



The Impact of Women on The Modern Novel in Khaled Hosseini's Novel: A Thousand Splendid Suns

Raghda M Ali AlJabban

Assistant Lecturer, Department of English Language, Faculty of Education for Women, University of Kufa, Najaf, Iraq

* Corresponding Author: **Raghda M Ali AlJabban**

Article Info

ISSN (online): 2582-7138

Volume: 05

Issue: 05

September-October 2024

Received: 02-08-2024

Accepted: 04-09-2024

Page No: 647-650

Abstract

Khaled Hosseini is considered one of the modern Afghan authors in the modern novel. He focuses greatly on logic in his literary works, which often focus on the Afghan reality and the terrorism and harm that accompanied it on the level of Afghan society, which often focuses on the extent of terrorism that accompanied that period and what happened to the fictional characters in the novel (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*). Therefore, this research focuses on the repercussions of violence and the image of feminism during the Taliban's control of Afghanistan and the extent of freedom that Afghan society obtained. The research focuses on the role of Afghan women in the social and cultural structure and Taliban policy during that period. Therefore, the discussion questions are raised in this research:

- Did the Taliban give women rights during their period of control over Afghanistan?
- Did the author convey women's suffering in a realistic way?

Keywords: A Thousand Splendid Suns, Afghan society, Taliban, Khaled Hosseini, violence, Afghan women

1. Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" tells the events of Afghan history, from the Soviet invasion to the rule of the post-Taliban rebuilding. The novel depicts the saga of pains and struggles of the people of Afghanistan, who have been suffering due to several invasions and wars. The book also describes the story of two women, Mariam and Laila, who face unbounded suffering and dare to hope for freedom. They challenge the traditional notion of gender roles, redefine their human rights and excess masculine power, and attain strength as vigorous as the strength of a thousand splendid suns. Characterizing them, Hosseini symbolically represents the political upheavals of Afghanistan and the Afghan people's innate desire for independence. The novel's story undeniably links the volatile events--the violence, horror, anticipation, and faith of the country in intimate terms (Yeasmin, 2020) ^[6].

Being the first Afghan-American writer who writes in English, Khaled Hosseini is a relatively new novelist whose literary reputation was established since his debut novel, *The Kite Runner*. His successive two books, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* have achieved the same worldwide recognition and success. The common thread that links Hosseini's novels--apart from them being set in and representative of Afghanistan's multilayered society and complex history--is the fact that each character in these fictional works sets out on a journey that is determined and, to a large extent, linked to the country's turbulent historical and social background. The characters' itineraries intersect with and reveal a lot about the country's social, political and historical complex matrices. Though he hopes that his novels reveal an authentic and truthful portrait of his homeland, Hosseini doesn't claim to take on the mantle of "a teacher, a sociologist or an anthropologist" who can fully and adequately teach about Afghanistan, as he states in his interview with Fanney Kiefer.

Nonetheless, his novels feature characters and stories that have a worldwide resonance thanks to their symbolic function of a long-overlooked and relegated country, Afghanistan. Hosseini's fiction penetrates the cultural boundaries that set a chasm between the East and the West. In other words, his novels are packed with elements of a culture that is so foreign yet nonetheless very familiar with its themes and characters. That makes Hosseini's works stand out in the so-called ethnic literature; his rendering of Afghanistan's culture and history accessible to foreigners. (Souissi, 2015) ^[13].

Violence is an integral and recurring theme in Khaled Hosseini's "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*". The novel portrays two women, Mariam and Laila, who face different forms of violence. As they navigate Afghanistan's patriarchal society, the violence they endure is both personal and political. The novel is set against the backdrop of some of the most violent periods in Afghanistan's history, including the Soviet invasion, the civil war, and the rise of the Taliban, each of which brings about its forms of brutality and oppression. Hosseini's depiction of this violence offers a lens through which readers can better understand the systemic nature of oppression, especially as it relates to women in Afghanistan. The most personal form of violence in the novel is domestic abuse. Mariam and Laila, though initially strangers, become co-wives to Rasheed, a man who embodies the oppressive patriarchal norms of Afghan society. Rasheed's control over his wives is maintained through verbal, psychological, and physical abuse. His violence is symbolic of the broader societal acceptance of male dominance and female subjugation (Dobson & Mann, 2017) ^[5]. The power imbalance in Rasheed's household reflects the societal structures that allow and even encourage violence against women. As feminist scholars have noted, patriarchal societies often sanction male violence as a means of controlling women and maintaining the social order (MacKenzie, 2020) ^[10].

