

# Unheard Women's Voices: Gender Stereotypes In Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns

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## Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) explores the lives of two women, Mariam and Laila, in Afghanistan during a time of political turmoil and gender inequality. The novel provides an important insight into the unheard voices of Afghan women and sheds light on feminist themes. The paper examines the women's struggles and experiences as observed in the novel from a feminist perspective, which inspects how they cope with patriarchal societies. The novel highlights the oppressive conditions faced by women in Afghanistan and the limitations placed upon them due to societal norms and expectations. Hosseini illustrates Afghan women's resilience and strength in the face of immense adversity through Mariam and Laila. The novel gives voice to the unheard experiences of Afghan women and raises awareness about the injustices they endure. Through its exploration of feminism, agency, female solidarity, and intersecting forms of oppression, the novel contributes to a broader understanding of gender inequality and the importance of advocating for women's rights.

Keywords: Afghan women, feminism, subjugation, patriarchy.

## Introduction

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The feminist movement aims to provide equal opportunities, rights, and representation to all genders. Gender inequality and stereotypes' are challenged and dismantled by challenging and dismantling systems of power, privilege, and discrimination. A feminist movement or ideology focuses on women's basic rights. French philosopher and socialist Charles Fourier coined the word 'feminism' in 1837. Feminists aim to create social, cultural, and political equality between both the genders. Initially, the movement began in Europe, followed by France and the Netherlands in 1872, Britain in 1890, and the United States in 1910. Various aspects of female problems are discussed in all three waves of feminism. The first wave of feminism was characterized by the fight for the rights of women to vote and to own property. It took place at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. In the 1960s and 1970s, a second wave of women's rights activism took place when women were strong on the political front and demanded more rights. The right to equal pay is one of the four rights that are included in this category. There are also the rights to be free from sexual and physical violence, to have access to safe and legal abortions, and to receiving higher education. A third wave of feminism emerged in the 1990s, during which issues such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation began to be addressed as part of the feminist movement. Similarly to the second wave, it continued to fight for the same rights and principles that had been set out by the first wave. Feminist theory holds that there is a central focus in literature for representations of women in which the voices of women are predominant.

One can easily grasp the different generations of a society through the use of this theory when reading a literary text set in that society. The following is an excerpt from a book written by Rebecca West in her book 1913:

It is true that I have never been able to figure out what feminism is, only that I know I get called a feminist whenever I express sentiments that distinguish me from

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a doormat or when I express sentiments that are different from the sentiments of others. (121)

Khaled Hosseini is widely regarded as one of the most prominent authors working today. Modern-day Afghanistan is the backdrop of his famous novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). Despite being Afghan women, Mariam and Laila were born two decades apart. Tragic circumstances bring them together. Throughout history, Afghan women have faced the most severe cases of gender inequality in the world. Laila and Mariam discuss feminism and gender equality in the context of their experiences. Women in Afghanistan faced more dire circumstances as the war with the Soviet Union progressed. Many feminists throughout the world were alarmed by the treatment of Afghan women, especially their forced marriages, lack of freedom, loss of identity, lack of space, and mental torment. Liberal principles and equal rights are taboo for Afghan women. One of the key aspects of feminism explored in the novel is the theme of agency. Mariam and Laila navigate their lives in a society where their choices and freedoms are severely restricted. They are subjected to physical and emotional abuse, forced marriages, and subjugation. However, as the story unfolds, both women find ways to assert their agency and make choices that challenge the constraints imposed upon them. Their acts of resistance and defiance demonstrate the resilience of Afghan women and their determination to assert their rights and identities. Another significant feminist theme in the novel is the power of female solidarity. Mariam and Laila develop a deep bond and form an unlikely friendship, supporting each other through their shared experiences. They find solace and strength in their connection, providing emotional support and a sense of unity in the face of adversity. The portrayal of this female friendship emphasizes the importance of solidarity among women and their capacity to empower each other in oppressive circumstances.

