

THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS

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Abstract

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini takes place in various locations in Afghanistan and Pakistan from the late 1950's to present day. It highlights the harsh reality of Afghan society towards the women. Where women do not have any freedom to act, talk, wear clothes and ornament, get education, go outside of the houses, using cosmetics, etc.; all these issues very nicely delineated in the present novel. Present paper also tries to find out the oppression of the women in patriarchal Afghan society.

Key Words: Women, Khaled Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns, Patriarchy, Matriarchy, oppression, etc.

***THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN IN KHALED HOSSEINE'S A
THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS***

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The historical fiction novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was written by Khaled Hosseini. (2007), this novel takes place in various locations in Afghanistan and Pakistan from the late 1950's to present day. Divided into four separate parts, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* details the lives of two Afghan women who cross paths on a consistent basis. Specially, it is a story of three women's (Mariam, Nana and Laila) suppression by husband, society and even the law of Islam too. When we first meet Miriam, she is a child that has a conflicted relationship with her father. After the death of Miriam's mother, she is forced to marry a man at age 15. After having difficulties becoming pregnant, Miriam's husband turns to abuse.

Eighteen years later, we are introduced to Laila who is the second wife of Miriam's husband. Laila is fourteen years old and just recently lost her parents as a result of terrorist activity. Not wishing to starve or turn to prostitution, Laila made the decision to get married to an abusive man. After years of abuse, Miriam kills their husband in order to protect Laila. After returning home to find Laila re-uniting with her childhood love, the husband begins beating her violently. In order to draw the attention from Laila for the crimes committed, Miriam pleads guilty to murder and faces execution. After the fall of the Taliban, Laila and her childhood love return to the city in which Miriam was raised. In the end, it was uncovered that Miriam's father had always loved her and regretted the decision he made to give her away to her husband. The characters Laila and Mariam will be compared and contrasted in their dealing with the supremacy of men. Nana always says Maria about women as: "Only one skill. And it's this: tahamul. (Endure)" (17).

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* shows the control of men upon women in Afghanistan which is illustrated through the stories of three women: Nana, Mariam and Laila. These women go through similar hardships and cope with their struggles in different ways.

Mariam was brought up in isolation, living in a small kolba with her mother, Nana. The only others in her life were her father, Jalil, and a few towns people that came to visit, the most special being Mullah Faizullah with whom Mariam had a special bond. Mariam was a harami or bastard, and her mother never missed a chance to remind her of this. "At the time, Mariam did not understand. She did not know what this word harami—bastard—meant ... Later, when she was older, Mariam did understand ... 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, acceptance" (4). Because of this word, she felt

worthless. Nana constantly made this statement a reality by stating "There is nothing out there for her. Nothing but rejection and heartbreak" (18) when Mullah Faizullah told Nana that Mariam wanted to go to school. Nana made Mariam believe that she would always be seen as a filthy harami and would go nowhere in life. Her fate was already decided for her in her mother's and society's terms. Mariam was raised with this idea—that she was of no value and would never live a normal life or find happiness—and it carried on into her future.

When it came to Mariam's father, Nana always told her that he did not truly care about her although he showered her with gifts and brought her bliss. Behind closed doors Jalil was her father, but he had an image to uphold so their relationship never went outside of the kolba. Nana reminded Mariam constantly of Jalil's wrongdoings and told her she was unloved and not wanted. She told Mariam how Jalil had blamed her for Mariam, that she forced herself on him. She engraved the message in her brain that "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always"(7).

Although Mariam denied what her mother continuously told her, she would eventually realize that this statement was the truth. When she wanted to go to the movies one night with Jalil, Nana reacted furiously reminding her of her actual worth. "What a stupid girl you are! You think you matter to him, that you're wanted in his house? ... A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing, Mariam ... It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you. I'm the only one that loves you ... when I'm gone you'll have nothing ... You are nothing!" (26). She tells Mariam she will die if she goes, but Mariam wants to badly to be loved and accepted by her father that she goes anyway. When she is denied by him and realizes Nana is right, she comes home to find her mother hanging from a rope, dead. From then on her worthlessness is confirmed in her eyes.

Laila had a drastically different upbringing than Mariam. She grew up mostly without a mother. Her mother, or Mammy, was overwhelmed with Laila's brothers fighting in the war, and immersed herself in being in bed, waiting for them to return. She was detached from Laila's life and did not teach her any role in society, a reason for her defying it later in the novel. Her father, Babi, did most of the parenting. He encouraged Laila to get an education and told her she was going to be great someday, something vastly unlike what Mariam was told. She was much different than girls her age, she enjoyed playing with her friend Tariq, who she would later fall in love with and cause rumors to circulate about her. Their love becomes intense and upon Tariq revealing his family is moving away, Laila engages in one of the worst things a woman can in society: premarital sex.

Although Laila and Mariam have extremely different childhoods, they are thrown into a similar situation in their future. At the young age of fifteen, Mariam is without a mother and given away for marriage by her father whom she thought loved her. She is

thrown into a marriage with Rasheed, a man vastly older than her, and is exposed to the male dominance her Nana had always spoken of. From then on, she conforms to the oppressed woman's image and endures what she must. She wears the burqa, makes the meals, and cleans the house as she is told. She is seen as a failure and disappointment to Rasheed when she cannot have a child, and constantly blames herself. She thinks the baby was an undeserved blessing due to Nana's death. After this, everything she does is wrong to Rasheed and she must endure his abuse and anger.

