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**Crisis and Memory: Trauma, Testimony,  
and Longing in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the intertwined themes of crisis and memory in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, focusing on how trauma, testimony, and longing shape the lives of the protagonists, Mariam and Laila. It investigates how trauma manifests through the characters' experiences of war, displacement, and personal loss and how these traumas are conveyed through their testimonies. Hosseini's work offers a profound examination of the personal and collective struggles faced by Afghan characters against the backdrop of historical and social upheavals. By analyzing the characters' reflections and narratives, the study explores how testimony serves as a tool for processing and communicating the impact of past events. Additionally, the paper addresses the theme of longing, examining how the characters' desires for belonging and a better future are shaped by their memories and traumatic experiences. Through a close reading of Hosseini's work, this research sheds light on the broader implications of crisis and memory in understanding the characters' emotional landscapes and their search for resolution and meaning. The study also highlights the resilience and strength found in the bonds of female solidarity and the transformative power of storytelling as a means of testimony, emphasizing the yearning for a better future.

**Keywords:** Crisis, Trauma, Testimony, Longing, Memory, Afghanistan

**Introduction**

The exploration of trauma, memory, and longing has become a pivotal area of interest in contemporary literature, providing profound insights into the human

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condition. Khaled Hosseini, a prominent Afghan-American author, delves deeply into these themes in his novels, crafting narratives that not only reflect personal and collective crises but also offer a lens through which readers can understand the complex interplay of memory and identity. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* offers an interesting examination of Afghan women's lives amid the socio-political upheavals of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The novel traces the intertwined destinies of Mariam and Laila, two women from different backgrounds who are brought together by the ravages of war and oppressive societal norms. Through their experiences, Hosseini illustrates how crisis, whether personal or collective, leaves lasting imprints on memory, shaping identity and influencing the course of one's life. This paper seeks to analyze how Hosseini uses the motifs of trauma, testimony, and longing to depict the enduring spirit of his characters and the collective memory of a nation in crisis. It explores how individuals and societies navigate and survive the crises that define their existence. Hosseini mentioned in an interview with *The New York Times*, "If you look up stories about Afghanistan, it's always about violence, it's about displacement, it's about the drug trade, it's about the Taliban ... there is precious little about the Afghan people themselves" (Hosseini). This historical background offers an ideal setting for investigating the emotional and psychological effects of these kinds of crises on the characters.

Khaled Hosseini uses trauma as a prism through which to examine the intricacies of individual and societal challenges in his novels. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* describes trauma as "a mental condition caused by severe shock, stress or fear, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). In Freud's view, a traumatic experience is "any excitations from the outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield; there is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus which have broken in and binding of them" (Freud). In Hosseini's writings, trauma is seen as more than just a personal tragedy; rather, it is a powerful force that both forms and is affected by social and historical settings. Trauma is depicted via the individual and group experiences of his characters, with an emphasis on how it manifests itself in relation to loss, displacement, memory, and conflict.

### **Personal Crisis and Trauma: Mariam's and Laila's Journey**

Mariam's life is marked by a series of traumatic crises that begin in her childhood. As an illegitimate child, she is constantly reminded of her inferior status by her mother, Nana, who addresses her as "a clumsy little *harami*" (Hosseini 3). Based on psychoanalytic theory, particularly Lacan's mirror stage concept, which states that our sense of identity is socially constructed and unstable (Lacan), Mariam absorbs the unfavorable impressions and creates a disjointed image that impedes her capacity to establish a unified identity. This stigma shapes her self-perception and

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colors her interactions with the world. Given the importance of family pride and lineage in Afghan tradition, Mariam's birth portends a life of marginalization and shame. Her misery stems from the fact that she is an illegitimate child and experiences trauma for the rest of her life because of her mother, Nana's internalization and projection of this social shame onto her. She lives on the outskirts with Nana in a dilapidated *kolba*, cut off from the luxuries and social approval of her father's home. Her longing for her father's acceptance is cruelly dashed when he makes her wait the whole night outside his house. This painful event is compounded by the suicide of her mother, who hangs herself out of distress and feelings of betrayal when Mariam leaves her to seek her father's acceptance. This incident leaves Mariam with a deep sense of guilt and abandonment, setting the stage for her future suffering.

Mariam, now all alone, is taken in by her father, Jalil, but is soon forced by his wives into a marriage with Rasheed, a much older man. The wives, motivated by their desire to erase the shame associated with Mariam's illegitimate birth, see this as an opportunity to rid themselves of her. As Mariam notes:

"They had been disgraced by her birth, and this was their chance to erase, once and for all, the last trace of their husband's scandalous mistake. She was being sent away because she was the walking, breathing embodiment of their shame" (Hosseini 48).