All of the novel's female protagonists—Nana, Mariam, Laila, and Aziza—experience male tyranny. Since Mariam is an illegitimate offspring, she and her mother Nana are considered social outcasts. In their remote mountain home, Mariam receives Quran

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instruction from the mysterious 'Mullah Faizullah.' Mariam's dad, Jalil, is a successful movie theatre owner with three exes and eleven kids. He helps Mariam and her mom out financially, but he doesn't want to claim them as his own. He cares deeply for Mariam, but he'd rather not publicly associate his name with her. He tells Mariam that the theatre's picture and sound quality is terrible when she tells him she wants to go to the movies with him. When Mariam persists, he promises to arrange for a ride to the movies. All of Jalil's other kids, including the girls, attend schools and go movie theatres, but Mariam. There is also 'othering,' since Mariam is regarded similarly to other people.

This is true of the vast majority of Afghan females. They weren't given the respect due to actual people. Mariam was plagued by difficulties, which she attributed to external factors. Mariam is correct in attributing Nana's suicide to her forced marriage to Rasheed. After getting married, Mariam relocated to Kabul, the most progressive city in Afghanistan. However, her narcissistic patriarch husband, Rasheed, still kept her under his thumb. When Mariam has several miscarriages, Rasheed turns into a crazed dictator and abuses Mariam at home while she suffers in silence. In a terrible scene, Rasheed forces Mariam to eat stones because he is preoccupied with begetting a male child. This scenario shows the horrors women endure when they are unable to have children. Even before the Taliban mandates that all women wear the burqa, it is Rasheed who demands his wife do so.

This brought the realization that there can be no justice for me, as a Muslim woman as long as patriarchy is justified and upheld in the name Islam. The prevailing interpretations of the sharia do not reflect the values and principles that I hold to be at the core of my faith" (Hosseini, 629).

Mariam treats Laila with the warmth and compassion of a mother. Her own mother is emotionally unstable due to the loss of her two sons in the Afghan civil war. As a result, Laila's idealism and sense of independence are put to the test when she marries Rasheed in order to provide her unborn child a father through Tariq. Rasheed is often insulting them and

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threatening to harm them. Hosseini demonstrates Mariam's struggle to accept Rasheed's cruelty.

It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insult, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat. But after four years of marriage, Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes not ( Hosseini, 97-98).

In this tale set in Afghanistan, women are oppressed by their male countrymen, who dominate society and view women as second-class citizens. Afghanistan's society has long been stereotyped as conservative and traditional, which has contributed to the country's marginalisation. Countless political and religious regimes have had an impact on society, pushing it further and further away from civilization and modern ways of living. The novel emphasises the perilous status of Afghan women. The key element leading to marginalisation is the unstable political climate, which has a profound impact on the status of women in Afghan society. Strict Islamic law was reestablished in Afghanistan while the Taliban were in power. The shocking inequalities against women are laid bare in the directives given to females. The common Afghans appear to be under continual surveillance, with the most severe consequences awaiting them should they deviate even slightly from the ludicrous diktats of the authoritarian authorities.

Attention women: you will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a Mahram, a male relative. If caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home... Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-Akbar. (Hosseini, 270-71)

Afghanistan's future rests on her shoulders because she is the kind of resilient woman who can withstand the onslaught of any terrible guy sent to destroy her and the people and things she holds dear.

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From that point on, she and Mariam are the targets of his verbal and physical abuse at home. The Taliban subject Laila to the lowest type of humiliation imaginable. The author creates a formidable female protagonist in Laila. Mariam is only encouraged to gain the strength to fight back and murder Rasheed by her presence and encouragement. The following judge's statement provides insight into the way Muslim males view women. By the end of the book, Laila had accomplished everything she set out to do. Mariam and Laila's friendship brings them comfort and joy. Because of the confidence they have in each other, they are able to let go of their mental and physical anguish, which strengthens their bond.

Almost ten years. But for a moment, standing there with Tariq in the sunlight, it was as though those years had never happened. Her parents' death, her marriage to Rasheed, the killing, the rockers, the Taliban, the beatings, the hunger, even her children, all of it seemed like a dream, a bizarre detour, a mere interlude between that last afternoon together and this moment. (Hosseini, 333)

The concept of a patriarchal society is a central theme that underlines the power dynamics and gender roles prevalent in Afghan culture. Women in a patriarchal society are typically consigned to duties of servitude and have little say in political or economic matters. This societal structure is deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and religious beliefs, and it shapes the interactions, expectations, and opportunities of men and women. "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam." (43) The line encapsulates the essence of how patriarchal norms manifest. The metaphor of a compass needle implies that no matter the situation, blame is consistently directed towards women. This highlights the prevalent tendency to assign responsibility to women even when they might not be at fault. It reflects the belief that women are somehow inherently responsible for the problems or conflicts that arise in society. The quote reinforces the unequal power dynamic between men and women. Men are portrayed as the accusers, those with authority, while women are

