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Tolerance, Forbearance and Endurance of females in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini

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Abstract

Afghan-born American author and physician Khaled Hosseini's second bestselling book, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, published in 2007, is set in "Afghanistan's war-torn world" and focuses on Mariam and Laila's unsettled life and relationship. The narrative is of Mariam and Laila and the role they play as women till the end of the novel. In the first part of the novel, the narrative is focused on Mariam, the second part discusses Laila, and the third part is about the relationship between the two. The novel also relates, in the background, the troubled history of Afghanistan over the past several decades, mirrors a section of the Afghan population, i.e. its women, that probably suffered and lost the most during that time. Through this heartbreaking story of two women married to a man, Rasheed, who physically, psychologically and emotionally oppresses them. The writer attempts to portray the condition of Afghan women not only affected by the war but also marginalised by their domestic authorities, their husbands.

The present paper aims to investigate the Afghan girls, where patriarchy has crushed their freedom, where they are victimised at the domestic level by their husbands or in social order under the rule of the Taliban. Their strength and tenacity to survive are identified with a glimpse of hope at the end of the novel when Laila escapes from the captivity of Rasheed and Mariam kills him in order to save all of them from the rigmarole of patriarchy. In this book, Khaled Hosseini puts together numerous other prohibitions on schooling and family subjugation on the topic of women's oppression in Afghanistan.

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Keywords: Unsettled Life, Troubled History, Narrative, Heartbreaking, Psychologically Oppresses, Marginalised, Domestic Authorities, Patriarchy, Tenacity, Women's Oppression.

Introduction

The second novel of Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, was published after Hosseini went back to his native Afghanistan to examine the situation of the country following decades of instability. Before the Soviet occupation, Hosseini fled Afghanistan, and this novel is a move towards his repentance for the decision of his family not to return to the country. Unlike the first book by Hosseini, there are no scenes set in America in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Hosseini tells the tale of two influential Afghan women of various ages from different areas whose lives collide for a while. The book covers the Afghan past from the pre-Soviet war to the post-Taliban rule. The first section reflects on the childhood of Mariam, an illegitimate, born daughter raised in a small hut outside Herat town. Laila, a character in the novel, has focus one section on her, who is a younger generation than Mariam. Laila is born in Kabul, and her dad wishes she can contribute to society in Afghanistan. The third part explores the collision between the lives of Mariam and Laila. We are following their separate paths in the last section.

About author

Khaled Hosseini, the afghan- American was born on the 4th of march in the year 1965, in the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul. His father, Nasser Hosseini, has served as a diplomat in the Foreign Ministry of Afghanistan. His mother, Maimoona Hosseini, has worked as a teacher in higher secondary school. She is a Persian teacher, taught Farsi and History to students. Khaled had to shift with his family as Afghanistan was becoming a war zone, also in 1976 his father being transferred to Paris. In 1978, PDPA, known as the People's Party Of Afghanistan, confiscate the government as Soviets occupied Afghanistan. So to secure his career, Khaled was taken to the US, where he finished his education in high school. There he bagged his degree in biology from Santa Clara University. After this, he became a medical practitioner, then later in march of 2001, he became the legalised doctor. Hosseini along with his medical education started initiating writing. With his strong will and dedication, he was successful in giving his first internationally known novel, *The Kite Runner* which came in 2003.

This first work of his has some semi-autobiographical traits which are beautifully

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narrated in the text. When he came back to Afghanistan after being twenty-seven years of age, he could sense the complete change in the lives of the people living there. This change in the lives and surroundings of his native land inspired him to write his next work, *A Thousand Splendid Suns,* which came in 2007.

About the text

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini gives a picture of the plight of women behind Afghanistan's walls during several world invasions. The book *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Hosseini derives its name from a poem written by the poet Saib-e-Tabrizi of the seventeenth century regarding Kabul.

The book describes, from two women's viewpoints, three decades of anti-Soviet insurgency, civil war, and Taliban dictatorship. In the book, through the story of Mariam and Laila, the question of feminism and gender justice was created. The novel highlights certain constraints put on women regarding their employment, their decision making, they are stripped of their freedom as well which hinders their great potential in the male-dominated world. Male dominance of women in Afghanistan is a significant concern relevant to the feminist theme of this book.