This points towards how patriarchal social standards enable Mariam to be objectified and discarded. As Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* stated, women are frequently cast in the role of the "Other" (de Beauvoir); Mariam's story eloquently illustrates this idea as she is regarded more like a burden to be removed rather than a free individual.

Rasheed's abuse begins almost immediately after marriage. Mariam endures severe physical and emotional violence, worsened by her inability to bear children, which further incites Rasheed's anger and brutality. Her suffering is portrayed vividly through Hosseini's stark descriptions:

"It wasn't easy tolerating him...his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat...She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his...punches, slaps, kicks." (Hosseini 98). This portrays the intense fear and helplessness Mariam experiences daily, trapped in a cycle of domestic violence with no means of escape. Mariam's defiance is met with even more brutality. In one particularly harrowing episode, Rasheed beats her so severely that she is left bloodied and broken, "Mariam was barefoot and doubled over. There was blood on his hands, blood on Mariam's face, her hair, down her neck and back. Her shirt had been ripped down the front" (Hosseini 262). This description paints a grim picture of Mariam's suffering in Afghan society, where "what a man does in his home is his business" (Hosseini 260). According to this, a man's decisions and acts within his home are private and are not subject to examination or intervention from outside parties, including other family members or even authorities.

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Mariam's trauma in the novel is also characterized by isolation and silence. Her voice is suppressed by the oppressive forces around her, including the patriarchal societal norms that dictate a woman's place and the extreme physical and emotional abuse she suffers at the hands of Rasheed. Her isolation is further aggravated by the lack of a support system, as she is cut off from any potential sources of help or solace. Aditi Jana comments that this is not just "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 in all ages" (Jana 7). It implies that many women, across cultures and times, experience similar fates of oppression and abuse, emphasizing the universal gender-based injustice. Mariam's intense loneliness and internalization of her grief and misery are rendered invisible by societal indifference and complicity.

Laila's journey, like Mariam, is also fraught with personal trauma against the backdrop of a war-torn Afghanistan. Her life, once marked by happiness and carefree moments with her loving parents, is abruptly shattered as bombs begin to rain and people are forced to flee for safety. The escalating conflict disrupts her family's existence, leading to extreme changes in her life trajectory. The departure of her love interest, Tariq, to Pakistan due to the escalating violence adds to her sense of loss. The devastating impact of the war is further heightened by the tragic death of her parents in a bombing, which leaves Laila severely injured and orphaned. This traumatic event forces her into an incredibly difficult situation where she is compelled to seek refuge with Mariam and Rasheed. "Laila took the grim reality of the people in her life. Ahmad and Noor, dead. Hasina, gone. Giti, dead. Mummy, dead. Babi, dead. Now Tariq ..." (Hosseini 213). She had no one to turn to; everybody she knew was either dead or gone. The revelation of her pregnancy with Tariq's child adds another layer of complexity and hardship to Laila's situation. After regaining her health, she had planned to leave for Pakistan, but picturing her life in the refugee camp with the baby and harsh weather and living conditions left her with no choice but to marry Rasheed, a man who is significantly older and whom she does not love. This choice is indicative of both personal desperation and the larger backdrop of how women are frequently forced into dangerous situations during wartime, forcing them to choose survival over autonomy. At just 14, Laila is thrust into a marriage rife with distrust, violence, and oppression. Rasheed's abusive behavior further magnifies her trauma, illustrating the harsh realities faced by women in times of conflict.

### **Collective Trauma: Afghanistan's Tumultuous History and Women**

Hosseini uses the novel to explore the collective memory of a nation in crisis. The novel's backdrop is the violent and chaotic history of Afghanistan, which adds layers of collective trauma to the personal struggles of the characters. This depiction is not merely a backdrop but a crucial element that reflects how historical trauma intertwines with personal experiences. As Vamik Volkan argues, collective trauma is a fundamental factor in shaping national identity and personal experiences,

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suggesting that Hosseini's narrative can be seen as a representation of this phenomenon (Volkan). The novel portrays the impact of decades of conflict on Afghan society, particularly on women, who bear the brunt of both personal and societal oppression. The Soviet invasion, the subsequent civil war, and the arrival of the Taliban all contribute to a pervasive atmosphere of fear and hopelessness. Such periods of conflict lead to what can be termed as "sociopolitical trauma," which deeply affects societal structures and individual psyches. The conflict in Afghanistan caused immense destruction and loss of life. The Soviet-Afghan War, followed by the civil war and the emergence of the Taliban, resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians while millions more fled the nation as refugees. Entire villages, infrastructure, and houses were devastated by the ceaseless shelling and warfare. Cities like Kabul were left in ruins, with many neighborhoods unrecognizable due to the extensive damage.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 signified the start of a lengthy period of conflict. The fighting between Soviet forces and the Mujahedeen, Afghan guerrilla fighters, resulted in the deaths of countless civilians and the displacement of millions. Many Afghan families were compelled to leave their homes and seek sanctuary in neighboring countries, leading to a massive refugee crisis. UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, quoted: "Afghanistan's displacement crisis is one of the largest and most protracted in UNHCR's seven-decade history. We're now seeing a third generation of Afghan children born in exile" (UNHCR). The civil war that followed the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 further worsened the situation. The power vacuum left by the Soviets resulted in fierce fighting between various Mujahedeen factions, leading to further destruction and loss of life. Kabul, the capital city, was particularly hard-hit, with neighborhoods reduced to rubble and thousands of civilians killed in the crossfire. This period of instability and violence deeply traumatized the Afghan population, leaving scars that would last for generations.