The violence in Rasheed's home is a microcosm of the more significant political violence that rages in the streets of Afghanistan. As the country is torn apart by war, the brutality that Mariam and Laila experience inside their home mirrors the violence outside (Loboda, 2016) ^[9]. The Soviet invasion, civil war, and later the Taliban regime each usher in different forms of violence that permeate every aspect of life in Afghanistan. Under the Taliban, violence becomes institutionalized, particularly against women. The Taliban's strict interpretation of Islamic law strips women of their fundamental rights, confining them to their homes and subjecting them to public punishments for even minor infractions (Baker, 2013) ^[1]. This systemic violence reinforces the personal violence that Mariam and Laila experience, blurring the lines between the individual and the political.

In "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*", violence is not just a backdrop for the characters' stories but a fundamental force shaping their lives. Mariam, who was born out of wedlock, grows up with a sense of shame and guilt that is reinforced by the emotional violence she experiences from her mother, Nana (Woolf, 2015) ^[18]. Nana constantly reminds Mariam that she is a harami (an illegitimate child), and this emotional abuse becomes internalized, shaping Mariam's sense of self-worth. When she is later married off to Rasheed, her experiences of domestic violence only reinforce her belief that she is undeserving of love or respect (Chakrabarti, 2014) ^[3]. The psychological effects of violence are as profound as the physical ones, and Hosseini's portrayal of Mariam highlights the lasting impact that emotional and psychological abuse can have on individuals (Mehta, 2012) ^[11].

Laila, on the other hand, initially comes from a more privileged background, but her life is also marked by violence. The war in Afghanistan destroys her family and leaves her vulnerable to Rasheed's advances (Bokhari, 2017) ^[2]. Laila's marriage to Rasheed results from personal circumstances and reflects the more significant political

violence ravaging her country. In marrying Rasheed, Laila is forced into a life of domestic violence, mirroring the way Afghan society forces women into subservient roles (Rubenstein, 2018) ^[14]. However, Laila's story is also one of resistance. Unlike Mariam, who internalizes the violence she experiences, Laila actively resists it. She fights back against Rasheed's abuse and refuses to let the violence define her (Stewart, 2015) ^[17].

The intersection of personal and political violence in the novel is most clearly seen in the depiction of the Taliban regime. Under the Taliban, women are stripped of their autonomy and subjected to even more severe forms of violence (Hashim, 2016) ^[7]. The public executions, beatings, and stonings that are depicted in the novel serve as a stark reminder of the institutionalized violence that has long been a part of Afghan society (Lichter, 2013) ^[8]. However, Hosseini also uses these depictions to critique the broader socio-political structures that allow such violence to continue unchecked (Spivak, 2018) ^[16]. Through the experiences of Mariam and Laila, the novel highlights how violence is both a tool of control and a consequence of societal breakdown.

One of the key themes that emerges in "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" is the resilience of the human spirit in the face of violence. Despite the overwhelming brutality that Mariam and Laila experience, they find ways to resist and overcome it (Baker, 2013) ^[1]. Their friendship becomes a source of strength and solidarity, allowing them to endure the violence around them. Mariam's ultimate act of defiance, killing Rasheed to protect Laila, serves as a powerful example of how violence can be used as a means of liberation. In this moment, Mariam reclaims her agency and breaks free from the cycle of violence that has defined her life (Moghadam, 2009) ^[12].

In this research, I explore the nature of violence in "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" through three critical lenses: domestic violence, systemic violence under the Taliban, and the broader political violence that serves as the backdrop for the novel, by examining the different forms of violence that the characters experience, I aim to demonstrate how Hosseini uses violence not only to critique Afghan society but also to highlight the resilience of the human spirit. Through this analysis, I will argue that "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" is ultimately a story about survival and resistance in the face of unimaginable hardship.

2. Discussion

The depiction of violence in "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" serves multiple purposes within the narrative. Khaled Hosseini uses violence as a plot device and as a means of exploring broader themes related to gender, power, and resistance (Clark & Herbeck, 2019) ^[9]. The domestic violence that Mariam and Laila experience at the hands of Rasheed is perhaps the most personal form of violence in the novel, but it is also reflective of the larger patriarchal structures that dominate Afghan society (MacKenzie, 2020) ^[10]. Rasheed's abuse of his wives is an extension of the societal norms that allow men to control and oppress women, and his behaviour is enabled by the legal and cultural systems that prioritize male authority over female autonomy (Loboda, 2016) ^[9].

