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Resilience, Resistance, and the Fight for Agency in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the challenges Afghan women face in the patriarchal society depicted in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand splendid Suns. In the novel, women embody Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the 'other,' defined not by themselves but in relation to men. Often seen as a narrative of women's repression under the Mujahideen and Taliban regimes, this study highlights their resilience and fight for agency. It explores every phase of their lives: victimization, the quest for independence, and acts of resistance. The analysis will explore how social, political, and cultural factors amplify their struggles, yet also serve as catalysts for transformation. It will also consider the broader implications of women's struggles for gender equality in a deeply divided society.

Keywords: *Oppression, Resistance, Patriarchy, Afghanistan, Taliban, Mujahideen*

Introduction:

Women have historically borne the brunt of suffering in society, often as the most vulnerable and marginalized group. They have been perceived through the limiting lens of the patriarchal gaze, which reinforces their subordination to men. Patriarchy legitimizes male dominance in every sphere—family, society, and governance—positioning men as the controllers of power. As Simone de Beauvoir asserts in *The Second Sex*, men are defined as the assertive subject and the absolute, while women are relegated to the recessive other: "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (6). This entrenched patriarchal system is the root cause of various forms of violence against women, manifesting through practices like female feticide, rape, sexual harassment, domestic abuse and the systemic denial of education.

For women in Afghanistan, patriarchal norms rigidly dictate their power over their lives and gender roles. Khaled Hosseini, in the postscript of *A Thousand splendid Suns*, describes Afghanistan as a patriarchal tribal region where "men have decided the fates of women…. For centuries, women

there have been told when they will marry, who they will marry, and, incidentally, for how much. For the most part, rural Afghan women have led quiet, subterranean lives of obedience and service" (410). This reality is vividly portrayed through Mariam, who cannot decide whether to marry a man she has never met and who is over twice her age. Forced to comply with the supposed traditions of a male-dominated society, Mariam is coerced into the bond during her *nikah* (Islamic marriage contract). Without seeking her consent, the Mullah declares, "All that remains now is the signing of the contract" (53), reflecting the systemic disregard for women's autonomy.

Patriarchal control extends beyond marriage, dictating every facet of women's lives. Women are forbidden to appear on the streets without a *burqa* (a garment covering the entire body) or a male companion. Rasheed, embodying Kabul's patriarchal culture, imposes these restrictions on Mariam. He insists she wear a *burqa*, claiming it protects her honour while reinforcing male dominance. He forbids her from interacting with anyone, including relatives or guests, and uses threats to ensure compliance: "Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only" (69). Over time, Mariam internalizes these oppressive norms, becoming what Lois Tyson terms a "Patriarchal Woman"—one who "has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy" (85). Rasheed's manipulation leads her to view the *burqa* as a comforting shield, echoing his words, "You'll get used to it" and "With time, I bet you'll even like it" (71). This gradual submission underscores the deep psychological impact of patriarchy on women's identities.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (293), emphasizing that the development into a subservient woman is a social construct that begins in childhood. Similarly, a girl becomes a patriarchal woman because society programs her from the start to embody traits that align with femininity, such as sensitivity, passivity, expressiveness, empathy, affection and devotion. Meanwhile, boys are taught to exhibit traits of masculinity, including aggression, courage and assertiveness. This phenomenon, known as social constructionism, suggests that society acts as a mould, shaping women as women and men as their dominant counterparts. Mariam's upbringing follows this pattern as she learns from her mother that men are always right and women are to blame for everything. Her mother, Nana, illustrates this harsh reality to Mariam:

> You know what he told his wives by way of defense? That I forced myself on him. That it was my fault. Didi? You see? This is what it means to be a woman in this world….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. You remember that, Mariam. (7)

In a patriarchal society, women not only face external marginalization but often internalize these patriarchal norms, further entrenching their subjugation. As Julia Kristeva argues, femininity is

"marginalized, oppressed, just as the working class is marginalized and oppressed" (Qtd. In Tyson 103). This oppressive worldview is evident in Nana's counsel to Mariam: "It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have" (18). Nana's words reflect the harsh reality of a system that expects women to endure without question. Mariam's desire to attend school is crushed by her mother's rebuke, who tells her, "What is there to learn?...What is the sense schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon. And you'll learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one. One skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school. Look at me…Only one skill. And it's this: tahamul. Endure" (18). These words shape Mariam into a woman who internalizes the notion of passivity, embodying what PanditaRamabai attributed to the Hindu Lawgiver Manu: "In childhood a female must be subjected to her father, in youth, to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent" (31).

The novel also explores the additional roles assigned to women by patriarchy, such as marriage and motherhood. When Mariam resists marriage, one of Jalil's wives says, "You can't spend the rest of your life here. Don't you want a family of your own?...You have to move on" (47-48). This insistence on marriage as a woman's ultimate role highlights the extent to which patriarchal norms define a woman's worth, further reinforcing the oppressive structure in which Mariam and others like her are trapped.

The oppression of women and gender inequality in Afghanistan have been exacerbated by political conflicts, which are themselves deeply entrenched in patriarchal doctrines. For instance, when Soviet troops occupied the country, they introduced policies aimed at improving women's rights, including decrees guaranteeing equal rights, compulsory education, and the right to divorce. However, these reforms were met with resistance from extremists and a male-dominated society, resulting in further suffering for women at the hands of the Mujahideen, who declared Afghanistan an Islamic state. They imposed severe restrictions on women, including compulsory hijab, early marriages for girls as young as 11, and prohibitions on leaving the house without a male escort. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, when Mariam and Laila are caught attempting to flee Kabul without a male guardian, Laila pleads with the officer not to return them to their home due to Rasheed's cruelty. The officer responds, "What a man does in his home is his business…. We do not interfere with private family matters, hamshira" (260). Laila's defiant retort, "Of course you don't. When it benefits the man" (260), exposes the pervasive patriarchal indifference to women's suffering, but her resistance proves futile.

