

**“There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life....
And it’s this: tahamul. Endure”:** A Feminist Analysis of the Female
Characters in Khaled Hosseini’s *And the Mountains Echoed* and *A Thousand
Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

Women’s liberation and empowerment has more often than not been battled for in books by female writers. Khaled Hosseini, the young Afghan-American writer whose remarkable contribution to fiction makes him prominent around the globe proves that male authors too can produce feminist fiction with élan. In his novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*, he depicts unique female characters such as Nana, Mariam, Laila, Nila Wahdati, Amra and Pari who are oppressed by the rigid patriarchal Afghan society. The author embarks on a new perspective. He does not merely display the marginalization of women and their victimization but also counteracts it by bringing forward female characters who either voice feminism or are epitomes of endurance and resistance. Through his mindboggling heroines, he deplors the social and cultural structures that support the degradation and devaluation endured by women. This paper attempts a feministic analysis of the mental strength and will power of the women characters who rise from their miserable plight like ‘splendid suns’.

Keywords: Resistance, oppression, endurance, marginalization, violence, conflicts, feminism.

In his works, Khalid Hosseini explores the representation of females who are subject to double standards, mistreatment, corruption, and savagery which is authorized by patriarchal benchmarks and political structures. Feminism starts with a consciousness that women are excluded from “male cultural, social, sexual, political and intellectual discourse. It is a critique of prevailing social conditions that formulate women’s position as outside of dominant male discourse” (Dolan 3). In the book *Listening to Silences*, Elaine Hedges opines that women’s silences of their exclusion arise from “circumstances of being born into the wrong class, race or sex, being denied education, being numbed by economic struggle, muzzled by censorship....” (327). This article looks at Hosseini’s portrayal of the predicament of women and their ways of resistance through the viewpoint of feminism. His novels discuss an Afghan female’s lifestyle against the gender oppression that is enforced on them through their culture and religion. He portrays their will and strength to survive the crisis. Hosseini has an amazing insight into female

psyche and “endeavors to provide voice to Afghan women by bringing their suffering to fore” (Shameem 62).

A Thousand Splendid Suns and *And the Mountains Echoed* emphasize that life of a woman in Afghanistan is among the hardest and most marginalized forms of life in this world. The women characters from across different classes of society, namely, Mariam, Nana, Laila, Nila and Pari indicate the conflicts and problems of Afghan women under the debilitating shadows of patriarchal oppression and war. In Afghanistan, a woman has to face all those forms of violence which a male faces, and in addition to all that, she also has to face patriarchy, sexual abuse and most of the burdens of social customs and taboos.

A Thousand Splendid Suns (2007), introduces female characters who are suppressed, victimized and sexually harassed. Throughout the novel, Hosseini asserts that beneath a burqa, there is a breathing human being : a woman who has emotions, impulses, aspirations and expectations in her life, just like a man has. But Afghan social set-up and political circumstances had enclosed them in a non-breakable closet where, “they are displayed through the Islamic cultural lens of females” (Dar). Hosseini avers that women are not as weak as they look through a hijab, rather they are strong enough to bear the highly intolerable conditions of violence. The novel “cleverly shows feminism and activism” (Singh) of Afghan women who challenge the brutality they suffer. Hosseini’s women look soft, but the softness is used just to shrink and fold themselves in their marginalized space merely to withdraw from the threats to their life, and very soon they stretch themselves, for their survival (Shodhganga 86).

The framework of the novel is the position of females in marriage according to the guidelines of the traditional Afghan structure. The patriarchal factor in such a framework often perpetuated females as the slaves of men. A good wife must control her feelings and needs and submit herself to male aggression, frustration and victimization. A good wife should be an embodiment of virtue and chastity. She should sacrifice her whole life to fulfill the needs of her husband. The French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes: “One is not born a woman but becomes one” (301). A female's identity is formed by the responsibilities and societal expectations that are dictated to her at a very young age. Her most esteemed trademark is expected to be silence and submission. The specific lives of Nana, Mariam and Laila give an insight into this endorsed ethos in the Afghan culture. The patriarchal components which underlie the Afghan open constitution portray females as subordinated and substandard contrasted with men in various parts of the social life (Rahimi 6).

“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” (Hosseini, *A Thousand* 17-18). This is the reality of life of Afghan females that Nana highlights early in the novel. This represents the misery of a wife who lives at the mercy of her husband, is just a reproduction device, besides being a slave to him and therefore worthless if she is not able to carry out this role play.

