



Women under the Taliban: fiction vs. reality- a comparative study of Khaled Hosseini's *A thousand splendid suns* and the historical experiences of Afghan women

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ABSTRACT

This Article Studies About the Restrictions faced by women under the Taliban rule in the novel. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini and also compares fictional representation with documented historical accounts of Afghan women experience under the Taliban governance. Through analysis of important key themes like restrictions on mobility, denial on education and health care, domestic violence and forced marriages. This study argues that Hosseini's narratives not only functions as a fiction but also as a form of historical testimony. Based on the reports from United Nations, Amnesty International, The feminist majority foundation and scholarly literary criticism. The article evaluates the accuracy, limitations, and enduring relevance on the novel depiction. Even though the novel achieves significant historical fidelity it also serves a boarder humanistic purpose by promoting global empathy for Afghan women whose stories have been hidden by political narratives.

Keywords: Taliban, Afghan women, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini, gender apartheid, fiction and history, women's rights, Afghanistan

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) is one of the most widely read literary work which explores the struggles faced by Afghan Women under the Taliban rule. The Story is set against three decades of Afghanistan history from the Soviet invasions through the civil war to the Taliban governance. The novel tells the story about two women's named Mariam and Laila, whose lives are shaped by institutionalised oppression, domestic violence and political upheaval. The novel's emotional power lies in its portrayal of how political ideologies translate into daily suffering of individual women.

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Yet literary fiction, however empathetic is not a historical document. Critics have both praised Hosseini for humanising a population often reduced to statistics and also questioned whether this narrative oversimplifies or selectively represents the complexity of the Afghan crisis. The article takes up those dynamics easily: how faithfully does *A thousand Splendid Suns* reflect the documented realities of Taliban governance in Afghanistan, where does the novel succeed in its historical accuracy and where does it fall apart

To answer these questions, this article undertakes a conceptual comparison between the novel's fictional world and historical accounts from the United Nations, Amnesty international, The Feminist Majority Foundation and Academic literary scholarship. The Analysis is divided into five key domains of women's oppression under the Taliban: freedom of movement and dress, access to education and healthcare, domestic violence, forced marriage and erasure women from public life

Historical context: the Taliban and Afghan women

To understand the novel, one must know the historical reality behind it. The Taliban seized control on Kabul on 27 September 1996 which led to a period of governance that gained world recognition because of its systematic oppression against women. From 1996 to 2001 the Taliban imposed certain restrictions based on gender with no parallel in modern governance

Based on the Feminist Majority Foundation majority of the public life was occupied by the Afghan women about 50% of students and 60% of teachers at Kabul university, 70% of school teachers, 50% of civilian workers and 40% of doctors in Kabul were women. After Taliban seized power changes in reality occurred within a week

According to Wikipedia documentation between 27 September 1996 to 17 December 2001 Taliban women were restricted from going out in public places without a male presence, they must have to wear burqa all the time, education was denied and receiving treatment from male doctors was prevented. Women who didn't follow the rules faced brutal public punishments.

These restrictions were not purely based on cultural norms but forced by the ministry for the promotion of virtue and prevention of the vice. A group of qualified mortality Police were hired to patrol streets, dispense beatings and to execute punishment for those who violated the rules. Women had to face severe problems which cost their life many of them died because they could not access healthcare and some of them were arrested because there was no male presence to escort them.

Restriction on mobility and dress: a parallel analysis

One of the major themes in *A thousand splendid Suns* is how Taliban control over women's appearance and movement. In the novel Mariam and Laila had to face different problems under the Taliban forces specifically based on their dress code and on their freedom of movement. The burqa becomes a central symbol in the novel because it is not only a garment but it represents how women hide themselves from the outside world and it also show how they control their identity and feelings through private resistance.

The character sketch from the novel can be closely connected to the documented historical accounts. The article on Wikipedia about the treatment of women under the Taliban records that they placed severe restrictions on women's freedom of movement and difficulties among people who could not afford burqa. The document further talks about testimony of a women who had been beaten for walking the streets alone without a male guardian "My father was killed in battle...I have no husband, no brother, no son. How am I to live if I can't go out alone? This resembles Mariam from the novel a woman with no male relatives and no sanctioned independence.

