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Plight of Afghan Women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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A Thousand Splendid Suns is a 2007 novel by Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini. It is his second, following his bestselling 2003 debut, *The Kite Runner*. By profession, Khaled Hosseini is a medical doctor.

Hosseini was born in Kabul, where his father worked for the Afghanistan Foreign Ministry. In 1970, the family moved to the Iranian capital where Hosseini's father worked for the Embassy of Afghanistan. In 1973, his family returned to Kabul. After three years, Hosseini's father got a job in Paris. The Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew the regime of Mahommed Daoud Khan with the support of the army in a bloody coup in April 1978. Hosseini's father decided that the family would not return to Afghanistan. Instead, in 1980, they sought political asylum in the US. Hosseini is currently a Goodwill Envoy for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). He shares the prevalent outlook amongst the professional Afghan émigré population (Thompson).

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini uses a character by the name of Babi Said who is the father of one of the leading female characters Laila, to point to the origin of the title of the novel. On page 172 of the novel, Babi reiterates two lines of the poem about Kabul written by an Iranian poet of the 17th century, Said Tabrizi, and states that he has forgotten the rest of the poem. We get to know further from *Wikipedia* that the title of the book comes from a line in the Josephine Davis translation of the poem "Kabul", by the aforesaid Iranian poet:

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.

The book opens in 1964 and closes in 2003 depicting the tumultuous lives of two Afghan women and how their lives cross each other. It is a book about the lives of women in Afghanistan's deeply patriarchal society. The story has two protagonists: Mariam and Laila. This double focus imparts breadth and balance to Hosseini's representation of the problems faced by women across the country. The novel focuses on the friendship between these two leading female characters. Being divided into four parts and starting with Mariam in the first part, followed by Laila in the second and fourth, the story centers around the relationship between the two women in the third part.

The novel follows two Afghan women, born two decades apart, whose lives are brought together through a series of largely tragic events. It lays bare the truly horrendous existence of women and girls. From its opening page, the novel relentlessly exposes the injustices to which women are subjected. Mariam lives in *Kolba* on the outskirts of Herat with her embittered mother. Being the illegitimate daughter of an already thrice-married rich man, she is forced to live in shame and secrecy. Jalil, her father happens to be a wealthy man who after deserting Mariam's mother starts living in town with his three wives and nine children. Since Mariam is Jalil's illegitimate daughter begotten out of wedlock, she cannot live with her siblings. Jalil used to visit his illegitimate daughter Mariam every Thursday. On her fifteenth birthday, Mariam wishes to see *Pinocchio* at her father's movie theater and when that wish is not fulfilled she ends up visiting her father's house in the town. Jalil refuses to meet her, and she is left with no option but to sleep on the porch. Assuming that her daughter is not going to return home, Mariam's mother commits suicide. Mariam is then taken to live in her father's house where Jalil promptly marries her off to a shoemaker named Rasheed, who is from Kabul and thirty years her senior.

Natasha Walter in her review of the novel describes that despite the trauma of going to live with a complete stranger who insists that she must wear the burqa and hide upstairs when visitors arrive, a tentative hopefulness begins to grow in Mariam that she may be able to win some affection from her husband, especially when she becomes pregnant.

But Hosseini vividly brings home what life is like for women in a society in which they are valued only for reproduction. A woman's value in Afghan society has often been measured by her ability to bear children, specifically boys. Mariam's life with her husband is truly miserable as she fails to give birth to a son which results in Rasheed's violent attitude towards her. In Kabul, Mariam becomes pregnant seven successive times, but suffers repeated miscarriages. As a result Rasheed subjects Mariam to cruel acts of physical punishment. Once she has suffered a series of miscarriages, her marriage becomes a prison: "Mariam was afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not."(89)

Mariam observes the difference between women in the more prosperous areas of Kabul to those in her poor neighbourhood, "These women were...modern Afghan women. ...These women mystified Mariam. They made her aware of her own lowliness, her plain looks, her lack of aspirations, her ignorance of so many things"(68).

With Mariam's arrival in the Afghan capital, the narrative shifts its focus to Laila, whose beginnings in life, in a house just down the street from Mariam's, has been comparatively fortunate. Born into a loving and educated family, Laila benefits from the unprecedented opportunities provided for women under the Soviet occupation. As her father remarks, "Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they're probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before"(121). Laila develops an intimate relationship with a boy named Tariq who happens to live in the same neighborhood. War comes to Afghanistan, and Kabul is bombarded by rocket attacks. Due to the war Tariq's family decides to leave the city, and the emotional farewell between Laila and Tariq ends with them making love. When Laila's family decides to leave Kabul, they are attacked by a rocket

which destroys the house, kills her parents, and severely injures Laila. Laila is then sheltered and nursed back to health by Rasheed and Mariam.

