events but...a systematic function of patriarchy to keep all women subjugated" (Koyama, 252). Women in Afghanistan face these systemic disadvantages long before and during the Taliban regime, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive interventions to address the root causes of gender-based oppression and to ensure women's rights and well-being are upheld.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini delves into the harrowing realities faced by Afghan women, drawing from his own experiences and observations during his trips to Afghanistan. Through the lives of central characters Laila and Mariam, Hosseini exposes the systematic oppression and devaluation of Afghan women driven by domestic, political, social, and religious norms. Set against the backdrop of Afghanistan's tumultuous history, including the Soviet invasion, Taliban rule, and the aftermath of 9/11, the novel chronicles the profound challenges and injustices endured by its heroines. Hosseini vividly portrays the pervasive gender bias, distorted religious interpretations, and oppressive governmental policies that contribute to the suffering of Afghan women.

Central to the narrative are the issues of women's rights to education, justice, and freedom, which are systematically denied and suppressed. The differential educational experiences of women in Afghan society, as portrayed in the novel, underscore the entrenched gender biases and patriarchal norms that limit women's opportunities and autonomy. Mariam's desire for education is stifled by societal expectations, with her mother dismissing her aspirations with the admonition to endure rather than seek learning. Nana, depicted as the first victim of patriarchal bias in the novel, suffers the consequences of her illegitimate affair with Jalil. Forced into a life of isolation and stigma, she bears the burden of societal judgment,

while Jalil faces no repercussions for his actions. This disparity highlights the unequal treatment of women in Afghan society, where men are absolved of responsibility while women bear the brunt of societal condemnation. The social stigmatization faced by Mariam as a harami, or illegitimate child, further exemplifies the gendered nature of societal punishment. Women like Mariam and Nana passively endure their trauma, resigned to their fate due to societal norms that justify their suffering in the name of tradition. Through these characters, Hosseini exposes the pervasive injustice and hypocrisy of a society that holds women accountable for transgressions while excusing men's actions.

In the novel, Hosseini vividly portrays the draconian restrictions imposed on Afghan women by the Taliban regime, particularly the mandatory wearing of the burqa. In the beginning of the novel, Hosseini introduces burqa through Mariam's mother Nana, "wore her best hijab for him (Jalil)" (Hosseini, 22). The Taliban's enforcement of strict dress codes and limitations on women's freedom signify a significant regression in women's rights and autonomy. Before the Taliban's rise to power, the burqa was not universally mandated for Muslim women in Afghanistan. However, under Taliban rule, wearing the burqa becomes compulsory, symbolizing the regime's oppressive control over women's bodies and lives: "There seems to be considerable agreement that the burqa, the heavy garment that covers the entirety of a woman's body with only a narrow mesh screen for vision, has become the universal symbol of women's oppression in Afghanistan". (Kensinger, 2)

The Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law, particularly their strict adherence to Pashtun customs and beliefs, reinforces gendered notions of honour and purity. Women are forbidden from working outside the home, and severe punishments are imposed for any perceived violations of the Taliban's moral code. The Taliban's imposition of such harsh measures exacerbates the already challenging social and cultural barriers faced by Afghan women. It shows as "the ways in which governments and the military

use, and alter, prevailing discourses about gender to their own ends" (Whitworth, 26). Despite the resilience and strength of women like Mariam and Laila, the Taliban's policies make it increasingly difficult for women to assert their rights and freedoms. Through his portrayal of the Taliban's reign in Afghanistan, Hosseini sheds light on the systematic oppression and dehumanization of women under extremist regimes. The novel serves as a stark reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and women's rights in Afghanistan and around the world.

Through the lens of Mariam and Laila's experiences, the novel exposes the brutal mistreatment and patriarchal despotism that women endure, particularly within the confines of marriage. Hosseini portrays Rasheed as a misogynistic figure who embodies the worst aspects of patriarchy. He treats Mariam as little more than a possession, locking her away and subjecting her to physical and emotional abuse. Rasheed's cruelty towards Mariam intensifies when she is unable to bear him a male heir, demonstrating the pervasive societal expectation placed on women to fulfil traditional gender roles: "when marrying, a woman moves into the home of her husband, there exists a very strong Afghan code of honour which dictates that, once married, an Afghan man must protect and care for his wife. A woman's status increases significantly once she produces children, while childlessness is regarded as disastrous for both men and women" (Hosseini, 18). The scene where Rasheed forces Mariam to chew pebbles as punishment is a chilling depiction of his sadistic nature and the extent of his control over her. Mariam's fear and powerlessness in the face of Rasheed's brutality highlight the profound imbalance of power between men and women in Afghan society.

