



## KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*: A SAGA OF AFGHANISTAN

FARHANA YEASMIN

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jashore University of Science and Technology, Jashore-7408, Bangladesh.

Email: [dipaislam95@gmail.com](mailto:dipaislam95@gmail.com)/ [farhana\\_eng@just.edu.bd](mailto:farhana_eng@just.edu.bd)



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### Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) tells the events of Afghan history from the Soviet invasion to the rule of the post-Taliban rebuilding. The novel depicts the saga of pains and struggles of the people of Afghanistan who have been suffering due to several invasions and wars. The novel also describes the story of two women, Mariam and Laila, who face unbounded sufferings in their life and dare to hope for freedom. They challenge the traditional notion of gender role, redefine their human rights, excess the masculine power, and attain strength vigorous than the strength of thousand splendid suns. Characterizing them, Hosseini symbolically represents the political upheavals of Afghanistan and Afghan people's innate desire for independence. The story of the novel undeniably links the volatile events--the violence, horror, anticipation, and faith of the country in intimate terms; thus, the novel becomes an epic of the country. Using New-Historicism, this paper tries to focus on Khaled Hosseini's documentation of the cultural, social, and political aspects of Afghan history in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to show it as a saga of war-torn Afghanistan.

Key words: hope, politics, saga, Soviet, suffering, Taliban, war

### 1. Introduction:

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* captures three decades of Afghan political history where people face a lot of social, political, economic, and cultural changes. The novel's story is based on the lives of two women during the last three decades of Afghanistan from the late 1960s to early 2000s. It begins with the regime of Daoud Khan (1973-1978) and ends with the withdrawal of the Taliban rule (1996-2003). During Daoud Khan's regime, the people of Afghanistan witnessed development in all sectors. Women got the right to education and freedom, though not on a broader scale. After Daoud Khan's assassination, the Soviet Union

entered Afghanistan in 1979 and lasted until 1989. During the Soviet rules, though Afghanistan underwent several changes, the people of Afghanistan enjoyed the taste of modernity and education. That time, the Communist government launched an organization called *Afghan Women's Democratic Organization*, "[d]uring the Communist regime, women got access to education and employment and got important positions in government offices, army and police departments" (Dharmani and Singh 211). Many progressive people supported the Soviet Union. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the author captures this historical event through the speech of Khala Rangmaal:

She said that Soviet Union was the best nation in the world, along with Afghanistan. It was kind to its workers, and its people were all equal . . . And everyone in Afghanistan would be happy too, she said, once the antiproggressives, the backward bandits, were defeated. (Hosseini 111)

However, most of the women were deprived of this kind of empowerment. Moreover, “[t]he Soviet soldiers molested rural Afghan women, and this aggravated the flames of resistance against the Soviets” (Dharmani and Singh 211). In 1992 the Mujahedeen sized the power and curtailed the human rights of women, “[t]he constitution was abolished. The country witnessed the civil war as different ethnic groups fought for power” (211). The socio-political scenario of Afghanistan changed drastically.

The factional fighting that took place from 1992 to 1994 left parts of Kabul looking like London after the Blitz. According to ICRC between 20000 and 30000 civilians died and thousands more injured. The fighting was fuelled by ethnic and sectarian hatred and marred by atrocities including mass executions, rape, torture, looting and indiscriminate bombardment of residential areas. (Lee 627)

After the Civil war, the Taliban took hold of the power and controlled the state imposing their brutal rules. In the name of religion, they reinforced inhuman rules to protect the so-called tradition. They brought the country into a disaster with extreme fundamentalism. “On capturing Kandahar, Taliban did not lose much time in imposing their self-interpreted version of Islam” (Fatima 36), they started new Sharia law and banned television and music. Hence, referring to the Taliban flyers, Khaled Hosseini in this novel makes a travesty that religion is no more under the control of God, rather is controlled by the tyrants:

*Our watan is now known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. These are the laws that we will enforce and you will obey:*