Nana who conceives her employer Jalil’s child is addressed as the guilty and is excluded from society. She is thrown off the periphery of normal living to deliver the child all alone and quietly accepts the accusations against her. To a rich and powerful man like Jalil, Nana

resembled a 'mugwort', a weed, something you tear out and hurl aside. Nana and Mariam lived in an isolated kolba with rejection, abandonment, unhappiness, spite and frustration filling their lives with gloom. Nana often blurts out: "He betrayed us, your beloved father. He cast us out. He cast us out of his big fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily" (5). Nana speaks remarkably about "our lot in life," the lot of the inadequate, ignorant "women like us" who have to withstand the problems of life, the suppression of men and the contempt of society. Being ignored throughout her life and bearing the burden of false indictments without any hope for justice, Mariam's mother dies in seclusion under emotional breakdown and gets buried somewhere near the boundary of a cemetery. Nana is the archetype of the sacrificing women who have learnt to live for others without ever making any demand for their selves. She is the prototype of selfless motherhood who commits suicide for the sake of her daughter.

The young Mariam the social outcast, the 'harami' little girl of Jalil is married off to a thirty-five year old Rasheed, a crude rogue who says it annoys him "to see a man who's lost control of his wife" and believes that "a woman's face is her husband's business only" (Hosseini, *A Thousand* 63). Simone de Beauvoir discusses the double standards: "...he wants the woman to be his and to remain foreign to him. He fancies her as at once a servant, an enchantress but in public he admits only the first of these desires, the other is a demand which he conceals in the secrecy of his own heart and flesh" (221). Mariam tries her best to meet up with her roles with serious dedication and to persist without dissent. Mariam has been told before by her mom that "like a compass needle that focuses north, a man's denouncing finger dependably finds a female" (Hosseini, *A Thousand* 7). She silently suffers his harsh beatings, shifting moods, volatile temperament and "walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat." She fails to bear a child and is gradually reduced to the status of a servant in Rasheed's household: an outcast once again. Mariam's infertility makes Rasheed more and more bitter and cruel towards her. "...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 asks, breaking the molars in the back of her mouth. He tells her, "Now you know what you've given me in this marriage" (94). "She shuddered with dread when he was this way, scoffing, fixing the belt around his clenched hand, the squeaking of the calfskin, the flicker in his red eyes. It was the dread of the goat, discharged in the tiger's enclosure, when the tiger first turns upward from its paws, starts to snarl" (145). Mariam had never learnt to question her fate or challenge her destiny. She succumbs to her sufferings by accepting them as God's will and turns mute. It is through the subtext of silence that Mariam tells the story of her grief and pain. Mariam's choice to slaughter Rasheed so as to save Laila's life is the vital defining moment in the novel which shows Mariam's outburst at the subjugation she has been facing since childhood: emotionally, socially, physically and psychologically. "This was the first occasion that she was choosing the course of her own life" (182). She is no longer a passive casualty to Rasheed's savagery; she picks up power and emerges victor against patriarchy.

The life of Laila, who is forced to be Rasheed's second wife, is equally haunting. Though Laila is the valued daughter of an intellectual and modern man, who motivates her to engage in knowledge and learning, her life is devastated when a rocket lobbed by one of the warlord groups of Kabul kills her parents and destroys her house. Her pregnancy by Tariq leaves her no other choice but to marry Rasheed. She turns into another victim of Rasheed, physically,

emotionally and sexually. Raised in an atmosphere of equality between the sexes, Laila finds Rasheed's traditional views and his abusive behavior repulsive. Laila's resistance against Rasheed, the patriarch dictator, is depicted when Rasheed was beating Mariam with a belt and Laila "lurched at him. She snatched his arm with both hands and attempted to drag him down, however she could do close to dangle from it. She succeeded in moderating Rasheed's advance toward Mariam" (Hosseini, *A Thousand* 126). Laila's demeanor towards the dictatorship of Rasheed is to oppose and fight back. When Rasheed denies her from visiting Aziza, her response is: "You can't stop me, Rasheed. Do you hear me? You can hit me all you need, however I'll continue going there" (164). In spite of the fact that Rasheed's refusal to accompany Laila leads her to being beaten by Taliban specialists, she does not budge. She displays solid resistance against persecution.

A generation born apart and with very different concepts about love, affection and family, Mariam and Laila are two females brought together by war, misfortune and destiny. Seeking divorce is an impossible dream for both these women so the only option left, is running away from home to escape. But destiny has something else in store for them. They get caught by the police and are handed over to Rasheed once again. Both these women are poles apart in their disposition and conduct. Laila is the major revolting force who motivates Mariam to rebel against the conservative patriarchal society which has made them subaltern. After the death of Rasheed, Laila's chooses to leave all the struggling behind, to develop again a new feeling of self and start a new life with Tariq. Laila represents the educated, intelligent modern woman. She symbolizes the Afghan woman who plays a significant part in the conversion of conventional principles in the Afghan life and community.

