

## Depiction of Women's Life and Suffering in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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### Abstract

*Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Afghan women like any other women have never had a place in the 'center' where they could have access to the 'means of power'. Some women might have had happy life, but most have suffered various types of misery and violence in the household. In addition, women's places in this 'Patriarchal society' were also taken by men due to exploiting their physical power. In most regions where education among men and women has reached its lowest level, women are never treated as individuals with identity. They have been marginalized from the social life. Based on the traditional values, women have collective identity. They are never allowed to portray themselves as independent characters. In fact, women have always suffered their marginalization in this society. The main aim of this paper is to reveal the life and suffering of women in Afghanistan through studying the major women characters in Hosseini's novel, A Thousand Splendid Suns.*

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**Keywords:** Suffering, Afghan women, Patriarchal society, marginalization, identity, gender

### Introduction

In 1965, Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. Subsequent to the coup in 1978 and the invasion of Soviet, he and his family refuged to the United States. As a novelist and an elite, Khaled Hosseini has endeavored to represent the life and suffering of women in Afghanistan through his women characters in his novels. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Hosseini is not just a simple novel regarding the portrayal of culture and tradition of this country to the world, but it is rather a written work of fiction depicting the suffering of women through the two major women characters, Mariam and Laila, who continue to live under the injustice, and gender discriminative atmospheres created by this 'Patriarchal society'.

Based on the ground realities in Afghanistan, Afghan women Like Mariam and Laila have always experienced various forms of oppression, discrimination based on gender, and violence, but most men by exploiting their physical power and 'gender relations' have succeeded in sidelining women. In fact, like Nana calling Mariam "harami" meaning bastard, most women have had nothing but to suffer like a five year old Mariam, the injustice Jalil, his father has committed in impregnating Nana, but also blaming her for this crime. He as a man is counted innocent due to being a man in this 'patriarchal' setting, but Nana as a woman has been silenced and has been forced to accept the crime that has been thrust upon her. She has to deliver a girl, Mariam, who must also suffer like her mother. Accepting to endure as a woman is not only the problem. Moreover, Nana has been portrayed as a 'subaltern' woman and also an illiterate character that does not have access to 'power' to 'produce' knowledge and she does not have knowledge to have access to power. Like her mother, Mariam is also a woman who cannot speak. Hosseini has portrayed Mariam as a subaltern character who belongs to

the lower economic, political and social order. She does not have access to education to control her life (Akhtar et.al 113). Despite of all the sufferings, Mariam carries on fighting for her lost identity both at home and in the society. She is the woman who has the potential to claim for her true identity. However, it is Jalil, who has always told Mariam stories about real life. Jalil never takes Mariam to the city or to the cinema that he always talks about the big screen. It is Jalil who has made the life miserable for Mariam and her mother by letting them live in the remote area in the country. He does not allow Nana to become his wife and does not accept Mariam as his legitimate daughter. Mariam has to suffer, but she fights and never stops fighting for her identity. But, Laila as Rasheed's wife also suffers under his command and control, but she is a legitimate daughter of her family. Laila's father unlike Mariam's father supports Laila in getting education rather than marrying. "Marriage can wait, education cannot" (Hosseini 114). Babi, Laila's father does not encourage Laila to marry as Jalil has forcefully made Mariam to accept marrying Rasheed rather than letting her go to school. Laila due to having education understands the language and knowledge to protest stronger than Mariam, but Mariam's lack of education has weakened her power to produce her own discourse and structure her life. Men like Jalil and Rasheed represent and speak for her.

### **Mariam's life of suffering and endurance**

Suffering in Mariam's life does not only start to happen in her teenage years or in her adulthood. She has already started to suffer as a little girl while living alone with Nana. Jalil is only physically available for her, but her emotions have not been considered. Even Nana, her mother does not stop torturing her mentally by calling Mariam, a "harami", a bastard or an illegitimate individual. In addition, Nana is assaulting Mariam mentally when she breaks an object in Kolba. A Five year old Mariam does not really understand the denotative and connotative meaning of the word, "harami". Moreover, she is not mature and knowledgeable enough to differentiate her current status as a bastard and the person who is really responsible for this identity crisis. However, Mariam as a child understands that Nana for cursing her uses this bad word. When Mariam gets older, she really knows the meaning of this taboo word. Now she realizes the fact that Nana's aim of using "harami" while calling her really meant something that people in general do not really want to have or possess. "Nana meant ... Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance" (Hosseini 4). To analyze and interpret, this bad word means an illegitimate product of an illegitimate act that she as a person does not qualify to claim for her rights as other people like her half-sisters have access to, such as being accepted as an individual with identity and agency, loving someone or being loved as a daughter and even a family that Mariam as a daughter due to having been an illegitimate individual does not possess. Nana is the only person Mariam has as the person who has delivered her.

