

## The Role of Feminism in Confronting the Patriarchal Society in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by Khaled Hosseini

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### Abstract:

This research unveils the raw and unyielding endurance of Afghan women as depicted in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It exposes the brutal reality of a patriarchal and religiously entrenched system that not only subjugates but systematically devastates women's lives. This study reveals the dark side of male dominance that controls and exploits the female. Women are trying to eliminate gender classism, and the term endurance resonates strongly within this struggle. Many women find themselves confined within a space of endless endurance because the majority of women suffer from inequality and can't get absolute freedom. The protagonists Mariam and Laila exemplify lives marked by such endurance, leading us to choose this title *The Endurance of Two Women in Afghan Society*. The main turning point is when Mariam decides to kill Rasheed, a decision she made alone without any man interfering in it. The study's aim is to critically examine the entrenched marginalization of Afghan women through the lens of feminist theory and Elaine Showalter's Insights. By dissecting *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, we expose the patriarchal mechanisms upheld by political, social, and religious institutions that deny women their fundamental rights. This paper shows the struggles of women to survive and free themselves from the suffocating constraint of persecution and violence. Mariam obtained her freedom, and rights, and became self-sufficient only when she had hit her husband. Her death represents the turning point of Laila's life by giving her the power and the freedom to make her own decision.

Keywords: (Feminism, endurance, society, discrimination, patriarchal).

## دور النسوية في مواجهة المجتمع الذكوري في رواية ألف شمس مشرقة لخالد حسيني

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### المخلص:

يكشف هذا البحث عن قدرة تحمل المرأة الأفغانية الخام التي لا تلين كما صورها خالد حسيني في رواية ألف شمس ساطعة. ويكشف عن الواقع الوحشي للنظام الذكوري المتأصل دينياً والذي لا يخضع حياة النساء فحسب بل ويدمرها بشكل منهجي. تكشف هذه الدراسة عن الجانب المظلم لهيمنة الذكور التي تسيطر على النساء وتستغلن. تحاول النساء القضاء على الطبقة بين الجنسين، ويتردد صدى القدرة على التحمل بقوة مع هذا النضال. تجد العديد من النساء أنفسهن محصورات في مساحة من القدرة على التحمل التي لا نهاية لها لأن غالبية النساء يعانين من عدم المساواة ولا يمكنهن الحصول على الحرية المطلقة. تجسد البطلتان مريم وليلى حياة تتميز بمثل هذا التحمل، مما دفعنا إلى اختيار هذا العنوان. نقطة التحول الرئيسية هي عندما تقرر مريم قتل رشيد، وهو القرار الذي اتخذته بمفردها دون تدخل أي رجل. تهدف الدراسة إلى فحص التهميش المترسخ للمرأة الأفغانية من خلال عدسة النظرية النسوية ورؤى إيلين شوولتر. من خلال تفصيل رواية ألف شمس ساطعة، تكشف عن الآليات الذكورية التي تدعمها المؤسسات السياسية والاجتماعية والدينية التي تحرم النساء من حقوقهن الأساسية. تُظهر هذه الورقة كفاح النساء من أجل البقاء وتحرير أنفسهن من القيود الخانقة المتمثلة في الاضطهاد والعنف. حصلت مريم على حريتها وحقوقها، وأصبحت مكتفية ذاتياً فقط عندما ضربت زوجها. يمثل موتها نقطة تحول في حياة ليلي من خلال منحها القوة والحرية لاتخاذ قراراتها بنفسها. الكلمات المفتاحية: (النسوية، التحمل، المجتمع، التمييز، الذكورية).