*All citizens must pray five times a day. If its prayer time and you are caught doing something other, you will be beaten.*

*All men will grow their beards . . .*

*All boys will wear turbans . . .*

*Singing is forbidden.*

*Dancing is forbidden.*

*Playing cards, playing chess, gambling, and kite flying are forbidden. Writing books, watching films, and painting pictures are forbidden.*

*If you keep parakeets, you will be beaten. Your birds will be killed.*

*If you steal, your hand will be cut off at the wrist. If you steal again, your foot will be cut off. (Hosseini 270)*

The Taliban enforced many inhuman decrees and compelled people to follow them. Scared of being punished for trivial cause, people preferred staying at home and became virtually estranged. Because of the vicious rules of different regimes, the people lost their hope and accepted their deplorable fate. Many left Afghanistan, but those who did not have enough resources had to endure their fate. They lead a life of poverty, hunger, fear, torture, and punishment. The Taliban showed their real intention attacking the U.S. in 2001. After the U. S. declared a counter-attack supporting the Mujahedeen against the Taliban, the booms, rockets, explosives crushed the country once again. However, the people of Afghanistan with the hope for a better future worked for rebuilding the country. The novel recaptures all these historical events and also ends with a tone of positivity, that is, Laila comes back to Afghanistan, and with Tariq and Zaman, she rebuilds the orphanage which symbolizes the renovation of the country. In this novel, Hosseini documents the authentic picture of Afghan history by showing the intense effects of the political conflicts on the life of the characters. Using new historicism, this paper attempts to read *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a re-vision of the Afghan history--a saga of Afghanistan.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

As literature is related to the social, cultural, and political surroundings, we cannot read literature in isolation. New historicism is a literary approach that deals with the relation between literature and history, and advocates “the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period” (Barry 167). It refuses “a literary ‘foreground’ and a historical ‘background’” (167) and sees “literature as contributing to, informing, influencing and participating actively in the construction” (Nayar 203) of social, political or historical contexts. It is an equal reading of text and co-text. New historicists focus primarily on the social, historical, and cultural conditions of a literary text as well as the how a literary text reflects, reproduces, or reinforces these conditions—“the textuality of history, the historicity of texts” (Barry 167). According to this theory, literary texts are cultural artifacts that can tell the reader about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meaning operating in the period and place in which the text was written. This paper will apply new historicism to analyze the representation of Afghan history in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

## 3. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: A Re-vision of Cultural Aspects of Afghanistan

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* provides a vivid picture of the rich cultural heritage of a land and describes the impact of the tremendous religious forces on it. The novel covers Anti-Soviet Jihad (1979-1989), Civil war (1992-1994), Taliban tyranny (1996-2003), and the vast religious and cultural changes occurred within the period. Representing two generations, Laila and Mariam articulate the quest of a struggling nation.

At the beginning of the novel, Hosseini introduces the reader to the rich culture and abundance of Afghanistan. Shah Rukh Mirza (1405) along with his wife Gauhar Shad, refined the country with secular buildings, mosques, madrasas, royal tombs, and shines. Herat was one of the affluent regions of Afghanistan and was strongly influenced by its cultural and political ties with Iran. Herat was a center of Sufism, the Herati musicians,

including female ensembles, were much-demanded in wedding parties and other celebrations. In the novel, Mariam’s father, Jalil tells her the past glory of Afghan culture and its rich historical values, “the city where Mariam was born, in 1959, had once been the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, painters, and Sufis” (Hosseini 4). He describes her, “the green wheat fields of Herat, the orchards, the vines pregnant with plum grapes, the city’s crowded, valued bazaars” (5). However, with the changes in power, the culture also changes.