The real person who has committed the crime of impregnating Nana and letting Mariam to live a life of shame and loss of identity in this 'patriarchal' society is Jalil, but he disregards his faults by continuing disguising as a true father by calling Mariam, his "flower", but not a "harami". Instead, it is Nana, who suffers by living with no individuality and agency to ask for her rights as a woman; it is Mariam who suffers from fatherless and illegitimate condition that Jalil has created. Jalil as a man has been portrayed as a liar who does not respect Mariam as a flower. Mariam's identity crisis is connected to Jalil's fault and mistake. Jalil due to Mariam's low position in the community never takes her or provides her 'enabling condition' to visit the city, gardens, and grape vines, and various marketplaces. Instead, he only tells her stories and describes these places to Mariam. Jalil's 'hegemony' and 'power' in his family has forced Mariam to accept her father's knowledge without questioning him. Jalil by not letting Mariam to get education and not allowing her to visit the city and other areas has led to keep

her in darkness. Mariam has been represented as an uneducated woman who sees the world through the stories of a man. She has been silenced by her father's explanation of the history of this city and the physical location of some great places beyond her "kolba" without having visited them. But, Nana has been represented as an uneducated woman who does not believe in Jalil's stories and promises and his calling Mariam, "his little flower". She has been presented as a woman who judges a man based on his actions, not his words.

Endurance is the theme that has been vividly presented by Hossieni in the initial parts of the novel where Nana, Mariam's mother has been portrayed as a woman who does not pay attention to Mariam's going to school. Nana considers going to school as wasting one's time. There is one thing that all women learn and they do not teach it at school is only one thing that is "endurance". Nana's example of tracing back to her own miserable life with Jalil and his wives is the only thing Nana stops Mariam from going to school. Mullah Faizullah is the only man who has been depicted as an individual endeavoring to bring Mariam from the margins of life to the 'center' and 'social mobility' through education, but Nana like Jalil is the person who has led to leave Mariam in her identity crisis. Mariam has to suffer her lack of true identity and respect both at home and in the society. Mariam is rather discouraged from pursuing her studies at school she would called an illegitimate child, would be laughed at, and would be made fun of as a person with no roots. Nana prioritizes herself and her lonely life to have a partner like Mariam rather than helping Mariam get her education. "You're all I have. I won't lose you to them ... No more talks about school" (Hosseini 18). Nana has been portrayed as a sad woman who has made an effort to sacrifice the life of Mariam and her future for the grievance she has had in her life. Mariam has been portrayed as a woman who does not possess the power to go to school due the absence of her true identity. Jalil is the real guilty in Mariam's current bad identity, but Nana as Mariam's mother does not help Mariam not only as a mother, but as a woman in this 'Patriarchal society'. Nana has been shown as a women character who would rather want Mariam to continue to her legacy as a marginalized individual of the society with no education to know her rights and build her identity. Nana by having been raised and having lived in this society has been fully influenced by 'Patriarchal thought' that has made her like a man not allowing Mariam to study. Jalil has left her alone that she would like to mitigate the storm of her sorrows by forbidding Mariam from school to entertain herself and produce her substitute rather than elevate the level of Mariam's knowledge and wisdom in order to get acceptance in the society and never be dependent on a man.

Mariam as a woman continue to suffer her weakness in asking for her rights in her own marriage. Men like Rasheed and Jalil as well as other men in the room of "Nikkah" are depicted as an alliance against Mariam to forbid her from asking for her rights that are already specific in Islam, her dowry. Mariam has been depicted not only as a weak woman, but also the weakest human being in this room lacking the power to assert her identity as a woman with rights, but she has already been disabled by the men around her. Rasheed's haste in buying tickets and Jalil's endeavors in getting rid of Mariam validates the power of men and powerlessness of women in this society. "I understand that Rasheed agha has tickets for the bus to Kabul that leaves shortly ... we will bypass some of the traditional steps to speed up the proceedings" (Hosseini 52). It also reflects the portrayal of women as objects rather than human beings. Although, there occurs Nikkah for Mariam and Rasheed, there is no mentioning of dowry and other rituals that have to be performed for the sake of Mariam as a bride. Mariam has been portrayed as a simple individual who has always trusted Jalil despite of Nana's warning. Jalil's act of getting rid of Mariam by marrying her to the shoe maker Rasheed proves himself to be heedless towards Mariam's having trusted him as a man who would always defend her and her rights in this world. This marriage has happened without any dowry to respect the position of Mariam as a woman

in her husband's family. Mariam without Dowry is handed in to Rasheed to take her to Kabul. In fact, Mariam has been depicted as a slave that is sold to Rasheed in a cheap price.