### 1. Introduction

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini (2007) delves into the experiences of Afghan Muslim women and their adherence to social and cultural conventions prevailing in a predominantly Muslim nation. Through the narrative, the challenges faced by women in Afghan society and culture are vividly portrayed. The central characters, Mariam and Laila, undergo different life experiences initially, but their suffering intensifies due to the impact of the

Afghan war and the rule of the Taliban. This analysis focuses on the resistance of these female characters against the oppression embedded in patriarchal societies. The research aims to delve into the oppression faced by women and the hurdles encountered by the main female characters as they stand up against the oppression by male figures as depicted in the novel. The book illustrates how the rigid and unwelcoming religious beliefs prevalent in Afghanistan impede the progress and exposure of women in society. The significant Muslim presence in Afghanistan highlights certain factions' ambitions to govern the country based on Islamic principles, with laws exerting a powerful influence on women's lives. The novel portrays these laws as discriminatory against women, forbidding them from pursuing education and employment, as well as from venturing outside without male accompaniment. These restrictions are commonly known as Taliban laws, and the discrimination experienced by women in society is attributed to patriarchal norms, rather than solely to Taliban legislation.

### 1.1 Overview of the novel

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a novel that is based on real events. The book narrates the experiences of two women, Mariam and Laila, and sheds light on the terrible hardships they faced in a society where men held complete authority enforced by religious prejudice. Hosseini also depicts their social standing and the prevalent violence in the Afghan society where these women reside. The author seeks to convey the unique attributes of the era when women were oppressed in all aspects of their lives. This is a very pertinent narrative about a

war devoid of romanticism; it does not focus on the traditional heroes of war, but instead on the heroic spirits of women. It is a profound insight that pertains to everyone, irrespective of gender. The suffering within contemporary society, within a single nation, and within the hearts of mothers creates a hauntingly melancholic undertone throughout the story. The storyline captures the Oriental themes of prayer and a war-torn Afghanistan. This piece introduces us to the author's style: Hosseini's novels abound with descriptions of Afghanistan, as most of his literary works are set in this country. The novel under examination is no exception and is rich with Afghan phrases that are occasionally directly explained: "Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the harami who are culpable, not the harami, whose only sin is being born" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 4). The reader is introduced to the term "harami" - which means "bastard". This highlights the fact that from the start, Mariam was not a wanted child; in addition, she was a girl, symbolizing a certain vulnerability. The use of this term sets the tone. "There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school... Only one skill. And it's this: tahamul. Endure... It's our lot in life, Mariam" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 12). Hence, we observe that the stereotype of a woman's worthlessness is instilled from early childhood, often by the mothers of these young girls. It is passed from mother to daughter: self-hatred, insignificance, and subservience.

## 1.2 Representation of Women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Hosseini aims to acquaint readers with the emotional impact of the intricate destinies of women from lower social classes. Right from the start, the author immerses us in Mariam's world, a young girl living with her unmarried mother in the outskirts of heart, illustrating the sorrowful nature of Mariam's life. Her mother is afflicted by epilepsy, and the girl lives each day longing to meet her father, who manages the Herat Cinema Station, and yearning to be acknowledged as part of her father's household. "What's the point of educating a girl like you? It's like polishing a spittoon. There's only one skill a woman like you and me needs... tahamul. Endure" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 12). During that period, girls were not allowed to receive an education because it was believed that gaining knowledge would lead to freedom. Nana expresses these thoughts when she discovers Mariam's desire to attend school. Although it was expected for women, such as Jalil's other daughters, to pursue higher education, Nana did not see the value in it. Eventually, education for women became unavailable under the Taliban rule, regardless of their social standing. Even before the Taliban gained power in Afghanistan, Mariam's father, who lacked empathy, never considered the possibility of her seeking education. Following her mother's suicide, Mariam, the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy man ashamed of her existence, quickly entered into a marriage with the much older shoemaker, Rasheed. Their relationship deteriorated after Mariam experienced a miscarriage, which was considered a tragedy in a society where women were primarily valued for childbirth. Rasheed grew increasingly despondent over his wife's inability to bear a child, particularly a son, which was crucial for

