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The Portrayal of Afghan Women under Soviet Occupation and Taliban Rule: An Analysis of Mariam and Laila's Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the depiction of Afghan women during the Soviet occupation and Taliban rule through a qualitative analysis of the two central characters, Mariam and Laila, in Khaled Hosseini's "A Thousand Splendid Suns". Utilizing feminist and interpretive literary frameworks, the research examines how their personal experiences reflect broader themes of gender oppression, political instability, and cultural restrictions in Afghanistan's tumultuous history. Mariam, an illegitimate child, faces lifelong marginalization, while educated Laila witnesses her future being destroyed by war. Despite these adversities, both characters embody resistance Mariam through her final act of sacrifice and Laila through her ongoing struggle for education and freedom. Their evolving relationship highlights the theme of female solidarity, challenging the patriarchal norms that seek to isolate and silence women. This study employs thematic and textual analysis to reveal that Hosseini's narrative not only exposes the injustices faced by Afghan women but also showcases the transformative power of resilience and sisterhood. By highlighting these experiences, the novel makes a significant contribution to feminist literary discourse and provides profound insights into the realities of women's lives in conflict zones. Ultimately, this study affirms the role of literature in amplifying marginalized voices and advocating for post-war social gender justice.

Keywords: *Afghan Women, Political Instability, Taliban Rule, Gender Oppression, Resistance, Solidarity, Feminist Analysis.*

Introduction

The literature on the experiences of Afghan women during the Soviet occupation and Taliban rule reveals a history of deep-rooted gender oppression, cultural resilience, and political marginalization. Scholars have consistently emphasized how women's lives have been affected by political turmoil, cultural norms, and ideological shifts. Moghadam (1997) explains that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 triggered a decade-long conflict that altered the path of Afghan society. During this period, the roles, freedoms, and social status of women underwent drastic changes. She notes that while the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), supported by the Soviet army, attempted to implement reforms aimed at achieving gender equality, these measures faced hostility from conservatives, often resulting in violence against women.

Background of the Study

Afghanistan's socio-political history has experienced decades of turmoil, conflict, and regime changes, each stage profoundly impacting citizens' lives, especially women. From the Soviet invasion in 1979 to the emergence and rule of the Taliban in the 1990s, Afghan women have been rooted in a deep patriarchal structure amid war, cultural conservatism, and institutionalized gender discrimination. Regardless of which regime is in power, women's opportunities for education, employment, healthcare, and personal freedom have been suppressed, often violently enforced. Despite facing these harsh conditions, women have continued to resist, survive, and advocate for their rights in various forms—these narratives are often underestimated or simplified in mainstream discourse. Literature provides a powerful space for the emergence of marginalized voices and challenges to dominant ideologies. Khaled Hosseini's *"A Thousand Splendid Suns"* (2007) captures the complex and often brutal life experiences of Afghan women through the lives of its two protagonists, Mariam and Laila. Set against the backdrop of the Soviet occupation, civil war, and Taliban rule, the novel vividly depicts the emotions of endurance, loss, love, and resistance. By intimately focusing on the intertwined fates of the two women, the narrative becomes a site for exploring the psychological and material consequences of gender oppression in a conflict-ridden society. This study stems from the need for a critical analysis of the literary depiction of Afghan women in a specific historical and political context. By focusing on *"A Thousand Splendid Suns,"* the research highlights how the novel can illuminate the socio-cultural realities of Afghan women and serve as a tool for feminist criticism and political awareness.

Statement of the Problem

The academic attention to Muslim women in literature often relies on an Orientalist framework, making them victims or objects of exoticism. The image of Afghan women is often portrayed through a singular narrative, lacking detailed exploration. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing *"A Thousand Splendid Suns,"* focusing on the experiences of Mariam and Laila during the Soviet occupation and Taliban rule. It explores themes of oppression, resistance, and resilience among Afghan women.