Moreover, Mariam has been represented as a guest rather than a wife in her own house. Rasheed has not brought Mariam from Herat that he must share the properties and specifies her room as a bride. "This is my room" (Hosseini 59). Rasheed rather emphasizes on his power and possession that directly rejects Mariam's share as a wife in this country women like Mariam must suffer the inequality that men has led to continue by repressing women. Even Mariam is not properly welcomed as a real guest in Rasheed's house that she must be properly welcomed and dignified. But, she is rather like a guest who has the right to live in this house for a long time, but she cannot claim for anything to own. Mariam has to disguise like a guest, but has to work like a maid for Rasheed in return for the food. 'What do you think? That this is hotel?'" (Hosseini 64). Working inside and outside home has been forcefully gendered by this society that women have to suffer and live in their own houses as the unwelcomed guests. Rasheed as a member of the 'social circle' makes Mariam live in a marginalized situation in the house, however, she must perform her roles as a wife in order to have happy life and individuality.

But it is Rasheed, who has been represented as an individual controlling both Mariam's acts and her emotions. Hosseini has presented Mariam as a women character who has not only had unhappy life as a girl with Nana and Jalil, she has also experienced a lot of emotional suffering subsequent to her several miscarriages that has led to make her sad. In addition, these miscarriages have also changed dramatically the mood of Rasheed. He believes Mariam has not only failed him as a husband, but also as a father that Mariam has not been able to give him a son. "He was more apt to sulk these days, to fault her cooking, to complain about clutter around the yard ... Her questions seemed to irritate him" (Hosseini 93). After various miscarriages, Mariam has never been the center of Rasheed's attention as his wife. Rasheed has never endeavored to console Mariam as not only as a wife, but also as a mother of his child that she must have misery for her loss. Hosseini has depicted Rasheed as a man who has prioritized his desires over the miseries of Mariam. Mariam lacks 'individuality' and 'agency' in Rasheed's house. Mariam has been portrayed as a woman whose only job in her house is to make her husband happy by delivering baby boys that she has failed to do. Rasheed's use of verbal abuse and correcting each and every move and behavior of Mariam resembles the acts of a 'master' against his 'slave' that Mariam must suffer as the slave of Rasheed, but not his wife. She must behave as a submissive wife. Mariam has been showed as an individual who has become the victim of the gender relations in the society that she has been considered as an inferior and marginalized person in the society – she has been presented as a person with no knowledge. The source of knowledge is in men that they should guide and discipline women if needed. Women like Nana have been silenced by Jalil, so Mariam as her daughter and the wife of Rasheed should also know her position in the society. For Rasheed, she has never been a complete human with mature thoughts and mind. She is like a baby for Rasheed. He gives himself the right to guide Mariam. In fact, Jalil has never listened to Nana's words. Like Jalil, Rasheed as a man will also disregard Mariam's words.

Mariam has also been depicted as a woman who suffers physical discomfort committed by Jalil in the house. In addition to the verbal and emotional suffering, Mariam due to plenty of miscarriages during the four years convinces Rasheed to look for faults in Mariam's works and cooking in order to torture her for having failed him in becoming a father. One day, Rasheed in order to punish Mariam for not having cooked the rice properly, punishes Mariam by making her chew the pebbles. 'Put these in your mouth.' 'What?' ... 'Now chew,' he said ... Then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molar" (Hosseini 102-3). Mariam as a woman has