In December 1998, Taliban banned taxi drivers from transporting women who did not completely cover their faces ,a detail which is not present in the novel which illustrates the oppression Hosseini tries to capture .According to the UN women report (2024) even today some women must be accompanied with a male relative when they leave their homes even for a short journey Widows or women with no male relative must risk their life for buying food or accessing health care .From this we get to understand how Hosseini accurately tried to represent a structural form of oppression

The denial of education: Hosseini's Laila and historical erasure

The central motif in *A Thousand Splendid Sun* is Education. Laila was raised by an intellectual father who often said that a women's greatest asset is her education this represents a generation of Afghan women who dreamt a future of possibilities only to have it obliterated. The novel's heart-breaking phase are those in which Laila watches the schools being closed, watching her dreams narrow to the dimensions of Rasheed's household. Historically this is one of the most documented aspects of Taliban governance. The Feminist Majority Foundation notes that under Taliban rule women were not allowed to continue their education beyond the age of eight and were not allowed to work. women were forced to seek education in underground schools where they and their teachers put themselves at a risk of execution (Feminist Majority Foundations ,2020). According to medica Mondiale report (2024) one of the first political action of the Taliban was to restrict girls from attending secondary schools

Based on the UN Human Rights (2023) the women rights in Afghanistan had gone backwards during the pre 2002 era. The freedom and rights gained by women in the past 20 years were lost during the Taliban governance. This statement resembles the narrative of Laila who represents not just an individual tragedy but a collective generational loss. this removed an entire female intellectual class.

A Thousand Splendid Suns Literary Analysis (2023) notes that Hosseini's portrayal of the denial of education is not incidental but structural. The novel argues about the consequences of Taliban policies on women access to resources and futures. This analysis is supported by the literary scholarship published in the sociology& cultural review which positions Laila and Mariam as victims of gender oppression

Healthcare denied: the hospital scenes and their historical basis

Chapter 39 of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* talks about Laila's childbirth scene. She gives birth at a segregated, under resourced hospital without anaesthesia, on a cold operating table. The female doctor overseeing the delivery admits to having no X-ray equipment, no suction, no oxygen and no antibiotics. Laila is cut open on a cold table without anaesthesia it is barbaric and animalistic at the same time it was not exceptional but representative of the conditions faced by all Afghan women.

This Scene in the novel has direct historical context. The Wikipedia article on Taliban treatment of women records that the Taliban did not allow any male doctors to touch the body of a women in the name of consultation and female doctors were banned from working because of these restrictions the healthcare system collapsed and many women died because of incurable illnesses. Based on the UN women report even today Afghan women's find difficulties in accessing healthcare facilities. Many women fears keep them from leaving they're on homes and those who do may have travel miles to a clinic only to be turned away simply because they are women. Even now in some provinces women can't be treated by male doctors and there are fewer health workers. From this we get an idea of how Hosseini tries to combines his fiction with contemporary reality and trying to retain urgent relevance.

Amnesty International's Afghanistan report (2024) further notes that in November 2024 the Taliban imposed a new restriction in Herat requiring all female patients, caretakers and staff to wear burqa to access healthcare facilities the pattern Hosseini had noted in his fiction seventeen years before.

Domestic violence and forced marriages: Rasheed as a structural metaphor

The character sketch of Rasheed is an abusive husband of Mariam and Laila. Some critics mention it as a literary device which serve a dramatic villain purpose. But a deep analysis suggest that Hosseini constructed Rasheed not only as an abusive husband but he tried to portray him as a product and beneficiary of a system that supported male voice. The novel shows how The Taliban laws and customs shaped Rasheed's brutality. Forced Marriage is another aspect in the novel which is closely connected with documented realities. Mariam when she was fifteen was married to a man she never met. Laila was married because of her circumstances which involved loss of her family members. Based on the medica Mondiale report under the Taliban rule the islamists forced families to give them their unmarried daughters as brides and some families actually choose to marry off their daughter to a Talib in order to gain protection for the family.