Research Questions

1. How do Mariam and Laila's experiences in *"A Thousand Splendid Suns"* reflect the themes of oppression, struggle, and solidarity?
2. What insights does feminist literary analysis provide regarding women's agency and resilience in the socio-political context of Afghanistan?

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the literary representation of Afghan women in *"A Thousand Splendid Suns"* under the Soviet and Taliban rule.
2. To explore the themes of oppression, resistance, and solidarity through the characters of Mariam and Laila.
3. To understand how the novel, particularly feminist narratives, serves as a key lens for interpreting historical and cultural realities.
4. To contribute to the broader field of gender studies by providing contextual analysis of women's agency and resilience in Afghan literature.

Literature Review

Buffield (2010) detailed that after the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the fall of the People's Democratic Party, Afghanistan fell into a civil war, which led to the rise of the Taliban around the mid-1990s. Under Taliban rule, women nearly lost all of their civil rights. He pointed out that women were banned from receiving education, working, or engaging in public life without male guardianship. The regime institutionalized gender segregation, thus embedding discrimination against women into every aspect of daily life. Rashid (2000) emphasized that the political instability during the Soviet and Taliban periods and religious extremism made women tools of ideological enforcement. He noted that these historical periods not only made women victims but also regarded them as symbols of cultural and religious identity, burdened with embodying the country's morality.

Saikal (2004) explains how the inability of the post-Soviet regime to stabilize the country exacerbated the marginalization of women. After the Soviet withdrawal, the dominance of jihadists led to an era filled with lawlessness and gender-based violence. Saikal details the widespread prevalence of forced marriages, honor killings, and domestic violence, which normalized the suffering of Afghan women. Ahmed-Ghosh (2003) documented the ongoing structural violence and patriarchal customs that restrict women's autonomy. She points out that even before the Soviet invasion, traditions such as purdah (veiling) and child marriage already limited women's freedoms. Her research reveals that these customs persisted even during the people's democratic party of Afghanistan (PDPA) attempts at reform, thereby restricting the actual progress made during the Soviet era.

Rubin (2002) recorded how women displayed resilience under overwhelming social constraints. He pointed out that even under Taliban rule, Afghan women organized secret schools, medical clinics, and underground advocacy networks. Their resistance was multifaceted, including both passive endurance and active rebellion, showcasing the complexity and strength of women in the face of tyranny. Kandiyoti (2007) explored the intersection of tradition and modernity in Afghan gender relations. She argued that women's roles are primarily defined through family relationships, which restricts their identity to daughters, wives, and mothers. Her analysis concluded that these roles are not only socially imposed but also culturally sanctified, making transformation extremely difficult.

Abirafeh (2009) criticized the international intervention in Afghanistan, arguing that foreign efforts often overlook local knowledge and cultural contexts. She contended that imposing Western feminist models without local involvement has resulted in little improvement in women's lives. This highlights the importance of analyzing indigenous narratives, such as those in Hosseini's works, which reflect authentic voices and life experiences. Tyson (2006) stated that feminist literary criticism provides a powerful framework for examining literature centered on women's experiences, especially in patriarchal societies. She suggested that such analysis can reveal hidden ideologies and clarify gender dynamics in various socio-political contexts. Therefore, feminist criticism offers a lens through which texts (like '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*') can be meaningfully interpreted.

Abdullah (2012) argues that Khaled Hosseini's novels serve as feminist narratives that capture the struggles and inner strength of Afghan women. He emphasizes that the characters of Mariam and Laila are not only victims but also survivors exhibiting autonomy. This characterization challenges the traditional view of Afghan women as silent sufferers. He further argued that Afghan literature has evolved over time. Early literary representations

often portrayed women as silent, submissive figures, influenced by external perspectives. Recent works, including those by Afghan writers, strive to reclaim these narratives, depicting women as autonomous and multidimensional characters.

