

**The Personal and the Political -  
Critiquing Khaled Hosseini's  
*A Thousand Splendid Suns***

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**Abstract**

Khaled Hosseini's *Thousand Splendid Suns* is a historical saga of the people who brave their domestic struggle with great resilience in the war ravaged Afghanistan. The novel offers several sites of contestation to debate about Politics, religion, culture and patriarchy. The personal struggle is entwined with the national struggle and the study reveals how men and women become the victims of this historical upheaval and assert the supremacy of humanism.

**Keywords:** Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Religious conservatism, Political turmoil, Patriarchy, Ethnic diversity, Education for women

The *Thousand Splendid Suns*, the titular phrase has been taken from the Persian Poet Saeb-e-Tabrizi's poem signifying the beauty of Afghanistan. Predominantly, the novel traces the lives of three women Nana, Mariam and Laila along with two men Rasheed and Tariq who desperately try to define their lives. But women try to champion their struggles with their domestic and political issues. The novel shows the evolution of the Afghan women by re-creation as the political scenario changes and the reaffirmation of their identity. Though the hopes of these Afghan women are crushed by political turmoil and patriarchy, the bonding between them promises that humanism could never diminish till the women inhabit the earth. The thousand splendid suns behind the veils are Afghan's metaphor who continue to preserve the quality of humanity amidst the oppressive situations. The paper analyses how politics, religion and culture has deprived even the basic rights for women and highlights how these ordinary women with the contesting forces of men emerge as radical forces surging ahead to meet the shocking realities of their home and nation.

Nana and Mariam suffers because of religious conservatism and social neglect while Laila suffers due to patriarchal assumptions and political insurgency; The irony of the whole situation is how they remain ignorant of the turbulent political situation and yet it disturbs the

lives of these women. Though the soviet forces, communists, Talib Conservatives dictate the women's submissions, their rebellion is entirely personal. As Kate Millet puts it, Society is an oppressive one, in which all human beings are socializing to strict and limiting sex roles, regardless of their individual potential.(40 )

Mariam is kept behind the veil bearing the abuse of harami when she was six years-old – the time. She did not know what the word harami-bastard meant. Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice; to see that it is the creators of harami, whose only sin is being born.” (4) The little girl Mariam and Nana's life is contrasted with Jalil living happily with three wives and nine legitimate children. Nana stands as a victim to the practice of polygamy licensed by the patriarchal society. Nana's euphoria could be perfectly understood by the humiliations she receives from the neighbourhood and Jalil's wives.

Nana who worked as a housemaid was driven out after hearing about the illegitimate connection with Jalil. Jalil escapes the rancour because religion licences polygamy but Nana was made a social outcast by the rich wives of Jalil. Nana was a devoted wife, but the lack of social and economic recognition turns her insane with her daughter. She feels so worried though we understand Jalil's affection for Mariam. But Jalil fails in his familial obligation to give social honour for the little child Mariam who is mocked as a "harami".

Mariam loves to see the minarets, orchards, wheat fields which her father described during his visits, but their social isolation denies her such delightful sights. The admiration of Mariam for Jalil's description reverted to a bitter sense of betrayal for abandoning her mother and casting her out of his big fancy house. Nana refers to him as 'rich man telling rich lies'. Starting her life as a house maid in Jalil's house, she was just driven out of the house because of her low economic status. But innocent Mariam decides to visit Jalil's house much against Nana's pleading to avoid it. Anticipating the shame and pain that Mariam would undergo in Jalil's house, Nana commits suicide before hearing them. Mariam returns with humiliation to face the corpse of her mother. After her mother's suicide, Mariam remembers Nana's words:

A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing Mariam, It is not like a mother's womb. It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you.'

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.' (7)

Nana anticipates the ugly situations Mariam has to face when she socializes with the outside world. Hence, she does not prefer to send her to school. She denies education for her as the mother believes her education is to learn only one skill and that is tamul – endurance.

Mullah Faizullah, the gaunt, stooping old man with white beard serves as a soul companion and counselor to whom Mariam confides her secret aspirations. She expresses her desire to go to school, a real school and not just to be tutored Quran by the Mullah. She pictured herself in a classroom with other girls of her age, longed to place a ruler on a page and draw important looking line Nana dismisses.' (17)

At the age of fifteen, she is married to Old Rasheed by her illegitimate father's insistence. Jalil is the victim of religious fundamentalism but his unforgivable betrayal to give Mariam in marriage to old Rasheed submitting to the dictates of his wives shocks us. His humanism is killed in his act of denying basic rights for the 15 year old child who believes him. Mariam's stoic endurance which her mother taught her to practice bitterly comes to light. Mariam could see, She [Mariam] was being sent away because she was the walking, breathing embodiment of their shame." (48). But, she does not fail to stab Jalil, "I thought about you all the time. I used to pray that you'd live to be a hundred years old. ...I didn't know that you were ashamed of me." (48)

