

Thematic Analysis of Khaled Hosseini's '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*'

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Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a compelling novel that explores the lives of Afghan women against the backdrop of socio-political and religious oppression. The novel follows the journey of two women, Mariam and Laila, who navigate the hardships imposed by war, patriarchal structures, and personal tragedies. Through their evolving relationship, the novel underscores themes of resilience, hope, and female solidarity, providing an intimate portrayal of the struggles faced by Afghan women. This paper examines the major themes in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, including oppression and hope, shame, female bonds, women's education, and the significance of pregnancy and children. Hosseini uses oppression as a central motif, illustrating both personal and societal restrictions placed upon women. Mariam and Laila endure severe emotional and physical abuse from Rasheed, their husband, reflecting the broader struggles of Afghan women under strict patriarchal rule. However, despite the numerous adversities they face, the characters continue to hold onto hope. Mariam initially finds hope in her desire for love and acceptance, while Laila's hope is embodied in her love for Tariq and her dream of escaping Rasheed's control. These cycles of hope and despair mirror Afghanistan's turbulent history, where political transitions often spark optimism only to be followed by further oppression. In addition to this, the novel also explores themes including Shame, female bonds and relationships, women's education, and objectification of women through multiple pregnancies. In conclusion, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a powerful narrative of resilience, sacrifice, and hope. It sheds light on the injustices faced by Afghan women while celebrating their strength and perseverance. Hosseini's novel serves as both a critique of societal oppression and a tribute to the enduring human spirit.

Key Words: A Thousand Splendid Suns, oppression, Afghanistan, relationships, education.

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini is an extraordinary novelist of Afghan-born American origin. He is known for his clear portrayals of Afghanistan, most notably in his novel *The Kite Runner* (2003). His second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, published in 2007. The novel discusses the relationship between two women, Mariam and Laila, in Afghanistan, that was fraught with socio-political turmoil. The novel was an instant success and gained huge recognition for Hosseini. Khaled Hosseini had hailed the novel as a 'mother-daughter story' in contrast to his *The Kite Runner*, which was believed to be the 'father-son story'. The novel contains some of the themes from his previous work like family conflicts and socio-political turmoil. However, Hosseini focuses primarily on female characters in the novel, unlike his previous novel, *The Kite Runner*, where male characters dominated. Khaled Hosseini draws the title from the Persian poem 'Kabul', translated by Josephine Davis:

*"Every street of Kabul is enthralling to the eye
Through the bazaars, caravans of Egypt pass
One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs
And the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls"*

Speaking about the novel, Hosseini asserted "I was searching for English translations of poems about Kabul, for use in a scene where a character bemoans leaving his beloved city, when I found this particular verse. I realized that I had found not only the right line for the scene, but also an evocative title in the phrase 'a thousand splendid suns,' which appears in the next-to-last stanza."

Plot Summary

The novel is set in the early 1970s Afghanistan, when one of the two important characters, Mariam, is a teenager living with her mother, Nana, in Herat. Mariam is the illegitimate child born to Jalil, a wealthy businessman in Herat and his maid Nana. She is addressed as *harami* (bastard) by her mother (K. Hosseini, 2007). Mariam is neither revered by her mother nor her father, considering her illegitimate birth. "Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the *harami* who are culpable, not the *harami*, whose only sin is being born." (K. Hosseini, 2007). Mariam admires Mullah Faizullah who teaches her the recitation of the Quran. Jalil visits Mariam every week, despite her mother despising Mariam and refusing to consider her a true member of his family. One morning Mariam decides to visit Jalil's residence to see him, against her mother's wishes. Nana poignantly threatens Mariam, "I'll die if you go. I'll just die." (K. Hosseini, 2007).

She is not allowed into the house and is told that he is not in the house. Mariam is expected to sleep outside the house of Jalil. The next morning, she awoke in resentment and headed towards Herat. Upon her return, Mariam finds her mother hanging from a rope to commit suicide. Mariam feels guilty because of her feelings for her mother and realizes that Nana was correct about Jalil. Mariam abhors Jalil even more after she is married to Rasheed, a widower, who owns a shoe shop in Kabul and thirty years her senior. Mariam is astounded by the cosmopolitan atmosphere in Kabul. Rasheed compels Mariam to wear a burqa and stay inside the house. Rasheed initially shows Mariam around the city and purchases her the gifts she wanted. After some time, she suffers multiple miscarriages, he grows hostile towards her and begins to admonish and beat her.