"like a compass needle that always points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam ."[1] (Hosseini,p-7)

Women are taught to tolerate and be a silent observer of crime which happens on them right from their childhood. It can be examined through the dialogues between Mariam and her Nana:

"There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school . . . Only one skill. And it's this: *tahamul.* Endure . . . It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have. Do you understand? Besides, they'll laugh at you in school. They will. They'll call you *harami.* They'll say the most terrible things about you. I won't have it. . . There is nothing out there for her. Nothing but rejection and heartache."[1] (Hosseini, pp-17-18)

Afghan woman battles for protection and freedom from the suffocating chains of oppression and violence. It can be seen in one incident when Rasheed makes Mariam eat pebbles which break her all the teeth thus make her endure the pain she never dreamt of.

"Soon, Rasheed returns with a handful of pebbles and forces Mariam's mouth open and stuffs them in. He then orders her to chew the pebbles. In her fear, she does as he

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asks, breaking the molars in the back of her mouth. He tells her, "Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing else." [1] (Hosseini, pp. 94)

While men, on the other hand, enjoy the full freedom and life according to their terms and entertainment. Any kind of boundaries and restrictions do not bind them. They live their lives as free souls. They do not live for the family but for themselves only and never compromise their freedom.

"A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you." [1] (Hosseini,pp-25)

A Thousand Splendid Suns, describing the tragic truth of girls in Afghanistan. This tale illustrates some of the significant issues in developing countries, such as poverty, inadequate education systems, and child marriages. Lack of citizenship, enforced marriages, withdrawal of freedom, and violence against Afghan lasses are the issues that concern feminists worldwide. It is his second novel, set against the backdrop of the recent history of Afghanistan. It depicts two Afghan women, born two decades apart, whose lives are united by a series of most tragic events. Khaled Hosseini talks about the lives of Mariam and Laila in this book. Mariam is designated as *Harami* in the novel, who is considered as an illegitimate child. She does not go to school but studies at home tutored by Mullah Faizullah as women were not allowed to get an education in Afghan society. She learns to read and write the Quran, too. She tries to persuade her mother to agree that she is going to school, but her mother insists that she must learn how to look after the household chores.

Whereas Laila belongs to very loving parents and her father, Hakim, was an active person who knows how to value females and their existence. It was Laila's father who told the importance of education for females to Laila over the marriage. He told her that women's role does not end after marriage and giving heirs to a family. It was quite noteworthy of Hakim that during the dominance of the Taliban, he was trying to give proper direction to his daughter by sending her to school to get proper education there. Hakim had a liberal attitude towards women and firmly believes that Afghan girls have an equally vital role to play in their nation.

"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,

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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." [1] (Hosseini, Chapter 16, p. 103)

Hakim claims his daughter's education will continue and contribute to the post-war reconstruction of Afghanistan. At the end of the novel, as she heads a plan to restore an orphanage in Kabul, Laila fulfils the dreams of her dad for her.

In their lives, they are linked by a devastating twist. They experience the same pain and agony, and in Afghanistan endure identical stereo-typical trials of being a female. The author shows how they are motivated by their challenges and hardships to battle back and hope for fulfillment and a better future. Hosseini also stresses the connection between the oppression of Afghan women and the plight of Afghanistan. He masterfully weaves Laila and Mariam's narrative into the context of the tumultuous recent history of Afghanistan. Women's rights in the Taliban authority culture have diminished; they are forbidden from smiling openly, from playing sports, from even speaking or shaking hands with non-Mahram males, and most notably from participating in schools or other educational institutions. After the Civil War, when the Taliban came to power in 1996, they established a gender apartheid system that placed women in a state of permanent house arrest unless accompanied by a male relative. With the harsh laws enforced by the Taliban, women's advancement in education and employment was smashed. "Under Taliban rule women have been stripped of their visibility, voice, and mobility"[2]