The cultural landscape of Afghanistan underwent a radical change because of the nasty play played in the name of religion. Religion in Afghanistan has played an important role in determining the destiny of the people because the upheavals, destruction, violation, war, exploitation and loss people have encountered—all these are directly or indirectly allied to religion. During Daoud Khan’s rule, there was a relatively peaceful ambiance and people were free in practicing religion. “The state employed thousands of women in the health service, education, civil service, and in the police. Under the Communist regimes from 1978 to 1992 gender policy was even more liberal” (Lee 46), there were no stern religious forces in Afghanistan. Although most Afghans were deeply religious, urban people were not particularly regular in practicing the rituals of Islam. Besides burqa was primarily an urban phenomenon and something of a status symbol for upper class women. The novel recapitulates this history in the plot. Without any male escort, Mariam regularly visits the village of Mullah Faizullah who teaches her to read and write, and recite the Koran. In her childhood, she enjoys freedom in practicing religion. After getting married, Rasheed compels her to wear burqa. However, it is Rasheed’s personal choice to force her to wear the burqa. Though women face some rules, there is no implication of harsh religious forces in the life of Afghan people.

However, in Afghanistan, the freedom people enjoyed gradually declined, since it was recognized as a deviation from the principles of the Koran. A large number of people united in the name of Mujahedeen (a term used in Islam for

those who fight for securing the rules of Islam) protested against the government who introduced modernism. In their war against the Soviet Union, they got support from the U.S. They misused their power and started massive killing. Moreover, they forcefully recruited many young boys and men in their religious battle—they called jihad. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Rasheed refers to this situation:

“They’re forcing young boys to join,” he said. “The Mujahidin are. In plain daylight, at gunpoint. They drag the boys right off the streets. And when soldiers from a rival militia capture these boys, they torture them. I heard they electrocute them—it’s what I heard—that they crush their balls with pliers. They make the boys lead them to their homes. Then they break in, kill their fathers, rape their sisters and mothers.” (Hosseini 248)

In the beginning, people supported the Mujahedeen with the hope that they would bring positive change in the country. However, the situation went contrary. Renaming the country as the *Islamic State of Afghanistan*, the government imposed strict laws especially on women, and banned them from the workplace, education, or health services. D.P. Sharma in *The New Terrorism: Islamist International* (2005) comments on this situation:

After the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, in February 1989, the infighting among various Mujahideen groups erupted in the country . . . In the war against the Soviet troops in 1980s, the Afghan tribals that had been fighting among themselves for supremacy for centuries, joined hands to forge an alliance against the common enemy. No sooner the Soviet army left, than the coalition of victorious factions disintegrated. Each faction started fighting with other for control of Kabul. (328-29)

However, supporters of communist, on the other hand, tried to adopt modern culture because it allowed them to lead a life of equality. In the novel, Laila notices that her teacher, Khala

Rangmaal, does not cover her hair, she forbids “the female students from doing it. She said women and men were equal in every way and there was no reason women should cover if men didn’t” (Hosseini 111). This clash between fundamentalism and modernity gave birth to civil war and then to the Taliban. The people who had been disillusioned by the promises of the Mujahedeen thought the Taliban their saviours who would offer them the taste of peace and order. However, the Taliban proved to be more fatal fundamentalists than others. In 1996, the Taliban built the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan* and people welcomed them with “shouting and whistling, firecrackers, and music” (266). The novel documents the belief of the people in the speech of Rasheed:

At least the Taliban are pure and incorruptible. At least, they’re decent Muslim boys. *Wallah*, when they come, they will clean up this place. They will bring peace and order. People won’t get shot anymore going out for milk. No more rockets! Think of it. (266)

Soon after forming the government, the Taliban declared a list of codes for the people according to their skewed perception of the Sharia laws and the Koran. They did not spare even a slight violation of their given edicts. “The public hanging, speedy on the spot trial was rampant during the Taliban rule believing that these would bring far-reaching consequences” (Fatima 40). They destroyed the art of the pre-historical period and so, the country lost its cultural heritage. They burnt books except the Koran, banned television and music, closed universities, and cinema halls. The novel tells how the rich culture of Afghanistan was destroyed in the name of religion:

