

**GENDER RELATIONS AND UNFAIR SOCIAL STRUCTURES: A STUDY ON  
KHALEED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS***

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**Abstract**

*Khaled Hosseini's novels attempt to study in detail and analyze critically the agonizing and harrowing experiences of the Afghan society under the grotesque regime of the Taliban. Hosseini, one of the prominent writers of Afghanistan explores the Afghan psyche and brings forth the unknown facts about the Afghan history and socio-cultural behavioral patterns. This novel is written from the female perspective by focussing the major characters Mariam and Laila. Khaled Hosseini, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* introduces many female characters who are victimized, sexually harassed and suppressed by both male and female figures, and in spite of all that suffering imposed on them, they challenged the brutality. These female characters witness the war life in Afghanistan. Their voices are heard as bloodshed rather than words. Being a diasporic author, Hosseini looks at his country with a nostalgic fervor to reconstruct the country's history in cultural patterns and records the suffocations of their life in the homeland. The present study is a serious attempt to analyze Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* from the perspectives of History, Culture and Gender.*

**Key words:** Khaled Hosseini, Taliban, suffering, history, terrorism, brutality

**Introduction**

Women throughout history have been objectified, treated as a commodity, a liability and silenced. With time they internalized the limitations and the inferior status forced upon them by the society and came to accept their conformity to the male dominated system as natural. They began to view their suppression as compulsory and hence unquestionable. They have been victimized in the name of the religion, culture, honour and pushed towards the dark cells of backwardness and illiteracy. Therefore, having the right of education, vote or to participate in political activities was out of question. In some societies women didn't even have names of their own. They had a role to play only in the personal sphere of life. However, all women, rich and poor, educated or illiterate, shared the absence of one common thing: identity. Almost in all societies, women were expected to live secluded lives. Even when there were women rulers in power, society was still patriarchal. The common women were supposed to

be subservient, self-sacrificing and dependable. For example, during Elizabethan era, an unmarried, educated, valiant queen ruled England for half a century, influenced everything to such an extent that the whole era was named after her but when one looks at the general condition of the English women of that age it was no better, one finds no elevation in their status. They were restricted to enter realms of knowledge and were barred from exploring the world. There were limits – even for the women of the most influential families. They were kept away from politics and law and could only pursue a career in domestic service.

Male guardianship was, however, universally considered as compulsory. And, for centuries these male guardians viewed women as their property, used them as a mode of payment for their debts, lost and won them in battles and challenges. Women were regarded as symbols, not as humans and thus were subjugated and oppressed from times immemorial. The levels might differ but the fact remains same universally. Women throughout history have faced great hardships and harassments. For centuries, they lived and died without rights and a sense of identity. They viewed themselves through the patriarchal lens and understood their role in relation to their male partners. One cannot deny that there were societies and times when men had the right to decide life and death for women and this right was not only practiced but also considered absolutely indispensable.

But with passing of time women were largely kept away from the religious affairs. Therefore, their knowledge of the religion was limited only to what their men told them about it. And they would pass that knowledge on to their daughters. Islamic feminists argue that what women actually believe and pass on to other generations is not the true message of Islam but merely a male interpretation of it. They argue that Muslim women's estrangement within their societies is the result this patriarchal interpretation of Islam which denies them their proper rights and role. They believe that the seclusion of women is only rooted in the traditional notions of male superiority and not in the teachings of Islam

### **Discussion**

The history of Afghanistan is marked by political instability, particularly during the last 30 years of prolonged war, infrastructure collapse, and restrictive political regimes. The situation of women in Afghanistan has been dismal during this period. Their status was undermined during the Soviet occupation and under subsequent regimes; in fact, the violation of Afghan women human rights is considered to have been at its worst in the early 1990s (Farhoumand, 2005).

The backdrop of the novel is war zone area of Kabul, Afghanistan. The acute exploitation and torture the women in the novel endeavored is worth studying. The novel depicts the life of Mariam and Laila which by fate had brought them together as the wives of same man, Rasheed, who torture them, abuse them physically and mentally. Afghanistan, the native

country of Khaled Hosseini and where all of his three novels are set has a tumultuous history. Although almost every country in the world has violence and bloodshed in its history, Afghanistan's past has been spectacularly bloody. Something which makes this fact painful is that it is still not peaceful today and is full of civil war, religious extremism and civil strife. Much of this strife is because it was at the crossroads of history, foreign invaders have always tried to overtake it and the locals have always fiercely resisted, resulting in the internalization of violence.