been portrayed as a subaltern character that lacks the agency and power to defend herself and fight for her rights on her husband as well as for her identity as a human being. However, Rasheed has been portrayed as a man who does not perform his role as a husband. He is rather depicted as a master dealing with Mariam as a slave, not as a wife. Moreover, Rasheed has also been compared to a colonizer who has always endeavored to correct his colonized subject by disciplining her. To conclude, Mariam after being punished and killed for having assassinated her husband, Rasheed, has changed her illegitimate start to a legitimate end by building her identity both as a sister for Laila and as a mother for Laila's children. "She thought of her entry into this world, the harami child ... She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last ... This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginning" (Hosseini 350). According to Çevik, Rasheed's killing by Mariam is an act of rejecting Nana's advice of suffering as a woman; she rather protests by getting rid of Rasheed in order to protect Laila from his oppression. Prior to her punishment for Rasheed's killing, Mariam also receives respects from people in the prison. Mariam was born with an illegitimate identity, a "harami" that she was always called by her mother and later by Rasheed that Mariam always had to suffer as a woman, but her own protest against men's cruelty especially Rasheed's brutal treatment of Laila, makes Mariam kill Rasheed in order to get freedom and identity both for herself and Laila. Unlike Laila, who was born as a legitimate child, Mariam has always endured her status as an illegitimate person from the very beginning of her birth, but Mariam after being punished and killed for Rasheed's killing achieves an identity and constructs her individuality as a woman who has found a family like Laila and her children. She is not killed as a "harami", but as a woman who has had a family and has had status and identity as a friend, sister and a mother in the end. The end that rejects its beginning; the end that gives Mariam an identity, but it helps Laila regain her identity.

#### **Laila's life and suffering as a woman**

Unlike Mariam who has started her life as an illegitimate child, Laila is the legitimate daughter of her parents. Unlike Jalil, Babi, Laila's father is a supportive man. He has always endeavored to elevate the identity of Laila by encouraging her to educate herself. Babi takes Laila to school every day. However, Laila's mother is still in bed when Laila's father takes Laila to school. Laila's mother also represents most mothers who are still heedless towards the education of their daughters and do not make any efforts to encourage their daughters attain their goals in life. Hooda asserts Babi might love Laila as his daughter and respect her individuality as well, but Laila's mother favors her sons more than Laila. Mariam despite of having lived in a bad economic condition had been loved by her mother, however, her father was not there (6). Women like Laila's mother always favor sons rather than daughters that leads to helping 'Patriarchy' and its 'ideology in the society. Compared to Mariam in her teenage years, Laila has been represented as a woman who does not suffer very much. She has a supportive father that encourages her to get education.

After Mariam, Laila's suffering in her life starts when her parents are killed due to a rocket targeting her house. Rasheed, the male character, who is already married to Mariam endeavors to make Laila marry him by faking the death of Tariq, Laila's childhood friend. Rasheed's treatment and nursing of Laila has never been humanitarian. He has just wanted to marry a fertile woman to deliver him babies that Mariam has not been able to do. "We need to legitimize this situation ... It looks dishonorable, an unmarried woman living here ... I can't go on feeding her and clothing her and giving her a place to sleep. I'm not the Red Cross, Mariam ... She is fourteen. Hardly a child. You were fourteen, Remember?" (Hosseini 208). During the civil war, women like Laila have been represented as the prey and men like Rasheed have been portrayed as the hunters to grab and destroy the lives and

individualities of women like Laila that Laila and women like her are not able to find their ways in this 'Patriarchal society'. Rasheed has never tried to respect the existence of the unconscious and injured Laila as a woman and as a guest who must have her own privacy in life. He never guides Laila to the right path as she really wants. Laila is forcefully convinced to choose between the life on the street where there is civil war, loathing, and killing and Rasheed's house where Laila will find sanctuary and a husband like Rasheed to feed her in the absence of Tariq and her family who are already dead. In this society, a woman without a man has no identity, so Laila has no other option but to say "Yes" to the marriage proposal offered by Rasheed through Maraim in order to find sanctuary and individuality as a woman, but Mariam's situation has been ignored both by Rasheed and Laila. Laila is not the only woman who must suffer the exploitation of her position by a man like Rasheed in this society. Like Laila, there are plenty of women who are exploited by men. In addition, Laila has to suffer the gender discrimination of Rasheed against Aziza, her daughter. Zalmai, her son has always been pampered by Rasheed, but Aziza has been treated like a fatherless girl. "On the way to Karteh-She, Zalmai bounced in Rasheed's arms, and Aziza held Mariam's hand ... Laila had not found the strength to tell Aziza the truth. She had told her that she was going to a school, a special school, where the children ate and slept and didn't come home after class" (Hosseini 306). Both Laila as a mother and Aziza as a daughter in Rasheed's house have been presented as 'subaltern' who cannot stand or raise their voice for their rights. Aziza has been shown as the character who is not in a position to fight for her rights, but Laila's struggles for finding a position in this society does not give results. Based on the gender roles in this society, Mariam and Laila possess the roles of wives who must stay home and do chores and Rasheed's role as a husband is to work out and provide food for them that he fails. The 'social circle' that is involved in creating these roles is men. Rasheed as a man has failed to play his roles well. However, he is depicted as a man who punishes a little girl like Aziza and makes Laila suffer as a mother for his own failure by sending Aziza to the orphanage. Aziza as a little girl witnesses the gender inequality and gender discrimination in her very childhood, but Rasheed's failure in his roles and his power over his wives and Aziza makes her to lie about the death of Rasheed. She must introduce herself as an orphan in order to be accepted in the orphanage.