Spivak (1988) posed a significant question: can marginalized groups speak for themselves, highlighting that marginalized populations often lack the means to express their experiences? However, she acknowledges that literature can act as a conduit for conveying these voices. In *"A Thousand Splendid Suns,"* Hosseini enables Mariam and Laila to express their stories, thereby amplifying the voices of Afghan women. Hosseini (2007) illustrates the complexities of Afghan women's lives through Mariam and Laila. Although their experiences are different, they are intertwined by a shared oppression and mutual support. The relationship they develop becomes a powerful testament to female solidarity and resistance.

Nafisi (2003) argues that literature can serve as a strong form of protest in an oppressive society. She emphasizes that storytelling enables individuals to maintain their identity and dignity in the face of authoritarianism. In this sense, Hosseini's narrative is not merely fiction but a social commentary. Bahri (2003) points out that in postcolonial literature, women often symbolize the nation, tasked with preserving cultural purity while bearing the burdens of political betrayal. This burden is evident in Mariam and Laila's lives, as they are expected to adhere to social norms while enduring personal and political trauma.

Duplay (1990) studied the Soviet efforts to integrate women into the public sphere through education and employment. She found that while urban women benefited, rural areas were hardly affected by these reforms. The failure to interact with local communities led to resentment and backlash, which were later exploited by the Taliban. Taitro (2006) criticized the top-down nature of Soviet gender reforms. She argued that without grassroots support and cultural negotiation, these policies lacked sustainability. This criticism highlights why reforms rapidly collapsed after the Soviet withdrawal.

Human Rights Watch (2001) detailed the Taliban's gender policies, which imposed strict restrictions on women's lives. Their report vividly describes public executions, lashings, and the prohibitions against women attending school and working. These abuses formed a culture of fear and oppression, which is vividly reflected in Hosseini's narrative. Abu-Lughod (2002) warned against using the oppression of Afghan women as a justification for military intervention. She advocated for an approach based on cultural understanding and local agency. Her critique adds depth to the interpretation of Hosseini's works, viewing them as narratives rooted in internal resilience rather than external salvation.

Kakar (1995) provided detailed information on Taliban laws and their implementation, which included regulations on dress codes, behavior, and even laughter. His work offers a factual context for Hosseini's fictional portrayals, allowing for better understanding. Latifa (2002) recounts her personal experiences under Taliban rule, focusing on education as a form of resistance. She describes secret schools and the risks taken by teachers and students. Her memoir is similar to the character Laila in Hosseini's novel, who risks everything to ensure her children receive an education. Brodsky (2003) analyzes the correlation between literacy rates of Afghan women and empowerment. Her findings show that education not only enhances women's self-esteem but also strengthens their ability to resist domestic abuse and social control. Nussbaum (2000) proposed the capabilities approach, emphasizing the importance of education, health, and freedom, which are fundamental to human dignity. This framework

reveals the struggles of Mariam and Laila, who try to reclaim their basic rights in a society that has deprived them of these rights.

The reviewed literature presents a nuanced understanding of the experiences of Afghan women under Soviet and Taliban rule. Scholars and critics have consistently emphasized the interplay between cultural norms, political systems, and gender dynamics. Insights drawn from feminist and post-colonial frameworks enrich the analysis of "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*," which connects human faces with statistics and policy failures. Hosseini's narrative is both a literary achievement and a socio-political document, reflecting and responding to the oppression suffered by Afghan women for decades.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a feminist literary analysis approach. Feminist literary criticism provides tools for analyzing how literature portrays women, challenges patriarchal norms, and highlights gender power dynamics. It also focuses on the representation of female characters within the context of social expectations, cultural practices, and historical events. In this study, the feminist approach plays a crucial role in examining how the experiences of Mariam and Laila under Soviet and Taliban rule reflect broader issues of gender inequality and social oppression. The combination of interpretivism and feminist methods enables the researcher to critically explore the texts on multiple levels. While the interpretive perspective facilitates an understanding of meaning and symbolism in the novel, the feminist perspective underscores the operating power structures and gender dynamics.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, which is the most suitable method for exploring the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of the human experience as depicted in the literature. The data for this study were collected through an in-depth textual analysis of Khaled Hosseini's "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*." The data collection process began with multiple readings of the novel to gain a comprehensive understanding of the plot, characters, and context. During these readings, paragraphs particularly relevant to the research questions were meticulously recorded. The data collection process also included reviewing secondary materials, such as academic articles, literary critiques, and historical texts, which provided context for the events depicted in the novel. These materials helped to place the novel within the broader sociopolitical context of Afghanistan and provided a basis for interpreting the text. In addition, I adhered to the style of the APA 7th edition research paper writing guide.

