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Silent Cries of Afghan Women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

Literature often reveals not only the visible realities of a society but also the suppressed and unheard voices that exist beneath its surface. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* powerfully articulates the silent suffering of Afghan women living under intersecting forces of patriarchy, war, and rigid socio-religious codes. This paper examines the unheard voices of women in Afghanistan through a postcolonial feminist lens, foregrounding how gendered oppression is shaped by specific historical, political, and cultural conditions rather than universal female experience. By focusing on the lives of Mariam and Laila, the study analyses how domestic tyranny, institutionalised patriarchy, and prolonged political instability systematically marginalise women and normalise their suffering. The paper argues that women's endurance, silence, and sacrifice are not inherent traits but socially produced responses to sustained oppression. Hosseini's narrative thus becomes a literary space where suppressed female voices are reclaimed, exposing the deeply entrenched structures that confine women to subservience and deny them agency within Afghan society.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism, Gendered oppression, Patriarchy, Domestic tyranny, Silence and endurance, War and women, Afghan society, Female agency

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) occupies a significant place in contemporary fiction for its sustained engagement with the lived realities of Afghan women across decades of political upheaval. The novel does not merely narrate personal tragedies; it situates women's suffering within a complex network of patriarchy, war, religion, and socio-cultural control.

Literature, as a cultural discourse, often gives voice to what society prefers to silence. In this sense, Hosseini's novel becomes a narrative space where the muted experiences of women are articulated, recorded, and questioned. The present study seeks to examine these silent cries through the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism, which allows a contextual and historically grounded understanding of women's oppression in Afghanistan.

Postcolonial feminism challenges the tendency of mainstream Western feminism to universalise women's experiences and to overlook cultural, historical, and political specificities. It insists that women in postcolonial societies experience oppression in ways shaped simultaneously by colonial legacies, indigenous patriarchal structures, religious interpretations, and ongoing political conflicts. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, women in the Third World cannot be treated as a "homogeneous, undifferentiated group" because such an approach erases material and cultural differences (67). This insight is crucial for reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, where Afghan women's suffering cannot be separated from the nation's history of invasion, civil war, and authoritarian rule.

The novel foregrounds how patriarchy operates not only at the level of family but also through social institutions and state power. Mariam and Laila's lives demonstrate that gender oppression is produced and reinforced through marriage, motherhood, honour codes, and legal systems that deny women autonomy. Their endurance is often mistaken for passivity, but postcolonial feminism helps reframe endurance as a survival strategy shaped by coercive circumstances rather than innate submission. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us, the subaltern woman's voice is frequently mediated or silenced by dominant structures of power (308). Hosseini's narrative attempts to recover that silenced voice by presenting women's suffering from within their lived experiences rather than through an external moralising lens.

The domestic space in the novel functions as a microcosm of the larger political order. Rasheed's authority within the household mirrors authoritarian regimes that legitimise violence in the name of morality and tradition. Postcolonial feminism draws attention to this overlap between private and public forms of domination, where women's bodies become sites of control and symbolic honour. The repeated insistence on female modesty, obedience, and silence illustrates how cultural norms are internalised and reproduced across generations. Mohanty's assertion that gender relations in postcolonial societies are "historically and culturally produced" (71) resonates strongly with Hosseini's depiction of Afghan womanhood as a learned condition rather than a biological destiny. Furthermore, the novel exposes how war intensifies gendered vulnerability. Political instability restricts women's access to education, mobility, and economic independence, making them more

dependent on patriarchal protection that often turns into oppression. Postcolonial feminism enables a reading of these conditions without reducing Afghan culture to inherent barbarism; instead, it locates women's suffering within intersecting systems of power shaped by history and geopolitics. By adopting this theoretical lens, the present paper argues that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* should be read not only as a humanitarian narrative but also as a postcolonial feminist critique of structures that normalise women's silence and suffering in the name of culture, religion, and social order.