Laila as a woman by marrying Rasheed also endures the drawing of some boundaries by Rasheed and the loss of her freedom for education and her identity after she marries Rasheed. Getting education is the only way that Laila would like to achieve in order to build her identity both at home and in the society, but Rasheed's initial acts towards Laila looks a great deal promising by praising her more than Mariam, but he endeavors to exploits the position of both Laila and Mariam to control his power over them in the family. Rasheed has been depicted as a weak individual who cannot stand against the protest of both Mariam and Laila whether their sisterhood bond becomes mighty. He degrades Mariam for having been an illegitimate child in order to disconnect the bond between these two major women characters. Based on 'sex and gender', Rasheed has not been represented as a strong man to ignore the power and strength of women like Mariam, but he is rather scared of it and compares Mariam to the Russian car "Volga", but Laila is praised and is considered the German "Benz" for looking like a woman that she must be accepted and must not have manly figure and power. Despite of having been praised by Rasheed, Laila has been portrayed as a woman whose identity belongs to Rasheed. "I am your husband now... you are the queen, the malika and this house is your palace ... 'All I ask in return ... I ask you avoid leaving this house without my company'" (Hosseini 217). After marriage, Laila's identity as a woman is entirely connected and limited to Rasheed's and she is not allowed to continue her studies. Unlike Rasheed, the only man who has always supported Laila in getting education and elevating her identity is her father, Babi, who is not alive. Now, Rasheed does

not Laila to attain her goals by educating herself. Laila has to suffer the loss of the opportunities in getting education after marrying Rasheed. Rasheed as a husband has his rights on Laila, but he does not grant Laila's rights as his wife to continue her studies. Rasheed as the male character has been depicted as the representation of those men who do not want their women to educate in order to know their values and rights in the society. Mariam, one of the major characters is the woman that Rasheed has always suppressed and sidelined for her illiteracy. However, Laila after the assassination of Rasheed by Mariam rebuilds her identity by reconnecting herself with Tariq and becomes a teacher in the orphanage that is reconstructed by the financial support of Mariam's inheritance left by Jalil.

### Conclusion

Hosseini's use of Mariam as one of the major women characters in this novel is to represent the suffering of those women who have always suffered in this patriarchal society. Mariam from the very start of her life suffers the absence of her true identity. She has always been called a "harami", a bastard by Nana, her mother. Mariam has also endured her powerless while trying to go to school, but her mother discourages her and asks her to suffer and "endure". In addition, Jalil and his wives do not allow Mariam to go to school like her other step-sisters, but she is rather forced to marry Rasheed. They consider her like a liability that must be removed from their house. Mariam's life after marriage does not change. Her identity and happiness is connected to Rasheed's mood and happiness in the house. Mariam as a wife has performed her role well while taking care of stuff in the house, but not having delivered baby boys for Rasheed has been a failure that Mariam suffers and Rasheed increases her suffering by beating her. However, Mariam's sisterhood with Laila helps her find both happiness and identity - as a friend for Laila and as a second mother for Laila's children. Mariam's killing Rasheed has been a sign of freeing herself and Laila from the oppression they have suffered for a long time. Mariam in order to save Laila from this killing accepts her crime and is assassinated as a punishment, but she dies, not as an illegitimate person, but as a legitimate woman with identity as friend and as a mother.

Contrary to Mariam, Laila as the second major women character was born a legitimate child who had a father, Babi, who has not forced her to marry in her teenage years, but rather encourages her to get an education. Jalil tells stories to Mariam by hiding the real world from her, but Babi has always allowed Laila to explore the world herself by letting her study at school and taking her on a tour. However, Laila like Mariam also suffers when her parents are killed and she has to marry Rasheed in order to survive. Laila also loses her freedom for education and her identity as a woman. Rasheed as her husband draws boundaries for Laila to limit her activities as his wife, but Laila as a 'subaltern' character has always fought to ask for her rights as a woman. But, it is Mariam, who sacrifices her life by killing Rasheed in order to save Laila from death and get freedom for her. Laila is helped by Mariam to regain her 'agency' and 'individuality' as a woman. Finally, Laila succeeds in marrying Tariq and becoming a teacher in the orphanage.

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