Laila is brought into Rasheed and Mariam's life through tragic circumstances. Due to the violent war taking place all around them, Laila's house is struck by a bomb. Her parents are both dead, and she is left alone with severe injuries. Mariam and Rasheed nurse Laila back to health, and Laila agrees to marry Rasheed. She does so because she believes that Tariq is dead and she happens to be bearing his child, an unforgivable sin that she must conceal. She then undergoes the same treatment from Rasheed that Mariam had to tolerate. He forces her to stay at home and wear a burqa, and her every move is watched by Mariam. With the addition of Laila, Rasheed now has the control of two wives, and in his eyes it must remain this way.

Throughout most of Laila and Mariam's lives, Rasheed has ultimate power over them. They truly must endure everything: his mood swings, dissatisfaction with their cooking or daily cleaning, insults, and treatment as if they are worthless in general. He treats them as objects rather than human beings. For example, at times he would compare Laila and Mariam to cars. Mariam was the old, slow car and Laila the new and exciting car. However, Laila was no longer viewed this way once she gave Rasheed a daughter rather than a son. Similar to when Mariam lost her baby, Rasheed thought nothing of Laila after that. The women just became items that he could control at all times. The worst of all of Rasheed's treatment towards them was the abuse. Countless times the women would be slammed against the wall and beaten bloody just for doing a simple thing wrong.

Both Laila and Mariam deal with Rasheed's behavior differently. This is due to their separate and drastically dissimilar upbringings. Since Mariam grew up believing that she was a worthless harami and would never love or be loved, she conformed to the life she was given. She did not know of anything else and was convinced that there was nothing better for her. Day to day, she goes on living a life full of oppression and a feeling of worthlessness. When Rasheed abuses her, she does not protest. If he is disgusted with her meal, she apologizes for her wrongdoing. She is treated like waste by Rasheed and gives him everything in return. She endures and lives in this lifestyle for years until she meets Laila, who will change everything for her.

Laila, being raised on the idea that she could do whatever she dreamed, reacts quite differently to Rasheed's demeanor. While Mariam simply allows Rasheed to treat her as though she is nothing, Laila constantly defies Rasheed and fights for herself, her

daughter and son, and Mariam. Based on her past and childhood it is already obvious that she is not the ordinary Afghani women. One specific example of when Laila acts out against Rasheed is when he slaps her and she shockingly punches him in return.

"Laila watched the arch of her closed fist, slicing through the air, felt the crinkle of Rasheed's stubbly, coarse skin under her knuckles ... At the moment, she was too astounded to notice or care ... When it did, she believed she might have smiled ... It seemed worthwhile, if absurdly so, to have endured all they'd endured for this one crowning moment, for this act of defiance that would end the suffering of all indignities" (267). This one act brings Laila joy to finally defy Rasheed for once in her life. To her, this seems worth everything they had gone through. The fact that Laila hits Rasheed back shows the different kind of women she is compared to Mariam. Laila is the representation of the woman yearning to be something more, resisting the control that is over them.

The contrast between Laila and Mariam is evident throughout the novel until the pivotal event in which Mariam stops endures and acts out against Rasheed, thus ending his life. When Rasheed finds out Tariq has been visiting Laila, he is infuriated. He blames Mariam for letting it happen and intends to hurt them both. He beats the two of them terribly and it is clear that he plans on killing both of them. He is choking Laila, and her life is slowly slipping away. It is at this moment that Mariam decides to take matters into her own hands for the first time in her life and fights back.

"And so Mariam raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could, arching it so it touched the small of her back. She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life. And, with that, Mariam brought down the shovel. This time, she gave it everything she had" (311).

Mariam's final act against Rasheed that results in his death indicates that she has endured far too much. She needed to defy society and the power Rasheed had over her. She was finally acting for herself and others, thus deciding what she was going to do in her life. This was something she had never done. Mariam is the representation of the women who struggle and try to conform to the roles they are given by men and society, but are lead to take matters into their own hands.

With the death of Rasheed, Laila and Mariam are free from his control. Mariam saved their lives and the bond she and Laila share through their hardships is eternally unbreakable. Laila manages to run away with Tariq and the children, however, Mariam does not want to risk them being caught and punished for Rasheed's death. She sacrifices her life and wellbeing for Laila and the children, and faces her fate—execution at Ghazi Stadium. "She thought of her entry into this world, the harami child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident ... And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian, A mother, A person of consequence at last ... This was

a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings" (329). In Mariam's last moments of life, she realizes that the label of harami that Nana had given her was not meant to stay with her, it had been washed away and replaced with someone who would have lived life with love and friendship. She came into the world believing she meant nothing, and changed this assumption and left the world as something. She endured because she was supposed to, and once she endured too much, she acted upon this. "One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs, or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls" (172).

The characters Laila and Mariam are two opposite yet similar examples of the struggles thousands of women were facing, are facing, and will face in the country of Afghanistan. The above quote symbolizes the women that are facing oppression. They are isolated and trapped within society, forced to be what the male gender wants them to be. Women must stay at home, thus hide behind walls, unable to shimmer like many women are in other cultures. Women are forced to be unseen and cannot flourish by being their own person. This quote reflects sadness for how women are treated, not able to show themselves or their true beauty. Instead, they cannot be seen in public by other men and are virtually owned by their husbands. The stories of Laila and Mariam are stories of overcoming hardships, thus giving other women hope. They embody characters full of courage and emotion, and their actions against society are truly inspiring.

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