



DELINEATING THE ABSURDITY OF LITERATURE AS PORTRAYED IN HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

Ashraf Omar Tajmeeh^{1*}, Prakash A², Keerthana.R³, Karthikeyan.R⁴

¹Research Scholar, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Avadi, Chennai. E-mail: ashraftajmee@gmail.com.

²Research Supervisor, Professor, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Avadi, Chennai. E-mail: prakasha@veltech.edu.in.

³Research Scholar, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Avadi, Chennai. E-mail: ashraftajmee@gmail.com.

⁴Research Scholar, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Avadi, Chennai. E-mail: rkarthikeyan2311@gmail.com.

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ABSTRACT

Khaled Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, explores the characters' struggles to maintain hope amid personal and political oppression. The book employs elements of absurdity, allowing the author to delve into the illogical aspects of the real world. The novel examines philosophical questions about life and existence through absurd themes, characters, and situations, revealing meaning and structure within apparent meaninglessness. The absurdity is particularly evident in certain characters' irrational behaviours and discriminatory treatment, which highlight the bizarre nature of life's misfortunes. This paper aims to unravel the instances in the novel that showcase the peculiarities of life's unfortunate events and the characters involved in them.

Keywords: Absurdity in Literature, Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Introduction

In 1996, the conclusion of the Afghan Civil War led to the Taliban seizing control and implementing a gender-based

apartheid system. This regime required women to stay indoors unless accompanied by a male guardian and imposed additional restrictions that hindered women's career

advancements. For instance, windows in women's homes visible from the street had to be painted black. These oppressive measures, among others, prompted author Khaled Hosseini to write a novel about the plight of women in Afghanistan, a country he had left behind years earlier. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the two main characters are not modelled after any particular women from Kabul. Instead, they represent Kabul's female population's collective spirit and resilience, which inspired the book.

“I had the opportunity to visit Kabul right before the release of the *Kite Runner*. It was an incredible experience spending two weeks in the city. Although *A Thousand Splendid Suns* were not directly inspired by any specific women I met, they were influenced by the remarkable collective spirit of all the women I encountered in Kabul in the spring of 2003.” (Hosseini, 2007, p.21)

Moreover, the novel's personal stories of hope mirror the Afghan people's broader ideological hope. These women's lives are marked by numerous instances where absurdity plays a crucial role. Afghans often believe the country will finally attain freedom with each new ruler. However, similar to their hopes, the aspirations for Afghanistan often turn into

despair as each new regime ultimately fails to bring true freedom. This paper will primarily focus on identifying examples from the book that illustrate the peculiarities of life's misfortunes and the characters involved in them.

Mariam and Laila: Absurdist Lifestyle

The term “literature of the absurd” denotes a collection of dramatic and prose fiction works that convey the belief that the human condition is inherently absurd and can only be authentically represented through equally absurd literature (Meyer Howard Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 2015, p.1). In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam and Laila are the central characters. The narrative is presented from Mariam's perspective in Part One, from Laila's viewpoint in Parts Two and Four, and alternates between both characters in Part Three. Both women experience absurdity in their lives. Mariam learns the Koran and literacy from Mullah Faizullah, but when she expresses a desire to attend school, her mother, Nana, insists that endurance is the only necessary lesson: “The key to success lies in one single skill, and that is resilience. Embrace the power of endurance and watch yourself conquer any challenge that comes your way” (Hosseini, 2007b, p.14). Mariam's life takes an absurd turn when she is abandoned by her father, Jalil, and married to Rasheed despite her



objections. Her childless marriage to Rasheed traps her in a life of obedience and suffering until Laila brings her a glimmer of hope toward the story's end.

“Rasheed’s gaze was fixed on her, but Mariam shook her head in response. “Useless,” he muttered, swiftly grabbing the phone from her grasp. “Like father, like daughter.” As they exited the lobby, Rasheed hurriedly approached the deserted coffee table and slyly slipped the remaining jalebi ring into his pocket. Later, he brought it home and presented it to Zalmai.” (Hosseini, 2007b, p.186)

Mariam finds a sense of peace in the absurdity of her life through revenge. After her mother’s death, she is neglected by Jalil, who forces her to marry Rasheed despite her objections. This childless marriage subjects her to a life of misery and subservience until Laila brings a glimmer of hope. Mariam eventually takes drastic action against Rasheed: “I’ve taken the life of our husband. I’ve robbed your son of his father. It’s not fair for me to flee. I just can’t do it. Even if we’re never caught, I’ll never... Her lips quivered.” (Hosseini, 2007b, p.217). Mariam’s experience reflects a profound alienation, as described by Camus, where the disconnect between a person and their circumstances leads to a

sense of absurdity (Camus, O’Brien, and Aguilera, 2016).

Laila, on the other hand, experiences a sense of absurdity when her world is shattered by the death of someone she cares about. Tariq’s attempt to escape from Rasheed represents her only hope. Rasheed proposes to marry Laila to maintain a facade. Despite learning of Tariq’s death, Laila remains hopeful because she is pregnant with Aziza. Unlike Mariam, Laila has a supportive father who values her education. Hakim assists Laila with her studies and emphasises the importance of education for her, which is equal to any boy. He teaches her at home when it becomes unsafe for her to attend school in Kabul, highlighting the significance of female education.

Laila’s life gains meaning through her love for Tariq: “And sometimes it gets rubbed. Especially when it’s hot. Then I get rashes and blisters, but my mother has creams that help. It’s not so bad. Laila had burst into tears.” (Hosseini, 2007b, p.83). This quote illustrates Laila’s deep affection for Tariq. Her love for Tariq allows her to break free from Rasheed’s abusive control. When Laila and Tariq finally marry and start a family, the contrast between her oppressive arranged marriage and her loving relationship with Tariq becomes evident. Laila’s daily life under Rasheed

was filled with despair and unfulfilled dreams, whereas her relationship with Tariq brought her happiness and fulfilment. Sexual encounters with Rasheed were coercive, whereas with Tariq, Laila felt safe and loved. The most significant change is Laila's shift from fear and repression with Rasheed to honesty and bravery with Tariq. The absurdity of fate in Laila's story is that her love becomes meaningless and tragic when her lover dies, highlighting the unfortunate nature of her situation.

Conclusion

In a deeply patriarchal society like Afghanistan's, the gender-based system enforced during the Taliban regime made it extremely difficult for women to survive. Women like Mariam and Laila had to confront the inherent absurdity of their lives, accepting a harsh reality from which there was no escape. The sudden loss of light and illusions leaves individuals isolated and permanently exiled. This disconnection between a person and their life and between an actor and their setting forms the core of the absurd experience. Mariam's situation exemplifies someone estranged from life. In contrast, Laila has a father who values her education and understands its importance. Although she finds love, it ends tragically. Khaled Hosseini's brilliance lies in his ability to

capture the lives of Afghan women through interviews, transforming their stories into compelling fiction. Afghans consistently hope that each new leader will bring liberation, but these hopes often turn to despair as new regimes fail to bring freedom. This pattern mirrors the personal hopes of individuals. This paper analyses events from the novel that highlight the absurdity of life's challenges and the characters involved. Examining the experiences of the main characters deciphers the elements of absurdity present in their lives.

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