

**EDUCATION: EMOTION: EVALUATION- EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN.  
A STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S A THOUSAND  
SPLENDID SUNS.**

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**Abstract:** Women all over the world are challenged by a number of obstacles that restrict their ability, not only in their house but also in the society, to play significant roles. For a long time women stayed far behind men in the socio-economic equality, freedom to express and expose their individuality. In many countries two thirds of the adult illiterates are women, even though many researches show that the achievement of gender equality has enormous socio-economic ramifications. The paper attempts to bring a study of the characters in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to highlight the need of women's education to get empowerment.

**Keywords:** abusive marriage, desperate women, education, empowerment.

**Introduction:** To epitomize the actual status of women many novels portray the struggle of women against the social, economic and cultural forces, which lead to the exploitation of the individuality of the women. The characters translate the inner feelings, personal experience and struggles of the married women, into a sociological interpretation of the womanhood.

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghanistan writer, creates characters which have the simplicity and true emotions of the middle class people contending with unhappy families, abusive marriages, the rich people with their typical domination and inequality outlook, the oppressive governments and their repressive restrictions upon the people.

In his first novel, *The Kite Runner* (2003), he reveals the war and political turmoil themes of betrayal and retribution. It centers on fathers and sons relationships and friendships between men. It portrays the ethnic tensions between the Hazaras and the Pashtuns in Afghanistan, and the terrible experiences of the people. His second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, published in May 2007 focuses on the relationship between mothers and daughters. The setting is again Afghanistan, but he has taken the last thirty years of the country's chaotic history of war and oppression during the years of the Soviet occupation, then the civil war and the Taliban dictatorship. He depicts how war and tyrannical religious conviction, change the life of ordinary people living in Afghanistan, especially women. Hosseini depicts the culture of the people in a simple language, and presents their lives and difficulties. He intends to deal with the plight of poor and uneducated Afghan women, who endure the hardships of life, the control of men, and the contempt of society. It draws attention to the ill treatment and sorrows of the women as they struggle with patriarchal dominance, economic exploitation.

It is a historical novel in the view point of an innocent Harami girl, Mariam. She is the victim of the male chauvinistic customs prevailed in Kabul. Her daily life pictures the social, economical and political problem prevails around her which darkens her world and collapses her dreamful life into pieces.

Mariam is an illegitimate child, the product of a servant, Nana and a wealthy man, Jalil. Her mother is the one who emphasizes this idea the most, because she is bitter about the circumstances of her life. Nana has paid the full price for having a child out of wedlock while Jalil has seemingly paid nothing more than money to support her and Mariam in little more than a hovel outside of Herat. Jalil shows himself to be affectionate towards Mariam. He always pacifies her by saying that she is like Queen Gauhar Shad who raised the famous minarets in Herat in the 15th century and he prefers the name 'Mariam' which is the Tube rose, a lovely flower which is one of his favourite flowers. But really, she is neither honored nor given freedom even to reside in her father's home. Mariam will admire her beloved father for his vast and worldly knowledge. She will quiver with pride to have such father who knows great things. But knowing the hardships of women's existence and the true psyche of Jalil, her mother says,

'What great lies!..... Richman telling rich lies..... And don't let him charm you. He betrayed us, your beloved father. He cast us out. He cast us out of his big fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily.' (Hosseini, 5)

Nana, the spoiled mother, who is compelled to think that 'a woman need only endure', makes her daughter also to be trained, to have the same attitude for the sake of their live. Whenever Mariam questions her to get rid of Herat and move to Kabul to lead a happy life with her father she says,

'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 you remember this Mariam.' (Hosseini, 7)

In the meantime, Mariam also pays for having even been born as she is a reminder of all Nana has lost. Her mother accuses Mariam of discarding her, and insists she'll die if Mariam leaves.

