

Beyond Silent Suffering: Trauma, Intersectionality, and the Transformative Trajectory of Agency in Post-Conflict Afghanistan

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Abstract

This study critically investigates the double marginalization of Afghan women as portrayed in Khaled Hosseini's seminal novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), foregrounding the intersecting oppressions of gender, class, socio-political instability, and cultural patriarchy. Employing a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Feminist Theory, Postcolonial Feminism, Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Subaltern Theory (Spivak, 1988), the research unpacks the layered subjugation endured by female characters, particularly Mariam and Laila. These characters are emblematic of a broader sociocultural reality where women are doubly silenced—first by patriarchal domestic structures and then by overarching political and religious systems. The analysis reveals how Hosseini crafts a narrative of suffering, complex trauma, endurance, and eventual resistance through the intimate portrayal of his protagonists' lives. The study demonstrates how their struggles are not isolated but are deeply rooted in Afghanistan's tumultuous history, marked by civil war, Taliban oppression, and socio-religious conservatism, which collectively deny women autonomy and voice. The analysis utilizes Trauma Theory to trace the trajectory from internalized subjugation and "silent terror" to "purposeful resistance" (Asghar, 2023). Crucially, the study deepens its application of Intersectionality to compare the distinct forms of oppression faced by Mariam (rooted in illegitimacy and class stigma) versus Laila (rooted in the devastation of war and loss of privilege). It affirms the novel's literary and political significance, especially in light of Afghanistan's ongoing gender crisis, and calls for sustained scholarly engagement with localized female experiences in postcolonial narratives.

Key-Words: Intersectional Feminism, Subalternity and Gender, Trauma and Resistance, Afghan Women's Marginalization

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's identity as an Afghan-American author shapes *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Born in Kabul in 1965, Hosseini fled Afghanistan in 1980 following the Soviet invasion, settling in the United States. His diaspora perspective informs the novel's portrayal of Afghan women, aiming to humanize their struggles for a global audience. This intent is evident in Mariam and Laila's stories, which strive to counter stereotypes of passivity (Hosseini, 2007). Published in 2007, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* traces the lives of Mariam and Laila, whose personal struggles reflect broader societal and political upheavals in Afghanistan. Mariam, stigmatized a *harami* (bastard), is compelled to marry Rasheed, a much older man, at the age of fifteen. Laila, initially a privileged and educated girl, becomes Rasheed's

second wife after war destroys her family and prospects. Their shared experiences under Rasheed's abusive control highlight the personal toll of patriarchal norms, while their evolving bond underscores the power of female solidarity.

To ensure a theoretically rigorous analysis, this study must engage with the postcolonial critique concerning the representation of the subaltern voice. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concern is that marginalized groups struggle to articulate their agency when mediated by local and global discourses, which is pertinent given Hosseini's Western audience appeal (Spivak, 1988). Furthermore, Edward Said's *Orientalism* suggests that certain depictions, such as describing the burqa as a "cage" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 279), risk exoticizing Afghan oppression for a Western readership (Said, 203). Therefore, this research seeks not only to identify oppression but also to critically examine if the novel successfully counters stereotypes of passivity (Hosseini, 2007, pp. 47, 401) or if it simplifies complex localized cultural issues for global consumption.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The present research is anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates feminist theory, postcolonial criticism, intersectionality theory, and trauma theory. This framework is selected to comprehensively analyze the complex and overlapping structures of oppression experienced by women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Postcolonial Theory and Subalternity

Postcolonial feminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) critique the homogenization of Third World women and stress the importance of contextualizing gender oppression within specific cultural and political environments. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" argues that marginalized groups are silenced by local and global discourses (Spivak, 1988), a critical concern given the novel's diaspora authorship and audience (Spivak, 2020). This analysis explicitly utilizes Spivak's framework to study Mariam and Laila's resistance, arguing it challenges third-world women's "aphasia" (Ma, 2023). Furthermore, the study integrates Edward Said's *Orientalism* (203) to analyze narrative depictions that may risk exoticizing Afghan suffering for a Western audience.