Television screens were kicked in. Books, except the Koran was burned in heaps, the stores that sold them closed down. The poems of Khalili, Pajwak, Ansari, Haji Dehqan, Ashraqi, Beytaab, Hafez, Jami, Nizami, Rumi, Khayyam, Beydel, and more went up in smoke . . . They shut down the cinemas too . . . Kharabat, Kabul’s ancient music ghetto, was silenced. Musicians were

beaten and imprisoned, their *rubabs*, *tambouras* and harmoniums trampled upon. The Taliban went to the grave of Tariq's favorite singer, Ahmad Zahir, and fired bullets into it. (Hosseini 273-274)

#### 4. *A Thousand Splendid of Suns: A Re-vision of Social Aspects of Afghanistan*

Along with the cultural aspects represented in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini depicts the tangible pictures of Afghan society where gender discrimination, early marriage, domestic violence, polygamy, and poverty are so common. In Afghanistan, women have been complying with the norms given by patriarchy generations after generations and so, are oppressed and marginalized. Because of patriarchy, men have been enjoying absolute authority on women either at home or outside. Women always exist as the *others* under the clutches of this evil system and belief them worthless. Bell Hooks in *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women* (1984) opines, "[m]ale supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to bonding with men" (3). In the novel, through the lives of Nana, Mariam, and Laila, the author illustrates the severe gender discrimination and orthodoxy that prevail in Afghan society. Jalil and Rasheed, the two representatives of patriarchy successfully implement phallogocentric hegemony on the female characters. Jalil, Mariam's father, enjoyed Nana's company until she became pregnant and banished her to *kolba* with her upcoming child. He even disowned the child, Mariam. Again, Rasheed never thinks a woman more than an object that satisfies men and produces children. After getting married he never thinks of the expectation of Mariam and does not give her time to settle down in a new place. When his hope that he will be successful by being the father of a boy child does not come true, he shows his abusive nature. He finds faults in everything:

There was always something, some minor thing that would infuriate him, because no matter what she did to please him, no matter how thoroughly she submitted to his wants and demands, it wasn't enough. She

could not give him his son back. In this most essential way, she had failed him—seven times she had failed him—and now she was nothing but a burden to him. She could see it in the way he looked at her, *when* he looked at her. She was a burden to him. (Hosseini 98)

Mariam realizes the pitiful reality of the world and gets puzzled. She realizes the truth of her mother's remark, "[I]ike a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam" (7). Rasheed also skillfully marries Laia, a girl of fourteen years old, at the age of sixty. However, Laia descends from his love, when she gives birth to Aziza, a girl child. He hates her and deprives her of fatherly affection. Later, for Zalmi, the boy child, he provides all possible privileges, even buys toys and gifts for him when he has a financial crisis and decides to send Aziza to an orphanage as he cannot bear the expense of all the members.

The patriarchs of Afghanistan had taken privileges from the rigidity of religion to add more misery to the life of women. In this novel, Rasheed, "a beguiling patriarch" (Sebastian 54) pretends to be a fervent Muslim by forcing his wives to wear the burqa. However, he does things forbidden in Islam—keeping pornographic pictures, magazines, taking alcohol, showing anger during Ramadan, being abusive to wives, etc. He takes the privilege from the strict rules prescribed for women by the Taliban to oppress his wives. The deplorable situation of women became worse because of the Taliban invention of terrible types of discrimination and the males utilized these fully to exploit the wives. To establish their so-called Islamic state, the Taliban released a list for women to follow:

##### *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 you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home.*

*You will not under any circumstances, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.*

