
Plight and Predicament of Women in Afghanistan in Khaled Hosseini's "A Thousand Splendid Suns"

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ABSTRACT

Khaled Hosseini in his novel "A *Thousand Splendid Suns*" examines the status of women, immediately after Taliban takes power in Afghanistan. The intent of this paper is to explore the inhuman conditions that are inflicted by the ruthless dominant patriarchal rules that crush the women in Hosseini's novel. Mariam and Laila stand facing all oppression and tumult in their lives. The novel provides a great overview of the situation of women in Afghanistan

Keywords: Status of women, Patriarchal rules, Oppression, Subaltern.

A Thousand Splendid Suns (2007) is tumultuous story set against the volatile events of Afghanistan, (1960-2003) almost forty years from the soviet invasion to the reign of the Taliban, rebuilding the U.S. Intervention in 2001 that projects the violence, fear, hope and faith of Afghanistan in intimate human terms. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a remarkable chronicle of three decades (1960-2003) of Afghan history and deeply moving account of family and friendship.

This paper deals with the plight of women Afghanistan as the subaltern lot. The women characters of Indian writers in English *Kamala Markandaya Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal* and *Shashi Deshpande* still breathe and lead normal life in independent India but the excruciating conditions of in women in Afghanistan are by far drastically poignant and inhumane.

Hosseini's work also sheds light on the broader issues affecting Afghan society, including the impact of war, the oppression of women and the consequences of political instability. Through the compelling journeys of Mariam and Laila, the author reveals the strength and resilience of Afghan in woman in the face of adversity. The book highlights two Afghan women Mariam and Laila, born two decades apart, whose lives are brought together through a series of largely tragic events. Both strangers to each other, they live a few doors apart in Kabul. When a bomb falls on laila's home killing her parents, she is taken in by Mariam and her husband Rasheed.

The story starts in 1974, decades before the Taliban came into power in 1996, & ends after the era of Taliban rule. Mariam lives in a kolba on the outskirts of Herat with her mother Nana.

Her mother, Nana, was a servant in the household of Jalil, a rich and powerful man who took advantage of her. Mariam's father lives in town ten with three wives and ten children. Mariam is his illegitimate daughter so she cannot live with them, but Jalil visits her every Thursday. He cannot love her openly as he does his legitimate children.

Nana loves Mariam, but speaks bitterly to her, making plain that she was an illegitimate child and could not have a legitimate claim on love, family and home. To Jalil's wives Mariam was "the walking, breathing embodiment of their shame". (Pg 45, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*) After Nana's death they married her off to Rasheed, a shoemaker from Kabul "to erase once and for all, the last trace of their husband's scandalous mistake."

Mariam was fifteen and Rasheed a shoemaker from Kabul was forty-five years old. Mariam with dignity and fortitude suffered, her husband's coarse behaviour with as much cheer as she could muster. In Kabul Mariam became pregnant seven times but could not conceive. Rasheed gradually turned abusive and his coarseness slipped over from contempt to brutality.

"It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat. But after four years of marriage, Mariam saw clearly how woman could tolerate when she was afraid Mariam was afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, on occasion he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks." (Pg 89, A Thousand Splendid Sun)

Women suffered violence not only from the Taliban forces, but from the biological relatives and their husbands. -Wikipedia. Taliban Treatment of Women

Mariam faces disappointment and abuse as Rasheed's true nature is revealed. He forces Mariam to wear a burqa, treats her with contempt, subjecting her to scorn, ridicule and insults.

The second part of the story begins in spring 1987 and centres on Laila, the daughter of a University Teacher. By the end of the communist rule in 1992, Laila is fourteen and spends her time with Tariqi her best friend. Laila's life takes a sharp turn towards ruin. Though she is the cherished daughter of intelligent father, who encourages her to pursue education. Laila finds her life literally shattered when a rocket lobbed by one of the warlord factions fighting for control of Kabul after Soviet Union's departure lands on her house and kills her parents. Circumstances force Laila to be the second wife in household of Mariam and Rasheed.

The story of Mariam and Laila intersect each other. Both form a complex bond as they endure domestic violence, social constraints and the constant threat of Taliban. Laila is the only daughter of Hakim and Fariba. The absence of both of Laila's older brothers who have gone to war, makes her mature for her age fills her with a sense of purpose. Laila has a strong desire to use her intelligence and education to improve the world around her.