And the Mountains Echoed (2013) is also set in Afghanistan, an Islamic country where women's rights are highly restricted. Hosseini describes the plight of women who are trapped in the patriarchal social and cultural power structures. He portrays how the repressive Afghan society justified the violence, degradation and devaluation of its women. The reflection of Afghan women as un-intimidated by oppression is determined through the type of resistance represented by Nila, Pari and Amra. "The novel presents the modern day women and the role they partake in the society" (Vats). The author introduces a unique female character like Nila Wahdati, who voice out feminism.

A patriarchal society is featured in the story when Saboor has to sell one of his children for money, chooses to sell his daughter Pari instead of Abdullah, because daughters are deemed burdens and useless compared to sons. A patriarchal culture is again seen when a young woman, Nila is oppressed by her dominating father which leaves her emotionally unstable. She has repeated rows with her father over how she should live her life. Nila is expected by her father and the society to be obedient, silent, and compliant. Her activities are always monitored and her father controls her life, which triggers Nila's rebellion and feminist revolution (Yarra). "My father would have to send a search party to bring me back. He would lock me up. For days... He would say from the other side of the door, you humiliate me... And sometimes he answered that question with his belt, or a closed fist. He'd chase me around the room. I suppose he thought he could terrorize me into submission" (Hosseini, *And the Mountain* 208-209).

However, Nila defies all her norms and goes against the status quo of how a woman is supposed to behave. She is intelligent and retorts back, wears tradition-defying clothes and does not care what people think about her. Her nonchalance was displayed in her poems which were “angry indictments of Afghan gender roles” (212). Nila’s refusal to comply with the patriarchal contemplation of womanhood suggests the start of her feminism insurgence. She writes poems about romantic love and lust, which was a taboo at that time, especially by a woman. She is abused by her father who brands her poems as “the ramblings of a whore” (211). Her father’s repeated attempts to beat ‘nang and namoos’ into her makes her even more rebellious.

Nila proves to be everything a typical Afghan woman/spouse is not. Mrs. Nila Wahdati is an unpredictable, romantic, and undeniably talented woman renowned for her sexually charged poetry and is as controversial as her poems: “beautiful, very outspoken, temperamental...drinking freely, smoking”(Hoby). She is the troubled wife of Mr. Suleiman Wahdati, a wealthy, gay Kabul businessman. Instead of succumbing to the beliefs of how a spouse is supposed to function in the household she flouts again and moves around the city according to her own free-will. Despite the Afghan beliefs that a wife is her husband’s property and does not have the rights over her own life, Nila shows her insurrection by leaving for France when Suleiman Wahdati becomes terribly ill and disabled. Nila unapologetically chooses to break the rules and content herself. In the author’s own words, Nila is “full of anger and ambition and insight and frailty and narcissism”(qtd. in Hoby). The men remark that her throat should have been slit by now because she defied stereotypical behavior: voiced her opinion instead of swallowing it. Nila was a symbol of change. She did not approve of patriarchal subjugation and social barriers placed on women in society regarding their sexuality.

Through the characters Pari and Amra, Hosseini describes the revolution of women in the modern society. Amra Ademovic is a Bosnian nurse working in a hospital in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. She is a capable, smart, fiercely intelligent and selfless woman who uses her training to care for the injured in her hospital. Amra, a volunteer dedicating herself to aid war-torn patients in Afghanistan, is labeled by her male colleagues as “the hardest-working woman in Kabul. You do not want to cross this girl. Also, she will drink you under the table” (Hosseini, *And the Mountain* 145). The adventurous Amra puts herself in a working environment occupied with mostly men, and proves competent. She is bright and knowledgeable, and challenges men who look down upon her, through her wit and work. Pari who is raised by a strong-willed and feminist Nila represents the intelligent modern woman who takes part in academic activities and political debates, thought to be restricted for women before.

Thus through the portrayal of powerful women characters, Khaled Hosseini declares that “a woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man...She is an autonomous being, capable of, through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation” (Ramamoorthy 115). Hosseini’s choice to sketch characters who voice the need to challenge and question oppression depicts him as a perfect feminist author. He never seems to skip any of the feminine impulses and emotions throughout these two novels. His women negate regression based on the set roles for Afghan females. These women may be troubled, but they are strong and have a sense of dignity to them.

They staunchly condemn the hegemonic forces of the male oriented society, its cruel tenets and tradition. In their endurance and resistance lies their moral strength. As a feminist fiction, the novels not only display the marginalization and victimization of women, but also “counteracts it by bringing forward characters that go against it and fight for feminism” (Yarra).

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