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (1991) is foundational, arguing that overlapping identities—such as gender, class, and ethnicity—create distinct forms of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality remains a vital framework for understanding the compounded discrimination faced by Afghan women. Mariam's illegitimacy, rural upbringing, and gender, and Laila's transition from privilege to powerlessness during war, exemplify intersectional oppression. This study deepens the application of this lens to compare and contrast the distinct vulnerabilities: Mariam's marginalization is marked from birth by her status as a *harami* (Hosseini, 2007, p. 7), and social exclusion, compounding her gendered vulnerability. Laila's oppression, conversely, stems initially from the devastation of armed conflict intersecting with her gender and subsequent loss of class privilege.

Trauma Theory

The novel constructs trauma not merely as a debilitating condition but as a catalyst for healing and solidarity. However, the analysis must move beyond identifying acts of resistance to incorporate the clinical/psychological dimensions of compounded trauma, acknowledging the deep, persistent psychological impact of prolonged domestic and socio-political violence. Mariam's ultimate sacrifice—facing execution to ensure Laila's freedom—transcends personal survival. Laila's subsequent return to Kabul to advocate for girls' education (Hosseini, 2007, p. 341) reflects a commitment to collective healing, transforming personal trauma into societal progress (Asghar, 2023). This trajectory underscores trauma theory's emphasis on post-traumatic growth, where survivors

channel suffering into purposeful resistance. The study must also systematically explore how institutionalized edicts (e.g., the Taliban's total ban on women's education,) inflict a form of collective, state-sanctioned trauma.

Analysis: Factors Contributing to the Double Marginalization of Major Female Characters Patriarchal Society

Patriarchy manifests as a dual structure of dominance, encompassing a familial hierarchy ruled by paternal autocracy and a broader societal framework governed by male supremacy. Mariam grapples with self-doubt and ultimately succumbs to resignation under these oppressive conditions, unable to assert her identity. For Mariam, raised in an environment steeped in patriarchal beliefs, achieving happiness or freedom is profoundly challenging. Nana's cynical pronouncement, "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 7), becomes a tragic prophecy for Mariam, reflecting a societal predisposition to assign blame and shame predominantly to women for transgressions of patriarchal codes.

Applying Intersectionality:

- **Mariam's Stigma and Class:** Mariam's life is indelibly marked from birth by her status as a *harami*. This social stigma immediately compounds her gendered vulnerability, predisposing her to a life of shame and diminished expectations. Her illegitimacy, intersecting with her gender, results in her rejection by her father's family and society. This specific vulnerability drives her into the forced, abusive marriage with Rasheed.
- **Laila's Loss of Privilege:** Laila's early life presents a veneer of greater intellectual freedom fostered by her educated father (Hosseini, 2007, p. 69). However, the fragility of her relative autonomy is brutally exposed when war decimates her family and obliterates her familiar world, robbing her of her class privilege and education. Laila's gender, intersecting with the devastation of conflict, thrusts her into a desperate marriage that mirrors Mariam's entrapment.

Rasheed functions as a potent, albeit brutal, embodiment of patriarchal entitlement. His rapid transformation into an abuser upon Mariam's failure to produce a son demonstrates how male authority controls women's reproductive capacities. The horrifying incident where he forces Mariam to chew pebbles (Hosseini, Part 1, Ch. 15) symbolizes his power to inflict pain and humiliation to assert dominance. Jalil, Mariam's biological father, embodies the cowardice of patriarchal privilege, marrying off the fifteen-year-old Mariam to Rasheed to preserve his social standing, confirming women's status as disposable commodities.

Socio-Political Turmoil and Taliban Restrictions (Collective Trauma)

The socio-political landscape, marked by the Soviet invasion, civil war, and Taliban rule, exacerbates women's marginalization. The Soviet invasion (1979–1989) destabilizes Kabul, shattering Laila's family when a missile kills her parents, forcing her into a desperate marriage (Hosseini, 2007, p. 193). The subsequent civil war (1989–1996) transforms Kabul into a "city of ghosts" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 201). The war dismantles social safety nets, pushing women like Laila toward patriarchal dependency and crushing her aspirations for education and independence.