From rural Afghanistan she moves to liberal reformist Kabul where she is mystified by looking at the modern women. They made her aware of her own linen, her plain look, her lack of aspirations, her ignorance of so many things. But the gift Rasheed gives her is a burqa saying, 'it is to preserve her nang and namoos, their honor and pride'. (69) "Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only." (70) Men had their own moral codes licensed by the Afghan society and these women have to personally confront it. Rasheed who feels burqa is god's gift to preserve the nang and namoos spends his idle time leering at the nude pictures of young girls in pornographic magazines. Justifies, "I have friends who have two, three, four wives. ... what I'm doing now most supremacymen I know would have done long ago." (p. 215) Ironically, Rasheed cared much for her honor and she felt prized by his protectiveness. Treasured and significant. (80) But Mariam's life takes a drastic turn and she dares to challenge and protect herself when she has to share Rasheed with Laila. Rasheed Justifies, "I have friends who have two, three, four wives. ... what I'm doing now most men I know would have done long ago." (p. 215)

The novel unfolds the story of nine year old Laila in Kabul in the year 1987. Her life spans along with the regime of Communists, Soviets and Najibullah.

The life of Laila with Babi has its share of happiness. We understand that as an urban girl, and with Babi's liberal attitude, Laila is encouraged to go to school. Even in later years, he advises Laila, "I know you are still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now. Marriage can wait but education cannot. (114)

Added to his father's affection, Tariq the one-legged boy is her companion for life. Khadim harasses her by spouting warm water which smelled foul and "she yelps, howls and runs home frantically digging her fingers into her scalp, whimpered with disgust". Tariq challenges the ugliness around Laila and removes her veil to see the splendid sun.

But the political situation worsens and Laila learns to live amidst people who 'learned to walk with a milk bottle in one hand and a gun in the other. (174) When they decide to move out of Kabul, Babi recites Saib-e-Tabrizi's poem

One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roof  
Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls. 186

Before they could leave, the house was bombed and Babi dies. Laila was badly hurt, and Rasheed picks her up and the family tends her to wellness. Rasheed's slyness in caring for Laila is revealed sooner when Mariam's life is to be shared by Laila who seeks refuge in Rasheed's house. With much woe and misery of Mariam, Rasheed marries Laila. For the sake of survival, the already impregnated Laila (by Tariq) manipulates the identity of the child Aziza. According to Afghan culture, men are responsible for maintaining discipline in the family. Hence Rasheed was very keen on helping Laila only as his wife and she is trapped within the confines of the walls.

The truant Rasheed plays to impress Laila which results in mockery and humiliation for Mariam. Mariam cries that 'I am too old. Too old for you to do this for me.' He dismisses it as melodramatic and taunts her in front of Laila. "We are city people You and I, but she is a dehati. A village girl...Have you told her Mariam, have you told her that you are a harami? Mariam is shocked to hear the word harami which she despised, and it hits her hard. After a long time, but it hits her too harshly and paralyzes her. He continues, "But she has good qualities. If she were a car, she would be Volga and you a "Benz". (216) And "One would not drive the Benz as he does Volga and its foolish". He outwits Mariam when he says that 'Mariam will be my eyes and ears when I am away" (218) to guard Laila. As Simone De Beauvoir remarks, "The drama of women lies in the conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject and who always regards the self as essential-and the compulsions of the situation in which she is inessential".(207)

Mariam was visibly shaken and gets ready to spit her vengeance and retaliate against Laila and not Rasheed. As Kate Millet explicates in *Sexual Politics*,

Through the multiple advantages of the double standard, the male participates in both worlds, empowered by his superior social and economic resources to play the estranged women against each other as rivals. One might also recognize subsidiary status categories among women: not only is virtue class, but beauty and age as well. (38)

They share the domestic chores but with arrogant command from Mariam; and Laila understands that she has unnecessarily made Mariam and the child of hers as victims. She knew that what she was doing was dishonorable." Dishonorable, disingenuous, and shameful. And spectacularly unfair to Mariam. ... Laila already saw the sacrifices a mother had to make. Virtue was only the first." 219)

