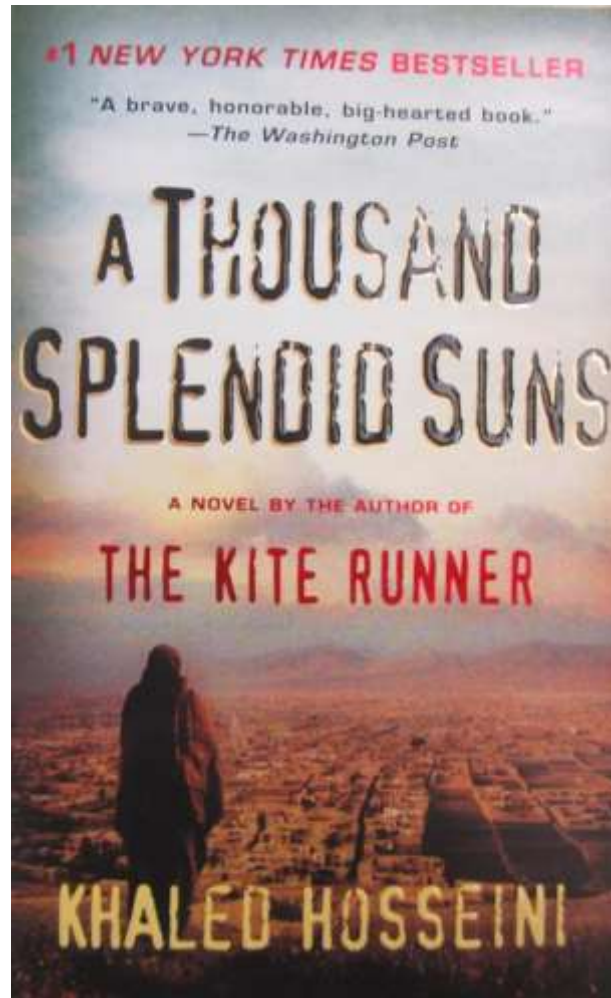


***A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini: A
South Asian Saga of Gender Apartheid and Emancipation**

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Thousand-Splendid-Suns-Khaled-Hosseini/dp/159448385X>

Abstract

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini published in 2007 is a modern epic of woman subjugation within the complex socio-political history of Afghanistan and it is not just-as many readers take it to be- a one dimensional love story or a mother-daughter tale or an imaginative fiction of two struggling Afghan women. In the backdrop of post-Taliban post 9/11 Afghanistan, this novel portrays myriad forms of social, political, cultural or familial injustices that had inexorably been meted out to the Afghan women even before the advent of Taliban regime in the country. Apart from caste and class one of the most prominent issues that the text grippingly engages with is gender apartheid. This paper endeavours to deal with almost all such nuances which contribute to the critical intrigue of the text and attempts to revisit the horrid socio-political past of war-ravaged Afghanistan.

Keywords: Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, subjugation, caste, class, gender apartheid, intrigue, nuances, socio-political past.

Introduction

Wali M. Rahimi the author of *Status of Women: Afghanistan* categorically points out that “The position of women in Afghanistan has traditionally been inferior to that of men. This position has varied according to age, socio-cultural norms and ethnicity. In fact Afghan women, even until the beginning of twentieth century were the slaves of their father, husband, father-in-law and elder brother. Her most valued characteristic was silence and obedience” (6). This observation may faithfully be taken as the preamble of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The novel has inextricably intertwined the personal and the political from the beginning and for this purpose the lives of two women protagonists belonging to two successive generations are yoked together by having their hopes and dreams, sufferings and endurance, struggle to survive, to constitute a family and to find an anchor crucially integrated to the contemporary socio-political turmoil of the land. Afghanistan is not a nation of homogeneous urbanized middle-class people and obviously it is not just Kabul which, in spite of witnessing the severest form of women oppression during the Taliban rule, has relatively been-according to Hosseini- “a hub for female autonomy” (Hosseini 410). On the contrary, rural Afghanistan especially south and east along the border of Pakistan suffers from a stark socio-cultural gap with the liberal reformist Kabul. In these tribal regions the women are traditionally made to suffer lives of confinement, illiteracy, burqa, public beatings, child or forced marriage and servile domestication. Thematically the narrative dwells on the binaries and convergence of the lives of two women protagonists i.e. Mariam and Laila, their mutual endurance and resilience, and finally their emancipations, not unexpectedly, in divergent ways.