The portrayal of Mariam's lack of agency in Rasheed's decision to marry Laila underscores the deeply ingrained gender inequalities and patriarchal norms prevalent in Afghan society. Women like Mariam are marginalized and treated as mere objects, with their desires and autonomy disregarded

in favour of male authority. In Afghan society, men hold significant power and privilege in matters of marriage and divorce, while women are often subject to the whims and desires of their husbands. The friendship that develops between Mariam and Laila is a testament to their resilience and solidarity in the face of adversity. Together, they endure the degradation and brutality inflicted upon them by their husbands, finding strength in their shared experiences and mutual support. Rasheed's treatment of Laila, initially fair but later abusive, further illustrates the cycle of violence and oppression that women in Afghan society are subjected to. His rejection of Aziza, Laila's daughter, reflects the deeply ingrained preference for male children and the devaluation of girls in Afghan culture. Through Mariam and Laila's intertwined stories, the novel shines a light on the systemic injustices and gender-based violence endured by women in patriarchal societies like Afghanistan. Their resilience and solidarity serve as a powerful reminder of the strength and resilience of women in the face of oppression.

The scene at the hospital in the novel highlights the dire state of healthcare for women in Afghanistan, particularly during the turbulent times of war and conflict. Laila and Mariam's journey to the hospital underscores the challenges faced by pregnant women in accessing essential medical care. The segregated hospital system, with separate facilities for men and women, reflects the deeply entrenched gender norms and restrictions that shape Afghan society. The lack of basic amenities such as clean water, electricity, and medicine at the Rabia Balkhi hospital highlights the systemic neglect of women's healthcare. Despite the overwhelming obstacles, Mariam's determination to ensure Laila receives medical attention showcases the resilience and solidarity between women in the face of adversity. The crowded waiting room filled with women patients and their relatives serves as a poignant reminder of the shared experiences and struggles of Afghan women. The dire situation at the hospital, with only two doctors available and a scarcity of

essential supplies, underscores the urgent need for improved healthcare infrastructure and resources in Afghanistan. Laila's decision to undergo a caesarean section without anaesthesia further highlights the desperate circumstances faced by women seeking medical care in war-torn regions. Through this powerful and evocative scene, Hosseini sheds light on the profound challenges and injustices faced by Afghan women in accessing healthcare, while also showcasing their resilience and determination to overcome adversity for the sake of their families.

The heart-breaking decision to place Aziza in an orphanage due to the dire circumstances of poverty and hunger highlights the profound challenges faced by Afghan women in providing for their families. Laila's sacrifice underscores the harsh realities of survival in a society ravaged by drought and economic hardship, where women are forced to make agonizing choices to protect their children. Hosseini's exploration of separate spheres for women and men illuminates the power dynamics within the household, where women often find strength and solidarity in each other's company. Mariam and Laila's alliance against Rasheed reflects their recognition of the need to unite in the face of patriarchal oppression and violence. Despite Rasheed's dominance and brutality, Mariam and Laila find strength in their shared experiences and mutual support. Together, they navigate the challenges of poverty and violence, determined to protect their children and preserve their own dignity. Through the characters of Mariam and Laila, Hosseini portrays the resilience and courage of Afghan women in the face of overwhelming adversity. Their bond serves as a powerful testament to the strength of female solidarity and the enduring power of love and resilience in the face of oppression.

The novel indeed portrays the pervasive atrocities faced by women in Afghan society, categorizing them into degrading roles that strip them of their humanity. From being viewed as deficient humans to being treated as subhuman, animals, parasites, inanimate objects, or even waste products, the women characters in the

novel endure various forms of degradation and oppression. However, what sets the narrative apart is its depiction of women not as silent victims, but as resilient fighters determined to survive and thrive despite the odds stacked against them. Through the stories of Mariam and Laila, spanning two generations, the novel chronicles their struggles for freedom and dignity in a patriarchal society plagued by violence and injustice. Mariam and Laila's journey is a testament to the strength and resilience of Afghan women, as they navigate the challenges of war, poverty, and oppression while striving to carve out a better future for themselves and their children. Their struggle is not just one of survival, but also of resistance and resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity.

The novel is not just a story of suffering, but also of hope and resilience, as women strive to reclaim their agency and become active participants in the rebuilding of Afghanistan. Their struggles and triumphs serve as a powerful reminder of the indomitable spirit of women in the face of oppression.

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