Scope and Limitations

This research focuses on the literary portrayal of Mariam and Laila in "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*." The analysis is limited to their experiences during the Soviet occupation and the Taliban regime, as represented in the novel. The study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach, using feminist literary criticism as the primary theoretical perspective. The research does not include a broader comparative study with other literary works or real testimonies of Afghan women, although such comparisons might offer additional insights.

Feminist Theory and Its Origins

The theoretical foundation for this study lies in feminist literary theory, a critical perspective that seeks to challenge traditional male-centric readings of literature and highlight women's experiences, voices, and struggles. Feminist theory seeks to examine how patriarchal

structures shape women's identities, limit their autonomy, and reinforce gender-based inequalities through social, cultural, and political mechanisms. By analyzing literature through a feminist lens, scholars not only critique the portrayal of women in texts, but also emphasize how literature can be a site of resistance and empowerment.

Simone de Beauvoir and the Concept of "Other"

One of the foundational theorists of feminist philosophy is Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), whose seminal book *The Second Sex* (1949) remains one of the most influential texts in gender studies and feminist criticism. In this book, de Beauvoir argues that "one is not born but made female" (de Beauvoir, 1949), emphasizing that femininity is not an inherent biological condition but a socially constructed identity shaped by cultural and historical forces. She introduced the concept of "Other" to explain how women are positioned as "others" in relation to the male "self", leading to social and psychological marginalization.

De Beauvoir's theories have had a profound impact on literary analysis, especially in contexts where women have historically been silenced, subjugated, or presented only through the perspectives of male authors. Her concept of the "other" is particularly relevant to this study, which examines how Afghan women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are treated as second-class citizens under oppressive regimes - first during the Soviet occupation and then under the Taliban. The Development of Feminist Literary Criticism Feminist literary criticism emerged as an academic discipline in the 1960s and 1970s, primarily in response to second-wave feminism. Early feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guba (1979) focused on recovering forgotten or neglected women writers and identifying stereotypes of women in canonical texts. Showalter's concept of "feminism" emphasizes the analysis of texts written by and about women, independent of male literary traditions.

In later developments, feminist theory became more intersectional as theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) argued for the importance of studying how gender intersects with race, class, and other identities. This is particularly important in contexts such as Afghanistan, where women's lived experiences cannot be separated from the influences of war, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status. Intersectionality allows research to explore how Mariam and Laila's oppression is not simply gendered, but is also structurally reinforced by militarism, poverty, and patriarchal practices.

Application of the Study

Drawing on this feminist theoretical framework, this study interprets the lives of Mariam and Laila as literary representations of the historical struggles of Afghan women. Feminist theory allows us to critically analyze how male-dominated structures manifest themselves in domestic violence, lack of legal autonomy, forced marriage, and social silence, and how women develop resilience through solidarity and emotional strength despite these difficulties. Their experiences resonate with de Beauvoir's concept of alienation, but also embody feminist ideals through resistance, transformation, and mutual empowerment.

Historical Context of Theory

Simone de Beauvoir and Postwar France

Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* in postwar France, a period marked by existentialist philosophy, political upheaval, and the early roar of women's liberation. Along with contemporaries such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Beauvoir promoted the existentialist belief that

individuals must create meaning in a meaningless world. For women, this meant confronting centuries of exclusion from intellectual, political, and economic life.