*Cosmetics are forbidden.*

*Jewelry is forbidden.*

*You will not wear charming clothes.*

*You will not speak unless spoken to.*

*You will not make eye contact with man.*

*You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.*

*You will not paint your nails. If you do you will lose a finger.*

*Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately.*

*Women are forbidden from working.*

*If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death.*

*Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-Akbar. (Hosseini 271)*

In 1997, the Taliban announced that men and women would be treated in separate hospitals. The men's hospitals were equipped with all possible facilities, while in women's hospitals, there was nothing. The female doctors had to wear burqa even during operation. In the novel, while giving birth to Zalmai, Laila has to undergo a caesarian operation without anesthesia. The doctor informs that:

*They won't give me what I need. I have no X-ray either, no suction, no oxygen, not even simple antibiotics. When NGOs offer money, the Taliban turn them away. Or they funnel the money to the places that cater to men. (283)*

Along with these, polygamy and early marriage existed in Afghan society and in the novel these malpractices are highlighted. Mariam's father, Jalil "had three wives and nine children, nine legitimate children, all of them were strangers to Mariam." (5). Like Jalil, Rasheed also has two wives,

Mariam and Laila. When Mariam attempts to convince Rasheed not to marry Laila as she is too young to marry, he replies, "I have friends who have two, three, four wives. Your own father had three. Besides, what I'm doing now most men I know would have done long ago" (208-209). He further justifies the early marriage of Laila, "[w]hat of it? What? She's too young, you think. She's fourteen. Hardly a child. You were fifteen, remember? My mother was fourteen when she had me. Thirteen when she married" (208). He is not the only man who is doing this. In Afghanistan especially in rural and tribal areas, girls had been getting married as early as their early teens.

Hosseini also portrays the picture of poverty that occurred due to the mighty wars. Like Jalil and Rasheed, thousands of Afghan people lost their property and jobs. The homeless people suffered and were affected by many kinds of disease, famine, and crime. The author in the novel remarks, "[p]eople living under scraps of cardboard. TB, dysentery, famine, crime . . . Those camps become frozen graveyard" (209). Because of the drought in 2000, people had to leave Kabul to save their lives. During the Taliban rule, the situation worsened. The government failed to provide the citizens' security, food, and shelter. Additionally, "[t]he physical assault on UN aid workers forced UN aid agencies to halt their programs in all areas, specifically it badly affected food supply, removal of land mines, repairing of war-devastated irrigation system and building of houses" (qtd. in Fatima 43). But the rulers did not bother about that. The then Taliban Planning Minister declared, "[w]e Muslims believe that God, the Almighty will feed everybody one way or the other. If the foreign NGO's leave, it is their decision we have not expelled them" (Rashid 23). In the novel, Rasheed also suffers from extreme poverty because he loses his shop by fire. It changes his way of life, "Rasheed walked briskly to the coffee table, which was now abandoned, and pocketed the last ring of *jelabi*. He took it home and gave it to Zalmai" (Hosseini 304).

### 5. A Thousand Splendid Suns: A Re-vision of Historical Aspects of Afghanistan

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini provides sharp insights into Afghan political history. He begins the novel referring to King Zahir Shah and Daoud Khan indicating the contemporary political upheavals. In Afghan political history before the regime of Daoud Khan, King Zahir Shah was the last king who ruled Afghanistan from 1947 to 1973. In 1973 King Zahir Shah was overthrown by his cousin Daoud Khan. In 1978, Daoud Khan was killed. This political event is also captured in Khaled Hosseini's first novel *The Kite Runner* (2003):

THEY WEREN'T SHOOTING DUCKS after all. As it turned out, they hadn't shot much of anything that night of July 17, 1973. Kabul awoke the next morning to find that the monarchy was a thing of the past. The king, Zahir Shah, was away in Italy. In his absence, his cousin Daoud Khan had ended the king's forty-year reign with a bloodless coup. (32)

