



FROM OPPRESSION TO EMPOWERMENT: EXPLORING RESILIENCE IN A *THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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ABSTRACT

The paper under investigation explores how resilience operates in Khaled Hosseini's book in the face of Afghanistan's turbulent social-political environment. It centers on Mariam and Laila, who show how women can tackle problems in the face of severe adversity. Through the characters of suffering, hope, and resilience narration the narrative shows the process of transforming from the condition of bondage to freedom. This exploration sheds light on resilience being much more than just subsisting; it blends in to play a pivotal role in personal growth and defiance against suppressors. The paper spotlights the way the novel talks about resilience as a transformative tool that can override personal destinies and social norms by focusing on both the individual case and the greater historical context of Afghanistan. The purpose of this study is to confirm that the examples given in Hosseini's work relate to resilience's role in personal and social transformation.

Keywords: Resilience, Feminism, Suffering, Oppression, and Empowerment.

Introduction

Afghan women have faced profound challenges and oppressions, shaped by decades of conflict, socio-

political upheaval, and strict patriarchal norms. The fundamentalist rule of the Taliban particularly exacerbated the oppression of Afghan women, severely

restricting their basic human rights, including education, employment, and freedom of movement, and subjecting them to severe gender-based violence and discrimination (Skaine, 2001). Despite these adversities, Afghan women have shown remarkable resilience and agency. The post-Taliban era brought about significant, albeit uneven, progress in women's rights, with increased participation in education, the workforce, and politics. However, the resurgence of the Taliban and ongoing instability pose substantial risks to these gains, leaving the future of women's rights in Afghanistan uncertain (Rippenburg, 2004). The complex interplay of international influences, local cultural practices, and political dynamics continues to shape the landscape of women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan, highlighting the need for sustained international support and a nuanced understanding of the local context to effectively address the challenges faced by Afghan women.

Literature and fiction have provided a poignant lens through which the oppression of Afghan women has been depicted, revealing the complex interplay of cultural, political, and personal dynamics that shape their experiences. Novels such as Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Atiq

Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* explore the deep-rooted patriarchal structures and societal norms that contribute to the oppression and marginalization of women in Afghan society. Through characters like Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, readers are confronted with the harrowing realities of domestic abuse, societal marginalization, and the struggle for personal freedom within the confines of a war-torn country (Probowati, 2017). Similarly, *The Patience Stone* delves into the psychological and physical abuses faced by a nameless woman, highlighting the extreme oppression and the eventual tragic rebellion against male domination in the domestic sphere (Probowati, 2017). These narratives not only shed light on the dire circumstances faced by many Afghan women but also underscore the resilience, resistance, and complex inner lives of women navigating a patriarchal society. Through literature, the silenced voices of Afghan women are amplified, offering insights into their struggles, hopes, and the indomitable spirit of resistance against oppression.

Khaled Hosseini's portrayal of women's oppression in Afghanistan is vividly depicted through his novels, offering insights into the struggles faced by Afghan women under patriarchal domination and during periods of political



turmoil. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini explores the lives of Mariam and Laila, who endure domestic violence, societal marginalization, and the harsh realities of living in war-torn Afghanistan. These characters embody the obedience, resistance, and empowerment that Afghan women navigate within a deeply patriarchal society (Imran & Ismail, 2022). Hosseini delves into the multiple forms of violence—physical, psychological, and sexual—that Afghan women face, highlighting their resilience and how they challenge and negotiate their positions within their families and society (Fadhilah & Handayani, 2022). The present research paper focuses on the depiction of oppression as well as the act of resistance through resilience in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

State Oppression

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, the oppression of women in Afghanistan is a central theme, depicted through the lives of its female protagonists, Mariam and Laila. This paper examines the multifaceted dimensions of gender-based oppression, contextualizing quotes from the novel to illuminate the changing socio-political landscapes and their impacts on women's lives. The era under the communist regime in Afghanistan heralded unprecedented freedoms and

opportunities for women, a departure from their historically marginalized status. Babi, Laila's father, encapsulates this period of relative liberation, "Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they're probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before... But it's true, Babi said, it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that, Laila" (121). This quote underlines the contrast between the past and present, suggesting a brief window where the future seemed promising for Afghan women, characterized by access to education and professional fields previously dominated by men.