The erasure of women from public life

The common factor in the novel and the historical document is the Taliban project to make women invisible from public space, professional life and political existence. This can be found in every phase of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* like in the boarding up of windows so women cannot be seen from the streets, in the closing of schools and workplaces and even in the reduction of women's entire existence to the domestic sphere under a husband's authority

The Feminist Majority Foundation describes the Taliban power as a system in which women of Afghanistan are under home arrest because they didn't have freedom of work, visibility, education, voice healthcare and mobility. The UN Human Rights reports that even today Afghan women feels invisible, isolated, suffocated living in prison like conditions. In every phase of the novel, we can see invisibility and imprisonment. Notes scholarly analysis observes that Hosseini focused the narrative on women because of the complexities faced by Afghan women. The Amnesty International Afghanistan reports that the Taliban governance further restricted freedom of expression and the right to education by banning university book written by women a detail connected to Hosseini's Novel.

Where the novel falls short: critical limitations

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has remarkable Historical fidelity because it tries to record women experience in Afghan. The world socialist web sites argues that the novel only hints indirectly that even after the Taliban fell the women condition was still worse. Even the Karzi governance failed in the improvement but the novel dose not strongly criticize it. The novel ended in 2003 before the power was regained so the readers may interpret that the issues were solved.

This is a substantive criticism. By closing the novel in a moment of tentative hope, Hosseini risk implying that fall of Taliban was a sufficient resolution a narration which involved a continuation of both Patriarchal violence and the Taliban's return to power in 2021. This optimism can be seen in Laila's ability to travel alone at the end of the novel symbolises a temporary restoration of women's freedom and mobility. Further the novel focuses on urban and rural Afghan women in Kabul for whom Taliban restrictions were an additional layer of tribal customs, geographic isolation and economic vulnerability. The Medica Mondiale notes that many young girls are at risk of forced marriages as the famine raging in Afghanistan drives people to desperation a dimension that the novel touches but not fully foreground.

Feminist literary theory and the novel

Feminist Literary Theory offers a multidimensional framework through which Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Can be examined. It is not just a work of fiction but a cultural text that documents, interrogates and challenges the patriarchal system that governs the Afghan Women's life across generations. The Feminist Critical Theory in the novel moves beyond the theme and exposes the ideologies of gender oppression, the politics of representation and the interplay between narrative voice and lived female experience. Research bridges fiction and historical reality which evaluates how literature reflects and reshapes our understanding of women under the Taliban.

The foundational level of feminist literary criticism by scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar says that literature is never politically neutral instead text are embedded within patriarchal ideologies systems which determine what all stories must be told, whose sufferings should be visible and how female voices are being suppressed .We can connect Showalter's concept of gyno criticism, the study of women as writers and subjects within a literary tradition with Hosseini, a male author writing female protagonists in a deeply patriarchal cultural context. He gives voices to women whose stories have been historically been invisible, the way of narrating those stories through male author raises critical questions and views about authenticity, agency and representation.

Fiction and contemporary reality: the weight of representation

When Taliban regained power in Afghanistan by August 2021, they once again erased women from public life. They banned girls from secondary and higher education, prohibited women from working in most sectors and enforced mandatory male guardianship. Based on the report from 2023 by United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) Afghanistan remains the only country in the world to ban women and girls from education beyond primary level. Feminist readings of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* extends beyond literary

into the geopolitical and humanitarian. Thus, the novel functions as an act of witness, mourning and an object of critical scrutiny for female scholars.

Maraim and Lalia: De Beauvoir, Butler and the gendered subject

The two protagonists in the novel, Mariam and Lalia are represented in a way that is closely correspondent to key feminist theoretical frameworks. Simone de Beauvoir theorized as the condition of women as the other can be connected to the character Mariam an illegitimate, child abandoned by her father Jalil, her forced marriage to Rasheed and her execution by the Taliban are not presented aberrations but a logical extension of social order in which women does not have any legal, moral and spiritual standing. De Beauvoir's argument that patriarchy denies women the status of transcendent subjects reducing them instead of immanence to the domestic and the bodily resonates with painful precision in Mariam's arc.

