

# Literary Representation of Women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

**Sumit Raj Verma**

PhD Scholar, Faculty of English, PK Campus, TU

Email: [thesumitrajverma@gmail.com](mailto:thesumitrajverma@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

*The study examines the difficulties that women in Afghanistan encounter in society and culture as depicted in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns. The novel revolves around Mariam and Laila, two Afghan women who are the main female characters in the story. Even though their lives were different at first, the war in Afghanistan and the Taliban-led government have made their lives worse. The main focus of this paper is to analyze the female characters and their resistance against the oppression of women in patriarchal societies. The thesis aims to explore the oppression experienced by women and the challenges that main female characters face in confronting the oppression from male characters as depicted in the novel. This research employs Islamic feminism as a theoretical framework to analyze the text, focusing on women's studies. The novel depicts how the rigid and intolerant religious beliefs in Afghanistan are hindering the exposure and advancement of women in society.*

**Key Words:** Representation, Prejudice, Discrimination, Inequality, Intolerance

## Introduction

The research examines *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Hosseini to illustrate how Afghan Muslim women are treated and abide by social and cultural norms in a predominantly Muslim country. According to Skaine, the majority of Afghans (84%) are Sunni Muslims, while 15% are Shi'a. The remaining population practices other religions such as Hinduism and Judaism (7). The dominant Muslim population in Afghanistan indicates that certain groups aim to establish the country's governance according to Islamic principles. The law is seen as a powerful factor in the lives of women. The novel portrays laws as discriminatory against women. Women are prohibited from attending school and working. It is also forbidden for them to leave the house without male relatives accompanying them; all of these regulations are known as Taliban laws. The discrimination against women in society is a result of patriarchal norms rather than Taliban laws.

## Discussion

In patriarchy, women are seen as weak humans (Tyson 83). You don't 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. In this masterpiece by Afghan-American Hosseini, he writes the results of interviews with two Afghan women, Maryam Jo and Laila, about the history and problems they experienced under Taliban law.

The story begins with the struggles of a woman named Mariam. Mariam is the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy staff member named Jalil, or as she is called Harami. Mariam's mother is a former cleaner at Jalil's house. Mariam and his mother have to step back and live their lives because the world does not accept the presence of Harami children in the family. The various difficulties that Mariam faced in her life show that her family in Jalil does not recognize her as a child. After her mother's death, her marriage to Rashid was arranged by Jalil's wives, but miscarriages ensued due to Jalil's cruelty. In the midst of her suffering, happiness appears in her life through Laila, a female character who later changes Mariam's life. Rashid involves Laila in her marriage. This becomes a big problem later when Laila gives birth to a daughter instead of her son, which Rasheed did not want. Because of this, Rashid is very aggressive.

The similarity of Mariam and Laila's fate brings them even closer together. It also helps them finally find happiness in life. Mariam needs someone to love her and Laila needs love too. This study will lead to using Islamic feminism to examine how women struggle as victims in their lives. This study analyzes the questions raised in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* based on primary source evidence. The research questions of this study are: 1. How are Mariam and Laila depicted as victims in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*? 2. And as depicted in the novel, the protagonists strive to achieve happiness. How do they struggle? In line with this question, this study explains the portrayal of Mariam and Laila as victims of a patriarchal society and reveals the protagonists' struggle for happiness.

This article focuses on the struggle against women's oppression and gender discrimination caused by Afghanistan's Taliban laws and patriarchal system as depicted in the novel. This study will enrich the reader's development of knowledge about literary theory, especially about feminism, which connects women with the problems they suffer under patriarchy. This study may serve as a useful reference for other researchers interested in the same theory and focus. The exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner involves acts or instances of oppression, conditions of oppression, and severe mental or physical strain caused by problems, situations, people, or fears. It can also be defined as A person who has been harmed by another person or who has suffered another injury, loss or damage as a result of a voluntary obligation.

