



Representations of Feminine Suffering in the Novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: A Critical Reading

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Abstract

This research explores the representations of feminine suffering in Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, through a critical approach that analyzes the forms of social oppression, domestic violence, and patriarchal dominance faced by female characters. The study focuses on how the novel's discourse constructs women's suffering not as a state of passive submission, but as a space where resistance, resilience, and feminist solidarity take shape. Utilizing Feminist Criticism supported by narrative analysis, the research aims to uncover the relationship between the textual structure and the socio-political context framing the female experience in Afghanistan, specifically during the country's major political shifts.

The research problem lies in questioning the mechanisms of the narrative representation of pain: does the text merely record suffering as an imposed reality, or does it employ it to expose patriarchal systems? By tracing the trajectories of the characters Mariam and Laila, the study highlights the "female body" as a battlefield for socio-political conflict. The research concludes that suffering in the text functions as a catalyst for forming a new identity that transcends the traditional frameworks imposed by patriarchal authority. This transforms the narrative from a mere document of historical pain into a discourse of human resistance, where the cries of victims intersect with the will for change. Consequently, the novel serves as a model of feminist narrative that rehabilitates the marginalized voice and grants it existential agency.

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1. Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, serves as an exceptional narrative corpus that delves into the depths of human suffering, positioning the feminist cause as a core axis through which contemporary Afghan history is re-read from a profound sociological and psychological perspective. The novel begins with the story of Mariam, a girl born out of wedlock, who faces early social ostracization branded with the stigma of being a "harami" (illegitimate). She spends an isolated childhood in a rural shack (*kolba*) with her oppressed mother, Nana, before being driven by a forced paternal decision into marriage with Rasheed, a violent man in his forties in Kabul, following her mother's death and the betrayal of her father, Jalil (Hosseini 10). This exile from the social center embodies what Simone de Beauvoir terms the "becoming of womanhood" as an imposed destiny; she clarifies in her theses that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" through a series of social constraints and formations (De Beauvoir 283).

Due to the violence and subsequent civil war which occur in Kabul, Laila ultimately loses her family (her mom and dad are killed during a bombing raid) as well as her lover, Tariq. She has to agree to marry Rasheed as the second wife, in order to save herself and her unborn baby from Tariq, which will become the most convoluted relationship of this book. In a restrictive and menacing space that effects their ability to find a voice, the dynamic of the two women becomes one of unusual female camaraderie. This relation is aligned with the "Patriarchy" which Ibrahim Khalil portrayed in details as an enslaved system of feminine identity that aims to make women equivalent to men's ownership through domestication (Khalil 45).

The story told in the book is not merely fiction, it also follows a historical timeline of how Afghanistan's political power shifted over time from royal family to Soviet occupation and then the rise of an oppressive regime under the Taliban. These political politics are examined in terms of their effect on women's bodies and spirits, a feature through which authorship-feminists appear as a responsive solidarity: rejection of the very notion of passive victimhood. Far more than simply documenting the suffering of women, the writer documents how collective suffering among women generates a community of political and social action that alters both a woman's identity and self-image (Hosseini 252). The solidarity born from these experiences of struggle among women, that is the type of solidarity where "Sisterhood", which hooks sees as a political mechanism for resisting hegemony (Hooks 67), exists: it creates the bond between women greater than their personal interest but equal to that of a common struggle.

The passage exemplifies the change from a "haven" to Rasheed's "prison" as he exerts his ultimate control of a masculine society that creates the right for him to own and dictate a woman. It does not passively accept the domestic abuse that occurs there; hegemonies of feminist consciousness are uncovered as Mariam and Laila move from a mystical silence which is born of pain and suffering to an existential "agent of self-determination." Their experiences critique the multiple forms of violation in which a woman's body and voice must contend, and serve for Spivak as an impulse sketching a way that subaltern voice never really articulates or expresses—an always-begun but not-for-themselves coming-into-being amidst the wreckage produced by developments encased within overarching systems of domination. (Spivak 82).

The novel dives deep into portraying "motherhood" as one of the most complex representations of suffering and resistance. Laila's agony in the hospital, undergoing a caesarean section without anesthesia due to the lack of medical supplies under Taliban rule, is an iconic scene embodying the peak of "representation of feminine pain" linked to both the body and politics (Hosseini 286). In contrast to this wound, we find Mariam's "surrogate motherhood" for Laila and her children a motherhood that redefines feminist concepts of eligibility and belonging, transcending biological ties to existential ones. This aligns with Elaine Showalter's vision of feminist literature that reformulates concepts of the "feminine self" away from traditional definitions (Showalter 154).