Mariam: Uneducated Lower-class Subaltern - Birth and Parentage

Mariam, a bastard girl-child born to a lower-caste mother Nana and upper class/caste father Jalil, is one of the two protagonists whom Hosseini portrays as a representative of the shattered rural Afghan family and the society as well. Mariam’s mother Nana who had once been a maid servant in Jalil’s household happened to get impregnated by Jalil and for that criminal offence on ‘her’ part she had to be marooned in a ‘Kolba’ which is a distant settlement from Jalil’s own lavish apartment inhabited by his three ‘legitimate’ wives and their nine children. Nana is unacknowledged by Jalil, suited then unwedded by a young parakeet seller from Shindand, and finally disowned even by her own father. Jalil who is one of the Herat’s wealthiest and best-connected men, friend of the mayor and the provincial governor, is consistent in adopting the same ‘face-saving deal’ in shedding off his responsibility by settling Nana in a ‘Kolba’ and marrying Mariam off with Rasheed. Whereas Mariam mourns her mother’s death heartily, she immediately severs her relationship with Jalil the first time she realises that her father indeed has always been ashamed of her. “It ends here for you and me. Say your good-byes” (55). Gordan and Almutairi justifiably assert in their article on the novel that “Mariam demonstrates the battles of the Afghan females who live in the conservative/orthodox community and the knowledge she obtained from decades of sustained various sufferings as a woman. They indicate the females who are split between the conventional principles and discovering their personal feeling of self-turned off from community and responsibility” (244).

Educational Experiences

Mariam’s childhood is basically beset with three persons, Nana, Jalil and Mullah Faizullah an elderly village Koran tutor. All of them educate Mariam in their own typical way. Jalil who appeared to be a man of “vast and worldly knowledge”(05) to Mariam always talks to her at length about Persian cultures- writers, painters, and Sufis, about Queen Gauhar Shad who had raised the famous minarets as

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her loving ode to Herat back in the fifteenth century, and about the great poet Jami. He makes Mariam recognize the rich romantic past of her birthplace which, in turn, makes her oblivious of her own bastard origin. However, the ivory tower of her childhood imagination crumbles down as she gets to face the harsh reality because of her own father Jalil. Mullah Faizullah teaches Mariam, in addition to primary reading and writing, the five-time *namaz* prayers and tutors her in Koran recitation. The man tries to empower Mariam spiritually with such knowledge as “God’s words will never betray you” (17). However it is Nana, her mother, whose worldly teachings seem to shape Mariam’s psyche to the maximum extent. She is taught a significant lesson which sounds like a foreboding by her experienced mother “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” (06). While Mariam is desirous of learning in an actual school, in real classroom situation, she is advised by her mother to learn that “There is only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don’t teach it in school...that is *tahamul*, endure” (18). Eventually Mariam proves to be a dedicated student of endurance all through her life until she meets Laila.

Marriage with Rasheed

Mariam’s marriage with Rasheed appears to be in many ways a re-enactment of Nana’s exile in the ‘Kolba’ particularly when Jalil’s role in both the events is considered. It might be coincidental that both the acts lead to the unnatural death of the mother and the daughter. Now Rasheed is that crucial zone where the two women protagonists come in contact with each other and the personal and the political get entangled. An upper class Farsi speaking Pashun of Kabul, Rasheed is a widower who marries Mariam a girl of barely fifteen, only to father, as it appears, a son. He is supremely conscious of his ‘naang and namoos’ i.e. honour and pride and makes no delay in declaring his legacy to the newly wedded bride “But I am a different breed of man, Mariam. 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. I want you to remember that” (69). Hakim, Laila’s father, who allows her wife Fariba walk on the streets all the time without burqa, is deemed by Rasheed as a man having no control of his wife. Rasheed is essentially a familial or domestic version of the Taliban. He makes burqa a compulsory for his wife much before the Taliban does the same for all Afghan women. Mariam is reduced to the stature of a subhuman being by his Taliban-like-force of verbal intimidation. The text bears ample references when Mariam is described as a cat, cockroach, goat or hag. Persecution reaches perhaps its zenith when Rasheed compels Mariam to eat pebbles just for some sort of mistake in cooking on her part. In fact it is Mariam’s inability to deliver a son that actually provokes a staunch male chauvinist like Rasheed to unleash such a violent and inhuman punishment. “Put these in your mouth’...His (Rasheed’s) powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in, his upper lip curled in a sneer. ‘Now chew.’” (102)

