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Empowerment in Khaled Hosseini's  
“A Thousand Splendid Suns”**

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## **Abstract**

Women have historically been regarded as inferior, insignificant, and minority citizens. This has been built by societal conventions that have traditionally pushed women to the centre of debates. Women have been purposefully suppressed to the point where their lives have become terrible in the so-called patriarchal culture. This study delves into the portrayal of women's empowerment through solidarity in Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The novel, set against the backdrop of Afghanistan's tumultuous history, vividly captures the struggles faced by Afghan women in an era of patriarchy. Drawing on feminist literary theory and socio-cultural analysis, this research investigates how Laila and Mariam navigate their lives, finding strength and agency through their deep bond of solidarity. Through closely examining the characters' experiences, the study explores how Laila and Mariam's relationship evolves from initial rivalry to a profound sisterhood forged by shared adversity and mutual support. This paper highlights how their collaborative efforts enable them to resist oppression, challenge gender norms, and pursue their aspirations despite the limitations imposed upon them.

**Keywords:** *Women Empowerment, Solidarity, Patriarchy, Resilience, Sisterhood, Gender Equality.*

## **Introduction**

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-born American author, was known for his lyrical portrayals of Afghanistan. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, his second book, is set against the backdrop of over thirty years of political unrest and is based on the author's 2003 visit to Kabul, Afghanistan. His portrayal of female characters and their concerns captures the attention of many readers. In the story, two Afghan women, Laila and Mariam, demonstrate a deep love tie and find themselves connected as though they cannot live apart; as a result, they are reliant on each other. According to Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" theory, people's behaviour is influenced by five basic needs, namely physical, protection, affection, confidence and self-realisation. All five principles of need are implicit in the novelist's language tactics; specifically, the employment of signs, pictures, emblems, symbols, and tokens assists readers in unravelling different elements of the woman's personality.

Sigmund Freud's "Psychoanalytic Theory of Motivation" attempts to study the inner depth of human behaviour. Freud identified two primary motivational forces. The first is Eros, or life impulses, which is a constructive power. This is represented as the "ego drive" and "sex drive". The second is *Thanatos*, or death desires, which is a destructive force. This "death drive" embodies the concept of Nirvana. Freud's research primarily focused on neurotic individuals.

On the other hand, Maslow, a contemporary of Freud, emphasised understanding positive mental health. This distinguished him from Freud and others. Maslow considers the physiological, safety, and social needs as inadequate demands that must be satisfied before reaching the ultimate aim of "self-actualisation". "Khaled Hosseini depicts masculine power achieving their wants by abusing women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Mariam and Laila, the novel's female representative characters, illustrate the causes that push women to put up with abuse and injustice in a patriarchal culture.

"My intention was to delve into the intimate lives of two Afghan women who were grappling with hardships. As a writer and an Afghan, I found no narrative more captivating, significant, or compelling than the plight of women in my homeland" (Hosseini, 2013, p. 409)

Viewing Mariam, the illegitimate child of Jalil and Nana, through the lens of Maslow's theory, offers a profound understanding of her suppressed psyche and turbulent thoughts. Nana, even while expecting a child, is denied necessities and safety. Years later, she recounts to Mariam the pain she endured during her birthing, saying, "You made me lay on that cold, hard floor for almost two days. I neither ate nor slept" (Hosseini, 2013, p.11). Instead of providing Mariam with her needs, her mother consistently refers to her as "a clumsy little harami" (Hosseini 2013, p.4).

She identified that a "harami" was only for people who are legitimate to claim for love, family, home, and acceptance. As an illegitimate, Mariam had to move into the suburbs with her mother, where she had little opportunity to discover her lack of necessities. Although Jalil used to see Mariam every Thursday, Nana referred to these trips as "his idea of penance" (Hosseini, 2013, p. 11).