The novel continues to uncover layers of suffering by tracing major fractures in the Afghan social fabric, not limiting itself to depicting poverty or physical violence, but diving into the "symbolic violence" exercised by society against women. Mariam's suffering since childhood did not stem from a lack

of material resources, but from the "existential illegitimacy" imposed upon her by her father, Jalil, and the surrounding society. This negation prompts us to read the text through Chandra Mohanty's concept of "Intersectionality," where patriarchy intersects with colonialism and religious extremism to shape the reality of women in the Third World (Mohanty 335). Feminism emerges here as an act of "recognition" of the Other's existence; Mariam sees herself for the first time through Laila's eyes, and this emotional merger is what enabled them to endure.

The details of feminine suffering reach their "biopolitical" peak under Taliban rule, where controlling the woman's body through the "burqa" and the prohibition of education becomes the primary test for the regime's legitimacy. Here, feminist resistance shines in its most brilliant forms: through teaching children in secret and maintaining bodily dignity despite the lash. This resistant act falls within what Terry Eagleton analyzes as the employment of literature to strip away oppressive ideology and expose the fragility of regimes built on crushing the Other (Eagleton 115).

The novel reaches a moment of "feminist epiphany" when Mariam realizes that her dignity cannot be reclaimed except through a decisive act that ends the cycle of violence. Her killing of Rasheed was a "liberatory act" through which she reclaimed ownership of her body and her decisions for the first time. The scene of Mariam's execution is the ultimate embodiment of suffering transformed into myth; it is a sacrifice at the heart of Judith Butler's concept of "identity performativity," where Mariam breaks the role imposed on her as a silent victim to create her own death as an act of absolute freedom (Butler 112).

In conclusion, the details and events of the novel confirm that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is not just an elegy, but a "feminist manifesto" redefining strength and heroism. Heroism here is not in carrying weapons, but in the "capacity to love" amidst the rubble and the "capacity to sacrifice" for the sake of the other. Laila, who returns at the end of the novel to practice teaching in Kabul, carries Mariam's spirit and dreams with her, confirming that a woman's voice, no matter how hard tyrants try to stifle it, will continue to shine like a thousand splendid suns. This echoes Virginia Woolf's vision, which demanded "A Room of One's Own" as a space for freedom and creativity—a space that Hosseini's women managed to wrest from the heart of hell (Woolf 12).

Furthermore, the narrative text in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* opens up to critical readings that transcend traditional centrality, as Khaled Hosseini offers a dissection of what can be called the "intersectionality of oppression." The Afghan woman in the novel does not face a singular form of oppression but is trapped in a complex system where local political tyranny intersects with deeply rooted tribal customs. This oppression is most hideous when a woman's consciousness is domesticated from childhood to accept inferiority as an inevitable fate, as seen in Nana's advice to her daughter Mariam:

"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. Always remember that" (Hosseini 11).

This quote encapsulates the structure of "symbolic violence" that precedes physical violence, where the idea that a woman is always responsible for the failures of the patriarchal system is planted in her mind, transforming suffering from an incidental event into an "imposed identity" that haunts the

female like her shadow.

In a related context, the "burqa" emerges in the novel not just as a piece of cloth, but as a "mobile spatial wall" imposing forced social isolation and blurring the features of the self. Hosseini describes Mariam's first experience with the burqa and her discovery of this desolate isolation, saying:

"Mariam had difficulty walking in the burqa, the hem always catching under her heels... and the view through the embroidered mesh, made of tiny, connected squares, seemed like seeing the world through a cage" (Hosseini 78).

Likening vision to a "cage" is a powerful narrative representation of suffering that transcends physical pain to reach the "suffocation of the senses," preventing women from free interaction with public space, making the act of "seeing" itself a form of existential rebellion.

The novel also internalizes a bitter struggle between "memory" and "forgetting." While oppressive regimes seek to erase women's history and reduce them to mere numbers, the narrative resorts to "documenting pain" transforming the daily details of Mariam and Laila into historical indictments. Feminism here is embodied in the "reclamation of the story"; when Mariam tells her tale and when Laila decides to return to her roots, they are practicing a type of "narrative resistance" that refuses silence. The architectural structure of the novel, moving between generations and places, reveals the "permanence of suffering," but it also reveals the transmission of "genes of resilience." Mariam, who was sacrificed at the beginning of her life, ends as a conscious "sacrificer," transforming her role from a victim of fate to a maker of history. This aligns with Edward Said's vision regarding the role of literature in confronting power by exposing the "unspoken" in the narratives of the marginalized (Said 114).