showcasing his manliness and providing an heir. Consequently, their marriage became more strained, leading to Rasheed 's volatile and irritable behavior, as the societal expectation was for women to bear children and manage the household, a role that Mariam was not fulfilling. As expressed in the novel by Hosseini (2007, p. 41), "to see a man who's lost control of his wife." In the context of Mariam and Rasheed's marriage, traditional gender roles and male dominance are underscored by societal expectations that women must bear children, especially sons. Rasheed's abusive behavior intensifies as he becomes increasingly frustrated with Mariam's inability to conceive, reflecting the belief that a woman's value lies in her fertility and a man's honor in producing an heir. This dynamic exemplifies how deeply ingrained cultural norms can lead to domestic abuse, as Rasheed's oppressive and demeaning treatment of Mariam is a manifestation of his need to assert control over her, highlighting the broader implications of gender inequality in shaping relationships and individual lives. By forcing Mariam to wear a veil and treating her with contempt, Rasheed exposes her to mockery and insults: "...walking past her as if she were nothing but a house cat" (Hosseini, 2007, p.55). Mariam lives in constant fear due to the psychological dehumanization she experiences at the hands of her husband, Rasheed, leaving her stripped of her dignity and autonomy, reduced to the status of a mere possession. Such treatment reflects a broader societal issue where women are often seen as objects to be owned, rather than as individuals with their rights and identities. The impact of this dehumanization on Mariam is profound, leading her to internalize feelings of

worthlessness and helplessness, reinforcing the belief that she is undeserving of respect or kindness. This psychological abuse deepens her sense of isolation and despair, trapping her in a cycle of self-devaluation.

“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 try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not” (Hosseini, 2007, p.56). The lack of a woman's right to object or vote is acknowledged. The author illustrates how Mariam remains resilient and hopeful despite the challenges in her life. Hosseini vividly depicts the societal expectations placed on women as primarily child bearers. Laila, the daughter of Mariam's neighbor, is another central character who was raised in a liberal environment with a caring father. Her father, a man of faith and love, was devoted to her well-being and education. “I know you’re still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now... Marriage can wait, education cannot” (Hosseini, 2007, p. 63). The progressive and forward-thinking stance on women's rights demonstrated by Laila's father's advice sharply contrasts with the prevailing norms of his time. This wisdom highlights the profound impact of education as a catalyst for empowerment and self-realization. Education is undeniably the initial step toward self-realization in society. Throughout history, the education of Muslim girls has often been limited to rudimentary skills, confining them to roles deemed appropriate within their societal framework. However, the expansion

of these educational boundaries represents a broader societal shift, providing Muslim women with access to some of the world's most esteemed academic institutions. This shift symbolizes not only a change in educational opportunities but also a redefinition of the roles women can aspire to within society. The life of another character in the novel, Laila, who becomes Rasheed's second wife, takes an even sharper path to collapse the fate of Laila epitomizes the harsh reality faced by many women subjected to oppressive circumstances. The transition from an optimistic young girl to a woman confined in a stifling marriage underscores the harmful consequences of preventing women from pursuing their aspirations and education. Her narrative acts as a powerful indication of the importance of emphasizing education as a tool for freedom and self-discovery. By valuing education over marriage, Laila's father represents a forward-thinking outlook and fairness, demonstrating the influential role of education in empowering women and confronting the limitations imposed by patriarchal standards.



The daughter of an intellectual who values education, Laila feels her life is shattered when a rocket hits her home. In the novel, women like Laila are rare and often leave Afghanistan, whether under Taliban rule or after. Unlike Mariam, who faced oppression due to unfortunate circumstances, Laila had the freedom to pursue education and independence. Laila, who was educated, never interacted with Mariam, who was not: "... passed Rasheed, the shoemaker, with his burka-clad wife, Mariam, in tow" (Hosseini, 2007, p.91). The novel portrays Afghan men as focused on serving and defending their country, seemingly oblivious to the oppression their wives endure. Despite their husbands' abuse and terror, Laila and Mariam's acquaintance blossoms into a strong friendship: "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. If she stayed, would this be her own face, Laila wondered?" (Hosseini, 2007, p.13).