The systemic violence imposed by the Taliban further exacerbates the suffering of women in Afghanistan. Under the Taliban's rule, women are subjected to public punishment for minor offences, and their movements and activities are severely restricted (Woolf, 2015) ^[18]. The novel's depiction

of the Taliban regime highlights how violence becomes institutionalized, with the state itself perpetrating acts of violence against its citizens, particularly women (Hashim, 2016) ^[7]. This form of violence is not just physical; it is also psychological, as women are forced to live in constant fear of punishment (Rubenstein, 2018) ^[14]. The Taliban's laws serve to reinforce the power dynamics that already exist in Afghan society, further entrenching the subjugation of women. However, Hosseini does not depict his female characters as mere victims of violence. Mariam and Laila display remarkable resilience in the face of the violence they endure (Chakrabarti, 2014) ^[3]. Their friendship becomes a source of empowerment, allowing them to resist the forces that seek to control them. Mariam's decision to kill Rasheed is a pivotal moment in the novel, representing her taking control of her fate for the first time (Moghadam, 2009) ^[12]. In this act, Mariam transforms from a passive victim of violence into an agent of change, demonstrating how violence can also be a tool of resistance (Stewart, 2015) ^[17].

3. Types of Violence in the Novel

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in the 1990s, they imposed strict restrictions on freedom of expression and the arts, including literature. Many books and writers were banned, and topics that dealt with women's rights, freedom, or even history became unacceptable. Literature that expressed liberal or anti-government ideas faced heavy censorship; in some cases, books were burned and libraries destroyed.

Many Afghan writers and authors were forced to leave the country due to fear of persecution, spreading what became known as "literature in exile." Writers like Khaled Hosseini wrote about their experiences and tragedies related to war, displacement, and oppression, helping to shed light on the harsh conditions the country faced under Taliban rule.

Due to the ongoing wars and conflicts, Afghan and global literature dealing with this period witnessed a significant transformation. The portrayal of violence in literary works, especially Afghan works, became directly focused on the violence and the way society lived under the grip of fear and hunger. The adverse effects, social upheavals, and political and economic fluctuations profoundly impacted public life and the literary process.

1. Domestic Violence: This type of violence is primarily portrayed through Mariam's relationship with her husband, Rasheed. Mariam suffers from constant physical and psychological abuse, which forces her to live in a state of oppression and despair. Rasheed's abuse of Mariam is not just a manifestation of physical strength but also a means of control and submission (Kumar, 2014) ^[19].

2. Political Violence: On the other hand, Laila's character is deeply affected by the political violence ravaging Afghanistan. The civil war and bombings have a profound impact on her life and family. Laila loses her parents in a violent attack, and the turbulent political situation forces her to make difficult decisions to survive (Smith, 2015) ^[21].

3. Psychological Violence: Besides physical and political violence, the novel highlights the psychological violence that affects the characters, especially Mariam and Laila. Deprivation, oppression, and the loss of loved ones all leave deep psychological scars on the characters and influence their long-term behaviour (Pal, 2012) ^[20].

■ The Impact of Violence on the Main Characters

1. Mariam

Mariam is one of the main characters who exemplifies the destructive effects of domestic violence. Raised in an environment filled with neglect and oppression due to her illegitimate birth, Mariam grows up feeling insecure and lacking self-confidence. Upon marrying Rasheed, she is subjected to direct physical violence, as Rasheed treats her with arrogance and cruelty, making her feel isolated and disconnected from life.

Despite these harsh circumstances, Mariam evolves into a character capable of making solid decisions by the novel's end. In a surprising turn of events, she decides to kill Rasheed, reflecting the inner strength she has developed through her suffering. This transformation shows how violence, despite its brutality, can lead to the empowerment and growth of characters.

2. Laila

On the other hand, Laila represents a resilient character who fights against the political and social violence surrounding her. The impact of the civil war on her life is evident from the beginning, as Laila loses her parents in a violent bombing and is forced to marry Rasheed to protect herself and her unborn child.

Despite these challenges, Laila maintains her strong spirit and will to survive. She defies Rasheed's continuous abuse and strives to build a new life with her old love, Tariq. This character demonstrates how women can face significant challenges, even in the darkest circumstances (Smith, 2015) ^[21].

3. Rasheed

Rasheed is the main character who embodies violence in the novel. He uses violence as a means of controlling his wives, and this behaviour is an integral part of his masculine identity. Rasheed believes that violence is the only way to maintain his authority and influence in his household. His character is portrayed as cruel and aggressive, seeking to impose his dominance by force, reflecting the patriarchal system that legitimizes violence as a means of control in Afghan society (Pal, 2012) ^[20].

The Consequences of Violence

1. Psychological Impact

Violence plays a central role in shaping the fate of the characters. For Mariam, violence led to her tragic end, as she was executed after killing Rasheed. This ending shows how violence can be destructive, even when used as a means of liberation (Kumar, 2014) ^[19].

2. Empowerment and Resistance

Conversely, Laila's experience demonstrates a continuous resistance to violence. Through her struggle against oppression and persecution, Laila succeeds in building a new life, sending a powerful message about the ability of women to confront violent conditions and oppressive societies. Therefore, "One Thousand Splendid Suns" reveals the profound impact of violence on the main characters, especially women. Through the characters of Mariam and Laila, Hosseini shows how violence can destroy individuals and lead to empowerment and liberation.