Her writing was revolutionary in its scope and intent. In an era when women's roles were primarily domestic, de Beauvoir called for women's intellectual and physical autonomy and revealed how deeply entrenched misogyny was in Western thought—from religion and philosophy to science and literature. Her emphasis on existential freedom—the idea that women must actively reject assigned roles—made her work indispensable in analyzing how oppressed individuals internalize social expectations, a theme that resonates powerfully among the characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Relevance in Postcolonial and Conflict Zones

Although de Beauvoir wrote in a Western context, her theory has since been applied to postcolonial and war-torn societies where patriarchal control is often exacerbated by political instability, religious extremism, and militarization. In such contexts, feminist theory becomes a tool of critique and recovery, revealing how women survive and resist under multiple intersecting forms of oppression.

In war-torn Afghanistan, as depicted by Hosseini, women are not only the "other" to men, but also to the nation-state, which often sacrifices women's rights in the name of religion, war, or political ideology. Therefore, de Beauvoir's theory of the other, coupled with modern intersectional feminist theory, is a profound perspective for understanding the social positioning and personal growth of Mariam and Laila.

Author and Novel

Khaled Hosseini: A Voice for the Voiceless

Born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1965, Khaled Hosseini is a prominent Afghan-American novelist and humanitarian. His unique literary perspective is influenced by his personal background: his family fled Afghanistan due to political unrest during the Soviet invasion and eventually found asylum in the United States. Hosseini's bicultural identity - deeply rooted in Afghanistan's cultural heritage while influenced by Western values - has a profound impact on his literary works. His writing is known for its emotional intensity, cultural authenticity, and profound exploration of the human condition within historical and political frameworks. As a writer and UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, Hosseini has always been concerned with giving voice to marginalized groups, especially Afghan women and children who suffer under authoritarian regimes and patriarchal traditions. His novels operate at the intersection of the personal and the political, showing how geopolitical turmoil can permeate people's lives.

Mariam's Suffering under Soviet and Taliban Rule

Mariam was born out of wedlock and suffered humiliation and social exclusion from an early age. Even her mother Nana did not stop torturing her mentally, calling Mariam "Harami", which means illegitimate. "Nana meant ... Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance" (Hosseini 4). Nana prioritizes herself and her lonely life, preferring to have a partner like Mariam rather than helping Mariam get an education. "'You're all I have. I won't lose you to them ... No more talks about school'" (Hosseini 18). Her suffering began before the political conflict directly affected her and was rooted in cultural stigma. Yet, during the Soviet occupation, Mariam's life remained largely confined to domestic violence. Rather than empowering her, larger political changes exacerbated the violence within her family.

As mujahideen warlords seized power after the Soviet Union, Kabul descended into chaos. Bombings and power struggles between factions offered no respite for women like Mariam. When the Taliban finally took power, her suffering intensified: strict Islamic law restricted her mobility, criminalized her presence in public without a male guardian, and prevented her from seeking justice. “‘I understand that Rasheed agha has tickets for the bus to Kabul that leaves shortly ... we will bypass some of the traditional steps to speed up the proceedings’” (Hosseini 52). She suffered severe physical and psychological abuse at the hands of her husband, Rasheed, with no legal or institutional protection. The Taliban regime rendered women invisible, and Mariam became a symbol of that invisibility—powerless, voiceless, and sacrificial for others.

Despite this, Mariam demonstrates an inner strength. Her final act—acknowledging the killing of Rasheed in order to save Laila—becomes a moment of self-assertion and resistance. In a regime that devalues her human rights, Mariam’s act of sacrifice is a declaration of her dignity and maternal solidarity.