After recovering from her injuries, Laila discovers that she is pregnant with Tariq's child. On receiving the news of Tariq's death and in order to avoid social disgrace and also in search of protection, she agrees to marry Rasheed, who is longing to have a young and attractive second wife and hopes to have a child with her. When Laila gives birth to a daughter Aziza, Rasheed is displeased and suspicious, and Laila also starts getting the same abusive treatment as Mariam. After Aziza's birth, Mariam and Laila eventually become confidantes and best friends and try to protect each other from the beatings of Rasheed. A few years later, Laila gives birth to Rasheed's son Zalmi who is born at a time when Taliban have come to power and living conditions in Taliban deteriorate due to a drought. When pregnant, Laila is so terrified that she is not able to summon love for Rasheed's child and she comes close to using a bicycle spoke to abort the baby. In another appalling passage, the child is delivered by caesarean section in a women-only hospital in which doctors are required to operate in burqas, using rudimentary, unsterilized equipments, and where there is no anaesthetic to numb the pain of the operation.

The novel sings of the slowly growing friendship of the two wives in the face of the horrific abuse from their shared husband. Laila looks at Mariam, and "for the first time, it was not an adversary's face Laila saw but a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotested, a destiny submitted to and endured. If she stayed, would this be her own face, Laila wondered?"(223) The women's only hope of affection or solidarity is with one another, and they survive not just physically but also emotionally by putting their faith in each other and in their love for Laila's children.

Mariam and Laila are subjected to frequent domestic abuse. After one dreadful beating, Laila reflects that before life with Rasheed, she "would never have believed that a human body could withstand this much beating..."(287). They make common cause and endure degradation, starvation and brutality at the hands of their husband until they are forced to take up a desperate, joint struggle.

Their plan to run away from Rasheed and leave Kabul fails as they are caught at the bus station. While trying to escape from their autocratic and bullying husband, Mariam and Laila are escorted back to their home by a police officer who despite the ladies' pleadings does not let them go and cites the law which requires the ladies to be returned to their husband. The police officer is not at all moved by Laila's explanation of endangering the women's lives. Instead he replies "what a man does in his home is his business." He remains unpersuaded by Laila's protests and adds "As a matter of policy, we do not interfere with private family matters *hamshira*"(238). Once again, they become a victim to domestic violence as Rasheed beats them severely and is almost on the verge of killing Aziza. Rasheed grows increasingly hostile, even frenzied, after an escape by the women is foiled. The aggressive reaction of Rasheed to his wives' attempt to abandon him only exacerbated their sufferings.

'You try this again and I will find you. I swear on the Prophet's name that I will find you. And, when I do, there isn't a court in this godforsaken country that will hold

me accountable for what I will do. To Mariam first, then to her, and you last. *I'll make you watch.*'

And, with that, he left the room. But not before delivering a kick to the flank that would have Laila pissing blood for days.(243)

Relief comes when Laila gives birth to a boy, but it's short-lived. The Taliban are in control; women must stay home; Rasheed workshop burns down and hence he loses his business; they have no food; Rasheed sends Aziza to an orphanage. When Tariq returns and meets Laila, Rasheed is informed of the meeting. Rasheed starts to savagely beat Laila. Had Mariam not intervened and killed Rasheed, he would have strangled Laila to death. When Mariam is sent to prison for killing her husband Rasheed, she finds that most of her cellmates were in prison for the "common offense of running away from home"(322). We see the injustice done on women through another female prisoner's story. The prisoner Naghma is imprisoned for the crime of eloping with one man.

She'd tried to elope to Gardez with a young man she'd fallen in love with, the son of a local mullah. They'd barely made it out of Kabul. When they were caught and sent back, the mullah's son was flogged before he repented and said that Naghma had seduced him with her feminine charms. She'd cast a spell on him, he said. He promised he would rededicate himself to the study of the Koran. The mullah's son was freed. Naghma was sentenced to five years. (323)

We see the patriarchal injustice wherein the man is acquitted from the same crime of eloping whereas the woman is sentenced to five years of imprisonment. The miseries of women do not end here. After completing her sentence, when Naghma is released from prison she is stabbed by her father who believed that his daughter had brought shame on the family. The story of Naghma reminded Mariam of the advice she got from her late mother Nana who said, "*Like a compass needle that points North, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam*"(323).

Thus the dramatic final section includes a murder and an execution. Another incident of misjudgement of women's caliber by men is seen when Mariam is presented in the court for murder. A young Talib judge questions her whether she had committed the crime of killing her husband or not. Mariam proudly confesses her crime of killing Rasheed. The following statements given by the judge are a clear indication of the attitude of Muslim men towards women.

'I wonder,' the young Talib said. 'God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. Western doctors and their science have proven this. This is why we require only one male

witness but two female ones.’ (324)

During the Taliban’s rule, strict Islamic laws were reinstated in Afghanistan. The instructions issued to women reveal the astonishing injustice done on women.

Attention women:

You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go 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.

