



## From Oppression to Empowerment: A Study of Pashtun Women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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### Abstract

Throughout the History, Pashtun women have faced cultural restriction and patriarchal marginalization, yet many have shown remarkable resilience and strength. Tracing their journey from silence to empowerment in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* helps illustrate the challenges and achievements of women in male-dominated Pashtun communities. The current study aims to investigate the plight of women, their role under patriarchy and possible paths for their emancipation as illustrated in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Applying Katherine Murray Millett's Radical feminist theory from her seminal work *Sexual Politics* (1970) as a theoretical lens, the study examines the patterns of male superiority and female inferiority within the novel. This study utilizes qualitative textual analysis, focusing on lived happenings of Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Their journey reveals their sufferings, solidarity and defiant actions. They challenge traditional gender roles and claim their autonomy, symbolizing broader struggles of Pashtun women for identity, dignity and freedom. Education, awareness of rights and dismantling of patriarchy can promote women empowerment in conservative Pashtun societies.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence, Education, Empowerment, Pashtun women, Patriarchy, Sisterhood.

### Introduction

#### Background of the Study

The empowerment of women is a journey by which women become conscious of gender inequalities and gain a stronger voice to advocate for equal rights at home, workplace and community. Pashtun women of Afghanistan and Pakistan belong to a single ethnic group, and are deprived of opportunities for empowerment. Pashtun women face denial of basic rights of education, work, freedom and expression. In Afghanistan and Pakistan's Pashtun populated Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, women face injustice, domestic violence and forced marriages (Umima Zia 1-19). The struggle for women's emancipation remains a universal challenge, in patriarchal Pashtun societies where women face entrenched limitations to mobility, education and autonomy. Pashtun women are expected to obey strict gender roles and are limited to domestic duties and motherhood. These suppression and denial of women's rights in the Pashtun belt are vividly shown in the second novel of Khaled Hosseini that is: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). This narrative acts as a compelling lens that reveals the hardships of Pashtun women for education, independence and dignity are brought to light. The novel portrays the harsh yet deeply human experiences of Afghan women, showing how they suffer, survive and sometimes overcome the oppression. In *A Thousand*

*Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini weaves the lives of Mariam and Laila to depict women's endurance, oppression, violence and loss, while revealing their resilience, courage and quest for freedom and dignity. This novel explains the painful experiences of many Pashtun women. Through the trials of Mariam and Laila, Khaled Hosseini exposes gender inequalities and celebrates women's unity and strength. The study adopts Katherine Murray Millett's radical feminist framework from *Sexual Politics* (1970), to explore gender relationships as primarily political rather than natural. Millett interprets that patriarchy not as a natural or biological phenomena but as a political system that structures male superiority and female inferiority. Using this lens, the current study criticizes that how patriarchy influence the life of Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and how their experiences correspond those of female subjugation in Pashtun society. In Pashtun belt, male dominancy deeply restricts women's lives, their access to education, freedom and autonomy. The aim of this research is to explore not only the plight of Pashtun women, but also reveals that through education and solidarity, these women can be empowered.

### Research Objectives

1. To highlight the plight of Pashtun women, their roles under patriarchal structures in Pashtun society as represented in Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.
2. To propose a way forward for the emancipation of women in Pashtun society as depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

### Research Questions

1. How does Khaled Hosseini depict the plight of women, their roles under patriarchal structures in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?
2. Which prospects help in empowering women in Pashtun society in the context of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?

### Literature Review

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has gathered significant scholarly interest for its portrayal of women's challenges under embedded injustice, particularly within Afghan and Pashtun cultural frameworks. The novel has been analyzed through the lens of Radical feminism theory as articulated in Katherine Murray Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) to demonstrate the lives of Nana, Mariam and Laila. The current study presents a captivating exploration of patriarchy, violence, resilience and female empowerment. Many studies have been conducted about this novel, some of them are discussed below.

Khalil, Bashir, Kaloi and Sagheer in the article "*Afghan Women's Condition as Portrayed in A Splendid Suns, Khaled Hosseini's Novel*" analyze the oppressive conditions confronted by Afghan women, particularly in Pashtun society, as portrayed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. By portraying the characters of Nana, Mariam and Laila, the novel illustrates the response to oppression, with Nana passively accepting discrimination, while Mariam and Laila resist and fight back. Ultimately, the study affirms the novel as a lens into the harsh realities of Afghan women's lives, their inferiority continues to prevent them from genuine empowerment (Khalil et al. 862-871). Similarly, Arshad, Iqbal and Amir in their work, "*From Empowerment to Suppression: Examining Gender Dynamics Through Material Feminist Lens in A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini*" paints the lives of Nana, Mariam and Laila to highlight the difficulties faced by Pashtun and Afghan women under patriarchy and worn-torn society in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The study examines coerced marriages, gender-based violence, loss of autonomy and denial of education as central barriers for women. Using Materialist feminism, the authors critique structures that suppress women's choices and rights. Mariam's endurance of illegitimacy, abuse and financial instability, alongside Laila's forced C-section without anesthesia, illustrate women's suffering

under both Rasheed and the Taliban. Ultimately, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* becomes a powerful lens for examining the challenges and emerging possibilities for the empowerment of Pashtun women (Arshad et al. 311-319).