The arrival of the Taliban in the mid-1990s ushered in a new era of repression, particularly for women. Wali M. Rahimi (1991), in "*Status of Women: Afghanistan*," wrote:

"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. In fact, 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." (Rahimi 6)

Rahimi's observations are supported by Nikki Keddie in her work "*Women in the Middle East: Past and Present*," who argues that historical gender hierarchies in Afghanistan were exacerbated by the political and social upheavals of the late 20th century (Keddie).

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The Taliban imposed a strict interpretation of Sharia law, stripping women of their rights and subjecting them to extreme violence and oppression. Taliban rule prohibited women from working outside the home, going to school, or even leaving the house without a male guardian. They were forced to wear the burqa, a full-body covering, and faced severe punishments for any perceived infractions. Public executions, often held in sports stadiums, were a stark reminder of the Taliban's brutal regime. Women accused of adultery were stoned to death, while those who disobeyed the dress code or ventured out unaccompanied were beaten. The suppression of education for girls was particularly devastating, as it denied an entire generation of women the opportunity to learn and advance in society.

The psychological impact of this destruction on the Afghan people cannot be overstated. The continued danger of violence, as well as the loss of loved ones, left deep emotional scars. Many Afghans experienced the trauma of seeing their homes destroyed and their communities torn apart. The fear and uncertainty created by the war permeated every aspect of life, making it difficult for people to rebuild and move forward. Many people left their homeland to seek refuge in other parts of the world, encountering numerous hurdles along the way. Living in refugee camps with no proper food and sanitation.

Hosseini, in his work, also portrays the normalization of patriarchal supremacy and domestic abuse in Afghan society through the experiences of his characters. When Mariam goes to the tandoor, she hears other women talking about their husbands, making her wonder "how so many women could suffer the same miserable luck, to have married, all of them, such dreadful men" (Hosseini 65). This reflection underlines the widespread nature of domestic abuse and the resignation of many women to their fates and how it is seen as common, normal, and usual in Afghan society.

### **Narrative as Testimony**

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, storytelling serves as a powerful tool for testimony and healing, particularly for the female characters whose voices are often suppressed in the patriarchal system. Initially, Mariam's trauma is characterized by silence and submission; she is conditioned to endure her suffering without protest, internalizing her pain and feelings of worthlessness. Using Trauma Theory as a guide, Mariam's journey shows how narrative can act as a tool for coping with and processing trauma. As her relationship with Laila evolves, Mariam begins to find her voice and her narrative shifts from passive endurance to active resistance. Her decisive act of killing Rasheed to save Laila is a profound testimony to both her suffering and her inner strength. "During their twenty-seven years of marriage, he had taken so much from her. She wouldn't stand by and let him take Laila too" (Hosseini 339). The act of killing Rasheed is not merely a moment of defiance but a reclaiming of her agency and an assertion of her worth as a person who, despite being

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marginalized and devalued, possesses the power to affect change. From a feminist standpoint, Mariam's transition from a helpless victim to a proactive change agent perfectly captures the idea of recovering agency and voice in a patriarchal culture. This fits with Gayatri Spivak's theory of the "subaltern" in regaining voice in postcolonial discourse, in which oppressed people use storytelling to fight against oppression. Viewed as a sort of counter-discourse, Mariam's last act of resistance challenges the prevailing power systems that have subjugated her all of her life.

Laila's role as a mother and educator further highlights the importance of narrative as storytelling. Through storytelling, she preserves the history and culture of Afghanistan for her children, ensuring that they are connected to their heritage despite the disruptions caused by war. In addition to preserving individual memory, this act of preservation also upholds shared memory within a community. Laila's stories impart lessons of resilience and hope, serving as a form of resistance against the forces that seek to erase their cultural identity.