Afghanistan is a religious theocracy, where religious preachers, who are fanatic in nature, control the country by harsh application of religious law. One of the most central features of such religious theocracies is that they subjugate women with force and absolute violence. They seem to think that women are nothing but machines for reproduction, machines who work and tend for men, give birth to their children, bring them up, feed them and cloth them and keep themselves in background their entire lives. There are ample religious and institutional grounds for discrimination against women in the Afghan society and that is why misogyny is so rampant in the country. It cannot be easily rooted out as it is deeply ingrained in the religious customs, rituals and habits of the people. Over time, men have managed to hold women in a stranglehold of institutional misogyny.

By telling the story of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through the perspective of two Afghan women, Hosseini is trying to emphasize certain aspects of Afghan life and history that differ from the established historical narrative. The novel, in fact, draws on the limitations imposed on women in Afghan life in order to explore how women have lived, endured, and subverted these constraints. The hopes and their destruction of the characters in the novel is reflected in the political vicissitudes of Afghanistan, where with the election of each new ruler there is new hope, but more often than not, their hopes are destroyed when the new ruler comes out to be even more of a sadist than the one before.

### **Gender Relations in *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

Gender relations differ throughout the novel depending on the occupying forces and the laws that accompany them. Under communist rule, for instance, girls are permitted to attend school and work outside the home. Babi celebrates this status and encourages Laila to take advantage of it. At the same time, however, girls are discouraged from spending too much time with members of the opposite sex before they're married. Gender relations can also depend on specific traditional or regional norms—Mariam, for instance, is required by her husband to wear a burqa long before this becomes law. Men, like Laila's brothers, are the ones who go off to fight, while the women stay home and often must deal with the repercussions of war.

The relatively progressive gender norms under communism change drastically with the arrival of the Mujahideen and, eventually, the Taliban. For Laila, the restrictions have the effect of taking Kabul, the city that she always thought of as hers, away from her, limiting her freedom of speech and movement. Even so, the characters find ways to subvert these norms: Laila sneaks across town to the orphanage, and with Mariam she plans an escape (though ultimately a thwarted one) from Rasheed. The Taliban may have legally sanctioned Rasheed's violent beatings, but Hosseini is clearly on the side of greater freedoms for women, and the reader is meant to cheer on Laila and Mariam as they struggle against these inequalities.

In the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, gender roles play a major role in how characters think about themselves and others. Men are raised to believe that they are responsible to suppress women's independence and autonomy, and women often internalize a sense of inferiority and/or subservience. The results of these conditions often include men's violence against women, and a general mistrust between the two genders. In this novel, Rasheed demonstrates this type of behavior to be true. Rasheed is a single shoemaker whose first wife and son died many years ago. He becomes the suitor for the young 15-year-old Mariam. He is a very traditional and strict older gentleman, which some difficult situations for Mariam to deal with in her life. Rasheed tries to exhibit excessive dominance in their marriage and instructs Mariam to be obedient, subordinate, and compliant with every single one of his demands. Mariam struggled often with the constant rigor of her daily housewife work. As a child, Mariam encountered many horrific adversities and obstacles that she had to fight through. She lived with her mother, who she refers to as Nana. Nana was a very strict, bitter, and nasty woman. Mariam was the only thing she had in her life and she constantly treated her as dirt. She referred to Mariam as a *harami*, which translates to a sinner and/or a bad person in our culture. She understood then what Nana meant, that a *harami* was an unwanted thing: that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, and acceptance.

The women depicted in the novel are from devastated war zone area, where people are struggling to meet their ends meet. In spite of the fact that they are not sure when the next bomb is coming, male chauvinism still prevail. Through Nana, Mariam and Laila, the pathetic inner life of the Afghan women is depicted. Mariam and Nana have accepted the subjugation and oppression and hiding their voice, But ultimately, Mariam in voicing out for Laila, she found her inner strength and for once she was her own master in killing Rasheed in order to save Laila. Women need to voice out and work together to bring about changes. One should not be a passive receiver of the crime being committed upon them. The novel ends with the hope that Laila might bring about certain changes, running away is not a solution.

But fighting against the unwanted subjugation and oppression is the solution. The main discrimination the women character undergoes through the patriarchal norms in the novel are:

- Sexual violence and physical abuse in the name of marriage.
- Subjugation and subordination, forced marriage, preference of boy child over girl baby, women are not allowed to walk freely without an escort or her husband.
- Stereotypes that women are weak, submissive and should obey the husband irrespective of illogical demands.
- Marginalization on the grounds of education and medical facilities when Laila was denied medical assistant during the birth of her second baby.