Laila is another important character in the novel, who lives close to Rasheed and Mariam's house in Kabul. She owes a lot to her father, Babi, for providing her with education. Laila's mother, Mammy, is depressed and unable to take care of Laila because she is obsessed with the death of her two sons, Ahamad and Noor, who have gone to fight with the Mujahideen against the Soviets. Mammy's depression worsens even more after she learns that her two sons are killed in the war. Laila had a far better childhood than Mariam. She used to attend her school with her friends Giti and Hasina. She also develops a friendly relationship with Tariq, a mischievous teenager, who lost one of his legs in a landmine attack while he was just five. Tariq and Laila get closer and fall in love with each other. They saw the departure of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. Their relationship grows romantic while the Mujahideen's fighting begins in Afghanistan. They sleep together for the first time before the family of Tariq departs to Pakistan. Laila's family also decides to leave to Pakistan, but unfortunately a rocket hits their home killing both her parent. Rasheed pretends to help Laila and nurses her back to health, to have his malicious intentions fulfilled. Mariam discourages him from not marrying Laila, but is threatened by Rasheed. Resentfully Laila is then forced to marry Rasheed and she realizes that she is pregnant with Tariq's child and considers her marriage to be the only option to protect her child and herself. Mariam finds it difficult to come to terms with Laila and keeps despising her and the two live in constant tension and hostility, till she gives birth to Tariq's daughter Aziza. After a few days, a man named Abdul Sharif comes to the house and asserts that Tariq was in the same vehicle with him that had caught fire on the way to Pakistan and was gravely wounded. He confirms the death of Tariq to Laila, who is left poignantly disillusioned.

Rasheed admires and loves Laila a lot, and begins to despise and abuse her, verbally and physically, after she gives birth to a baby girl, Aziza, but not a boy. Laila, being strong and bold, attempts to stop Rasheed from beating Mariam, which reduces the hostility and tensions between Laila and Mariam. They slowly become friends and develop a mother-daughter relationship between

them. Laila confides to Mariam that she has been stealing bit by bit from Rasheed and plans to escape to Pakistan in the spring. Together with Aziza, the two, Laila and Mariam, try to depart from Kabul. They are caught and questioned on their way before being taken to the house of Rasheed, who beats them severely.

After the Soviet forces quit Afghanistan, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan and began to implement stringent Sharia rules in Afghanistan. These strict religious laws prevent women from working and severely restrict their freedom and mobility. Laila realizes that she is pregnant with Rasheed's child and decides to abort the child. Finally, she ends up deciding that the Taliban will not agree to whims and will be prosecuted. She gives birth to a baby boy, Zalmai, through Caesarean without the use of anaesthesia. Zalmai grows out to be cheerful and playful, but has a malicious streak that comes out when he's with his father, who spoils him while largely ignoring Aziza.

Several years later, Rasheed loses his business in a fire accident and his family begins to go hungry. Mariam tries to call Jalil and speak to him, but in vain. She learns that Jalil is dead, while he came to Kabul to see her, but refused. Rasheed urges Laila to send Aziza into an orphanage. He does not agree to accompany her and Mariam to see Aziza in the orphanage. Laila defying her husband leaves her on her own and endures abuses and beatings from the Taliban for being a woman to roam alone on the streets. One day, while returning from the orphanage after meeting Aziza, Laila, Mariam, and Zalmai sees that there's a strange man outside the house. Laila identifies the stranger to be Tariq, and learns that Rasheed had hired a chauffeur, Abdul Sharif, who lied to Laila about Tariq's death, because Rasheed wants Laila to accept her marriage with him. Tariq was forced to stay in a refugee camp. In the camp, Tariq attempted to make money for his family by transporting coats across the Pakistani border, but the police found drugs inside the coats and he was imprisoned for several years before leaving for Pakistan and saving up money by working at a hotel. Laila tells Tariq about Aziza and both of them make plans to meet her. Zalmai overhears this news and informs Rasheed about this incident. Enraged by the news, Rasheed beats Laila and Mariam. When Laila tries to hit him back, he hits her even harder and begins to choke her. Mariam feels threatened and believes that Rasheed will kill Laila and therefore picks up a shovel from the toolkit and kills Rasheed.

Mariam initially consoles Laila by convincing her that they will run away together and lead a peaceful life in a small village. However, she does not want Laila and her family to suffer because of her and wants her to lead a peaceful life with Tariq and her Children. Mariam says she could never have hoped for the love and sense of belonging that she had experienced through the friendship with Laila. Mariam turns herself in to the Taliban and is imprisoned and then sent to Ghazi stadium to be

executed. After Mariam's execution, Laila and Tariq leave for Murree, Pakistan, and Tariq starts to work in a hotel. Laila enjoys her stay in Pakistan with Tariq, but later realizes the purpose behind Mariam's sacrifice, who never wanted Laila to work as a maid in a foreign country. After this realization, the family returns to Afghanistan and halts briefly at Herat, where Laila meets Mullah Faizullah's son, Hamza, and sees where Mariam grew up. Hamza hands over Laila a box that Jalil had left for Mariam, which includes a letter in which Jalil had asked for Mariam's forgiveness and encloses her part of the inheritance. Finally, the novel ends with Laila working in an orphanage, where she had sent Aziza. She learns that she is pregnant with her third child, and thinks of naming the child Mariam, if it were a baby girl.