'But where do I belong? What am I going to do now? I am all you have in this world, Mariam and when I'm gone you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing.' (Hosseini, 38)

Only after the suicide of her mother, Mariam learns to

know her real condition and why Nana has insisted before not to rely on her father. The teenage girl is forced by Jalil's wives to marry. They are disgraced by her birth and this is their right chance to erase the, 'Last trace of their husband's scandalous mistake'. They don't mention that two of Jalil's other daughters Saideh or Naheed are the same age as her, study in the Mehri School in Herat, and have plans to enroll in Kabul University.

When Mariam continues to scream at her father to tell them no and expects his care towards her, he says, 'God damn it, Mariam! Don't do this to me!'. In shock she says,

"I used to worship you, On Thursdays I sat for hours waiting for you..... I thought about you all the time. I used to pray that you'd live to be a hundred years old. I didn't know that you were ashamed of me...No. No, don't come. I won't see you. Don't you come. I don't want to hear from you. Ever.*Ever*."(Hosseini, 50)

Without any one's support and not even given a chance to deliver her wish, she is married to a much older 45-year-old shoemaker named Rasheed, a piggy brute man 'the big, square, ruddy face, with a hooked nose, flushed cheeks, bloodshot eyes, the crowded bad teeth and nails, yellow-brown like the inside of a rotting apple, bushy eyebrows, coarse salt and pepper hair'. He starts out merely brutish, but after Mariam fails to bear him children, he becomes gruff and psychologically abusive, insisting she wear a burqa and chew pebbles until her teeth break.

Rasheed treats her with ill-disguised contempt, subjecting her to scorn, ridicule, insults, even 'walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat'. Mariam lives in fear of his shifting moods, his unstable temperament, his insistence on steering even everyday exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not.

At the time of Eid festivals also she is isolated from others and informed to be in upstairs to her room as if he is honoring and protecting her namoos. Like her mother she feels prized by his protectiveness even when he compels her to wear a burqa. To the core of his ruthless approach, Rasheed takes the rice into his mouth and promptly spits it out. She is shaking and when she begins to clean the place, he returns with a handful of pebbles and forces her mouth open and stuffs them by clasp her jaw. Mariam struggles against him, mumbling, but he pushes the pebbles in her mouth and says to chew.

Like Mariam's, Laila's life is a period of survival to the fittest. Laila is the cherished daughter of an intellectual father and an affectionate mother, who encourage her to pursue a good education. They always say that all the girls must be educated for the development of the family and also the country. He says it is a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. But unexpectedly she finds her life literally shattered when a rocket, lands on her house

and kills her parents. She recalls her childhood days, when there was fiery problems prevailed in their place Babi says to Laila,

'Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila but they're probably more free now, under the communists and have more rights than they've ever had before.... Women's freedom is also one of the reasons people out there took up arms in the first place.'

(Hosseini, 121)

But now the Taliban controls the country. They massacre the Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks people. They also enact fundamentalist laws, most famously those banning music and dance, and those severely restricting women's rights.

Before entering in to the life of isolation, Laila loves Tariq, who has lost a leg to a land mine. She is fourteen, when he and his parents flee to Pakistan to escape the fighting between mujahedeen factions and nearly everyone she knows is killed by a stray rocket. When she knows that her dearly loved boyfriend has already left Kabul with his family she suddenly finds herself as an orphan with no resources or friends .So, when she discovers that she carries the baby of Tariq, she immediately makes her mind prepared.

Laila knows that what she was doing was dishonorable and unfair to Mariam. But she reluctantly agrees to become the second wife of the shoemaker Rasheed, who is now in his sixties, though she feels terrible to share the married life of Mariam. Then the life of Laila takes an even sharper path towards ruin. Rasheed is geared up to start his intimate relation to a broken girl of his daughter's age, like a wolf in a cow's garb, he says to Mariam,

"We need to legitimate this situation. People will talk. It looks dishonorable, an unmarried young woman living here. It's bad for my reputation. And hers.And yours. It is a common thing and you know it. I have friends who have two, three, four wives. Your father had three..."