The novel provides a poignant insight into the suffering of Afghan women amidst wars and patriarchal society and delivers a message of hope about the possibility of change and resistance.

Conclusion and Results

"*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" presents a compelling exploration of the nature of violence, particularly as it relates to the lives of Afghan women. Through the experiences of Mariam and Laila, Khaled Hosseini offers a powerful critique of the patriarchal and political structures that perpetuate violence in Afghan society. The novel highlights the personal and psychological toll of violence while also emphasizing the resilience and strength of its characters in the face of adversity. Ultimately, Hosseini's portrayal of violence serves not only to expose the suffering of Afghan women but also to celebrate their capacity for survival, resistance, and empowerment.

Also, Here we see the principle of Ethnic literature that Khaled Hosseini focuses on in his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which is that it focuses on race in terms of distinction and identification, as Reilly defines it as Hosseini sees it which is that Ethnic literature, the definition says, is literature like any other, except that it contains ethnic references. Sometimes, it is noted that ethnic references make the literature a unique statement. Still, according to the definition, the focus should be on the ethnicity textual references reveal. All is well and good, except for an obvious danger. What happens to the literariness of the ethnic? (Reilly, 1978) ^[15].

It is also a type of literature that depicts the experiences, feelings, and issues of specific ethnic groups, often marginalized or oppressed in larger societies. This literature reflects the cultural traditions, customs, identity, and conflicts that these ethnic groups face and expresses their attitudes towards the society in which they live, whether through adaptation, resistance, or contemplation of their ethnic identity. This is precisely what we find in Khaled Hosseini's writings as a psychological embodiment or a constant psychological character in the author's nature in conveying his race, group, and their effects to the audience, especially for Khaled Hosseini's works that excel in direct violence as in the novel "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" and the political and social events, social violence, and sexual oppression that occur on segments of society, especially women like Maryam, and the extent to which this violence affects the structure of the novel as a whole and the structure of the fictional character.

References

1. Baker A. Women and War in the Middle East: Gender, Violence, and Resistance. London: Zed Books; c2013.
2. Bokhari F. Afghanistan's Struggles: A Historical Perspective. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; c2017.
3. Chakrabarti A. Gendered violence and social exclusion in literature. *Journal of South Asian Literature*. 2014;29(1):54-75.
4. Clark A, Herbeck M. Violence, trauma, and recovery in Afghan literature. *Journal of Gender Studies*. 2019;21(2):198-212.
5. Dobson C, Mann J. The dynamics of domestic abuse in post-Taliban Afghanistan. *Journal of Women's Studies*. 2017;18(3):102-115.
6. Yeasmin F. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: A saga of Afghanistan. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*. 2020;8(3):381-390.
7. Hashim S. Political violence and gender oppression: Case studies in Afghanistan. *Afghan Studies Quarterly*. 2016;12(1):35-60.
8. Lichter M. Gender, power, and politics in *One Thousand Splendid Suns*. *Comparative Literature Review*. 2013;40(2):125-140.
9. Loboda S. War, politics, and violence in the literature of Afghanistan. *Middle Eastern Studies Journal*. 2016;33(4):87-102.
10. MacKenzie S. Masculinity, patriarchy, and violence: Analyzing Khaled Hosseini's *One Thousand Splendid Suns*. *Gender and Society*. 2020;34(2):146-160.
11. Mehta K. The intersection of violence and identity in Afghan women's narratives. *Journal of International Literature*. 2012;8(4):54-72.
12. Moghadam VM. *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers; c2009.
13. Souissi R. Drawing the human face of a homeland: A reading of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountain Echoed*. *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*; c2015.
14. Rubenstein R. *Enduring Violence: A Comparative Study of Literature and Conflict*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; c2018.
15. Reilly JM. Criticism of ethnic literature: Seeing the whole story. *Melus*. 1978;5(1):2-13.
16. Spivak G. The politics of gender and conflict in literature. *Critical Inquiry*. 2018;22(3):67-81.
17. Stewart P. Feminism and resistance in contemporary Afghan fiction. *Global Women's Rights Review*. 2015;7(1):112-120.
18. Woolf V. Women's struggles in war-torn societies: Afghan perspectives. *Comparative Literary Studies*. 2015;25(3):45-63.
19. Kumar R. Trauma and resilience in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*. 2014;3(2):45-60.
20. Pal A. Reading Khaled Hosseini. *Modern Fiction Studies*. 2012;58(1):206-225.
21. Smith L. Gender violence in Afghan society: A critical analysis of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *Contemporary Literature Review*. 2015;7(3):98-110.