### **Patriarchal Society**

The first victim of patriarchal bias is identified as Nana. Nana is forced to live a life of isolation because she fears social rejection as a result of her illegal relationship with Jalil and subsequent pregnancy. Jalil, who is equally responsible for this offence, escapes punishment. In actuality, his polygamous lifestyle is a sign of his wealth. Nana's experiences as an Afghan lady support her conviction that a man always points an accusing finger at a woman. According to Mariam, the only thing an Afghan girl needs to study is tolerance. Nana strikes Mariam as being wise beyond her years. One such coping mechanism used by most Afghan women is endurance, which entails returning to long-standing customs and routines and developing them as secure havens to block out suffering. This ritualistic, passive response is adopted by Nana, who then imparts it to Mariam. Like Nana and Mariam, the majority of Afghan women meekly endure the trauma of their circumstances since it is acceptable according to tradition.

A girl is always the victim of sorrow, according to Nana's common sense, which she draws from her personal bias. Nana thinks that an Afghan woman ought to be skilled in the art of endurance. Mariam serves as a tool for Hosseini's message that parents have a significant impact on how their children develop as individuals. Mariam is subject to different influences from Jalil and Nana. Nana is a helpless individual who has gone through unpleasant circumstances. Therefore, such experiences are the foundation for how she sees the world. After discovering she is expecting Mariam, Nana decides to live a life of seclusion.

Mariam is forbidden from going to the movies with Jalil by her parents. The satisfaction of Jalil's esteem requirements overrides Mariam's social demands, even though "it is the creators of the harami who are culpable, not the harami, whose only sin is being born" (Hosseini, 2013, p.4). Jalil desires to hold his nobility in society. Mariam needs selfless love, stability, and educational opportunity, but Jalil and Nana failed to meet these needs. Mariam's visit to Kabul is notable because she exhibits independence, freedom, and bravery while stumbling through the city's streets in search of her father.

She approaches Jalil's door and answers the door not as a visitor but as Jalil's daughter, defying all social conventions. Her first act of defiance against patriarchal authority is her obstinate reluctance to leave without first meeting her father and her decision to spend the night at his doorway. Even Jalil, who hides from Mariam's presence, is overwhelmed by such ferocious determination. Mariam has understood the real face of Jalil. Mariam returns home to face the biggest catastrophe of her life. Nana had hanged herself from a tree, she discovers. Mariam has had two devastating blows in a row as a result of Nana's death. Mariam will be troubled by Nana's death because she blames herself for it. On the same day, Mariam loses both of her parents. According to Hosseini, marriage in Afghan society is related to practicalities rather than pure love.

Marriage is portrayed as a patriarchal obligation and tradition. The statement, "For centuries, women have been told when they will marry, who they will marry, and, incidentally, for how much," (Hosseini, 2013, p. 410) supports this. Mariam's forced marriage to Rasheed, a burly, ruddy-faced man much older than her, is not an isolated case. Upon seeing Rasheed, her dream of a blissful married life shatters, leading her to think, "this is the face of my husband" (Hosseini, 2013, p.53). This jeopardises her physiological and safety needs once again.

Hosseini states, "there has always been an ideological gap between liberal reformist Kabul and rural Afghanistan" (Hosseini 2013, p. 409). Kabul is seen as a hub of "female autonomy" (Hosseini, 2013 p. 409), while Afghan women lead "subterranean lives of obedience and service" (Hosseini, 2013, p. 409). Mariam's parents deny her education, a crucial tool for gaining self-esteem and dignity. For women like Mariam, tolerance is the only required skill.

During her journey to Kocheh-Morgha, Mariam, a woman from the lowest social stratum, observes a disparity between her fate and modern women's. She encounters women who seem similar, but their

actions and autonomy bewilder her. They are fashionable, not wearing the burqa and even wearing red lipstick, which Mariam is forbidden to wear. Mariam, however, is condemned to a life of servitude and poverty, which “made her aware of her lowliness, her plain looks, her lack of aspirations, her ignorance of so many things” (Hosseini, 2013, p. 74).

