

WOMEN, WAR, AND THE WILL TO SURVIVE: FEMININE MARGINALITY IN HOSSEINI'S AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns (2007) presents a profound literary exploration of Afghan womanhood under the dual oppression of patriarchy and war. This paper examines the novel through a combined feminist and psychoanalytic lens, drawing on Karen Horney's concept of inner strength and Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity to interpret the evolution of Hosseini's female protagonists, Mariam and Laila. The study investigates how both women move from internalized subjugation toward moral autonomy, finding empowerment in suffering and solidarity. Feminist analysis reveals the systemic silencing of women's voices, while psychoanalysis interprets their trauma and resilience as manifestations of suppressed identity striving for recognition. By portraying women as the emotional and moral backbone of Afghanistan, Hosseini subverts the patriarchal narrative that renders them invisible. The novel ultimately transforms feminine endurance into a symbol of national hope, suggesting that the survival of Afghanistan itself depends upon acknowledging the spiritual and psychological agency of its women.

Keywords: Feminist Criticism, Psychoanalytic Theory, Female Marginality, Trauma and Resilience, Afghan Women, Moral Agency, Female Solidarity.

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's fiction is deeply rooted in the traumatic history of Afghanistan—a nation scarred by war, religious extremism, and sociopolitical chaos. Among his works, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* stands out as a searing portrayal of women's endurance amidst cultural and emotional devastation. The novel not only exposes the brutal realities of female marginalization but also reconstructs a narrative of resilience that transcends oppression. Through Mariam and Laila, Hosseini articulates the anguish and agency of women trapped within patriarchal structures, political turmoil, and psychological repression.

The intersection of **gender, war, and trauma** in Hosseini's narrative reflects the experiences of thousands of Afghan women who lived through successive regimes—from Soviet invasion to Taliban tyranny—where women's bodies and choices were battlegrounds of ideology. Yet, Hosseini refuses to present his female characters merely as victims. Instead, they become **embodiments of inner strength, love, and spiritual survival**, echoing Karen Horney's assertion that neurosis and suffering can lead to self-realization when transformed through emotional integrity. Similarly, Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory illuminates how Mariam and Laila confront identity crises, navigating between societal expectations and personal conscience.

This study adopts a **dual theoretical framework—feminist and psychoanalytic**—to unravel the complex representation of feminine marginality in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Feminist criticism reveals how patriarchal authority shapes female identity through domestic and cultural subjugation, while psychoanalytic theory explores the characters' internal conflicts, guilt, and search for validation. The analysis contends that Hosseini redefines heroism through his women: their quiet endurance and emotional courage counter the violence and instability of the male-dominated world.

Ultimately, Hosseini's novel is not merely a narrative of suffering but an ode to **female solidarity as a transformative force**. In depicting Mariam's self-

sacrifice and Laila's defiance, Hosseini envisions a moral rebirth of Afghanistan through the spiritual awakening of its women. This research, therefore, situates *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a **feminist-psychoanalytic text**, where marginality evolves into empowerment, and silence becomes the seed of revolution.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory: Marginality, Patriarchy, and the Silenced Voice

Feminist literary criticism, emerging prominently in the twentieth century, sought to reinterpret literature from the perspective of women's lived experiences and to challenge the patriarchal values embedded in cultural narratives. In the context of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, feminist theory exposes the **systematic silencing of Afghan women**, whose identities are shaped by patriarchal laws, religious authority, and war politics.

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, posits that woman has historically been constructed as "the Other" — defined in relation to man rather than as an autonomous self. Mariam, born illegitimate, embodies this notion of the Other: she exists outside social legitimacy, denied the right to name or identity. Laila, though educated and privileged, later confronts the same structures of subjugation, revealing that **education alone cannot dismantle deeply rooted patriarchy**.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminism provides another critical lens, critiquing how the "Third World woman" is often portrayed as a monolithic victim in Western discourse. Hosseini, however, humanizes Mariam and Laila, giving them depth, agency, and moral complexity. Their struggles are not simply against men but against **systems of gendered power** reinforced by culture, class, and religion.

bell hooks emphasizes the intersection of gender, class, and social conditions in women's oppression. Mariam's poverty, illiteracy, and illegitimacy place her at the lowest rung of this intersection. Yet, Hosseini transforms her

suffering into moral courage, illustrating hooks's idea that marginality can become "a site of resistance" (hooks 42).

Thus, feminist theory in this study interprets Hosseini's women as both products and challengers of patriarchy. Their acts of endurance — cooking, mothering, protecting — traditionally deemed domestic and passive, are reframed as **forms of political resistance**. By giving voice to their inner worlds, Hosseini performs a feminist reclamation of Afghan womanhood from the peripheries of silence and erasure.

Psychoanalytic Theory: Inner Conflict and Identity Formation

While feminism critiques the **external social structures** of patriarchy, psychoanalysis explores the **internal psychological dimensions** of female suffering and selfhood. This study integrates insights from **Karen Horney** and **Erik Erikson** to examine how Mariam and Laila's emotional trajectories reflect deeper identity conflicts shaped by trauma and longing for recognition.