In contrast to previous study Cevik and Tongur in their article, “*The Plight of Marginalized Women in Khaled Hosseini’s A Thousand Splendid Suns in the Third World Feminism*” examine the obstacles of Mariam and Laila as representations of Pashtun women facing gender inequality, political upheaval and oppressive social conformity. They argue that the Taliban’s rise denied women access to education, healthcare and employment, reinforcing systemic and domestic subjugation. Rasheed’s control over Mariam, symbolized by the enforced burqa, reflects patriarchal suppression, while Mariam’s sacrifice and Laila’s pursuit of education represent resistance and strength. Through a Third World feminist lens, the study emphasizes how Hosseini explores women’s strength and solidarity as seeds of empowerment. (Cevik and Tongur 56-64).

Furthermore, Imtiyaz Ahmad Bhat in “*Oppression and Marginalization of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini’s A Thousand Splendid Suns*” explores the obstacles of Afghan women through characters of Mariam and Laila under harsh religious, cultural, political rules especially during Taliban rule. Mariam’s illegitimacy and forced marriage at fifteen to abusive partner Rasheed reveals her lifelong subjugation. While Laila’s marriage to Rasheed at the age of fourteen suffers from his evilness. The burqa becomes a symbol of female oppression and women are denied from education, work and healthcare. Even female doctors are required to wear burqas during surgeries. Laila’s painful delivery of *Zalmai* without anesthesia and Nana’s lifelong punishment for bearing a child outside marriage highlights the severity of gender inequality. Yet, the solidarity between Mariam and Laila fosters resistance, culminating in Mariam’s sacrifice to save Laila, a powerful emblem of women’s courage and resilience (Bhat 179-186).

However, Ranawat in “*Repressed state of Afghan Women in Hosseini’s A Thousand Splendid Suns*” explores the repressed state of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, emphasizing the ways in which tradition, religion and culture intertwine to suppress women’s roles and freedoms. Afghan culture often links female behaviour to honor and pride, restricting their rights to education as seen in Hakim’s belief that a nation cannot succeed without educated women, contrasted with Rasheed’s patriarchal control over women’s domestic lives. Nana teaches Mariam to endure rather than resist, while Mariam herself suffers shame due to illegitimacy until finding resilience through her bond with Laila. Mariam’s ultimate sacrifice for Laila and her children and Laila’s return to Kabul as a teacher, reflects both their deep sufferings and enduring strength of women in a society that systematically represses them (Ranawat 1-7). While the existing studies have extensively examined the subordination of women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* under patriarchy but there is limited research on how empowerment can be achieved within Pashtun’s societal framework. This research aims to fill that gap through a blend of radical feminism. This study addresses this gap by analyzing perception of men, role of education and solidarity as a tool for the women’s empowerment in Pashtun society.

## **Textual Analysis**

### **Introduction**

Pashtun societies, primarily located in the northern and western regions of Pakistan and Southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan, are characterized by a set of tribal customs and values. These customs heavily influence the role and rights of women. They have been subjected to patriarchal control, and their public presence is limited. They face widespread marginalization with restricted availability of educational, medical services and economic opportunities. Women face struggles

dye to male dominant system especially in Pashtun belt where women are expected to be obedient and focus on household responsibilities.

The process of empowerment in such societies fraught with challenges because women's opinion, decisions and lives are always controlled by male dominant system. Women are silenced and limited to endure which is shown in Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It highlights the lives of Nana, Mariam and Laila who intertwined within the context of male-centered oppression and socio-political turmoil of Afghanistan. Through these characters Hosseini criticizes Afghan society where women suffer and also reveals resistance and solidarity among Mariam and Laila which offers hope and possibility for Pashtun women liberty and empowerment.