This analytical depth paves the way for understanding the novel as a human "manifesto" redefining feminist heroism. It is a heroism not limited to extraordinary acts, but one that lies in "continuing to live" despite all attempts at erasure. Thus, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* becomes a primary reference in Gender Studies, providing us with a precise anthropological vision of the feminine soul that defies breaking, and confirming that the woman's voice is the last fortress against the moral collapse of societies ravaged by wars. This makes the study of these representations of suffering a critical duty for understanding the mechanisms of human liberation in its finest forms.

2. Research Problem

The problem of this study stems from the necessity of understanding the nature of the representation of feminine suffering within the novel: Is this representation limited to a consumerist display of pain intended merely to elicit the reader's sympathy? Or does it transcend that to constitute a critical discourse that exposes the mechanisms of patriarchal oppression and highlights the potential for feminist resistance and rebellion within the text?

3. Research Questions

- How feminine suffering is (both physical and psychological) represented within the narrative structure of the novel?
- What is the nature of the oppression (social, political, and religious) to which the female characters are subjected?

4. Research Objectives

- To analyze the socio-political dimensions of feminine suffering in the novel.
- To examine the role of narrative techniques (such as polyphony) in shaping the feminist discourse.

5. Research Significance

The significance of this research lies in its bridge between literature and contemporary feminist studies. It provides a critical reading of a globally acclaimed novel from a localized cultural perspective, thereby enriching the academic library with analyses that address the representation of women in post-colonial literature and transcultural fiction.

6. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is built upon a methodological marriage between Feminist Criticism and Narrative Analysis. This integration aims to formulate an analytical tool capable of delving into the depths of the novel and deconstructing its ideological and aesthetic codes.

First, the research draws its philosophical reference from Simone de Beauvoir's theses, specifically her central axiom in *The Second Sex*: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." This concept provides a theoretical entry point to understanding the "becoming of womanhood" in Khaled Hosseini's novel. The female characters (Mariam and Laila) are analyzed not as fixed biological entities, but as subjects whose identities are constructed and molded by the pressures of social and political oppression. Here, suffering is not an inherent trait of femininity but a product of an "oppressive upbringing" imposed by the patriarchal institution, which transforms the female from an active "Subject" into an "Object" or a subordinate "Other."

Second, the framework opens up to contemporary concepts presented by Judith Butler regarding "Gender Performativity." This research argues that feminine identity in Afghanistan, as depicted by Hosseini, is a form of "forced performance" under the threat of violence. The burqa, silence, and isolation within private spaces are merely representations of roles imposed by political authority (the Taliban) and patriarchal authority (Rasheed). Butler's concept assists in uncovering how characters practice "resistance through performance," where suffering shifts from a submissive fate into a space for questioning and dismantling these imposed roles, leading to the moment of physical and spiritual rebellion.

Third, this feminist perspective integrates with Narrative Analysis as a procedural tool to deconstruct the story's structure. The research focuses on three primary narrative axes:

- **Space:** The "*kolba*" (shack), the house, and the city are analyzed as geographical spaces reflecting women's imprisonment and marginalization. Space transforms from a mere geographical site into a tool of spatial oppression.
- **Time:** Chronological progression and its overlap with major political shifts are studied to reveal the "accumulation of suffering." Time in the novel is not merely linear; it is a "circularity of pain" that is only broken by the revolutionary act at the end of the text.
- **Polyphony:** The research analyzes narrative focalization techniques and how the author grants independent voices to Mariam and then Laila. This allows the "pattern of suffering" to emerge from divergent perspectives,

revealing the diversity of the feminine experience between the margin and the center.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework aims to provide an integrated reading that links the "text" with "cultural reality." It moves beyond superficial readings of pain to focus on how the "structure of oppression" is constructed linguistically and narratively, and how the novel succeeds in transforming "suffering" from a mere emotional theme into a critical discourse that dismantles patriarchal centrality and opens new horizons for a resilient and resistant feminine identity.