### **Empowerment through Solidarity**

Laila's parents are introduced in the novel's first half. Rasheed's neighbour is Laila's family. At the communal tandoor, Mariam first meets Laila's mother, Fariba. Fariba presents herself and her ten-year-old son Noor to Mariam as a lively and friendly mother. Another victim in the story is Laila. She has perceived good childhood care when compared to Mariam. The war shatters her dreams and love. She has lost her parents. Rasheed has taken advantage of her pathetic condition in terms of refugee. He has married Laila. She is just fourteen years old and takes the hand of Rasheed, a sixty-year-old man. Rasheed announces the death of her parents and Tariq. Upon receiving the devastating news of Tariq's demise, Laila finds solace in her pregnancy. This unborn child instils in her a sign of newfound courage. She experiences an unprecedented form of love, one she has never encountered before. Victimised people, like Laila, understand that solitude is a danger that must be avoided at all costs and that there is no such thing as a modest concession to their links with the outside world. As tenaciously as their captors work to destroy their relationships, these captives seek to maintain contact with a world outside the one in which they are imprisoned.

Initially, Mariam views Laila as a rival, leading to a sense of animosity. However, over time, their relationship transforms from hostility into a bond resembling that of a mother and daughter. This is due to the growing connection between Laila and Mariam. They find solace in each other, fostering a sense of affection and solidarity. Their survival is not just physical but also emotional, anchored by their mutual trust.

Laila experiences Mariam's motherly love and devotion towards Aziza. Mariam, for the first time, feels genuinely desired. She hears declarations of love that are both blatant and unequivocal: “Mariam had never before been wanted like this. Love had never been declared to her so blatantly, so unequivocally” (Hosseini, 2013, p. 246). Mariam's maternal affection for Laila earns her a level of “respect and consideration not accorded to her as a mere wife” (Jung, 2000, p. 69).

Laila confesses the secret of Aziza being Tariq's daughter with tremendous force. Mariam experiences a solid bond as well as fulfilment of her esteem goals. Maureen O'Hara and John Nicoletti (2005) argue in "Tis Herself" that "a sense of belongingness is a sine qua non of healthy Psychological functioning everywhere." “Such a sense develops in childhood and continues throughout life through experiencing mutual empathy; by sensing oneself as a part of a whole”. (O'Hara & Nicoletti, 2005, p. 24)

Mariam, having experienced the betrayal of loved ones, is determined to prevent Aziza from

enduring the same. As a result, she showers Aziza with love and devotion. As Francis Bacon writes in "Of Love", "There is in man's nature a secret inclination and motion towards the love of others, which if not spent upon someone or a few, does naturally spread itself towards many." (Bacon, 1924, p. 45)

The love Laila and Aziza show Mariam gives shows Mariam realising she is not loathed. When Tariq returns to Afghanistan and sees Laila, Rasheed beats her. This act depicts "the patriarchal ideology of male dominance and female subordination in a traditional society allows Rasheed to be even more of a villain" (Karthic and Immanuel, 2018, p. 378).

The novel explores issues of female identity and life philosophy through the lens of Abraham Maslow. His "hierarchy of needs ranges from the most basic human needs of physiological needs for food, clothing, shelter, water, comfort, and procreation among others to the highest level of aesthetic needs for people to enjoy and promote the beauty of human environment" (Aruma, 2019, p. 26). Mariam's life disproves Maslow's hierarchy of needs. She had her basic needs met throughout her upbringing and marriage but lacked respect and esteem.

## Conclusion

In "A Thousand Splendid Suns," Khaled Hosseini portrays the empowerment of women through the profound bond between Mariam and Laila. Their solidarity shines against the turbulent backdrop of Afghanistan's political and social turmoil, illustrating their strength and resilience amidst oppression. The novel delves deep into their psychological struggles and the healing process that emerges from their solidarity, focusing on how they confront and navigate trauma, suppression, and the burdens of patriarchal expectations. Both characters challenge the oppressive norms of marriage, family, and society, finding strength in each other's support. Hosseini reinforces that their shared resilience allows them to endure and rise above the societal constraints designed to suppress them. Mariam's ultimate sacrifice and Laila's deep gratitude, embodied in her decision to name her daughter Mariam, highlight the enduring impact of their connection. This act symbolizes not just personal gratitude but a tribute to the transformative power of sisterhood and support in the face of adversity. Hosseini emphasizes that hope, courage, and unity can empower women to reclaim their voices and identities. The novel ultimately reflects the broader message that even in a patriarchal society, solidarity among women is a powerful force for change, healing, and resistance.

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