### **Analysis**

In the postscript to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, adapted from his speech at Book Expo America (2007), Khaled Hosseini provides a deep personal insight into the motivation and historical contexts that shaped his novel. In the rural Afghanistan, especially in the south and east near the Pakistan border, tribal traditions have long upheld a male-dominated social order. For generations, women were assigned husbands and bride prices without their consent. Their lives were largely confined to obedience, domestic service and seclusion. Publicly, they wore burqa and education for girls beyond the age of twelve has been rare, leaving literacy rates among women strikingly low in these areas. (Hosseini 407-412)

### **Patriarchal Oppression**

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* patriarchal oppression is central in the lives of female like Nana, Mariam and Laila. In patriarchal societies women are subjected under male dominancy. Patriarchy is a social construct that grants men dominance and female subjugation (Millett 23). The oppression of women begins even before a girl is born, as reflected through Nana and her illegitimate daughter Mariam who are abandoned by Jalil and his household. This imbalance demonstrates how patriarchy often blame women and consider them sinful for wrongdoings while male like Jalil ignored for their actions. Nana says that "his cast us out of his big fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily" (Hosseini 5). Nana's entire life disrupted by how deeply patriarchy punishes women and considers them worthless. Nana's statement that "learn this now and learn it well, my daughter. Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman" (Hosseini 7). It captures that women in patriarchal societies are blamed for every misfortune, shamed for their existence and taught that submission is their only option.

Nana raises Mariam in isolation, fearing that society would harm her illegitimate child and instills in her the belief that she is an "unwanted thing" *harami*, a word that scars Mariam's identity and continues to haunt her throughout her life. The unfortunate fate later shifts from Nana to Mariam (Niyamat et al, 2023). Mariam desired to acquire education, but she was denied this right. This refusal reflects the patriarchal notion that women do not need education but only obedience and domestic capability. Kate Millett emphasized that our culture constructed patriarchy a way to control women and making this system seem normal inside homes and daily life. Women taught to accept male dominance as natural (Millett 64). Hosseini argues that patriarchy marginalized women like Nana and Mariam which reflects the life of many Pashtun women. It portrays that male dominant system keeps women subordinate, silenced and expose them to brutal realities of society which denied their identity, freedom and justice.

### **Politics of Marriage**

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, forced marriage functions as key instrument of patriarchal oppression stripping women from self-rule, voice and dignity. Khaled Hosseini illustrates the experiences of women in Afghanistan especially in Pashtun society whose life are controlled

through socially constructed marriage practices. In the novel *Mariam*, at the age of fifteen, is forced to marry an old shoemaker, Rasheed. “You have a suitor, his name is Rasheed, and he is Pashtun from Kandahar originally, but he lives in Kabul. He cannot be more than forty” (Hosseini 46). Mariam was emotionally not prepared for marriage, she says “do not do this, do not make me” (Hosseini 47), but she was ignored. Patriarchy cannot function without force both physical and psychological (Millett 84). This normalization of child marriage reveals young girls are denied from the right of education, freedom and the right to shape their own lives especially in Pashtun belt. Women’s role reduced to vessels for male expectations. Kate Millett contends that patriarchy operates within the family which controls its members and makes them follow rules. Even women have legal rights, but they are still controlled through family systems. (Millett 74).

Once married, Mariam faces oppression, emotional and physical abuse from her tyrant partner, Rasheed. He enforces his patriarchal authority by isolating her from the outside world and force her into personal veiling when “he fished a sky-blue burqa from his bag” (Hosseini 69). It highlights how Mariam was feeling suffocation in marriage which was the life of every Pashtun woman. It contrasts with those people in Afghanistan who are educated, they were having freedom, dignity and mobility but Rasheed says “contemporary Afghan women married to progressive Afghan men who did not object to their wives mingling with strangers wearing makeup and nothing on their heads. They fail to realize that they are damaging their own dignity and self-respect” (Hosseini 74). Rasheed, a typical patriarchal man, treated women as objects of desire than as full human beings, especially in societies where their rights are limited (Millett 73). Rasheed is deeply hypocritical when Mariam discovers pornographic magazines in his drawer. “Beautiful women, who wore no socks, no shirts” (Hosseini 81). It reveals his hypocrisy while demand total modesty from his wife. Rasheed says, “Women face belongs only to her husband’s scrutiny” (Hosseini 82). It reflects his strict, conservative and patriarchal view that women should be completely hidden from public gaze. As their marriage continues, Mariam’s suffering worsens when she was unable to fulfill Rasheed’s obsession with fathering a son. “At the age of nineteen, she had failed him seven times and now in his eyes she was only a burden” (Hosseini 98). It highlights that male dominant system values women based on bearing children for them. Among Pashtuns there is a belief that a home without a male child is not worth preserving and should be demolished (Ali and Shah, 2019). Rasheed’s resentment culminates in a horrifying act of domestic violence when “he snatched her hand, opened it and dropped a hand full of pebbles into it. Put these in your mouth, chew” (Hosseini 102). The pebbles symbolize weight of male dominancy that punishes women for natural biological consequences beyond their control. Laila’s marriage to Rasheed, in his sixties, at the age of fourteen follows the same pattern as that of Mariam. After the death of her parents in civil war of 1978, she is coerced into marrying Rasheed for survival, not love. Millett’s theory helps to explain why women accept abuse for so long, they are conditioned to see male dominancy as normal and female submission as their duty (Millett 65). When Laila delivers a daughter, Aziza, whom Rasheed showed hate but years later she gave him his desired son, Zalmai. Laila’s situation shows how women consent is often overlooked or manipulated in the name of protection, Honor or tradition (Hosseini, 2007). Rasheed represents rural, patriarchal Pashtun norms that denied women from personhood. In Pashtun society women are judged by their ability to obey, serve and bear sons. Through their journey in forced marriage, Hosseini critiques the traditional norms of women’s vulnerability and expose how domestic arrangements serve as sites of both physical and psychological violence maintaining patriarchal control through the oppression of women.