7. Discussion

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, representations of pain intertwine to form a complex narrative structure that transcends the mere recording of historical events, moving toward an analysis of the cultural and political patterns governing feminine existence. Mariam's suffering begins from the very first moment of her birth; her arrival into the world was not merely a biological event, but a social stigma embodied in the title "*harami*" (illegitimate), which haunted her like a heavy shadow. This initial representation places the woman in a direct and harsh confrontation with the "Patriarchal Law" represented by her father, Jalil. Here, the suffering does not lie in hardship or material poverty, but in an "existential rejection" that stripped her of the right to belonging and recognition. As Simone de Beauvoir indicates in her central theses, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" through a long series of social and educational constraints that shape her identity as a subordinate (Beauvoir 283).

Mariam "becomes" a woman within the context of the novel through the experience of systematic isolation in the "*kolba*" (secluded shack), where her existence was confined to a narrow spatial boundary reflecting her existential marginalization. This trajectory was later cemented through her forced marriage to Rasheed, a character who reduced toxic masculinity to its most primitive and cruel forms. The transition from the authority of the "negating father" to the authority of the "oppressive husband" represents a shift in the form of suffering from symbolic exclusion to physical and institutional violence. In Rasheed's home, the female body transforms into a symbolic battlefield reflecting the grand conflicts ravaging Afghanistan. The domestic violence Rasheed practiced against Mariam and Laila represents the zenith of feminine suffering; this violence was not isolated from the general context but was a natural extension of the political oppression later exercised by the Taliban.

The body here is not just a suffering biological entity; it is a theater for political oppression. The Taliban's restrictions imposing the burqa and banning work and education were merely an expansion of Rasheed's lash from the private sphere to the public sphere. However, deep narrative analysis reveals that this "shared pain" did not lead to total collapse; instead, it created what can be termed a "Third Space" of resistance: the space of feminist solidarity that dissolved the class and age differences between Mariam and Laila.

When the novel reaches its dramatic climax with Mariam killing Rasheed, this act transcends mere self-defense to become the shattering of an entire "authoritarian structure" that had enslaved women for decades.

Mariam does not just kill an unjust husband; she performs a purgative act that transforms her long suffering into a bridge through which Laila crosses toward freedom and life (Hosseini 341). This act reformulates the concept of "Feminist Agency," where the woman emerges from the position of the passive victim to the position of the change-making subject, even if the price is symbolic or physical death. From a feminist critical perspective, this transformation reflects the "becoming of consciousness" shaped through suffering, as the oppressed body turns into a tool for liberation, and scars become marks of resistance.

Khaled Hosseini excelled in using the technique of narrative alternation between Mariam and Laila to deepen the psychological and cultural contrasts. While Mariam represents the "traditional woman" who absorbed pain with a silent, mystical patience born from years of rejection, Laila represents the "educated woman" who carries the seeds of conscious rebellion for her lost rights. This narrative contrast fundamentally serves the novel's critical discourse, illustrating that feminine suffering in patriarchal societies is a totalizing suffering that spares no one, whether the woman comes from the rural margin or the urban center. However, "consciousness" is what determines the outcomes of this suffering and the methods of circumventing it. While Mariam's resistance lay in silent endurance and emotional protection, Laila's resistance lay in the attempt to reclaim memory and dream of the future.

The conclusion of the novel, despite its tragic nature manifested in Mariam's execution, carries within it the seeds of genuine hope, embodied in Laila's return to the teaching profession. This confirms that the narrative does not seek to document pain for its own sake, but rather to construct an active "feminist self" capable of reproducing life amidst the rubble (Butler 112). This perspective aligns with bell hooks' arguments, which posit that feminist solidarity is the only way to break the cycles of systematic oppression (Hooks 67). Suffering in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* acts as a catalyst for changing social consciousness, as it exposes the mechanisms of patriarchal dominance and strips away the falsehood of discourses that employ religion or tradition to justify the enslavement of women.

Furthermore, setting (Kabul, Herat) emerges as an active element in shaping suffering. Women are confined within narrow spaces that grow increasingly restrictive with the rise of extremist movements. The burqa imposed by the Taliban was not merely a piece of cloth; it was an attempt to erase the visual and existential identity of the woman, making the very acts of "seeing" and "speaking" forms of rebellion. As Chandra Mohanty points out, the struggle of women in the Third World is inextricably linked to their political and economic conditions, making the representation of their suffering a political act inseparable from the national struggle for liberation (Mohanty 335). The critical discussion of this novel leads to the realization that Khaled Hosseini has provided an anthropological vision of feminine pain, transforming the stifled cries behind walls into a global literary discourse that condemns injustice and celebrates the human spirit's ability to shine like a thousand splendid suns despite the darkness of oppression.