Laila: Educated Upper-Middleclass Subaltern

Birth and Parentage

Laila, the other woman-protagonist comes off an upper middle-class liberal Kabul family. Her parents Hakim and Fariba who had once been first cousins got married out of love. Laila’s upbringing marks a stark contrast with that of Mariam. Amidst parental affection and lover’s (Tariq) care, friends’ (Giti, Hasina) cosy company and proximity with enlightened teachers Laila has had a sprightly childhood. Barring her mother’s too much obsessive care for her *jihadi* brothers and her own one or two encounters with Khadim who is later taken care of by Tariq Laila’s childhood is almost a perfect one.

Education

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Two persons Babi, Laila's father and Shanzai, Laila's school teacher has been instrumental in instilling liberal and progressive views in Laila's nature. Babi is sensible enough to perceive that "Women have always had it hard in this country...But they're probably more-free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they have ever had before" (133). A teacher by profession Babi is a conscious civilian who quite pragmatically teaches his daughter that it was perfect time to be woman in Afghanistan and Laila could take advantage of that. He is well aware of the fact that the Tijaks, who are ethnic minority, have always felt slighted as the Psthun kings ruled Afghanistan for almost two hundred and fifty years whereas the Tijaks for all of nine months back in 1929. In spite of this history of deprivation Babi is not an ethnicist and amidst all chaos he can dream of Afghanistan as a nation. It is evident from his views on ethnicism which he shares with her young daughter Laila- "It's nonsense and very dangerous nonsense at that- all this talk of I'm Tijk and you're Psthun and he's Hazara and she's Uzbek. We are all Afghans, and that's all that should matter. But when one group rules over the others for so long ...there's contempt. Rivalry. There is. There always has been" (128). He wants women like Laila to be educated to serve free Afghan nation as he believes that "When the war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, may be even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila" (114). Teacher Shanzai who was upright enough to declare herself as the daughter of a poor peasant from Khost, framed Laila's 'inqilabi' bent of mind with the ways she led her daily life and the radical notions she cultivated. Shanzai strongly believed in gender equality and thought that there had been no reason women should cover if men did not. She internalizes the spirit of patriotism amongst the young students and in Laila it manifests vividly in her final desire to leave the life of seclusion and peace with Tariq in Pakistan for her homeland i.e. Afghanistan.

Marriage with Rasheed: Conglomeration of the Subalterns

War wreaked havoc in Laila's family and altered the course of her life diametrically to the effect of making her orphan and, by a swift and tragic turn of fate, Rasheed's second wife. If Rasheed then a man of sixty devises a plot to father a son by Laila, a girl of barely fourteen, Laila who is already pregnant with Tariq's child, too, has not been schemeless. Therefore, in a number of ways, Laila's installation in Rasheed's household marks the inception of resistance. Rasheed's preference for Laila over Mariam as expressed metaphorically by the terms Benz and Volga for Laila and Mariam respectively is a latent recognition of Laila's schooled 'inqilabi' spirit. Interestingly Mariam who has endured all excruciating pain inflicted upon her by Rasheed without a single word of protest, gets almost metamorphosed by the proximity of Laila and registers her note of dissent for the first time ever in her life although against Laila whom she initially takes to be her contender. However these two subalterns do not delay in identifying their common enemy. Importantly both Laila and Mariam mutually adopt each other's most prized values -Laila's rebelliousness and Mariam's endurance. Laila proves to summit the pinnacle of endurance while she has to undergo a caesarean operation without anaesthesia. She confronts Rasheed at first intellectually, by registering her ideological protest against his empathy for the Talibani oppressive power structures and then physically by making an attempt to escape Rasheed's household and the country as well along with her child and Mariam. That the Taliban state is a direct sponsor to patriarch coercion is obvious from Laila's encounter with the police: "Police officer Rahman: 'As a matter of policy we don't interfere with private family matters, *hamishara*.'

Laila: 'Of course you don't. When it benefits the man'" (260).