The person who actually committed the crime of impregnating Nana and making Mariam live a life of shame and loss of identity in this ‘patriarchal’ society is Jalil, but he ignores his faults by continuing to pretend to be the real father, calling Mariam his ‘flower’ rather than a ‘bastard’. Instead, it is Nana who suffers, as she has no personality and ability to demand her rights as a woman; and it is Mariam who suffers, as she lives in the state of fatherlessness and bastardhood created by Jalil. As a man, Jalil is portrayed as a liar who does not respect Mariam. Mariam’s identity crisis is tied to Jalil’s faults and mistakes. Due to Mariam’s low status in the community, Jalil never takes her or provides her with ‘enabling conditions’ to go to the city, the garden, the vines and the various markets.

Instead, he just tells Mariam stories and describes the places to her. Jalil’s “hegemony” and “power” in the family forces Mariam to accept his father’s knowledge without questioning him. Jalil causes Mariam to live in darkness by not giving her an education and not allowing her to go to the city and other places. Mariam is portrayed as an uneducated woman who sees the world through the stories of a man. She is suppressed by her father’s explanation of the city’s history and descriptions of the physical locations of some great places, which she has never visited. However, Nana is portrayed as an uneducated woman who does not believe Jalil’s stories and promises and his calling Mariam “his little flower”. She is portrayed as a woman who judges a man by his actions rather than his words.

Laila’s life and suffering as a woman

Unlike Mariam, who started her life as an illegitimate child, Laila is the legitimate daughter of her parents. Unlike Jalil, Laila’s father, Babi, is a supportive man. He has always worked hard to elevate Laila’s status and encourage her education. Babi took Laila to school every day. However, when Laila’s father took her to school, Laila’s mother remained in bed. Laila’s mother also symbolizes the majority of mothers who remain indifferent to their daughters’ education and make no effort to encourage their daughters to achieve their goals in life. Huda claims that Babi may have loved Laila as a father and respected her individuality, but Laila’s mother preferred her son over Laila. Mariam’s mother had loved her despite the poor economic conditions she lived in, however, her father was not around. Women like Laila’s mother always prefer sons over daughters, which promotes “patriarchy” and its “ideology” in

the society. Laila is portrayed as a less suffering woman compared to Mariam as a teenager. She has a supportive father who encourages her to get an education.

After Mariam, Laila's life of suffering begins when her parents are killed by a rocket bombing of her house. Rasheed, the male character, who is already married to Mariam, tries to get Laila to marry him by faking the death of Laila's childhood friend Tariq. Rasheed's treatment and care for Laila is never humane. He just wants to marry a fertile woman to bear him the child that Mariam cannot bear. "We need to legitimize this situation ... It looks dishonorable, an unmarried woman living here ... I can't go on feeding her and clothing her and giving her a place to sleep. I'm not the Red Cross, Mariam ... She is fourteen. Hardly a child. You were fourteen, Remember?" (Hosseini 208). During the civil war, women like Leila are treated as prey, and men like Rasheed are portrayed as hunters who catch and destroy the lives and personalities of women like Leila, so that Leila and women like her cannot find their way in this 'patriarchal society'. Rasheed never tries to respect the unconscious and wounded existence of Leila as a woman, nor does he respect the privacy that Leila deserves as a guest. He never guides Leila to the right path that she truly wants. Leila is forced to choose between a life on the streets (filled with civil war, hatred, and killing) and Rasheed's home (where Leila can find shelter and a husband like Rasheed to provide for her, since Tariq and her family are dead). In this society, women without men have no identity, so Laila has to agree to Rasheed's marriage proposal through Mariam to seek shelter and individuality as a woman, but Mariam's situation is ignored by Rasheed and Laila. "We'll take care of each other," Laila said, choking on her words, her eyes wet with tears. "I'll take care of you for a change." (Hosseini, 2007, pp. 361–362). Laila is not the only woman who has to endure the exploitation of her status by men like Rasheed in this society. Like Laila, there are many women who are exploited by men. In addition, Laila has to endure Rasheed's sexism towards her daughter Aziza. Her son Zalmai has always been favored by Rasheed, while Aziza is treated like a fatherless girl. "On the way to Karteh-She, Zalmai bounced in Rasheed's arms, and Aziza held Mariam's hand ... Laila had not found the strength to tell Aziza the truth. She had told her that she was going to a school, a special school, where the children ate and slept and didn't come home after class" (Hosseini 306). In Rasheed's family, both Laila as a mother and Aziza as a daughter are presented as the 'lower class' who cannot speak up or fight for their rights. Aziza is portrayed as a character who cannot fight for her rights, while Laila's efforts to find a place in this society are fruitless. According to the gender roles in this society, Mariam and Laila's roles are wives who must stay at home and do housework, while Rasheed's role as a husband is to work and provide food for them, but he fails to do so. The 'social circle' that creates these characters is male. As a male, Rasheed fails to fulfill his role well.