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seen as passive recipients of blame. This perpetuates the idea that men's opinions and judgments hold more weight than those of women. It also touches on the stereotype that women are somehow more prone to making mistakes or causing problems. By implying that men's fingers are always pointing at women, the message is reinforced that women are always the scapegoats. The novel at the existence of double standards in the society portrayed in the novel. Men might engage in harmful behaviors or actions, but the blame is often shifted to women. This showcases the societal acceptance of men's actions and the expectation that women should bear the consequences.

Laila has agency over her life when she begins to make decisions that are in line with her goals. For example, Laila decides to go back to school despite having a rocky relationship with Rasheed and experiencing the horrors of war in order to fulfil her lifelong goal of becoming a teacher. Her determination is illustrated when she says, "I will go to the university. I will study, I will learn to read books, and I will speak better, much better, than that ignorant crook who calls himself president. Then I'll teach, and I won't have to sleep with anyone for my keep." (121) This declaration reflects her resilience in the face of adversity and her determination to reshape her future despite the constraints of her society. Throughout the novel, both Mariam and Laila's stories are marked by instances of resilience, courage, and the gradual empowerment they achieve despite the challenges posed by their patriarchal society and the turbulent times they live in.

The novel shows how the status of women varies across the world. The reader of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* can easily confront the change and adjustments in the position of the woman because much of the novel takes place in Kabul, a city that retraces the popular political alterations that took place there. When Mariam was relocated to Kabul and coerced into marrying Rasheed, she witnessed firsthand all the transformations that had taken place in the city. She found many aspects of contemporary life astounding, particularly from a female perspective: women could wear whatever they liked in terms of fashion, they could

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venture out into the city and explore on their own, they could go without wearing a head covering, they could drive, they could work, and they could even hold professional positions. In Afghanistan, this era is remembered as the most fascinating, especially for women, who experienced unprecedented levels of personal freedom. During this time, the Soviet Union ruled over Afghanistan and its citizens. All kinds of women's liberties can flourish throughout this time. Women were afforded equal opportunities in education. Their educational path was charted out for them throughout the communist era. For the benefit of women, equality has been imposed and disseminated across the country, guaranteeing them the same access to education as men. Because of the widespread belief in the equality of the sexes, covering one's hair and body in the form of a hijab or burqa was never mandated for women.

In 1996, when the Taliban took control of the city, many protections for women were eliminated. The rights of women have been severely curtailed and regulated. They are stigmatised, mistreated, and confined to their houses because they are not permitted to leave the house or go for walks outside unless accompanied by a male relative. The right to an education and the ability to work are no longer available to women. As a result, ninety percentage of Afghan women are illiterate at present. Since the Taliban retook power in Afghanistan in August 2021, they have reinstated the previous government's discriminatory policies on women. The new government shut down secondary schools for girls, thereby limiting their access to education. They made it hard for girls and women to get degrees and worked hard to keep them out of the workforce. The Ministry for Women's Affairs was eliminated by the new administration. Also, they made it so that women couldn't go outside of the country without a male guardian. They also made an effort to stifle female journalists and outlawed female participation in sports. In addition, the male-dominated Afghan government has not changed its ways and continues to violate the basic rights of women. War, political unrest, and sexism all have devastating impacts

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on the lives of the novel's female protagonists. He looks closely at the prejudice and harshness that female characters face and feels deeply for them. Also, it's sad to think that at an era when people all over the world are calling for gender equality, this country is imprisoning its women in the name of religious law.

Overall, the novel exemplifies how deeply ingrained patriarchal norms operate within the world of the novel. Women are seen as vulnerable targets for blame, while men hold the power to make accusations and judgments. The quote illustrates how this unequal distribution of power and responsibility perpetuates the cycle of gender inequality and reinforces the limitations placed on women's agency and autonomy. Through this portrayal, the novel sheds light on the challenges women face in a society where they are often held accountable for problems beyond their control, further highlighting the need for societal change and women's empowerment.

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