Taliban refers to truth seekers, a group of university students and young people who grew up in evacuation camps during the war. An association that enacts laws based on Sharia, the Islamic law that applies to Afghanistan. This study sheds light on the issue of women as victims of Taliban laws in Afghanistan and their struggle against them. To support this analysis, this study draws on Islamic feminism. As the story goes, women not only lacked education and economic power, but also had to contend with a male ideology that effectively condemned them to silence and submission. Men are better than women, and men are usually given first priority. This is due to the fact that men's strength and power are more dominant than women. The women are placed in the second area. Women's role is only to help and support men. Women's social status and economic status depend on men. Most aspects of a woman's life depend on his goodwill (Gorsky 2). This means that many

people believe that a woman's social status is not determined by her educational background or how intelligent she is. In contrast, it depends on a man's social status and how he treats women. A few years ago, most women were uneducated. As a result, they were not prepared for a job or career because it was assumed that their future lay in family life (Gorham 24). Some women believe that they should stay at home and only raise their children. They believe that as women, they don't need training to find a job or pursue a career. They believe that their life depends on their husband and family. This kind of system is called patriarchy.

Patriarchal system is a system in which men have authority over women in all areas of society ([http://study.com/patriarchal system](http://study.com/patriarchal-system)). In patriarchy, men make all decisions and hold all positions of power and authority both in society and in the family. Men define patriarchy as an organized and run society. Men make the rules and control business and government. A man will view his wife as an ornament of the house who must work day and night to serve and protect the home (Goldberg 37). Patriarchy is a traditional social model, within which political problems arise and lead to certain oppressions of women. Things have begun to change. Women are fighting for the right to equal treatment in all fields. The women's movement began in the United States in the early 1960s and 1970s. It is considered a "second wave" of a larger feminist movement that touched on all aspects of women's rights, including family, sexuality, and work. On the other hand, the first wave of feminism from the 19th century to the early 20th century focused on women's legal rights, such as the right to vote ([www.britannica, com](http://www.britannica.com)).

The feminist movement does not believe that physical differences between men and women, such as height, body shape, or physical compatibility, are factors that make men inherently superior to women (Tyson 86). Feminist critics have different opinions on every disciplinary issue they consider. This promotes a social change in traditional ideas about women that distinguish women from men in many aspects of life, such as equality in education, work, etc. With all these statements, feminism is said to be a means to end oppression and the exploitation of women. Feminism in general, although not necessarily limited to women, is concerned with advocating and promoting equal rights and opportunities for women on a political, social, psychological, personal, and aesthetic level (Holman 201). This means that when people think of feminism, they usually associate it with efforts to change women's lives and promote equality between women and men in all areas of life. Women should have the same power and status as men.

On the social side, feminism seeks to redefine women's self-image, change their second-class status, achieve equality, desire to be recognized as independent human beings, and also seek respect as women. Therefore, feminism equates women with men. Her status is not inferior even under the power of men. Women are free to participate in public life as they wish, and men cannot restrict them by force because they have the right to do so. In this case, the woman is often seen as the weaker being and becomes the victim, as she is unable to protect herself. One example is the Taliban law in Afghanistan. In the novel, women are increasingly exploited as victims.

Patriarchal ideology and Taliban law are discussed in the novel as the basis for women's sacrifice. The current study analyzed the novel from different perspectives. This novel was interpreted from a psychological point of view. According to research, Hossein's novel focuses on Mariam's struggle to find meaning in life. This study identifies that Mariam is portrayed as a person who is trying to find the true meaning of life. This study specifically analyzes the impact of patriarchal system and Taliban law in Afghanistan. Furthermore, this study analyzes the protagonists' struggles against oppression and discrimination.