The female protagonists in the novel, much like many Afghan women, are often portrayed as victims. Mariam is aware of this and her insight helps her reconcile with her own mother. Interestingly, this demonstrates how Mariam takes on a maternal role for Laila, guiding and protecting her. A poignant moment in the story is the murder of Mariam's husband. Similar to many victims of domestic abuse, Mariam blames herself for the male aggression and mistreatment. It takes her a long time to find peace within herself and gather the courage to confront him: "Was she ever a dishonest wife?"

Neglectful? Had she ever let him down? Had she ever been undeserving of his love? Had she ever given him a reason to doubt her? The truth was she never asked for anything. She never asked anything of him" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 181). Ultimately, Mariam's sacrifice and bravery reveal the complex interplay between victimhood and resistance. Her life, marked by struggle and endurance, underscores the harsh realities faced by women in patriarchal societies, and her ultimate act of defiance becomes a testament to her strength and resilience. Laila's life, though initially contrasting with Mariam's, intertwines with Mariam's through shared suffering and solidarity. Laila's experiences further illustrate the limitations imposed on women by societal norms and the impact of war on their lives. As the narrative unfolds, both women find strength in their bond, challenging the oppressive structures that seek to confine them. In summary, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* presents a poignant exploration of Afghan women's lives, highlighting their resilience in the face of systemic oppression. Through the characters of Mariam and Laila, Hosseini provides a compelling critique of gender inequality and the enduring spirit of women who, despite immense hardships, strive for a semblance of hope and dignity.

## 2. Literature Review

The survey of published works in a specific field of study or research, often over a set period, is termed as a literature review. It includes a detailed critical evaluation of the bibliography or a list that emphasizes the most important works (Ali & Malik, 2023, p. 16-31). It can encompass the collection of

scholarly works associated with a topic, summarizing and analyzing previous research on that topic, which may consist of scholarly books or articles in a research paper. Literature reviews aid in gathering ideas or information and formulating new research inquiries (Kennedy, 2007, pp. 139-147). In the article *Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns: A Saga of Afghanistan*, Farhana Yeasmin discusses how it depicts the suffering of the Afghan people under various invasions and wars, covering events from the Soviet invasion to the Taliban's rule. The story follows the lives of Mariam and Laila, two female characters who grapple with adversity while holding onto hope for freedom. Yeasmin highlights their challenge of societal gender norms, reevaluation of their rights, pursuit of empowerment, and the resilience they demonstrate in the face of daunting trials. Additionally, her scholarship delves into Afghanistan's history, examining its social, political, and cultural dimensions (Yeasmin, 2020, p. 381-390). The novel is said to provide a portrayal of Afghan society's history, culture, and social life, illustrating the challenges faced by people in the face of violence and degradation. The author presents the novel as an accurate depiction of the remarkable lives of two characters who confront oppression in a male-dominated society, showcasing the resilience of women in enduring repressive actions (Yeasmin, 2020, p. 389). Their study delves into how the community reacts to the consequences of a shift in power. Likewise, the article on post-colonialism and feminist perspectives, titled *Resistance: A Facet of Post-colonialism in Women Characters of Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns*, explores

*women's resistance to suffering*. The authors specifically focus on how women in their society and culture defy gender oppression and endure pain, choosing the novel because it highlights the struggles of Afghan women irrespective of their social status and their quest for individual significance. The analysis conducted by Gordan & Almutairi (2013, p. 240-247) focuses on two main characters, Mariam and Laila. They explore themes such as women's defiance and internal struggles. Their findings illustrate the challenges women face in conforming to societal expectations while also forging their own identities. The researchers also examine the traditional roles and portrayal of Afghan women in the novel, emphasizing their reliance on male figures such as fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons. Dr. Deepti Dharmani's article, *Women as Nation in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns*, delves into how the author depicts women as a collective entity in the novel. Dharmani discusses the impact of political upheavals like the Soviet invasion, wars, Taliban rule, and American intervention on the lives of Afghan women. The novel illustrates the resilience and steadfastness of the entire nation through its female characters. Hosseini's perspective, as argued by Dharmani, is that women's suffering is intertwined with the nation's suffering. In the novel, the focus is on the experiences of two Afghan women as they navigate life in their country, depicting both traditional and modern aspects of womanhood. The narrative is centered on their challenges and their defiance against oppression. Dharmani emphasizes that as women endure and stand up against suffering, the nation also demonstrates resilience (Dharmani,

2018, p. 212).