Lalia in the other hand represents a more complex negotiation between feminist aspiration and structural constraint. She enters the narrative with what feminist theorist Adrienne Rich might call a "will to change" a desire to inhabit her own life on her own terms. Educated, intellectually alive and politically conscious. Yet the Taliban's takeover, Rasheed's violence and her family members death made her nascent autonomy possible. Judith Butler theory about performativity of gender aligns with Hosseini's portrayal of Lalia. Lalia's identity is not fixed but certain scenarios shaped and reshaped by the social norms enforced around her. Even the burqa, the silence, the erasure of self become compulsory acts, not chosen one becomes pre-scripted performance under the Taliban.

Fiction against historical record: corroboration and its limits

The comparative feminist reading of the novel against the historical documents and realities involves both the strength and the limits of literary representation. Hosseini's representation of Taliban governance restrictions, the prohibition of women leaving home without male presence, closing of schools and bathhouses to women, the public violations on dress codes are related to the documented findings of human rights organisation including Amnesty International. The Revolutionary Association of women of Afghan (RAWA) which documented Taliban abuses throughout the 1990s recorded testimonies that is present in the novel as well: women were beaten for showing up in public without male presence, denied medical care because male doctors could not treat them and female doctors were banned from working and practising and were imprisoned in their home because of gender inequality.

However, the feminist literary theory questions the uncritical approach of fictional narrative with documentary testimony. Whatever its political intentions be it must require a plot structure, emotional arc, character resolution and inevitably a degree of aesthetics shaping that historical reality does not possess.

The ending scene of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* shows Lalia return to Kabul to rebuild the orphanage where her daughter Aziza stayed because of poverty, in memory of Mariam offers a resolution that many feminist scholars might identify as what Lauren Berlant terms “cruel optimism” a narrative closure which include all the aspects which satisfy the emotional, risky factors of structural oppression. The real Afghan women testimonies RAWA collected did not involve these details Many remained displaced, Widowed and traumatized in refugee campus in Pakistan and Iran throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s

Postcolonial feminist critique: who speaks, and for whom?

The question who speaks, and for whom is the central aspect of postcolonial feminist criticism associated with scholars like Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Spivak's one of the most famous essays “Can the Subaltern Speak?” raises the problem women in patriarchal system and how their voices are being suppressed. Mohanty's critique of western feminism talks about Third World Woman directly relevant to international readers of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The risk, as Mohanty argues is that such narratives even though compassionately written can inadvertently reproduce colonial gaze. Therefore, Afghan women become the objects of pity and rescue rather than the agents of their own political and social information.

The critique does not diminish the novel's humanitarian impact. In the west *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was able to generate public awareness of Afghan women's suffering and generated significant charitable interest in Afghan education and women's rights organization. But feminist theory insist that awareness and representation are not equivalent to justice and the way in which story are portrayed is as much as important as the real story. Afghan feminist writers and activists and the diasporic writers of the time focuses on the importance of centring Afghan women's own intellectual and political traditions. The poetry of Meena Keshwar Kamal, the activist of RAWA, the legislative achievements of women parliamentarians during 2004-2021 constitutional period rather than locating Afghan female experience exclusively within the frame work of victimhood and survival.

Gender apartheid and the novel's renewed urgency in the present

In the current scenario where the Taliban post 2021 governance has been described by UN experts as constituting “gender apartheid” the feminist reading of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* takes on yet another layer of significance. The novel published in 2007, was written in a period cautious about Afghan women's' futures. Girls went to school again, women started working and there were many government and international funding female literary programs across the country. The historical moment can be now seen in Afghanistan.

Reading the novel and connecting with the events occurred in 2021 and after and looking it through a feminist lens portray it not just as a literary analysis but also as a act of grief. A recognition that the life of Laila's generation of woman briefly possessed have been extinguished and the conditions Mariam faced have been restored.