This study focuses on Mariam Jo, the illegitimate daughter of a rich man named Jalil, and Laila, a young and smart girl who is the second main character, Nana (former housekeeper at Jalil's house). This article analyzes the expression of women's struggle through the two main characters, Daughter of Fariba and Hakim. Furthermore, this analysis also delves into the reasons why the protagonists become victims. They accept from childhood to adulthood. She is able to gain deep insight into the personalities and characterizations of both major characters through her initial engagement with the characters. After understanding the basic background about them, research focuses more intensively on their characteristics to reveal how they fight. The analysis uses feminist theory to illuminate the protagonists' motivations for suffering oppression and becoming victims of sexism, as well as the impact of Taliban law on their lives. This novel features two Afghan women, Mariam Jo and Laila, as main characters. The first main character, Mariam Jo, tells the reader what she has been doing, saying, and thinking since childhood. For example, other characters appear only in relation to Mariam, but since Mariam appears and dominates the entire story, she automatically becomes the main character (Nurgiyantoro 176).

Mariam becomes a central character who must demand the involvement of her readers, who empathize with her. She also becomes a dynamic character. She is a person who changes over time, usually due to the resolution of a central conflict or major crisis (<http://learn.lexicon.net>). Most dynamic characters are central characters rather than peripheral characters, since conflict resolution is the central character's main task. Therefore, Mariam is also one of the main characters who can really show the reader how she struggles to find happiness in life.

Mariam born in 1959 grows up Kolba outside Herat, a small city in Afghanistan. Her appearance starts in the beginning story as the little Mariam. Mariam was five years old the first time she heard the word harami (Hosseini 5). This story tells of first main character's life from her childhood, exactly on age five years old. Mariam has been a victim since birth, because she is an illegitimate child, she also is out casted including her father Jalil. She grows up by her mother, Nana. Nana is chased away by Jalil's family when she is pregnant of Mariam because Jalil refuses to acknowledge Mariam as his real daughter. Nana also frequently refers to Mariam as a harami, when Mariam gets wrong and does mistakes, her mother utters it when Mariam still five years old. She always remembers what her mother said:

You are a clumsy little harami. This is my reward for everything  
I've endured an heirloom, clumsy little harami

At the time, Mariam did not understand. She did not know what this word harami—bastard meant 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. (4)

This means that Mariam does not know what the meaning of word harami is. It is because she is still a little kid that does not understand the meaning of harami. Mariam spends her childhood in ignorance. Nobody pays attention to her. Later when Mariam grows older, finally she knows what the meaning of harami is. In the case, Mariam's status as an illegitimate child leaves her without a true family who would be isolated and would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, such as family, love and acceptance by the other people:

Mariam would listen dutifully to this. She never dared say to Nana how much she dislike her talking this way about Jalil. The truth was that around Jalil. Mariam did not feel at all like a harami. For an hour or two every Thursday, when Jalil came to see her, all smiles and gifts and endearments. Mariam felt deserving of all the bounty that life had to give. And, for this, Mariam loves Jalil. (5)

The quotation shows that Mariam always obeys her mother, although sometimes she does not have any deals if her mother said about badness of her father. Her father, Jalil heads for wipe out what he does to Mariam and Nana, to moderate his conscience he builds a small shack to them. He also visits Mariam once a week, and Mariam likes him. He always gives her some stories that make her imagine how nice father he is. She never feels as a harami when she hears all of stories from her father and feels that her mother does not love her as much as Jalil does without listening to what Nana said about him to Mariam. Nana tries educating Mariam about the pretentious love that Jalil Khan showers upon her, about how she was accused by Jalil himself when others in his family get to know of their illicit relationship. "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, Mariam" (7). It means that the role of women and how they are often undermined and abused by men in Afghani culture. That is Nana tries to tell Mariam, to be careful. Nana gives Mariam some of her firsthand experience on her life, because she is afraid Mariam will confront as same as Nana's bitter experience in the past. It also shows of radical feminism thought, while radical feminism is a belief that male supremacy is the root or model for all other oppressions (<http://amptoons.com>).