However, the narrative sharply contrasts these advancements with the period following the Mujahideen's takeover in 1992, marking a regressive shift in women's rights. The imposition of strict Islamic laws under the Mujahideen and later the Taliban regime severely curtailed the freedoms women had begun to enjoy. The novel poignantly captures this regression thus: "The Supreme Court under Rabbani was filled now with hardliner mullahs who did away with the communist-era decrees that empowered women and instead passed rulings based on Shari'a, strict Islamic laws that ordered women to cover, forbade their travel

without a male relative, punished adultery with stoning”(229). This shift underscores the fragility of women’s rights in the face of political upheaval and the ease with which gains can be reversed.

The Taliban’s rise to power intensified the oppression, implementing draconian measures that further restricted women’s rights and freedoms. The novel vividly depicts these restrictions through a series of decrees broadcast over the radio, “Attention women: You will stay inside your homes at all times... You will not, under any circumstance, show your face... Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately. Women are forbidden from working” (245). These decrees not only confined women to the private sphere but also stripped them of their identities, reducing them to mere shadows within society. In the face of these oppressive regimes, the contrast between the aspirations and realities of Afghan women becomes starkly evident. Mariam and Laila’s narratives provide a window into the psychological and physical toll of living under such conditions, where even the semblance of independence or modernity is met with suspicion and derision. The novel, thus, serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring struggle for rights and recognition faced by women

in Afghanistan, underscored by the cyclical nature of progress and regression in their fight for equality.

Domestic Violence

In Khaled Hosseini’s “A Thousand Splendid Suns,” the harrowing experiences of domestic violence endured by Mariam and Laila at the hands of their husband, Rasheed, are depicted with stark realism. These instances serve not only as personal tragedies but also as a microcosm of the broader societal issues facing women in Afghanistan. Through their suffering, Hosseini illuminates the grim realities of domestic abuse in a patriarchal society where women often have little recourse.

Mariam and Laila’s experiences with Rasheed are marked by a cycle of abuse, manipulation, and fear, which Rasheed justifies with traditional beliefs about male dominance and female subservience. A particularly chilling instance of Rasheed’s cruelty is captured when he forces Mariam to chew pebbles, an act that is both physically harmful and symbolically demeaning: “He shoved the pebbles into her mouth... ‘Now chew,’ he said. Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes... ‘Good,’ Rasheed said. ‘Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you’ve given me in this



marriage. Bad food, and nothing else”(212). This quote not only exemplifies the physical abuse Mariam suffers but also the emotional and psychological torment Rasheed inflicts, belittling her efforts and contributions to their marriage.

The violence against Laila is similarly brutal and is compounded by the fact that she is younger and initially more hopeful about her life’s possibilities. After a particularly vicious beating, the narrative captures Laila’s despair and determination: “Laila lay on the couch, feeling broken and old... But it was not mere survival that Laila sought. And it wasn’t fear of Rasheed... No. What drove Laila was the need to give her children... a better life” (265). This passage not only highlights Laila’s physical suffering but also her resilience and her deep-seated desire to protect her children from the cycle of violence.

Laila’s act of defiance is vividly captured in a scene where Rasheed, in a fit of rage, attacks Mariam. Laila intervenes, risking her safety to protect Mariam: “Laila... saw Rasheed raise the belt again, and she could not, would not, allow him to strike Mariam again. She struck him with the drinking glass and swung it with all the force she had in her. The world exploded. Then it went dark” (276). This act of

resistance is not just a moment of physical confrontation; it represents a turning point in Laila’s journey, where she actively chooses to stand up to Rasheed’s oppression. It signifies a break from fear and a move towards agency and solidarity among the women.

Hosseini does not merely present these acts of violence as isolated incidents but situates them within the broader context of gendered power dynamics in Afghan society. The impunity with which Rasheed exercises his authority over Mariam and Laila reflects societal norms that often leave women vulnerable to domestic violence. Furthermore, the legal and social frameworks of the time provided little support for women in abusive situations, rendering Mariam and Laila’s experiences emblematic of the struggles faced by many Afghan women.

Resilience

Khaled Hosseini crafts a narrative replete with instances of resilience, as his characters navigate the treacherous landscape of Afghan society. Beyond Laila’s act of defiance against Rasheed, the novel is imbued with moments where characters demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity, with Mariam’s journey offering a compelling portrayal of such endurance.