In spite of the queasy feelings and endless quarrels, Mariam and Laila shared love, fellowship and developed a personal niche to fight against the brutality of Rasheed, the patriarch. "... 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." (p. 249) On the scale of his religious diktats, Rasheed takes good care of the ladies but never encourages them to live for themselves. In Afghan society, Women are considered as their property and is taken extreme care by them. As Rasheed says, "... I am your husband now, and it falls on me to guard not only your honor but ours .... That is the husband's burden." (223)

Rasheed drifts away from Mariam after the death of their child and expects Laila to fulfill his desire. But Rasheed's disappointment with Laila for bearing a daughter makes him insane and brutal. Women are seen being baneful to the order in the society. Their suggestions are immediately dismissed and feel they are disruptive and unintelligent. Further, he subtly understands that the child belongs to Tariq and throws his fit of anger at everybody. But, for Mariam, "... she marveled at how, after all these years of rattling loose, she had found in this little creature [Aziza] the first true connection in her life of false, failed connections." (252)

The novel identifies as Simone observes that the 'masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid economic and social foundations. (207) Deprived of education and sound economy, even the reproductive or creative experiences of motherhood is dominated by masculine thoughts. Women are seen in the confines of religious fundamentalism and patriarchal perceptions. Nana and Mariam suffers due to these inadequacies of education and economy.

Ethnic diversity influences the relationships of the people and their thoughts and results in inner strife. One finds Rasheed as a Pashtun but yet he Speaks Parsi; Mariam is Tajik and the list is exhausting. But for Laila "To me, it's nonsense—and very dangerous nonsense at that—all this talk of I'm Tajik and you're Pashtun and he's Hazara and she's Uzbek. We're all Afghans, and that's all that should matter." (130)

We understand that sisterhood between two women poses resistance to Rasheed's patriarchal conduct. Though women is treated as a symbol of honour, Afghan men always

conditioned and also protected them. Laila decides to run away seeking a free life and she fondly calls Mariam to leave this wretched life and accompany her for “A new life: a life in which she would find the blessings that Nana had said a harami like her never would see.”. We understand that Rasheed takes care of economic welfare and discusses politics, but women could go out only with a male. Rasheed’s life has been patterned on the exegesis of what his religion has supplied him as moral codes. Gender roles are clearly differentiated, and lines drawn.

But this journey of emancipation did not last long and Rasheed is killed in the eventual fight with them."It seemed worthwhile, if absurdly so, to have endured all they'd endured for this one crowning moment, for this act of defiance that would end the suffering of all indignities"(300) Mariam is executed by the Talibans while Laila joins Tariq. Political scenario changes and Kabul’s penance has arrived too late. (398) Laila rebuilds a tiny part of Afghanistan with a school and a orphanage. Laila reminiscences that “Mariam is never very far, She is here, in these walls they’ve repainted, in the trees they’ve planted...in these pillows and books and pencils. She is in the children’s laughter...But mostly Mariam is in Laila’s own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns”.(402) As Laila pays homage she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back.” (p. 370). This is a great tribute to Mariam.

Tarif, an example of war victim who lost his leg in his young age due to bombing emerges uncrippled with his resilience. After encountering the public taunts and national struggle, he remains steadfast in his love for Laila. His acquaintance with Laila from childhood is fortified stronger till he leaves to Pakistan along with his parents. His indomitable spirit to fight his life becomes successful when Mariam kills Rasheed. This paves way for Laila to resume her life with Tariq and joins her in rebuilding Kabul.His steadfast affection for Laila is contrasted with Rasheed. Though Rasheed features as a man reflecting his society and religion, nang and namos, which actually didnot help his wives to live happily. Humanism fails at the cost of religious fundamentalism and adherence to the patriarchal supremacy.

One finds very kind and reformist characters like Mullah Faizullah who champions the cause of Women education and tutors Mariam with Quran. He often counsels Nana to foresee future of Mariam with good education. We meet Laila's father Hakim who encourages his daughter to remain educated.Though these men adhere to religion ,they are not conservatives.There is much admiration for these men to have surpassed with humanism and accepting a society of gender equity.Any religion places humanism as its major principle upon which foundations are the other things built.We see Laila and Tarif reconstructing a new Kabul.

Tossed by the wave of politics, but with no tall talk about female emancipation and demand for govt policies, these thousand splendid suns behind the veil wage their domestic

battle. Amidst the rattling of guns and tossing of shells in the war-torn country, the angry outbursts of these women is a war cry for change. The novel stands testimony to the social institutions in Afghanistan, the concept of marriage and motherhood, personal rebellions amidst religious conservatism and political conundrum. Mariam and Laila shine as splendid suns representing the glory of humanism. As Khaled Hosseini puts it in postscript, he tried to speak through the novel, the ordinary humanity behind their veils, their hopes, their longings and their disappointments.

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