Jewelry 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 school 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.(248-49)

Laila and Tariq leave for Pakistan along with their children Aziza and Zalmai. On their return to Afghanistan after the fall of Taliban, they discover a package in Mariam’s village with a letter full of apologies from her father Jalil. After reaching Kabul, Tariq and Laila fix up an orphanage where Laila starts working as a teacher. The novel ends with the news that Laila is pregnant with her third child and Laila has promised to name it Mariam if it is a girl.

From a very young age, Mariam was repeatedly reminded by her mother Nana that she was a harami(bastard) and that she is destined to suffer like her mother. In the opening pages of the book, Mariam’s mother had warned: “There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life... It’s this: *tahamul*. Endure”(17). Her cynical admonition turns out to be a tragically accurate forecast of the trials that await Mariam and Laila as wives to Rasheed.

The opening line of the novel “Mariam was five years old the first time she heard the word *harami*” introduces us to the pains and sufferings that Mariam will be going through in the course of the novel(3). The mention of this word always made the little girl depressed. At that time Mariam did not understand what that word means but could only figure out from the way her mother uttered that word that to be a *harami* was as loathsome and ugly as a cockroach.

Later when she was older, Mariam did understand. It was the way Nana uttered the word-not so much saying it as spitting it at her-that made Mariam feel the full sting of it. She understood then what Nana meant, 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)

Hosseini beautifully portrays Mariam’s feelings of helplessness in the following words:

She had passed these years in a distant corner of her mind. A dry barren field, out beyond wish and lament, beyond dream and disillusionment. There, the future did not matter. And the past held only this wisdom: that love was a damaging mistake, and its accomplice, hope, a treacherous illusion. And whenever those twin poisonous flowers began to sprout in the parched land of that field, Mariam uprooted them. She uprooted them and ditched them before they took hold. (229)

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Laila and Mariam’s destinies are interlinked through a tragic twist of circumstances. However, because of the low status assigned to women in the Afghan society, their decisions are made for them. Mariam must marry Rasheed because her unfeeling father and his wives force Mariam to do so. Her acceptance is merely a formality. Laila must marry Rasheed as she is orphaned and also pregnant with Tariq’s child. Furthermore, women are not allowed to travel alone or go to work and thus Laila does not have any other course to choose than to marry Rasheed. Together Mariam and Laila must survive their marriage to a brutal and controlling husband. In the end, Mariam must kill Rasheed in order to save Laila from being strangled to death by Rasheed.

In this novel, Hosseini tells the story of the role and place of women in Afghan society. Hosseini has explicitly dedicated himself to examining the condition of women. Laila may be the beloved daughter of her father but her brothers get all the attention of their mother. Laila is completely forgotten by her mother in her grief for the loss of her sons. Although Mariam lives in poverty

but she has the love of her mother. Both women's lives change for the worst when they get connected to a brutal shoemaker Rasheed through marriage. Hosseini portrays the hypocrisy of the laws of Taliban whereby the girls are prevented from attending school; are forbidden to work outside home even when the males are unable to support the family. Women and children's health is also neglected as there was only one understaffed and unfunded hospital in Kabul.

The powerlessness or low status of women in Afghanistan is directly addressed by Hosseini in this novel. The author presents multiple aspects of women's experience in rural and urban Afghanistan through the characters of Mariam and Laila. Mariam's life is constrained from the beginning as she cannot go to school whereas the other leading female protagonist Laila has this opportunity and is also better placed in Rasheed's house because of her youth and for giving birth to a male child. Later in the novel, both women are required to wear a full length burqa. Both women experience the strangeness of seeing the world through a mesh screen. The use of burqa has become a symbol of oppression and represents the plight of the women of Afghanistan. When asked by Rasheed to wear a burqa, Hosseini depicts the awkwardness of Mariam as she considers it a burden on her head. Unable to see clearly through the burqa, she trips over the hem. The deflated status of women in Afghan society can be seen as the birth of a daughter is not welcomed and does not call for celebration. Contradicting the husband or expressing her own opinion invites the risk of severe physical punishment.(Stuhr 70)

The novel is important because it speaks for women who have long been (and many of whom continue to be) condemned to silence. In Afghanistan it is the beatings and whippings and threats that make up the women's daily experiences. The novel is an intense story of gender discrimination, cruelty to women and patriarchal authoritarianism. The author narrates the tale of two victimized women who show courage in attempting to escape the Taliban and in bonding together against Rasheed whom they murder. The story depicts that the freedom women enjoyed during Soviet rule is all gone with the departure of the Russians and the rise of the Taliban. These two women have to devise ways to survive. The author has left no stone unturned in highlighting the plight of women in a Taliban governed Afghanistan. One can actually feel the pain and suffering that Laila and Mariam go through, both, during the times of the Soviets and when Taliban took over.

Thus we conclude that the women characters in this novel are subjected to untold suffering and rampant injustice imposed by the in-built social, cultural, and religious practices (Ayalew 59).

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