### **Unfair Social Structures in *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

There are inequalities deeply woven into the very fabric of a society and can be observed across institutions such as legal, educational, government and health care systems. Inequalities occur because of an imbalance in the distribution of political and economic power. While one group has historically set the rules and writes the law of the land, access of others to wealth and resources have been limited.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* explores the relationship between the two women Mariam and Laila, who were forced to marry the same man Rasheed. From being bitter and insecure, they suffered inhumanly from the hands of men both inside the house and outside, how these two women become life line for each other in the most tumultuous scenario. This story is written against the background of Afghanistan with focus on condition of woman in general under various regime starting roughly from 1950's till the end of Taliban rule 2002. A persistent theme of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is its theme of marriage vs. true love. There is a very clear difference between forced marriage on one hand and true love on the other. Since most of the marriages in a country like Afghanistan are arranged they tend to be forced as the bride rarely knows the groom before her wedding. The present study found out that marriage breaks upon Mariam without warning and absolutely without her consent. After her mother Nana commits suicide it becomes imperative for her father that he marries her off hurriedly as she cannot be left alone. She is not even officially adult and is just a child but she is married to a man over forty, a man named Rasheed who is thirty years older than her. She does not wish to be married to any such man but her father marries her off. She is heartbroken about the behavior of her father and about the fact that she left her mother to have a meeting with her father. She never gets to meet him and instead she loses her mother. As a further trauma she is then married to a person who is not only a complete stranger but is of the age of her father.

After a while, she becomes pregnant and Rasheed's love for her increases but he makes it clear that he prefers a male child and is hoping that Mariam gives him that. She starts behaving like a proper housewife and cooks and cleans for Rasheed. She tries to please him. However, one day Mariam slips in the bathroom and suffers miscarriage. Rasheed is dismayed and is gloomy and Mariam is very sad. She feels that it is her fault that the child died. But a few weeks after that she becomes pregnant again with Rasheed's child but she suffers miscarriage again. She has seven miscarriages in a row and all this while, Rasheed becomes increasingly abusive towards her. He starts beating her black and blue and is neglectful of her needs. We can see that the more extremist outlook which was represented by Rasheed who considered women to be a prized possession kept behind *burqa*, could be mercilessly beaten at will, an object to satisfy sexual requirements and to carry male scions of the family. Hosseini clearly intends us to show how behind every silent *burqa* in Afghanistan is an individual with a hidden history.

Marriage becomes a trauma for Mariam then as there is no respite from Rasheed and his beatings. She is constantly insulted by him and beaten to no end for no fault of her own. Once when she makes bad *daal*, Rasheed makes her chew stones which break her teeth, making her cry with agony. Marriage now has become perfect hell for her.

Women have very little freedom in Islamic Afghanistan, but after the Communist coup, the one good thing which happens is that they start teaching girls as much as they do boys. It is a brief respite for the education scenario for women in Afghanistan. But when the Taliban comes to power, they again ban all education of women. The story comes full circle. However, it is not just men who are against the education of women in Afghanistan. We see that while Mariam dreams of studying in a school, her mother is quite adamant that school will not help her in her life ahead and learning how to live well.

The basic hurdle in the education of women stems from the fact that they are not respected in the countries where the religious culture of Prophetic Monotheism rules. Women's rights were further eroded when the Taliban came into power in 1996 (Farhoumand, 2005). One of the most fundamental of Khaled Hosseini's themes is the theme of oppression of women in Afghanistan. They are shown to be beaten, abused and controlled like slaves by men. What seems worse is that the society seems to endorse this inhuman and barbaric treatment of women; what is even worse is that this social evil prevalent in the society is justified by religious texts and dominant religious preachers that control religious theocracies like Afghanistan. And there seems to be little hope for women in Afghanistan and their case for education. One such instance is when Mullah Faizullah insisted that Mariam should go to school Nana out rightly rejected the idea of sending her daughter to school. "Learn? Learn what, Mullah sahib?" Nana said sharply. "What's there to learn?" She snapped her eyes

towards Mariam..." 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 skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school. Look at me.' (18)

When Laila enters in the life of Mariam, she was already harden and was just living a physical abuses life without any meaning. Lalia is different from Mariam. She is educated and quite confident with her thinking as well as her body. When she agreed to marry Rasheed, she was only fourteen and completely aware what she is asking for in the marriage. She wanted to protect the child that was conceived out of the wedlock with her beloved Tariq. She knew very well that without her parents and her beloved she will have hard time living alone in Kabul. Rasheed often insults, mocks and threatens them. Hosseini depicts that it is not easy for Mariam to bear Rasheed's insults and his way of treating her.