### **Domestic Violence**

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, domestic violence is normalized in the life of Mariam and Laila which reflects patriarchal society. Rasheed’s cruel conduct to his wives is a vivid representation

of male dominance that controls every level of women's existence. His physical beating and emotional torment are the reflection of the ways in which Pashtun women's identities are controlled by men. Mariam faced physical attacks such as bashing, kicking and slapping, forcing victims to hear themselves and even killing (Mastour et.al, 2024). Mariam and Laila suffer from various offences. Rasheed is abusive towards them and treated his wives as vessels for reproduction and service to men. Millett states that sexual violence and humiliation are not just personal acts, but political tools used by men to dominate women in male centric culture. Force is the part of patriarchy that society uses to keep women obedient (Millett 86). Laila also suffers physical violence when her lips, tongue and mouth are injured resulting in her lower incisors breaking. It reveals the brutality, cruelty of men towards women in patriarchal society. "She was being yanked by the hair. Hair was ripped from Laila's scalp and her eyes welled up with pain" (Hosseini 261). In the novel psychological violence is also depicted when Rasheed humiliates and verbally abuses his wives to implement his supremacy over them. He insults Mariam in front of Lila in a humiliating manner. "a true blessing, we are all urban people you and I. Mariam have you informed her that you are a *harami*?" (Hosseini 97). Rasheed does not see Laila as a partner or even a human being, but as a possession to dominate. Mariam and Laila feel worthless, afraid and depressed they are enduring Rasheed's cruelty because they have no power to escape. The novel shows women in oppressive societies suffer both physically and psychologically. These abuse parallels the lived experiences of many Pashtun women. Women who speak for their defense called immoral and risk violent punishment. This act of violence can be analyzed through radical feminism theory, which argues that domestic violence is not simply about individual anger but about maintaining systemic male power to control. Rasheed's abuse is not emotional, but it is structured, repetitive and meant to instil terror, which aligns with the core idea of patriarchy as a system of domination.

### **Education as a Tool of Oppression and Empowerment**

Education is a basic entitlement for every person, irrespective of their gender, but women are deprived from this right. In patriarchal society women's education is considered unimportant. Economic and education system are powerful tools used by patriarchy to keep women in lower position in society (Millett 82). In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini presents education as a tool of oppression and path to empowerment, depending on who controls it. For many Afghan women, especially under patriarchy and tribal system, education is deliberately denied keeping them submissive and voiceless. Mariam desired to go to school like others but her mother, Nana dissuades her by saying "this is our fate in life, Mariam. For women like us, survival means enduring because it is all we have. They will mock you at school and will call you *harami*" (Hosseini 18). The patriarchal values shaped Mariam identity and making her believe that her only worth lies in serving men. Without education Mariam is more vulnerable to manipulation, forced marriage and lifelong abuse. Unlike Maraim, Laila grows up in a household that values education and progress. Her father, Babi, strongly believes in the necessity of girl's education, reminding her that "Marriage can wait but education cannot" (Hosseini 114). His faith in girl's education challenges traditional gender norms and represents a quiet rebellion against patriarchal customs. Despite education being a vital source of emancipation, Pashtun women are confined to domestic duties and viewing that women's place is either Kor(home) or Gor(grave). (Ali and Shah,2019).