Laila is equally critical against the Talibani 'fatwas': "They can't make half the population stay home and do nothing...This isn't some village. This is Kabul. Women here used to practice law and medicine: they held office in the government..." (271). Her unbending spirit of endurance and resilience glitters even more splendidly when she persists on visiting Aziza at the orphanage in spite of being beaten repeatedly by Rasheed and the Taliban militiamen. On the other side Mariam radiates

with the spirit of rebelliousness- a rare quality in her nature- when she blows the fatal strike of the shovel against Rasheed. “It occurred to her that this was the first time she was deciding the course of her own life” (341).

Burqa or Veil

Burqa which perennially occupies centrality in feminist discourse has deliberately been incorporated in the socio-cultural politics of this text. But whereas the obligation of wearing this burqa usually suggests the covert patriarch agenda of objectifying women, the text here reckons quite ironically the ‘comfort factor’ associated with it as expressed by the two women protagonists, Mariam and Laila. Mariam is made to wear burqa for the first time in Rasheed’s house and the physical uneasiness she feels is obvious- “The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen...the loss of peripheral vision is unnerving and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth” (71). Rasheed disapproves of her female customers who bare their feet to get fitted for shoes but he finds no fault in watching obscene magazines. He is careful enough to ask and help her wife wear burqa. It is quite interesting to note that Mariam discovers the comfort factor of the burqa when she is able to see the outer world without being seen through it- “And the burqa, she learned to her surprise, was also comforting. It was like a one way window. Inside it, she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinising eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past” (72). However, ‘modern’ Afghan women whom Mariam comes across in the Chicken Street of Kabul appear to have been exempted from wearing this exclusive female cloth:

“The women in this part of Kabul were a different breed from the women in the poorer neighbourhoods-like the one where she and Rasheed lived where so many women covered fully...modern Afghan women married to modern afghan men who did not mind their wives walked among strangers with makeup on their faces and nothing on their heads” (74).

In Hakim’s family neither his daughter nor his wife wears burqa. Shanzai, Laila’s school-mistress, as mentioned earlier did not care to wear burqa and she encouraged her girl-students not to wear it. Under Taliban threat the lady doctors had to wear burqa even while operating. ““They want us to operate in burqa’ the doctor explained...” (284). The utility of burqa is perhaps more realistically conceived by the women prisoners living in Walayat women’s prison. They are compelled to wear it to avoid the leered gaze of the guards’ there: “... the guards smoked outside the window and leered in, with their inflamed eyes and wolfish smiles ... they muttered indecent jokes to each other about them. Because of this, most of the women wore burqas all day and lifted them only after sundown, after the main gate was locked and the guards had gone to their posts” (352).

Laila’s experience with burqa is quite similar to that of Mariam. In spite of the problems she has to face for it while walking she too seems to love the anonymity it provides. “... she found some comfort in the anonymity that the burqa provided. She would not be recognised this way if she ran into an old acquaintance of hers” (226). Laila is again seen to assert the utility of the burqa when it enables her to hide from Aziza the pangs she feels for having admitted her (Aziza) into an orphanage. Robert J.C Young comments in regard to this ‘veil’ or ‘burqa’ that “For many westerners the veil is a symbol of patriarchal Islamic societies in which women are assumed to be oppressed, subordinated and made invisible. On the other hand, in Islamic societies and among many other Muslim women in non-Islamic societies the veil (hijab) has come to symbolise a cultural and religious identity, and women have increasingly chosen to cover themselves as a matter of choice” (78).

Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini in his novels tends to disturb the traditional political discourse of Afghanistan by speaking out for the first time the unheard history of the subalterns of the land. The two major women protagonists in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* truly epitomise the Western feminists' assumptions of the third-world women which have effectively been encapsulated by Mohanty as: "a group or a category [that] are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious(read 'not progressive'), family oriented (read 'traditional'), legal minors (read 'they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights'), illiterate (read 'ignorant'), domestic (read 'backward') and sometimes revolutionary (read 'their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war-they-must-fight')" (40). The novel therefore sheds light on hitherto the darkest niche of the socio-political reality of Afghanistan in a number of ways. It sketches out the original image of gross patriarchal, misogynist and male-dominated substructures of orthodox Afghan society. Not only as a tragic tale grippingly told *A Thousand Splendid Suns* will ever be read as a faithful historical record of Afghanistan and Afghan people of the time.

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