A Thousand Splendid Suns performs dual role in comparative study in the view of feminist theory. Even though the novel was able to bring out women whose lives have been systematically devalued and suppressed it also provides the critical tools necessary to interrogate the novel's representational politics not only what Hosseini shows us but the act is showing necessarily shapes, selects and omits. Literature is not something that substitute history and representation is not something which substitute for rights but when it is read with a feminist critical theory view, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* emerges as a text that both demands and rewards precisely this kind of sustained, politically engaged attention one that honours the complexities of Afghan women's experience rather than turning it to a single, tragic narrative of surging and survival

The ethics of empathy: literature, responsibility and the limits of fictional witness

The First thing that comes in the mind of the reader of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the suffering of real, historical documented subject is one of the ethical responsibilities. The Feminist Literary Theory equips readers with the tools to analyse gender, power and representation with critical precision it also raises certain obligation. The obligation to ask what fiction owes to women whose lives it evokes and what the readers owe to those same women once the book is closed.

Martha Nussbaum's influential argument that literature cultivates moral empathy that the act of occupying another's perspective through narration develops capacity of imagination. Based on this *A Thousand Splendid Suns* function by making the suffering of Afghan Women emotionally connected to readers who might otherwise reach out the suffering only as statistics, political or historical document. The novel's power lies particularly in Mariam's humiliation, Laila's grief and Rasheed's casual brutality these are not just data but experiences of different Afghan women's that demands moral response. In this sense, Hosseini's fiction does what journalism and policy documents rarely can it refuses the reader the comfort of detachment.

Yet this empathetic approach has its own ethical risk many feminist and postcolonial scholars have consistently warned about the empathy shown towards racialised other can slide in what Saidiya Hartman calls "the violence of identification" a process by which the privileged reader's emotional experience of another's suffering becomes paradoxically a way of focusing self rather than sufferer .When the western readers weep for Mariam and Laila, the question

must be asked whether the emotional engagement was able to make any structural change in the lives of Afghan women?. Even the current scenarios which occurred in 2024 over four million girls remain out school and women are prohibited from appearing in public spaces without a male presence suggest empathy, however genuine, has not been sufficient to reverse the conditions the novel depicts.

The ethics of fictional witness requires more than compassionate reading. It requires that literature must be understood at the very beginning rather than at the end it helps in deeper engagement with historical, political and humanitarian realities that fiction never fully contain. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a work which involve both moral seriousness and feminist dimensions but the Afghan women it represents continue to exist beyond its pages, in conditions that demand not only literary attention but also political will. Therefore, Feminist Literary Theory, measures literature of witness is not the tears it draws but the action it inspires.

Discussion: fiction as historical testimony

The comparative analysis presented in this article suggests that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* presents a variety of ways in a large measure, as a historical testimony in fictional form. Even though its domains of mobility, education, healthcare, domestic violence and public erasure it closely connected to historical accounts. This is not accidental, Hosseini an Afghan- American writer with deep connection towards his country brought both research and cultural memory to his work.

The Wikipedia article on the novel notes that Hosseini succeeded in making the emotional reality of Mariam and Laila's lives tangible and also giving readers an idea about what daily life in Kabul looks like both before and during the Taliban governance. The novel's strength not only lies in historical document but how Hosseini tried to translate them into the language of personhood: Life of women who cannot go the hospital, a wife whose dreams are hidden under a burqa. This Personalisation of Political violence is the novel's most radical act and a gift to readers to understand the Afghan women crisis

Based on The PMC Published study on Hosseini's women as modern architypes notes that novel presents Afghan women not as victims but as obedient, resistant and empowered in different measures. Many report notes Afghan women as pity but Hosseini gives them individuality, dignity through his novel

Conclusion

A Thousand Splendid Suns is not a perfect historical document but it portrays women during the Taliban era across dress, movement, education, healthcare and domestic life. Hosseini marks the historical realities not only as a novel of

literature but as a form of suffering witness. It limits the optimistic ending, the urban focus, the silence on post 2003 development which are real but they do not thrash out the achievement. The UN Women Report says the Taliban has taken over their right of education, healthcare, mobility, freedom of movement. Even today women face restrictions and not has been reversed. The issues Hosseini noted in fiction continues in reality. From this we can understand that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is not just a historical document but a witness to the struggles faced by Afghan women and world's obligation to witness their struggle is far from over.

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