### 3. The impact of Marginalization Within Afghan Society

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-American novelist, was born on March 4, 1965, in Kabul, Afghanistan. Hosseini's family relocated to the United States in 1980 after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He pursued a medical career, earning a medical degree from the University of California, San Diego, but found his true calling in writing. His debut novel, *The Kite Runner*, became an international bestseller, followed by *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *the Mountains Echoed*. Hosseini's second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is taken for the present study to delineate the factors that marginalize the Afghan women through the social, political and religious restrictions unwillingly forced upon them in reality. Hosseini explores the present state of social exclusion of the Afghan women through the characters of Mariam and Laila in the novel. "Hosseini's writing makes our hearts ache, our stomachs clench, and our emotions reel." *"USA Today"*. "In patriarchy, women are seen as weak humans" (Tyson, 1999, p. 83). They do not have the power to fight and solve life's problems. This mindset makes women weak and sometimes shapes their thinking, personality, and behavior to make them inferior to men. The novel covers three decades of anti-Soviet jihad, civil war and Taliban tyranny seen from the perspectives of two women. Mariam is the scorned illegitimate daughter of a wealthy businessman, forced at age fifteen into marrying Rasheed, who grows increasingly brutal when she fails to produce a

child. Eighteen years later, Rasheed takes another wife, fourteen year-old Laila, a smart and spirited girl who's only other options, after her parents are killed by rocket fire, is prostitution or starvation. Mariam and Laila become allies in a battle with Rasheed, whose violent abuse is endorsed by custom and law. The author gives a forceful portrait of despotism where women are dependent on fathers, husbands and especially sons. The bearing of male children being their only path to an accepted social status. Each woman in the end is forced to accept a path that will never be completely happy for them: Mariam will have to sacrifice her life to save Laila after she murders their husband while Laila, even though marrying her childhood love, must find a way to keep the sacrifice. Born a generation apart and with very different ideas about love and family, Mariam and Laila are two women brought jarringly together by war, loss and fate. As they endure the ever escalating dangers around them, in their home as well as in the streets of Kabul. They come to form a bond that makes them both sisters and mother-daughter to each other, and that will ultimately alter the course not just of their own lives but of the next generation. With heart-wrenching power and suspense, Hosseini shows how a woman's love for her family can push her to the edge, driving her to make shocking and heroic sacrifices. He brings to life the deep, all-consuming love that propels her to do whatever it takes to protect those she cares about, even when it means giving up everything. This love isn't just a source of strength it's a lifeline in the darkest times, holding her together when everything else falls apart. Even when faced with impossible

challenges, it's this love or the memory of it that keeps her going, providing the will to survive against all odds.

This research holds significance as an attempt to understand the experiences of Afghan women from 1978 to 2003, contextualized within the framework of class and gender constructions influenced by the local culture of patriarchy. Based on the descriptions of repression, violence, and atrocities endured by Afghan women, this research addresses two primary questions : how do the experiences of Mariam and Laila in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* reflect the impact of marginalization within Afghan society? and what are the specific social, political, and religious factors that contribute to their marginalization?

The term marginalization is referred to the social process by which a person or a group of people are made marginal or become relegated to the fringe or edge of society. It occurs when people are pushed to the edge of a society, usually as an effect of discrimination, making them stand out and look different from everybody else. Consequently, they feel alone and left out from the rest of society. Iris Marion Young remarks "Some people exercise their capacities under the control according to the purposes and for the benefit of other people" (2008, p. 49). "people are marginalized from society in order to be exploited" (Young, 2008, p.50). Marginalization creeps into the minds of people of various nations due to different reasons in different periods. For example, Africans were marginalized by Americans because of their color, while Indians were discriminated against among themselves