However, he is portrayed as a man who punishes girls like Aziza and makes Laila suffer for her own failure as a mother by sending Aziza to an orphanage. Aziza as a little girl witnessed gender inequality and sexism in her childhood, but Rasheed's failure in his role and the power he had over his wife and Aziza forced her to lie about Rasheed's death. She had to present herself as an orphan in order to be accepted at the orphanage.

Laila, as a woman, also endures Rasheed's demarcation of some boundaries after marrying her, as well as the loss of freedom to get an education and a loss of self-identity after marriage. Getting an education is the only way Laila can hope to achieve in order to establish her own identity in the family and society, but Rasheed's attitude towards Laila initially seems

very promising, more complimentary than his attitude towards Mariam, but he strives to use Laila and Mariam's status to control his power in the family. Rasheed is portrayed as a weak man who cannot stand up to the protests of Mariam and Laila, no matter how strong the sisterhood between them becomes. He degrades Mariam because she is a bastard, trying to sever the connection between the two main female characters. According to 'Gender and Sexuality', Rasheed is not portrayed as a powerful man who ignores the power and strength of women like Mariam, instead he is afraid of it and compares Mariam to a Russian car 'Volga', while Laila is praised and seen as a German 'Mercedes' because she looks like a woman who must be accepted and cannot have male characteristics and strength. Despite being praised by Rasheed, Laila is portrayed as a woman whose identity belongs to Rasheed. "I am your husband now... you are the queen, the malika and this house is your palace ... 'All I ask in return ... I ask you avoid leaving this house without my company'" (Hosseini 217). Laila does not achieve her goal by educating herself. After marrying Rasheed, Laila has to endure the pain of losing the opportunity to get an education. As a husband, Rasheed has rights over Laila, but he does not give Laila the rights as a wife to continue her education. Rasheed, as a male character, is portrayed as a representative of men who do not want women to be educated so that they know their value and rights in society. Mariam, as one of the main characters, is a woman that Rasheed has been suppressing and ignoring because she is illiterate. However, after Mariam assassinates Rasheed, Laila reshapes her identity by reconnecting with Tariq and becoming a teacher at the orphanage that was rebuilt with the support of Jalil's legacy left by Mariam.

Conclusion

This study examines the depiction of Afghan women during the Soviet occupation and Taliban rule through the characters of Mariam and Laila in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Employing a feminist literary framework based on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "otherness," the study explores how political instability, patriarchal oppression, and societal expectations shape the lived realities of Afghan women. The character of Mariam reflects the situation of illegal and uneducated women who have long been marginalized, whose lives are governed by cultural stigma and systemic neglect. In contrast, Laila's story highlights the empowering impact of education and parental support, even though she also suffered severe oppression under Taliban rule. Despite their different starting points, the two women are united by their shared suffering, ultimately forming a strong bond of solidarity.

This female alliance becomes a form of resistance and survival in a deeply patriarchal and violent society. Analysis confirms that the novel not only depicts the trauma experienced by Afghan women, but also embodies their resilience, agency, and capacity for change. Through the intimate lens of Mariam and Laila's personal journeys, Hosseini humanizes the wider sociopolitical crisis and challenges the simplistic portrayal of Afghan women as passive victims. Instead, he shows them as complex individuals who move forward with courage, dignity, and hope amid oppression.

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