The conservative minds of Afghanistani men and Afghanistan's law dictate that girls need to wear a burqa, and Rasheed fits into the clause of 'Afghanistani man', when he tries to order Mariam authoritatively for wearing burqa in the market because it is considered that only a husband has authority on the body and beauty of a woman. A "woman's face is her husband's business only"[1] (Hosseini,ch-10,p- 69). Mariam had never before worn a burqa. For the first time in the market, Mariam is wearing the burqa and finds it difficult to walk with it and see through the dress. This is seen in rural Afghanistan. Rasheed narrates an incident here when a few women came to his shop without burqa, revealing the modernity of urban Afghanistan:

"I have customers, Mariam, men, who bring their wives to my shop. These women come uncovered, they talk to me directly, they look me in eyes without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their knees. Sometimes they even put their feet in front of me [...] for measurements, and their

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husbands [...] think nothing of a stranger touching their wives' bare feet! They think they're being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education, I suppose. They don't see that they're spoiling their own *nang* and *namoo,* their honor and pride"[1] [Hosseini, ch-10, p-63]

Rasheed and Hakim are men with contrasting personality. Where Rasheed dominates and tries to overpower them, Hakim being a gentleman, respects women around him. He is a loyal husband and a lovely father of a daughter. Hakim knows the importance of rights which women are also capable of carrying. He never tries to disrespect women and binds them with strict rules.

As we move further in the novel, gloomy clouds of sadness overcome Mariam when Rasheed marries Laila, his neighbour, as Mariam was unable to bear a child. If a woman commits adultery, they kill her in Afghan culture, and the child will endure this guilt throughout his childhood. While Laila is pregnant with the child of her lover Tariq, she agrees to marry Rasheed as she wanted people to remember the baby as Rasheed's baby rather than name it "Harami." It takes a while for Mariam to adjust with Laila after Rasheed too beats her and bashes her in rage. It is also shown in the novel that Mariam, despite being a childless woman, can give some love to Laila's child, Aziza. Furthermore, teach her all the verses, she knew from the Koran. Mariam thinks,

"It's all I have to give her, this knowledge, these prayers. They're the only true possessions I've ever had." [1](Hosseini, p. 265)

Through Rasheed's behaviour and his treatment of women shows that he hardly respects females. Heis ready to bring as many women in his house as many required to have a rightful heir. No matter under what circumstances women go. He even shows his masculinity when Laila, Mariam and Azia try to escape from the house of Rasheed although police capture all the ladies

"Rasheed says to Laila after she is brought back by the police, "You try this again and I will find you. I swear on the Prophet's name that I will find you. And if I do, there isn't a court in this godforsaken country that will hold me accountable for what I still do. To Mariam first, then to her, and you last. I'll make you watch. You understand me? *I'll make you watch."* [1](Hosseini. p. 243)

Laila belongs to the docile community but exhibits very courageous and enduring traits. Among the three ladies, she is very rebellious and outrageous. She very boldly speaks against Rasheed and is victorious to some extent to rescue Mariam from the

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claws of their husband, Rasheed. After the tale, Laila can leave the place full of domination, repression, intoleration and prejudice. It is Mariam who under the influence of Laila can campaign against Rasheed and kill him. This act of killing can liberate the women from his captivity. Thus at the end, she too becomes courageous and a person who can stand for herself. Her personality changes drastically, feels her freedom when she is signing at her death warrant:

"After Mariam was punished with a sentence of death, she was led out to sign a document while the Taliban watched. "She wrote out her name - *the meem, the reh, the yah, and the meem* - remembering the last time she signed her name to a document, twenty-seven years before, at Jalil's table, beneath the watchful gaze of another mullah." [1] (Hoeissini, p. 326)

The novel ends with the words of Mariam, which tells her last thoughts and she leaves the world as a proud independent woman, inspiring and motiving other ladies:

"Mariam had entered this world a *harami,* a weed, but she is leaving it as a woman who had loved and been loved back. "This is a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings." She begins to say a few words from the Koran as the executioner tells her to kneel and look down. "For one last time, Miriam does as she is told... She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last." [1] (Hosseini, Chapter 47, p. 329)

Conclusion

The paper attempts to highlight Mariam and Laila's difficulties, pain and endurance. They were helped by their trust and self-determination to break all the shackles. Through these compelling characters Mariam and Laila, the paper creates a vision of women empowerment.

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