based on the community they were born into. Similarly, women in Afghanistan were marginalized by the opposite gender in their own nation due to the pervasive prevalence of patriarchal attitudes in all aspects of life. This form of oppression is faced by both Mariam and Laila. Mariam as discussed, is the illegitimate child of her father and is described by the very offensive term "harami" by society even her mother uses this derogatory word to address her. This situation is indeed very distressing. Mariam is also exiled by her father after being forcibly married to Rasheed. Her misery is reflected in the lines, "Mariam is born as harami, a harami was an unwanted thing; that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance" (Hosseini, 2007, p.4). This label of "harami" has certainly marginalized her. She cannot enjoy the same freedoms as others in the novel. She constantly suffers under her husband's patriarchal control and aggression. Rasheed considers her a repulsive creature blaming her for all the miscarriages she has suffered and leaving no stone unturned to marginalize her. Rasheed remarks that "all that she has given him in the marriage is only bad food" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 119). It is unfair to marginalize a woman for being unable to bear a son or for being illegitimate like Mariam.

In Afghanistan, the arrival of the Taliban led to the complete alienation of women. Their right to seek education was denied under such, tyrannical and conservative rule, as woman's education was deemed entirely un-Islamic. Women were not allowed to leave their homes for any academic pursuit.



Hosseini mentions this attempt to prevent girls from attending school: "girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 45). This restriction subjugates and marginalizes women in all aspects of life, whether at home or outside. Some girls, like Aziza, still pursue education but must ensure that the Taliban does not see them while doing homework, as evidenced by Aziza saying "but we have to pull the curtains, so the Taliban does not see us" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 312). This situation is distressing, as children like Aziza should not grow up under such fear. Mariam and Laila really believe in the importance of knowledge as seen from the novel. Laila's father Hakim was a firm believer in the fact that education to woman will empower her always. Mariam completely desired to place a ruler on a page and draw some important looking lines. Iris Young suggests that a systematic violence occurs when members of a group learn to live with the fear of attacks with no intention but damaging, humiliating, or destroying the person (Young, 2008, p. 61). Mariam suffers greatly from the excruciating distress caused by her violent husband, Rasheed. This violence is evident in the following passage:

"Get up," he said. "Come here. Get up." He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it. "Put these in your mouth." "Stop it, Rasheed, I'm\_" His 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," he said  
(Hosseini, 2008, p. 110).

Rasheed's hostility and violence towards Mariam illustrate that men often target their wives as outlets for their unchecked wrath. The novel's depiction of this abuse evokes sympathy for Mariam in readers. This is further emphasized in the passage: "Had she ever been a deceitful wife?" she asked herself. "A complacent wife. A dishonorable woman? Discreditable? Vulgar? What harmful thing had she willfully done to this man to warrant his malice, his continual assaults, the relish with which he tormented her?" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 331). This mistreatment of women by men, as portrayed by Rasheed's actions, is reminiscent of the Taliban's harsh and indifferent attitude towards women. Women under the Taliban, even those desiring to provide their children with a good education, face severe repercussions. Also, Rasheed's preferential treatment of his son Zalmai over his daughter Aziza further exemplifies the gender discrimination inherent in this patriarchal society. During a drought under Taliban rule, Rasheed sends Aziza to an orphanage while Zalmai remains at home with all comforts, highlighting the preference for male children.

### 3.1 Discrimination Against Afghan Women

Iris Young defines powerlessness as the lack of authority or power, a condition where individuals are unable to resist unjust treatment (Young, 2008, p. 52). In Khaled Hosseini's novel, this oppressive powerlessness and

marginalization is starkly evident in the lives of Mariam and Laila. Both women are subjected to severe marginalization under the patriarchal dominance of Rasheed. Mariam is trapped by Rasheed's cruel indifference and abuse, while Laila, in a desperate bid to emancipate herself, Mariam, and her daughter Aziza, attempts to escape to Pakistan. However, they are apprehended at the bus station, leading to Rasheed's brutal retaliation: he starves them and holds them captive, stripping them of any semblance of power. This harrowing situation is depicted in the novel: "Azan rang out a second time and still Rasheed had not given them any food, and worse, no water. That day, a thick, suffocating heat fell on them. The room turned into a pressure cooker" (Hosseini,2007,p. 288).