Under the Taliban rule, women's schools were closed, they were forced to wear burqa and those seeking education punished publicly. Despite these restrictions, education becomes a source of freedom for Laila. Her determination to secretly educate her children highlights that education serves as the first step towards empowerment. Khaled Hoseini demonstrates how both denial and pursuit of education profoundly affect women's ability to make choices, dismantle subjugation

and envision a hopeful future. For Pashtun women, education emerges not only a basic human right but serves as a tool for survival and emancipation within male-dominated society. Hosseini contrasts through Mariam and Laila, how education when denied becomes a tool of control but when embraced, turns into a weapon of liberation.

### **Female Solidarity and Sacrifice as Resistance**

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam and Laila's relationship evolves into a striking symbol of solidarity and sacrifice that resists the deeply embedded patriarchy of Afghan and particularly Pashtun culture. Initially they both endured Rasheed's brutality, turning shared sufferings into strength. Following their failed escape to Peshawar, Rasheed's violent rage escalated "He grabbed her and slammed her against the wall. The belt struck her again, the metal buckle biting into her shoulder, her fingers already bleeding" (Hosseini 338). It highlights the physical and psychological subjugation women face in male dominated culture. The mutual support between Mariam and Laila becomes an act of defiance, proving that female solidarity can rise above cultural constraints and challenge injustices in male dominated world (Aruna and Thambi, 2024). The turning point in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* occurs when Mariam kills Rasheed, choosing to protect her newly found family over her own life. Once silenced and dismissed as a *harami*, Mariam reclaims her autonomy by confronting her oppressor. Her confession in Walayat women's prison reveals her strength, she says "I confess to my actions, brother if i had not, she would have been killed by him. He was strangling her" (Hosseini 343). Her voice was calm that reflects her courage and moral conviction. Her final thought "this was a rightful end to a life of illegitimacy" (Hosseini 361). Highlights that resistance can restore dignity even in death. Khaled Hosseini presents female solidarity as a transformative force through the lives of Mariam and Laila that can challenge patriarchal oppression. Their bond becomes a subtle but profound rebellion grounded not in aggression but in affection, loyalty and shared sufferings. However, in Pashtun communities, male authority dictates honor and silence, their solidarity becomes an emblem of resistance, resilience and hope.

### **Conclusion**

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* exposes the deeply rooted patriarchal oppression of Afghan society, particularly within the Pashtun cultural framework, where lives of women are governed by systemic oppression, forced marriages, domestic violence and the denial of education. Through the journey of Mariam and Laila, the novel presents a profound critique of the social; and cultural traditions that restrict Pashtun women's liberty. Both women endure physical and emotional abuse at the hands of their tyrannical husband, Rasheed, whose cruelty isolates them and seeks to suppress their spirit. However, their shared sufferings give birth to a deep sisterhood based on compassion, loyalty and sacrifice. Their mutual support empowers them to confront Rasheed's cruelty, culminating in Mariam's selfless act of sacrifice, which stands as a symbol of ultimate resistance. The narrative also highlights the transformative power of education. Laila's pursuit of education and reopening the orphanage and school in Kabul demonstrate that education is means of empowerment and transformation for women. Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* becomes a literary testament to Pashtun women's resilience, illustrating that although cultural structures restrict them, through solidarity, education, and sacrifice, they can achieve empowerment and redefine their social existence.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This research examines the portrayal of women's suppression and emancipation in Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* especially when examined from the prospect of Pashtun women experiences. In Pashtun society women face coerced marriage, domestic abuse and limited access to education that hinder their empowerment. Through a close critical reading

of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, this research has critically explored how Pashtun women suffer subjugation and provide potential for women's agency. Applying radical feminism theory of Katherine Murray Millett's theory of *Sexual Politics*, the novel depicts how power operates within gender relations reinforcing male dominancy and female subordination through family, marriage, law and social norms. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* mirrors the hurdles faced by Pashtun women which is shown through the experiences of Mariam and Laila though shaped by different circumstances are bound by the oppressive systems. Mariam's illegitimacy and early marriage to Rasheed symbolize the gender-based violence abide by countless women in patriarchal cultures. Her silence, endurance and later resistance represent transformation from passive victims to dignified agency. In wider terms, Khaled Hoseini's novel has revealed the gendered injustice of Pashtun society. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a vital addition to discourses on women's rights in South Asia. This research indicates that true empowerment requires but also through systematic transformation of education, deconstruction of patriarchal values and sisterhood are crucial for Pashtun women's empowerment. Future policies and programs need to address gender-based barriers in schools and universities. Equal access to education for both men and women needs to be stressed to create an inclusive empowered society.

Finally, a change of patriarchal ideologies is necessary. Men particularly those who are in a position of authority in families, institutions or communities need to be led to abandon patriarchal indoctrination and affirm women's rights to self-determination. Women empowerment in Pashtun society exists in education, awareness and change in cultural thinking.

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