It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insult, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat. But after four years of marriage, Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes not. ( Hosseini, 97-98)

Laila became a companion in bearing the physical, psychological and sexual torture of Rasheed. Though the marriage between her and Rasheed has worsened the condition of Mariam, but later it did turn out to be a good for Mariam. Whenever there was problem between Laila and Rasheed, Mariam used to pay for it. One fateful night when Rasheed was beating Mariam with belt, Lalia came up in rescue of Mariam:

'No! Don't do this!'

'Now!'

Rasheed raised the belt again and this time came at Mariam. Then an astonishing thing happened: The girl lunged at him. She grabbed his arm with both hands and tried to drag him down, but she could no more than dangle from it. She did succeed in slowing Rasheed's progress towards Mariam.... 'You win. You win. Don't do this. Please, Rasheed, no beating! Please don't do this.'(235)

The whole episode had a great impact upon Laila as well as Mariam. Mariam for the first time in her life found someone who stood for her. Laila on the other hand stood up for someone since she cannot bear injustice. With this a new bond was formed between Mariam and Lalia, thus bringing them together, a sisterhood in struggle. Lalia tries to run away from Rasheed's house only to be brought back by the police. Life became hell for both after that incident. But Lalia is not a type of woman to give up that easily. And with the coming of Taliban things became worse in Rasheed's family. Years later, Laila gives birth to a son,

Zalmai and Rasheed was absorbed with his son and doesn't care about others in the family. Suddenly when Tariq turn up in her doorstep, she realized that Rasheed had sent Abdul Shariff to trap her. However, Rasheed finds out from Zalmai that Tariq came home and brutally begins to beat Laila. The two women see death in his eyes, and with a shovel Mariam kills Rasheed. Mariam takes the blame on herself, turns herself over to the Taliban to bear the consequences. She clears the way for Laila to find refuge for herself and her children in Pakistan with Tariq. Mariam gives in, as she finally finds love in Laila and her children. Laila lived the new life that Mariam gave her. When things are better in Kabul, she insists that her family move back home so they can help rebuild their city. Laila visits Mariam's old home and is able to relate to Mariam's talk about her Kolba, she comes to terms with her grief over Mariam's execution. Laila and Tariq build a new life in Kabul. Laila becomes a schoolteacher, and works in the orphanage where Aziza once lived. And when Laila becomes pregnant, she decides that if she has a girl, she'll name her Mariam.

In this connection we can also see how 'religion' affects everyone in this novel. The females, especially must live with the constant doctrines of Islam interpreted by the males in their life. Afghanistan is governed by Islamic Law. There is no separation between church and state; the church is the state. Mariam, as a young girl, sees how her mother is treated. Religious scripture allows men to have more than one wife. Her mother, not married to Jalil (a wealthy theatre owner) is thrown out after she becomes pregnant. Married women seem barely protected under religious law, mistresses have completely no protection. Mariam is born and from a very young age discovers that the only choice a woman has is to survive in Afghanistan's Islamic theocracy. When the Taliban came to power things for women, got worse. All the women protagonists, except for Laila, meet some kind of terrible ending. Their deaths are directly related to the cruelty of men.

### **Conclusion**

Meanwhile, in the text we see how Afghan women undertake strategies to survive, to fight the war, to restore their basic rights etc. Both Mariam and Laila were strong willed women. Of course one needs a lot of courage and capacity to suffer physical and emotional torture of abusive kind of husband and Taliban themselves for many years. Enduring and not fighting back was their mode of survival. But when they really fought it became the last day of Rasheed's life. Another women character which intrigued me was Mariam's mother. She used to bad mouth Mariam and was the first one to call Mariam a 'harami' as she was born outside the wedlock. Mariam hated her mother. But after her death she realized her importance. Initially Maraim and Laila were adversaries. But soon they were riding the same boat. Rasheed was meting out the same kind of harsh treatment to both of them. Relationship of pain develop between the two and both found solace and strength gradually in each other's company.



In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* two generations of characters are brought harmoniously together by the tragic sweep of war, where personal lives, the struggle to survive, to raise a family and to find happiness, are inextricably woven from the history playing out around them. Mariam realizes what a fool she has been. She kills in order to save her daughter-like Laila from death. For the first time she decides the course of her own life. At no point does it appear that Laila or Mariam have any legal rights. But Hosseini carefully portrays both Laila, whose parents raised her with a greater sense of entitlement and privilege, and Mariam, whose mother taught her to endure by taking control of the conditions under which they lived to the extent that they possibly could, and he has very cleverly shown feminism and activism on their part to some extent. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* the story of Afghanistan includes the description of the role and place of women in Afghan society. Khaled Hosseini has very sympathetically and sensitively examined the condition of women in Afghanistan, and women in general in this novel.

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