When Mariam expresses her desire for attaining a formal education to Mullah Faizullah (her Quran teacher) she wants to go to school like the other Jalil's children. "One day, as they were walking. Mariam told him that she wished she would be allowed to go to school. I mean a real school akhund sahib. Like in a classroom. Like my father's other kids" (13). It shows how she wants to do as same as the other children. It also shows how stubborn she is to get her right to be educated. Mariam does not simply accept that she must be isolated and cannot do things like the other do. She hopes that she can get the education like the other

kids get. It is also a kind of rebellion showed by Mariam who is always isolated from her childhood. She cannot do anything like the other children who she knows in their daily affairs. Mariam insists on attending school but Nana refuses it. Mariam learns early that the attainment of a formal education would not only be impossible for her, but also that such an education would be wasted on her. The larger point as a woman's responsibility is her home and her family because Nana does not see the need for a woman to be educated. It shows how Mariam's life is isolated from her childhood because she is illegitimate. Nana intervenes in it and says that a child like Mariam needs only one skill to live, which is not taught in school:

Only one skill. And it's this: tahamul. Endure. It's our lot in life, Mariam.  
 Women like us. We endure. It's all we have. Do you understand?  
 Besides, they'll laugh at you in school. They will. They'll call you harami.  
 They'll say the most terrible things about you. I won't have it. (18)

The most important thing to know about Mariam is her own realization that her life is hard and yet she endures all. This shows that the social system suggests women to learn endurance from their childhood. When she decides to visit Jalil, she must accept the sad reality that she is not treated like his real daughter. Jalil ignores her arrival in his house. Moreover, he lets her sleep on the road. She spends the night outside the house:

All during the ride, as she bounced in the backseat, she cried. they were tears of grief, of anger, of disillusionment. But mainly tears of a deep, deep shame at how foolishly she had given herself over to Jalil, how she had fretted over what dress to wear, over the mismatching hijab, walking all the way here, refusing to leave, sleeping on the street like a stray dog. (25)

It shows how Mariam is ashamed about what she does, she prepares well when she goes to Jalil's house. She feels how stubborn she is; she ignores her mother's advice not to go there. She just demands to meet Jalil, but she must accept how Jalil treats her not as his daughter as well as her thoughts. Another quote that shows her feeling:

Mariam kept thinking of his face in the upstairs window. He lets her sleep on the street. On the street Mariam cried lying down. She does not want to be seen. She imagines all of Herat know this morning how she is disgrace herself. She wishes Mullah Faizullah were here so she could put her head on his lap and let him comfort her. (25)

Then, she must accept of her mother suicide when she arrives in her house. After her mother's suicide, Mariam lives with Jalil's family. Life gives a hard knock and her love for her father is strangled when Jalil Khan disowns her, gets rid of her by marrying her off to Rasheed, a widow of shoemaker. She cherishes her marriage initially, Rasheed's over-protective nature, he talks about pride and honour:

He fished a sky blue burqa from the bag. The yards of pleated cloth spilled over his knees when he lifted it. He rolled up the burqa, looked at Mariam...'It

embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife...But I'm 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. (69)

In this dialogue, Rasheed introduces the use of burqa as a new rule for Mariam. He says about some women in Kabul that are freer only because of the mentality of their husband. He gives her the burqa before they leave the house together. It shows how men in Afghanistan oppress women.

### Conclusion

The study has explored that men can wear whatever they want. However, women must wear a burqa. Mariam being ashamed of being her illegitimate child is one of her main reasons why she cannot stand up for herself. She has been plagued by her guilt for most of her life. Rasheed's loss of losing her son would have been immeasurable, but such an endeavor would always be heresy for a woman. Rasheed's protection of Mariam does not last long. Eventually their relationship becomes bitter, as her presence was solely for the purpose of giving birth to Rasheed her son. Mariam is unable to have children, which makes her an angry, bitter, and fearful woman. Although she was initially annoyed by her Lyla coming into her own life, she soon formed a strong bond with her. She finally finds a chance to love and be loved by Laila and her children Aziza and Zalmay. She is a character whose dedication to her loved ones is a role model for readers. This will help her understand her mother better.

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