(Hosseini, 192)

When Mariam opposes their marriage, he answers that, 'If she were a car, she would be a Volga. You on the other hand, would be a Benz'. His demands and judgments rains down on them like the rockets on Kabul. They overcome several wars throughout their lives and turn into strong and faithful women, in spite of the abuse at the hand of Rasheed and the abusive treatment of women by the Taliban. He has the determined notion that 'God made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can'.

Mariam and Laila experience extreme physical, mental, and sexual abuse from every powerful figure in their life. Only for the sake of the innocent girl Laila, who becomes so close to her after giving birth to a girl Aziza, Mariam keeps silent towards the tyrant husband. When they try to go to Peshawar, from Rasheed's house, the restrictions and the customs prevail in Kabul compel them to be nailed into the same prison. Kabul is engulfed with the preaching that,

'Attention women: You will stay inside your homes at all times... If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home. No jewelry. No cosmetics. You will not speak unless spoken to. You will not make eye contact with men.... Girls are forbidden from attending school. Women are forbidden from working... Obey'.

(Hosseini, 249)

The women must find reservoirs of strength just to survive. Mariam considers her husband as the Mujahideen and the Taliban who abuse women and destroy their country. They live in a world of old time values and refuse to accept the need for women to have an identity beyond what can be seen under a burqa. Mariam and Laila portray the reality of life of a woman in a backward Muslim country. They are not only victims of abuse but they also resist. Then under the situational compulsion Rasheed is murdered by Mariam, when the Taliban drives out the Mujahideen and the United States drives the Taliban out of power.

Mariam knows all along that they cannot both go, because they might be caught and there will be no one to care for and protect Laila's children. So, even though Laila convinced her that they can make it together, Mariam refuses to leave. She is willing to face death rather than Laila dying, too. Mariam sacrifices herself to save Laila, Tariq, and the children.

At the time of execution, she closes her eyes without regret and accepts the end with abundant peace. She considers that the execution, by the Taliban, is a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings. Though she started her life as a *Harami* child, and considered by everyone, as a weed, regrettable accident and an unintended thing now, 'she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back.' (Hosseini, 329)

Laila comes to live for awhile in Pakistan with Tariq and the children. She eventually realizes that to honor the sacrifices of her parents and Mariam, she must return to her country to be one of those who strive to rebuild it. She recalls Babi's words in her young age that the most important thing in his life, after her safety, was her education.

'You're a very, very bright girl. You can be anything you want. I know this about you. And also I know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men... because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila'.

(Hosseini, 103)

Laila attains a maturity to be a good mother and a better woman and decides that she must accept her role in the rebuilding of her country. Mariam is in Laila's own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns. She says goodbye to Mariam and go back to Kabul. It attempts to show the fallout that Afghanistan's violent history in the handful of individuals, ending in death of Mariam at the hands of the Taliban and the promise of a new life for Laila. At last Laila and Mariam prove that,

*'One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs,*

*Or the Thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls'*  
(Hosseini, 172)

For their freedom, the women of the novel struggle to find and preserve their identity as a wife or mother or as a human being in their domestic world. Woman's desires, their economic and educational situations are conditioned by the society. Their critical state forces them to give their voice against the internal agony and encounters with the male chauvinism. It explores the issue of gendered self-representation and feminist concern by the strong portrayal of the characters to make new, empowering image for women.

The empowerment of women will surely reach its heights if they have emotive strength to face the inhumanity towards women, systematic victimization of women by patriarchal institutions, spousal abuse, influence of complete control of men, and resistance to discrimination as a woman. The position of women should be improved in order to get the ultimate success and development of the country.

Our former president also insisted the necessity to educate the society. He urges the nation to strengthen the country by saying that Knowledge, a driver for social development, will only empower the society. The societal transformation will occur through the development of education and recognizing of the potential. He stresses, 'Only when the women are empowered a stable society will emerge. There must be utmost priority for women education'. (Kalam, 172)

Hosseini's characters deliver that Women must fight for their rights and understand the Power of education. A woman should be self-controlled and strong willed, self-reliant and rational, and aware of the inner strength of womanhood with emotional power and essential courage.

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