#### **Female Solidarity and Shared Testimonies**

The bond between Mariam and Laila exemplifies the strength found in female solidarity. Initially, the two women are pitted against each other by Rasheed, who seeks to dominate and control them by fostering jealousy and rivalry. However, as they endure the shared experiences of abuse, violence, and the oppressive environment imposed by Rasheed and the Taliban, their relationship transforms from one of animosity to deep, mutual support. Drawing on Bell Hooks' concept of sisterhood, which emphasizes the transformative power of female solidarity in resisting patriarchal oppression, the evolving relationship between Mariam and Laila can be interpreted as a subversion of the patriarchal divide-and-conquer strategy (Hooks). By rejecting the restrictive roles imposed upon them, they reclaim their agency and establish a space of mutual empowerment. This evolution is a testament to the strength that can be found in shared experiences and the unique understanding that arises from them. Through their companionship, Mariam and Laila provide each other with emotional support and validation, turning their individual pain into collective strength. Their relationship can be interpreted through the lens of Adrienne Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum, which encompasses a variety of woman-identified experiences, highlighting how women's emotional bonds can serve as a form of resistance against male oppression (Rich). Their shared testimonies of suffering and resilience create a sense of belonging and understanding that is crucial for their survival. In a world that seeks to isolate and disempower them, their bond affirms their dignity and humanity, illustrating how female solidarity can transform personal trauma into a source of empowerment and healing. Their story highlights the importance of connection and mutual support in overcoming adversity and serves as a reminder of the strength found in unity.

#### **Longing for Family and Home**

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Longing is a recurrent theme in the novel that influences the choices and actions of the characters. It reflects on the broader narrative of displacement and identity that is central to Afghan literature and postcolonial discourse. For Mariam, this longing is intricately tied to her desire for acceptance and love - something that has eluded her throughout her life. As an illegitimate child, Mariam's yearning for her father's acknowledgment and her mother's approval is met with disappointment and tragedy, leaving her with a profound sense of loss and isolation. She lived away from her father and longed for "a life with a father, with sisters and brothers, a life in which she would love and be loved back, without reservation or agenda, without shame" (Hosseini 29). This unmet need for familial love drives many of her actions, and despite the abuse she endures in her marriage to Rasheed, she continues to yearn for a sense of belonging and worth. Mariam's ultimate sacrifice for Laila and her children is the culmination of this deep-seated longing. By saving Laila and her children, Mariam finds the family she has always yearned for - not one bound by blood, but by choice and love. "She marveled at how, after all these years of rattling loose, she had found in this little creature the first true connection in her life of false, failed connections" (Hosseini 246). Her act of self-sacrifice is a powerful testament to her desire to be valued and loved, and through this act, she secures her place in the family she has helped to protect. In this chosen family, Mariam finds the acceptance and love that had been denied to her for so long, fulfilling her lifelong longing in a heartfelt and transformative way.

For Laila, the longing is both personal and tied to her memories of Kabul. The Kabul of Laila's childhood is a place of beauty, joy, and promise - a stark contrast to the war-torn and devastated city she returns to as an adult. This longing for the lost Kabul drives Laila's efforts to rebuild and restore her home, symbolizing her hope for a better future not just for herself but for her children and her country. "This isn't home. Kabul is, and back there so much is happening, a lot of it good. I want to be a part of it all. I want to *do something*. I want to contribute" (Hosseini 379). Despite the overwhelming destruction and despair that surrounds her, Laila's longing for a return to her homeland, normalcy, and peace fuels her determination. She becomes a symbol of hope, striving to reclaim the life that war has stolen from her. Laila's actions - whether it's raising her children in the midst of conflict or working to educate the next generation - are deeply rooted in her desire to see her home restored to its former glory. Her efforts reflect a longing not just for the physical space of Kabul but for the sense of community, safety, and happiness that it once represented. This longing gives Laila the strength to endure the many hardships she faces, and it is through this longing that she finds the will to keep fighting for a future where her children can grow up in peace.

### **Conclusion**

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* poignantly captures the complex interplay of



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trauma, testimony, and longing in the lives of its central characters, Mariam and Laila. Khaled Hosseini deftly illustrates how Afghanistan's turbulent history has deeply affected its people, particularly women, who are often the most vulnerable in times of crisis. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty states, "Women have never been secure within (or without) the nation-state is always disproportionately affected by war, forced migration, famine, and other forms of social, political, and economic turmoil" (Mohanty 514). Through the personal and collective experiences of Mariam and Laila, the novel sheds light on the long-lasting scars of war, oppression, and domestic abuse while also highlighting the resilience that emerges from these hardships. The power of storytelling and memory is central to the narrative, serving as a means for the characters to confront their trauma, assert their identities, and find strength in their shared experiences. Their acts of defiance against the oppressive forces in their lives transform their suffering into a powerful testament of strength and hope, not only for themselves but for future generations.

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