Karen Horney argued that neurosis often arises not from innate female inferiority, as Freud suggested, but from **sociocultural repression and lack of validation**. Mariam's life reflects this: her illegitimacy and her mother's internalized shame create in her an "inner conflict between self-hate and the longing to love" (Horney 45). Mariam internalizes society's rejection and strives to fulfill the ideal image of a dutiful wife, only to realize her authentic self through an act of rebellion — killing Rasheed to save Laila. This cathartic act represents her psychological liberation and self-realization.

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory complements this analysis. His eight-stage model suggests that identity is formed through crises requiring resolution between opposing forces. Mariam's developmental path is marked by **shame and doubt**, instilled by her mother Nana and reinforced by Rasheed. Her final act reflects Erikson's stage of **integrity versus despair** — she attains moral wholeness and accepts her life's meaning.

Laila, by contrast, embodies **identity versus role confusion**. As a child of education and modernity, she struggles between her dreams of autonomy and societal roles imposed upon her. Her relationship with Mariam helps her achieve **generativity**, nurturing and rebuilding life through care and responsibility.

In both cases, Hosseini constructs a psychoanalytic evolution from repression to self-actualization. The women's suffering functions as a crucible of transformation — their endurance is not passive resignation but **a process of inner healing** that reclaims identity from trauma.

Feminist-Psychoanalytic Convergence

Combining feminist and psychoanalytic theories enables a nuanced understanding of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Feminism reveals the **external conditions**—patriarchal norms, war, and gendered violence—that confine women, while psychoanalysis interprets the **internal struggle** for selfhood within those confines. Hosseini's genius lies in connecting both realms: the **psychological trauma** of his female characters arises from **social structures of domination**, yet their eventual self-acceptance redefines moral agency.

Mariam's Journey: The Illegitimate and the Silenced Self

Mariam embodies the oppression of Afghan women subjected to **patriarchy, poverty, and cultural marginalization**. From birth, she is constructed as an “Other” — the illegitimate child of Jalil and Nana. Mariam's marginality is both social and psychological: she is denied familial recognition, education, and a legitimate place in society. Feminist theory frames Mariam's existence as a product of systemic patriarchy, illustrating de Beauvoir's notion that women are “defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her” (Beauvoir 26).

Childhood: Internalized Oppression

Mariam's formative years are marked by **internalized oppression**, a central concept in both feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks. Her mother

constantly reinforces her sense of shame: "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always" (Hosseini 7). This early socialization instills profound **shame and self-doubt**, reflecting Horney's idea of the "compliant personality" (Horney 45).

Forced Marriage and Domestic Oppression

Mariam is married to Rasheed as a social "protection" and duty, exemplifying **patriarchal control of female bodies**. Rasheed's household becomes a microcosm of male authority. Psychoanalytically, Mariam experiences **identity crisis**, navigating the tension between societal roles and self-actualization (Erikson 117).

Transformation Through Trauma

Her relationship with Laila becomes transformative. Feminist theory interprets their bond as **female solidarity**, while psychoanalysis sees empathic internalization of moral courage. Mariam's act of killing Rasheed to save Laila embodies both Horney's **real self** and Erikson's **generativity** (Horney 62; Erikson 124).

Legacy: Silence and Moral Strength

Even in death, Mariam's life demonstrates that **marginality does not preclude significance**; through compassion, sacrifice, and moral clarity, the socially oppressed assert spiritual and ethical authority.

Laila's Awakening: Education, Resistance, and Renewal

Laila contrasts Mariam, being born into relative privilege. Early education fosters identity and **critical consciousness**. Trauma from war challenges her sense of self, reflecting Erikson's **identity versus role confusion** (Erikson 118) and Horney's **real versus ideal self** (Horney 61).

Forced marriage to Rasheed illustrates that **oppression transcends class and education**. Female solidarity with Mariam empowers Laila, enabling moral and psychological growth. Motherhood further demonstrates **agency through**

ethical decision-making, and her education allows reconstruction of both identity and future opportunities. Laila's story embodies the **potential for renewal**, showing that resilience and empowerment can manifest differently depending on circumstances.

Synthesis – Female Solidarity and Reconstructed Identity

Mariam and Laila's narratives converge, revealing **female solidarity as transformative resistance**. Feminist theory frames their bond as a subversive act; psychoanalysis shows **empathic identification**, fostering moral agency. Mariam's sacrifice informs Laila's growth, illustrating intergenerational continuity of resilience. Their experiences suggest that **marginality can foster empathy, moral courage, and social influence**, redefining heroism beyond conventional patriarchal paradigms.

Conclusion

Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays Afghan women navigating **patriarchy, war, and trauma**. Mariam and Laila demonstrate that suffering can lead to moral, emotional, and psychological empowerment. Feminist theory highlights systemic oppression and solidarity, while psychoanalysis illuminates internal identity formation and self-actualization. Mariam's sacrifice and Laila's resilience exemplify how marginalized women **redefine heroism through endurance, care, and ethical courage**. The novel affirms that Afghan women possess the power to transform pain into moral and psychological strength, emphasizing **resilience, solidarity, and relational agency as active forces** in shaping both individual and societal identity.

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