Moreover, another critical dimension becomes apparent regarding the "geography of oppression," where space is

transformed from a mere physical realm into a tool for consolidating suffering. The domestic confinement imposed by Rasheed, followed by the strict spatial laws of the Taliban, turned the entire city of Kabul into an "open prison" for women. This spatial siege did not only aim to isolate the body but sought to "fragment consciousness" by depriving women of interaction with public space and education. However, the narrative reveals a pattern of clandestine spatial resistance; the dark corners of the home were transformed into spaces for storytelling and feminist solidarity. This confirms that "suffering" in this text is not a static fate but a dynamic state that generated innovative methods to circumvent patriarchal surveillance.

The representation of pain in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* transcends the individual dimension to become a historical indictment of the "patriarchal system" that invests in wars to reinforce its authority over marginalized groups. The moment of Mariam's martyrdom, presented narratively as a heroic and purgative act, confronts the reader with an ethical question regarding the price of freedom in extremist societies. Thus, Hosseini succeeds in transforming "feminine suffering" from a mere dramatic theme into a "protest document" that grants a voice to those long silenced behind walls of silence, asserting that feminist memory is the final fortress against the erasure of identity in times of great collapse. Consequently, the novel acquires its significance as a critical reference that dismantles the mechanisms of hegemony and rehabilitates the female body as a carrier of history and an agent of change.

8. Conclusion

This conclusion represents the cognitive and critical harvest of the research journey into the worlds of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The novel was not merely a transient literary elegy, but a profound dissection of the structures of power and resistance within an extremely complex socio-political context. Through its chapters, this research has demonstrated that the novel transcends being an emotional narrative of pain to become an explicit critical indictment of the patriarchal institution and the extremist political regimes that invest in the oppression of women to consolidate their influence. The text clearly reveals how "toxic masculinity" allies with political ideology spanning the eras of war to the Taliban rule to transform the woman's body into a symbolic battlefield and a subject of absolute control. The oppression of Mariam and Laila was not a series of isolated individual incidents, but the result of systematic "structural violence." Here, the novel functions as a protest document exposing the utilization of custom and religion to justify the existential erasure of the female, making the text a political cry demanding a reconsideration of the legitimacy of any authority built upon crushing half of society.

Furthermore, the study concluded that suffering in the text underwent a remarkable chemical and psychological transformation. After beginning as a submissive, fatalistic state in Mariam's ostracized childhood, it evolved through her relationship with Laila into a conscious "act of struggle." The concept of "Feminist Sisterhood" was not merely a fragile emotional bond but a deliberate political strategy to confront patriarchal oppression. Shared pain dissolved the class and cultural differences between the two characters, creating what can be termed a "Third Space" of resistance within the walls of domestic imprisonment.

This transformation confirms that feminist solidarity is the only tool capable of breaking the cycles of systematic oppression; Mariam granted Laila a second chance at life through her ultimate sacrifice, transforming her death into a liberatory act that broke the shackles of servitude forever.

On another note, the critical analysis proved that the aesthetics of narrative construction—from polyphony to the symbolism of space—were essential in conveying the human dimension of the Afghan female experience. The use of "polyphony" allowed the feminine experience to emerge from divergent angles: Mariam provided the voice of the suppressed rural margin, while Laila provided the voice of the educated urban center. This intersection granted the novel a rare critical comprehensiveness. Additionally, the symbolism of space played a pivotal role in embodying the existential siege of women, from the isolated "kolba" to the "burqa" as a mobile spatial field that blurs identity. The narrative here did not merely report historical facts but reconstructed the psychological time of the woman, turning her silence into a resonant language that condemns universal injustice.

In conclusion, the study finds that the novel succeeded in constructing an "active feminist self" capable of recovery and persistence despite all fractures. Laila's eventual return to Kabul to contribute to building an orphanage is the most significant result of this research; it represents the victory of will over attempts at erasure and forgetting. Ultimately, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* transformed from a document of pain into a discourse of hope, confirming that suffering was the womb from which a new Afghan identity was born—one that recognizes the value of women and makes the sacrifices of the past a bridge to a brighter and more dignified future. The novel remains an extraordinary model of committed literature (*littérature engagée*) that rehabilitates marginalized voices and grants them immortality in human memory, declaring that the will to live is stronger than all apparatuses of oppression, and that the sun of freedom must rise, no matter how long the night of suffering lasts.

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