Mariam’s life, marked by hardship

from its outset, is a testament to resilience. An illegitimate child rejected by her father, and married off to a cruel man at a young age, Mariam endures with quiet strength. Her most profound act of resilience comes towards the novel's climax when she takes a drastic step to protect Laila and her children from Rasheed's violence. In a moment of desperation and love, Mariam kills Rasheed, fully aware of the consequences that will follow. Her action is not driven by revenge but by a deep-seated desire to ensure Laila and the children's safety and future. Mariam's decision to face the punishment for her actions, to allow Laila a chance at freedom and happiness, underscores her resilience and self-sacrifice: "For the first time, Mariam prays for herself. She prays that, in the end, all her hardships will have been worth it" (304). Mariam's ultimate sacrifice illustrates her inner strength and her capacity to endure and act in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

After escaping Rasheed's abuse and finding refuge in Pakistan, Laila makes the courageous decision to return to Kabul. Despite the safety and stability, she might have in staying away, her love for her homeland and her desire to contribute to its rebuilding drive her return.

Laila's return is not just a physical journey back to the city of her birth; it's a

resilient claim to her past and a hopeful stride toward the future. She plans to work at the orphanage and rebuild the school, a tribute to Mariam's memory and a commitment to the next generation. Laila's resilience in this instance is characterized by her hope and her refusal to let the past's trauma define her future.

The resilience of Laila and Mariam is further manifested in the strength of their bond. In a world that has continually pitted them against each other, their growing friendship is a silent act of defiance. Together, they endure Rasheed's abuse, share the burden of their hardships, and find solace in each other's company. Their relationship evolves into one of mutual respect and deep love, a source of strength for both women. This bond allows them to withstand their circumstances and eventually, for Mariam, to make the ultimate sacrifice for Laila's happiness. The resilience of their bond highlights the power of connection and solidarity in the face of oppression.

Laila's defiance against Rasheed's oppression is vividly depicted in several instances throughout "A Thousand Splendid Suns." Her moments of resistance highlight her courage and determination to stand up against the violence and subjugation she faces. One poignant example occurs when Laila, in a



moment of astonishing courage, physically confronts Rasheed to protect herself and her family: “Then Laila punched him... Laila watched the arch of her closed fist, slicing through the air, and felt the crinkle of Rasheed’s stubbly, coarse skin under her knuckles. It made a sound like dropping a rice bag to the floor. She hit him hard. The impact made him stagger two steps backward” (264). This act of physical defiance is not only a moment of personal resistance but also a symbolic act of rebellion against the oppression she endures.

Another instance of Laila’s defiance is when she openly challenges Rasheed’s authority, refusing to allow her daughter to be turned into a street beggar, despite the danger of opposing him: “‘I won’t let you turn my daughter into a street beggar!’ Laila snapped” (264). Her willingness to confront Rasheed verbally and physically underscores her growing resolve to protect her family and assert her agency, even in the face of potential violence. Laila’s resilience and defiance are further exemplified when she refuses to be cowed by Rasheed’s threats and insists on visiting her daughter at the orphanage: “Then I’ll go by myself,’ Laila said. ‘You can’t stop me, Rasheed. Do you hear me? You can hit me all you want, but I’ll keep going there” (283). Her

determination to see her daughter, despite Rasheed’s attempts to control her movements, illustrates her growing independence and refusal to be subdued by fear.

Through these acts of defiance, Laila not only challenges Rasheed’s authority but also begins to reclaim her sense of self-worth and autonomy. Her moments of resistance against Rasheed’s oppressive behavior are a testament to her inner strength and her refusal to be broken by the circumstances of her life. Hosseini’s portrayal of Laila’s defiance serves as a powerful narrative of resistance and resilience in the face of oppressive power dynamics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini serves as a compelling testament to the indomitable spirit of resilience. Through the lives of Mariam and Laila, the narrative masterfully illustrates how resilience emerges not only as a means of survival but as a transformative force capable of challenging and overturning the oppressive structures that seek to confine women. This exploration reveals resilience as both a deeply personal journey of empowerment and a collective movement toward societal change in Afghanistan. By intertwining individual struggles with the

broader historical context, Hosseini's work affirms the pivotal role of resilience in navigating the path from oppression to empowerment. Ultimately, the novel underscores the profound impact of resilience on personal destinies and societal norms, offering a resonant message of hope and renewal amidst adversity. Through the lens of Mariam and Laila's experiences, "A Thousand Splendid Suns" not only illuminates the complexities of resilience but also celebrates its power to forge new narratives of freedom and dignity.

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