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and killed the president and leader, Hafizullah Amin and his brother in 1979. To rescue the country from the Soviet and communist policies, a new group of fighters arose in Afghanistan called Mujahedeen. By 1985 the majority of the Mujahedeen fought as part of the *Islamic Unity of Afghanistan Mujahedeen*. Ahmad Shah Massoud, one of the best Mujahedeen commanders fought under the banner of Jamat-I-Islam. Due to him and the Mujahedeen, the Soviet Union left Afghanistan in 1989. In the novel's narrative, the author recalls the historical events as well as the historical characters like Ahmad Shah Massoud, a supporter of the Mujahedeen. He addresses the Afghan-Soviet war (1979-1989) and the sufferings associated with it. Laila's two brothers, Ahmad and Noor, join the Mujahedeen and are killed, and Ahmad Shah Massoud attends their funeral. Because of the Afghan-Soviet war, a large number of people faced violence, killing, and torture, even, many were forced to leave into the neighboring countries. Observing the horror of the war, the common people of Afghanistan supported the Mujahedeen.

Laila's mammy's prayer tells the similar things, "I want to see my sons dream came true. I want to see the day the Soviets go home disgraced, the day the Mujahideen come to Kabul in victory" (Hosseini 142).

After the severe destruction in 1989, the Soviet troops left Afghanistan but the civil war continued. The Mujahedeen government imposed strict Islamic laws and restricted the territories of women. Though the Mujahedeen leaders were considered the heroes of the country, some of the leaders were involved in some unsocial and inhuman activities like looting, killing, drug trafficking, and raping which affected the traditional Afghan history. Through the story of Laila and Tariq, the author represents the sufferings of the common people in Afghanistan. This war snatches Laila's parents, friends, and lover, and forces her to live in Rasheed's house and to marry him afterward. Tariq loses his leg and takes shelter in Pakistan. The author describes the Mujahedeen's inhuman activities:

IN JUNE OF THAT YEAR, 1992, there was heavy fighting in West Kabul between the Pashtun forces of the warlord Sayyaf and the Hazaras of Wahdat faction. The shelling knocked down power lines, pulverized entire blocks of shops and homes. Laila heard that Pashtun militiamen were attacking Harazas households, breaking in and shooting entire families, execution style, and that Hazaras were retaliating by abducting Pashtun civilians, raping Pashtun girls . . . Every day, bodies were found tied to trees, sometimes burned beyond recognition. (173)

On 27 September 1996, the Taliban occupied Kabul. When they came to power, more atrocities and horrors submerged the life of Afghani people. The "Taliban changed the name of Afghanistan from the Islamic State of Afghanistan to the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan" (Fatima 40) and imposed Sharia law. Women's participation in education and workplace was crushed, "the Taliban closed all schools in Kabul depriving 102,000 girls of education and 7,800 teachers of employment"

(Maley 277). They killed the ex-communist president Najibullah and brother, and the “bodies of Najibullah and his brother remained hanged for full 24 hours” (qtd. in Fatima 40). Life in Afghanistan was going to be dangerous day by day. Many people lost their lives, children lost their parents and homes, and became the victim of Talib officers’ lust. In many families, after the death of the only earning male member, the educated women of the family could not work outside for financial support and so, were forced to beg or became prostitutes. For the survived male, no job or business was left. The country offered only poverty and hunger. In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini reveals the same inhuman acts of the Taliban. When Amir and Farid go to the orphanage to search Shorab, they see many orphan children. Most of them have lost their parents due to the Taliban’s rigid Sharia rule. He points out:

How many orphans live here? Farid asked. “More than we have room for. About two hundred and fifty”, Zaman said over his shoulder. “But they’re not all *yateem*. Many of them have lost their fathers in the war, and their mothers can’t feed them because the Taliban don’t allow them to work. (222)

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini portrays the acute picture of poverty and hunger for which the people are compelled to send the children to the orphanage. Rasheed decides to send Aziza to the orphanage and Laila consents so that Aziza will not die of hunger. The severe rules prescribed for women by the Taliban and their consequences are also emphasized in the novel. Mariam and Laila are the victims of Taliban rules which force them to come back to Rasheed’s cruel world. The strict rules privilege men to abuse women everywhere, “[o]ne day, a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna . . . and said, “I see you again, I’ll beat you until your mother’s milk leak out of your bone” (Hosseini 313). So, through tortures, violence, and inhuman acts, the tyrant rulers dominated the life of common people.