The Taliban's harsh policies deepen the systemic oppression of women, preventing them from working and denying their financial independence, claiming it conflicts with Islamic Sharia. This institutionalized misogyny makes women economically dependent on men. Despite Laila's education and qualifications, Rasheed, reflecting the Taliban's oppressive views, forces her into a life of poverty and helplessness, preventing her from supporting herself and her daughter. The novel captures this enforced dependency: "We get mothers like you all the time - all the time - mothers who come here, who cannot feed their children because the Taliban won't let them go out and make a living. So you don't blame yourself. No one here blames you. I understand" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 249). Rasheed exerts control through physical and psychological abuse, backed by a government that mirrors his patriarchal

tyranny. His confidence in the state's support for his actions underscores the systemic nature of women's oppression. Rasheed's threats expose the societal and legal endorsement of male dominance: "You try this again and I will find you [...] And, when I do, there is not a court in this Godforsaken country that will hold me accountable" (Hosseini,2007, p.147). This profound marginalization of women, reinforced by domestic abuse and institutional policies, highlights the pervasive patriarchal structures that strip women of their autonomy and humanity. Now turning our attention to the second primary question, what are the specific social political, and religious factors that contribute to their marginalization?

In her influential essay "*The Second Sex*," Simone de Beauvoir discusses the various roles that women are expected to fulfill in society. She identifies three major functions of bourgeois women: wife, mother, and entertainer. Despite the prestige of their households, these roles often leave women feeling incomplete and profoundly frustrated. As wives and mothers, women are expected to bear children, care for them, and educate them. While families celebrate women who give birth to sons, those who have daughters often face oppression and lose the respect and care they once had.

The ability for Mariam's father and her husband, Rasheed, to engage in multiple marriages without repercussion is indicative of a society where women disproportionately bear the physical and mental burden of such arrangements. Their silent acceptance of these injustices not only devastates

the affected individuals but also undermines the peace and happiness of the entire family, reflecting the dominance of males in the society. An example of this is Rasheed coercing Mariam and Laila to acquiesce to his decision to marry Laila, despite the significant age gap and while Mariam is recovering from grave injuries and the loss of her parents due to the civil war. This violates personal laws and reflects polygyny for Rasheed's own comfort (Hosseini, 2007, p. 208). Furthermore, the political realm emerges as an area where women's freedom can be advanced more than in religious and societal domains. Political influence has played a significant role in addressing discrimination against Afghan women, surpassing the impact of social and religious norms both historically and in the progress of the novel. While the novel initially portrays a period of progress in Afghanistan in 1964, when a republic was established under President Daud Khan, providing women with rights to education, freedom to remove the burqa voluntarily, and opportunities for work, the subsequent chapters mainly illustrate the harsh realities of war and suffering experienced during the reign of the Soviets, the Mujahideen, and the Taliban.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* has portrayed the problems of political dominance on a larger scale and the suffering of its people living under various political regimes such as the Soviets, the Mujahideen, and the Taliban. The novel provides a clear picture of the political injustice throughout Afghanistan. The experiences of Afghan women have varied greatly through different periods of conflict. During the Soviet invasion (1979-1989), women endured severe

abuses such as torture and rape as part of efforts to extract information, although some basic freedoms were maintained in urban areas. The Mujahideen's rule, which followed the Soviet withdrawal, brought a mix of progress and oppression. Women had opportunities to work and receive an education under the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani, but the ongoing civil war led to widespread human rights abuses, with varying degrees of freedom under different Mujahideen leaders. The most oppressive period came with the Taliban's rule from 1996 to 2001, during which women faced a harsh regime of gender apartheid, losing their rights to work, education, healthcare, and mobility, and enduring severe restrictions under a strict fundamentalist ideology.