The dire condition of Afghan women worsened under the Taliban's rule in 1996, as they misinterpreted Islam to enforce extreme restrictions on women and girls. Women were forbidden to attend school, forced to leave their jobs, and denied the right to file legal cases against their husbands. Even if they did attempt to seek justice, there was "no legal council, no public hearing, no

cross-examining of evidence, no appeals" (354). Mariam's experience exemplifies this system: when she is brought before a Taliban judge, he offers a patriarchal interpretation of Sharia' law, stating, "God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can…. This is why we require only one male witness but two female ones" (355). In a swift and unjust decision, Mariam is sentenced to death with a cold statement"May Allah forgive you" (357). Similarly, Naghma, a young woman who falls in love with a mullah's son, is condemned when their relationship is discovered. The mullah's son absolves himself, blaming Naghma for "seducing him with her feminine charms" (354). He is released, while Naghma receives a five-year prison sentence. These examples underscore the harsh reality for women in a society where patriarchy dominates both public and private life, severely limiting their agency and subjecting them to gross injustice.

Rasheed embraces the Taliban and their harsh laws because they empower him to enforce his patriarchal dominance over women. With the Taliban's support, men like Rasheed are emboldened to torment women like Mariam and Laila within their own homes, while the Taliban imposes its tyranny in the public sphere. Rasheed's oppressive behaviour is further demonstrated when he threatens Laila using the Taliban as a tool of control. He coldly declares, "I could go to the Taliban one day, just walk in and say that I have my suspicions about you. That's all it would take. Whose word do you think they would believe? What do you think they'd do to you?" (275). This threat underscores the power imbalance, where a man's word holds more weight than a woman's, and violence can be used to silence and intimidate. Meanwhile, Laila's attempts to leave the house to visit her daughter are met with brutal punishment. One day, a young Taliban soldier beats her severely with a radio antenna and warns, "I see you again, I'll beat you until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones" (313). This moment highlights the extent of violence women endure under both private patriarchal control and the Taliban's public authority.

The novel vividly portrays how women in Afghanistan have long been subjected to torture, oppression, and harassment under patriarchy, with the Taliban exacerbating their suffering. In his Postscript, Khaled Hosseini writes,

> Life was a struggle for some women in Afghanistan well before the Taliban. But it became all but unbearable with the outbreak of factional war, anarchy, and extremism. In many ways, that's when disaster really struck. Women suffered not only through the bombing…. They were abducted and sold as slaves, forced into marriage to militia commanders, forced into prostitution, and raped, a crime particularly heinous and unforgivable that was used to intimidate families who were opposed to one faction or another. (410-411)

This description paints a grim picture of the heightened cruelty faced by women during times of war and extremism, where their rights are not only violated but weaponized for political and social

control.

The novel also portrays the powerful acts of defiance by Mariam and Laila against the victimization and tyranny they have endured throughout their lives. Mariam, in particular, forms a deep bond with Laila and her daughter, Aziza, transforming into a nurturing, protective mother who prioritizes her child's well-being above all else. Despite enduring years of suffering, it is the love for Laila that becomes her breaking point. When Rasheed attempts to strangle Laila, Mariam sees the death in his eyes: "He's going to kill her…he really means to" (340). The thought of losing Laila is unbearable, and Mariam realizes that she cannot stand by and let Rasheed take yet another life: "He'd taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too" (340). In a surge of protective love, she strikes Rasheed with a shovel, hoping to save Laila, but recognizing the danger to both their lives in Rasheed's eyes: "But in Rasheed's eyes she saw murder for them both" (340). Her action becomes not just a response to Rasheed's cruelty, but a pivotal moment in her life—one in which she finally takes control of her fate: "It occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her life" (341).

This act of resistance marks Mariam's transformation into an active feminist, someone who reclaims her agency and sense of self. Even in her final moments, she finds peace in the knowledge that she has lived on her own terms: "a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginning" (361). Laila, too, exhibits moments of defiance that demonstrate her growing sense of self-worth. From a young age, she values education, which her father ensures she receives even amid the turmoil of war. Education fuels her voice and her willingness to resist. When Rasheed attempts to force Aziza into begging, Laila responds with fierce determination: "I won't let you turn my daughter into a street beggar" (292). When Rasheed slaps her, Laila strikes back with such force that it causes him to stagger two steps backward (292). Though her resistance often results in further violence, Laila refuses to submit, standing firm in the face of Rasheed's abuse and the Taliban's oppression. When Rasheed forbids her from visiting Aziza, Laila retorts, "Then I'll go by myself... You can't stop me, Rasheed. Do you hear me? You can hit me all you want, but I'll keep going there" (313). In this moment, Laila's words become a feminist declaration, challenging both Rasheed and the Taliban's oppressive rules that restrict women's mobility and autonomy.

In Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand splendid Suns*, the harrowing effects of patriarchy are poignantly illustrated through the lives of Mariam and Laila. Born into a society where their worth is diminished solely because of their gender, both women endure relentless oppression. Despite their efforts to conform to the roles prescribed for them, they find no respect or solace. Their stories shed light on the profound struggles Afghan women face to survive and assert their identities. However, the novel, aims to inspire women to recognize and embrace their inherent strength, advocating for their well-being, identity and self-esteem. It underscores the importance of sisterhood—a powerful

sense of unity and cooperation among women facing similar challenges. Mariam and Laila exemplify this solidarity, finding strength in their bond and resisting the oppressive forces around them. Their journey highlights the transformative power of mutual support in the face of adversity.

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