Daughter of a University educated man Laila is raised during a more progressive time in Afghanistan.

In contrast with Mariam, Laila values her schooling and has a more egalitarian view on justice, especially between the genders. Laila carries with her throughout the novel her idealism; which allows her to believe in better future. Her father was a of clear notions-

"I know I want you're still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now, he said. Marriage, can wait, education cannot. You're a very very bright girl. Truly you are. You can be anything you want, Laila. I know this about you. And I also know that when the war is going to over, Afghanistan is going need you as much as it's men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if it's women are uneducated, Laila. No chance."
(Pg 103, A Thousand Splendid Suns)

She was the determined daughter of a very supportive Father. Laila had received the **Awal Numra** certificate, given yearly to the grade top-ranked student in each grad. Her emancipated ideas about women were very realistic. When Kabul was overtaken by Taliban and the radio announced various restrictions about women, her first reaction was -

"They can't make half the population stay home and do nothing"
"This isn't some village. This is Kabul women here used to practice law and medicine; they held office in the government - "(Pg. 249)

A bond grows between the two women. Mariam becomes a second mother to Azija (Laila's child). The rest of this unforgettable story reflects the heart- rending sacrifices of these women, and allows the reader a peek behind the burqa, to the heart of Afghanistan. Rasheed turns, outrageous abusive and inflicts physical atrocities on both women, when he learns of a daughter's birth. They plan to run away from Rasheed & leave Kabul, but they are caught at the bus station. Rasheed inflicts physical punishments and tortures Mariam & Laila. They make common cause and endure degradation, Starvation & brutality at the hands of their husband until they are forced to take up a desperate joint struggle.

A few years later, Laila gives birth to Zalmai Rasheed's son. The Taliban has risen to power, & there is a drought, & living conditions in Kabul deteriorate. Rasheed's workshop burns down, & he is forced to take jobs he is ill suited. The family sends Azija to an orphanage. One day Tariqi appears outside the house. He & Laila are reunited. Their passions turn anew when Rasheed returns home from work, Zalmai tells his father about the visitor. Rasheed savagely beats Laila, & Mariam kills Rasheed with a shovel. Laila and Tariqi leave or Pakistan with their children. Mariam confesses killing her husband & is executed.

The story of these two women, which reaches its climax in act of extraordinary generosity & self-sacrifice, plays out against the backdrop of Afghanistan's tumultuous history, the deposition of king Zahir Shah in 1973 by his cousin Daoud Khan, overthrow of Khan five years later by rebels supported by Soviet Union, the long bloody war against Soviet Union troops for

the Mujahiddin, under whose Chaotic rule “Pashtuns & Hazaras, & Tajiks & Uzbeks” are killing each other, the calamitous triumph of the Taliban, the American invasion in the aftermath of Sept, 2001

A Thousand splendid suns draw the two real life characters Mariam and Laila who reflect the lives of thousands of Afghani women who have endured despite the odds. We see that women are treated as subaltern. He highlights on the constraint of education injustice, inequality for women, individual voice, and rights to health services denied to oppressed women of Afghanistan. In an age where human rights are pertinent, we see the dominant ruthless patriarchal world that crushes the feminine. In a radio broadcast somewhere on 27 September 1996, Kabul is overtaken by the Taliban. The radio announces the name of their country as “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” They announce

“These are the laws that we will enforce and you will obey.

Attention women.

You will stay inside homes at all times. If you go at your outside you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street you will be beaten and sent home.

You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten. Cosmetics are forbidden.

Jewelery is forbidden.

You will not wear charming clothes.

You will not speak unless spoken to.

You will not make eye contact with men.

You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten. You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger.

Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately.

Women are forbidden from working.

If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death. Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar.”

(Pg. 249, A Thousand Splendid Suns)

Women faced atrocities when Taliban came in power in 1996. The Taliban rulings regarding public conduct placed severe restrictions on a woman's freedom. Women faced virtual house arrest. Women were severely punished if found guilty + Mariam in the novel is executed to death after she kills her husband Rasheed for torturing her.

Hosseini quotes from Sahib-e-Tabrizi of 17th century, in praise of Kabul -

“One could not count the moons that shimmer on the roofs,

Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind the walls.” (Pg. 172)

Hosseini dedicates this book to the woman of Afghanistan. There is a ray of ray of hope and the novel ends with the idea that it is possible to rebuild after overcoming a challenging past.

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