## 6. *A Thousand Splendid Suns: A Saga of She-heroes*

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* tells the saga of two heroic characters Mariam and Laila who symbolically demonstrate the innate power of sisterhood, “the connection of women who are not biologically related but are bonded in solidarity” (Linda). The she-heroes strongly desire a life of dignity where they can sing the song of happiness, but they experience enormous turmoil in their journey of life that gives them the spirit to realize their self-potentiality. “The commonality of their adverse experiences helps the development of a union to protect themselves against a common antagonist, their husband” (Akhtar, et al.115). They excess masculine power and it is Laila who evokes Mariam’s latent spirit to attain her identity.

In this novel, Khaled Hosseini shows an orthodox patriarchal society where women are betrayed, abused, and punished. The story begins with the sorrowful tale of an illegitimate child named Mariam and her quest to find the meaning of life. After the death of her mother, Nana, she understands that in this selfish world she belongs to nowhere. In Rasheed’s house, Mariam lives with no desire, respect, and space to share her feelings. Her inability to give birth to children makes her life more miserable. She feels more degraded and begins to believe herself worthless when Rasheed plans to marry Laila. Life becomes a nightmare to her:

Over the years, Mariam had learned to harden herself against his scorn and reproach, his ridiculing and reprimanding. But this fear she no control over. All these years and still she shivered with fright when he was like this, sneering, tightening the belt around his fist, the creaking of the leather, the glint in his bloodshot eyes. It was the fear of the goat, released in the tiger’s cage, when the tiger first looks up from its paws, begins to growl. (Hosseini 234)

Laila’s story begins in 1987 when she is nine years old. Unlike Mariam, Laila enjoys a relatively happy life and gets proper treatment until her parents’ death. The destructive Soviet-Afghan war



compels Laila to marry Rasheed. In Rasheed's house gradually she begins to lose her identity and becomes another victim of domestic violence like Mariam. Gradually they develop a strong bond of love, solidarity that gives them the strength to fight back. Hans Toch in *Violent Men* (1969) states, "[v]iolence, ironically, creates harmony among otherwise warring elements" (33). When Laila protects Mariam from the hand of Rasheed, she teaches Mariam how to revolt against the tyrant. Laila's rebellious attitude helps Mariam to change the view of life and realize that she has the power to tear all indictments. She gets determined to ensure a better life for Laila and her children, "[h]e'd taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too" (Hosseini 340). Hence, she kills Rasheed when he becomes furious after knowing Tariq's frequent visits and is about to kill Laila, "[a]nd so Mariam raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could, arching it so it touched the small of her back . . . it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life (341). Her final stroke against the dictator shows that she breaks the gender asymmetries and becomes a radical woman who is dauntless to face anything. Though she attains freedom at the cost of her life, she does not regret, because:

She thought of her entry into this world, the *harami* child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last . . . This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings. (361)

Mariam's death gives her freedom, self-identity, and self-contentment.

## 7. Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* reflects the history, culture and social conditions of Afghanistan from 1960s to the early 2000s. It shows the cultural, social and political structure that cause degradation, inhumanity and violence. Along with

these, the novel explores the saga of two heroic characters, Mariam and Laila, who experience repression in a fundamental male dominated society. On the one hand, they undergo harsh treatment in the family and are subjected to the despotic regimes on the other. They resist the oppressive edicts of the country, demonstrate the power of womanhood and successfully achieve self-values. In this work, Hosseini opens a window through which the people of the world can peep into Afghan history and know the horrific reality. At the same time the optimistic ending tone of the novel will help the readers to track the hope and potentiality of war-torn Afghanistan.

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