Oppression and Hope

The characters in the novel often work to retain hope while they deal with the realities of socio-political and religious oppressions, besides personal oppression. Despite these oppressions, the characters in the novel keep expressing their hope. For instance, when Mariam asks Mullah Faizullah if she may attend school, a sense of hope appears in her life. For Laila, hope lies in Tariq and an attempted escape from Rasheed, her brutal husband. The characters walk into such events with high levels of hope, but as reality sets in, the characters' hope is crushed. Despite providing hope, the reader also finds suspense and emotional attachment to the characters in the novel. These cycles of hope reflect how the dreams of Afghan women are crushed constantly. The personal stories of hope are mirrored in the political hope of the Afghan citizens. With every new ruler in place, the people of Afghanistan express their convictions that they will be free. Yet, similar to the personal hope of individuals, Afghanistan's hope often turns to despair after the realities of each new regime attempt to shackle the people.

Shame

Jalil and Rasheed attempt to reinstate the importance of their reputations by doing their best to avoid any shame to their names. Therefore, Jalil takes action by casting Nana out of his house once she becomes pregnant with his illegitimate child and also does not keep his promise to take Mariam into town with him. He also gets Mariam married to Rasheed after Nana's death. Rasheed also notes that he would need to marry Laila because he could not have her living in his house without some sort of pretense, which will otherwise lead to his disrepute. He also spends beyond what his family could afford to make it seem that he belongs to the elite. However, ironically, both men behave in ethically shameful ways to keep themselves unaffected by the disrepute they would be accorded with otherwise. To protect their ideas of social expectations, they reach the extent of neglecting or even abusing their offspring and wives, sacrificing the welfare of those around them to save face.

Female Bonds

The women in the novel forge strong bonds despite the efforts of their husbands and the government to reduce women's power. The bonds differ in nature. For instance, Giti, Hasina, and Laila form a bond of girlish friendship, while Mariam and Laila form a much more powerful familial bond later in the novel. Nana gains her strength from her daughter Mariam, and Mariam finds an admirer when she arrives in a Taliban-controlled prison. The novel suggests that women have a strong ability to find strength and support in one another. Mariam never would have gained the strength to fight Rasheed if she had not gained confidence and love from Laila.

Women Education

The women in the novel '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*' have a variety of educational experiences. Mullah Faizullah tutors Mariam in the Quran, and she learns how to read and write. Yet, when she asks her mother about going to school, she insists that the only lesson that Mariam needs to learn is about endurance. Laila, in contrast, has a father who prioritizes the importance of her education. Hakim diligently works with Laila on her homework and provides Laila with extra work to expand her knowledge. He believes that Laila's education is as important as that of any boy. Babi tells Laila that "A society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance." (K. Hosseini, 2007). After the streets of Kabul become dangerous, he insists on tutoring Laila himself. He also talks about the importance of women attending universities. Aziza is educated by both Laila and Mariam, who contribute what they know to educate her. Mariam teaches the Quran, and Laila eventually volunteers to teach at her school. The end of the novel feels hopeful in terms of the education of women in that Aziza heads off to school.

Pregnancy and Children

Hosseini considers pregnancy as a symbol of hope throughout the novel. Laila's pregnancy with Aziza allows her to remain positive after she learns about the accidental death of Tariq. Aziza and Zalmai thus offer light and joy to a story that is otherwise gloomy and dark. Childbirth is often considered painful, and the pain that mothers feel during the various birthing scenes reminds us of the sacrifices that parents make to bring new life into the world. The mother's pain is worth the joy and attachment that she feels once she gives birth to the child. On the other hand, Mariam's pregnancies each offer her an opportunity to be hopeful for the future. Nevertheless, a woman's value in Afghan society has often been measured by her ability to bear children, specifically boys.

Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a poignant and powerful novel that captures the struggles and resilience of Afghan women amidst political and social turmoil. Through the intertwined lives of Mariam and Laila, the novel highlights the harsh realities of oppression, the enduring hope for a better future, and the unbreakable bonds between women. The themes of shame, social expectations, and gender roles are explored through the poignant and heart-wrenching experiences of the protagonists, reflecting the broader struggles of Afghan society. Hosseini brilliantly portrays how women find strength in each other and resist the forces that seek to devalue them. Education is an important incentive that symbolizes the expansion and potential for change in rights and opportunities. Laila's father, Babi, emphasizes the need for education for progress. This is a message that resonates throughout the novel. Similarly, pregnancy and motherhood serve as symbols of hope, indicating the hope that women make for the future of their children. Ultimately, a thousand magnificent suns are a history of stability, sacrifice and love. He sheds light on the injustice that women face, and also celebrates their strength. Hosseini's novel is not just a history of suffering, but also a testimony of a persistent human spirit and the strength of hope in the face of hardships.

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