The rise of the Taliban in 1996 marked a new phase of oppression. Their draconian edicts—such as: "You will stay inside your homes at all times. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 248)—institutionalize gender oppression. These policies inflict a form of collective, state-sanctioned trauma, banning women from education and public life. Hosseini illustrates this systemic violence with the closure of girls' schools (Hosseini, 2007, p. 249) and the destruction of cultural artifacts and books. This era aligns with Spivak's (2006) notion of double marginalization, where patriarchal forces converge with political extremism to silence women.

Analysis: Main Female Character's Resistance to Marginalization

e Trajectory from Silent Suffering to Agency

Afghanistan's entrenched patriarchal system typically enforces women's subservience. Mariam's mother, Nana, conforms to this pattern, acquiescing to her marginalized status. In contrast, Mariam and Laila strive to overcome their subjugation, driven by shared adversity. Their resistance is analyzed not just as an act of valor, but as a psychologically complex break from years of internalized subjugation and trauma.

Mariam's memories of enduring Rasheed's abusive behavior throughout their marriage were initially marked by silent terror. She grapples with self-doubt and ultimately succumbs to resignation, believing endurance is her sole recourse. This resignation and **internalized** subjugation are protective mechanisms against the chronic abuse, highlighting the profound psychological damage preceding her resistance.

Laila, with her innate sense of female autonomy, demonstrates silent, calculated defiance by stealing small amounts of money from Rasheed's wallet every week to fund her eventual escape (Hosseini, 2007, p. 121).

The ultimate act of resistance occurs when Rasheed, enraged by Laila's reunion with Tariq, subjects Laila to brutal and relentless beatings. When Mariam intervenes to shield Laila from the violence, her own memories resurface, culminating in an exhaustion with oppression. With unwavering determination, Mariam acts decisively to save Laila, her children, and herself, liberating them from Rasheed's tyranny (Hosseini, 2007, p. 347). This act manifests profound valor and devotion.

Post-Traumatic Growth and Collective Healing

The protagonists' resistance marks a transformative trajectory where trauma becomes a catalyst for solidarity. Mariam recognizes her primary responsibility to protect Laila and Aziza. Her audacious act of slaying Rasheed, coupled with her acceptance of legal culpability, saves her family and ignites hope.

Laila, empowered by Mariam's altruistic sacrifice, harnesses the resolve to defy oppression, pursuing emancipation and self-fulfillment (Hosseini, 2007, p. 401). Laila's eventual decision to advocate for girls' education should be framed not just as personal healing, but as a deliberate attempt to counteract the **historical and structural trauma** inflicted by the Taliban's bans on female education. She transforms personal trauma into **purposeful resistance** and societal progress, achieving self-determination and recognizing her intrinsic worth (Hosseini, 2007, p. 401).

Conclusion

This inquiry delineated the catalysts of oppression afflicting the principal female protagonists in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and explicated their strategies of resistance against such marginalization. The subjugation endured emanates predominantly from two pervasive forces: the entrenched patriarchal paradigm governing familial and communal interactions, and the hegemonic authority operating through religious and legal edicts.

The study's principal findings underscore that masculine dominance, epitomized by coerced unions, domestic brutality, and societal strictures stifling female agency, constitutes a primary wellspring of oppression. However, by deepening the application of Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), the research demonstrates that the foundational oppression of gender is compounded distinctly for each woman: Mariam's early life is defined by the intersection of gender and the stigma of illegitimacy and class, while Laila's later life is defined by the intersection of gender and the collective trauma of war and political instability.

The novel's female characters exhibit unyielding fortitude in countering marginalization through their psychological and physical comportment, moving from initial resignation and "silent terror" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 346), to physical and psychological defiance (Hosseini, 2007, p. 347). Mariam's sacrifice and Laila's evolution affirm women's capacity to effect societal change through unified resistance

(Hosseini, 2007, p. 347). The inquiry intimates that liberation is attainable through solidarity and personal sacrifice.

The implications of this analysis suggest that dismantling patriarchal dominion and advancing gender equity necessitate both individual audacity and systemic societal reform. The protagonists' narratives illuminate the efficacy of personal fortitude and collective support for the oppressed. Though set in Afghanistan within a specific temporal framework, their saga illuminates the intersectional nature of oppression in a non-Western context, offering a platform to amplify marginalized voices and underscoring literature's role as a medium for social critique.

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