The workforce, schools, and universities were off-limits to women under the rule of the Taliban. Women were not allowed to go out without a close male relative, and they were required to wear the burqa. Women and girls were denied healthcare as female doctors were prohibited from working. Despite international condemnation, slight changes occurred, such as a few women doctors being allowed to work and secret home schools for girls operating in Kabul. This is reflected in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* where Kaka Zaman secretly teaches girls at the orphanage. "Aziza said Kaka Zaman made it a point to teach them something every day, reading and writing most days, sometimes geography, a bit of science, something about plants, animals. 'But we have to pull the curtains,' Aziza said, 'so the Taliban don't see us.' Kaka Zaman had knitting and balls yarn ready, she said, in case of a Taliban

inspection. ‘we put the books away and pretend to knit’” (Hosseini, 2007, p.166). From age eight, women were not allowed direct contact with men outside close relatives. Women were forbidden from appearing in public without a burqa and a male relative. Other restrictions included banning women from speaking loudly in public, painting over windows, and prohibiting the photographing or filming of women.

Women faced severe restrictions on movement, creating difficulties for those without a burqa or male escort, effectively placing them under house arrest. Decrees forbade women from riding in taxis without a male relative and segregated bus services were introduced. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* illustrates this when Laila is beaten by Taliban officials for visiting her daughter's orphanage without her husband. Laila had been beaten by the Taliban officials many times when Rasheed refused to accompany her to visit Aziza in the orphanage. The Taliban banned all women from employment, impacting household incomes and reducing many families to begging. Education suffered as most elementary school teachers were women, leading to school closures. Thousands of families fled to Pakistan, but those who remained experienced severe economic hardship. Hosseini ends the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* with the liberation of the Afghan women after the defeat of the Taliban regime in 2001, the continuation of the oppression of the Afghan women in yet more secret forms in some of the rural parts of the country is evident from the thrashing news we see in the newspapers even today.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study have examined *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through a feminist lens, uncovering the intricate ways in which Khaled Hosseini's narrative reflects the lived realities of women under patriarchal oppression. The analysis has highlighted how the novel portrays the profound struggles of Mariam and Laila, illustrating their personal experiences within the broader sociocultural and systemic frameworks that limit their agency and perpetuate gender inequality. The analysis begins with an understanding of broader feminist discourse, tracing the evolution of feminist thought and its relevance in examining the experiences of Mariam and Laila. Additionally, it has explored the role of religious beliefs and Islamic principles in reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics. The novel's depiction of how the Taliban regime manipulates religious interpretations to justify gender inequality adds complexity to our understanding of the characters' suffering, revealing the interplay between personal struggles and larger systemic forces. We have explained how Mariam's silent endurance of her husband's cruelty represents the immense, often unacknowledged strength required to survive under oppressive conditions. Her ultimate sacrifice for the freedom of Laila and her children stands as a testament to the boundless courage and selflessness in the fight against patriarchal oppression. This act of defiance transcends personal victory, symbolizing the broader resistance of women against systemic injustice. By engaging with feminist theory, particularly the frameworks of



Elaine Showalter, this research has emphasized the importance of recognizing the intersectionality of gender, culture, and socio-economic factors. The characters in Hosseini's novel navigate a world where their identities are constantly shaped by external forces, yet their resilience highlights the power of the human spirit in the face of adversity. The waves of feminism provide a historical and theoretical backdrop that enriches our understanding of the novel's themes. The evolution of feminist thought, from early focuses on suffrage and legal rights to more nuanced considerations of identity and intersectionality, mirrors the journey of the characters. Their struggles and triumphs resonate with the broader feminist movement, making *A Thousand Splendid Suns* a critical text in the ongoing discourse on gender equality. In synthesizing these elements, this research has highlighted the novel's contribution to feminist literature, particularly in its portrayal of women's endurance and the potential for change within oppressive systems. The characters' unyielding spirit, despite the many challenges they face, serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing fight for gender equality. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* stands as a testament to the strength of women, offering a narrative that is both deeply personal and universally resonant. This research underscores the importance of celebrating female resilience and advocating for a just and equitable world, serving as a reminder of the women who silently endure the burdens placed upon them.

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