A Thousand Splendid Suns traces the entwined lives of Mariam and Laila across decades of Afghan turmoil, rendering political upheaval as the force that shapes private existence. The narrative treats Afghanistan not as mere backdrop but as an active matrix in which gender norms, familial institutions, and daily survival are continuously produced and renegotiated. This account reads the novel's episodes as social data: domestic practices, public decrees, and intimate conversations become evidence of a cultural system that naturalises women's subordination while appearing historically contingent. Gender in the narrative is portrayed as an acquired social condition rather than a biological destiny; in the novel's terms, becoming a woman is a process of inculcation and regulation. Female subjectivity is produced through recurrent pedagogies of limitation: from early childhood girls are taught endurance and modesty as moral goods. Mariam's mother articulates this lesson plainly, "there is only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life… tahamul. Endure" (TSS 17), thereby registering endurance as the formative virtue that prepares a woman for socially prescribed invisibility. This formative injunction establishes a pattern: cultural training shapes expectations, which in turn legitimise interpersonal domination.

The household serves as the principal locus where social definitions of gender are fixed. Marriage functions less as a relationship than as an institution that converts personal identity into a role defined by service and obedience. Mariam's initial hope for legitimacy dissolves into the recognition that intimate space is permeated by public cruelty, "Mariam saw now that there was no wall high enough to keep out the cruelty of the world" (TSS 56). Within this confined polity, Rasheed's proclamations of proprietorship, "a woman's face is her husband's business only" (TSS 63); "I'm the man of this house" (TSS 221), operate as claims of sovereign authority that mirror political regimes. The domestic regime thereby reproduces the mechanisms of state power: centralised control, surveillance, and impunity for violence enacted in private.

War reshapes the field of gender relations by transforming women's bodies into contested terrains and by converting sexual violence into a weapon of collective humiliation. The city itself becomes haunted, "Kabul had become a city of ghosts" (TSS 147), and its ruins register not only physical destruction but the collapse of social protections. In such conditions survival logic displaces moral

judgement, and practices that might once have been exceptional become routinised. The novel stages the consequences starkly: policies and practices that constrain women-curfews, prohibitions, enforced seclusion-effectively remove the material means for autonomy, while the cultural stigma attached to sexual violation makes rape an instrument for the annihilation of family honour. The text admits the extremity of that stigma in the bleak formula that "death was a far better alternative than being raped" (TSS 283), thereby exposing the cultural calculus that privileges communal reputation over individual life.

Analytical frameworks that conceptualise power as diffuse and productive illuminate the novel's depiction of domination. Power does not solely repress by overt force; it operates through norms, institutional practices, and internalised dispositions that make certain behaviours intelligible and others unthinkable. Within the narrative, women anticipate censure and pre-emptively modify behaviour; internalised shame and anticipatory silence constitute mechanisms of governance as effective as physical coercion. The socialisation of shame and the routinisation of obedience are forms of power that require no constant external enforcement because they have been naturalised.

The domestic interior is the principle milieu in which bodily regulation is rendered mundane, yet it also functions as the primary archive of memory and identity. From the earliest scenes, the narrative makes visible the ways in which personal histories are recorded in small domestic objects and gestures, and how dispossession is often enacted through intimacy. Mariam's early relation to the house of her father is indexed by a string of domestic recollections that reveal how betrayal is inscribed in the smallest habits, "Two days before-when Mariam could think of nothing in the world, she wanted more than to walk in this garden with Jalil-felt like another lifetime" (TSS 36). Such remembrances demonstrate that loss is not merely historical fact but embodied experience, recalled in bodily postures and in the ache of unrealised desire.

Bodily coercion appears as a language of power whose grammar is learned early and enforced brutally. Physical punishments and ritualised humiliations teach subordinate subjects to anticipate and to pre-empt further injury. The text recurs to the scene of forced humiliation-an action executed with mechanical cruelty-to show how bodily discipline is both a tool of domination and a formative pedagogy, "He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in" (TSS 94). This image compresses metaphor and method: the emplacement of pebbles in the mouth is an act that silences speech by literal insertion, converting voice into presence of foreign matter; it also signifies the social imposition of indelible shame.

Where the body is disciplined from the outside, interior regimes of shame and self-policing complete the cycle of domination. Men and women both enact surveillance, but the burden of moral scrutiny falls disproportionately on women, who are taught to live pre-emptively under accusation. The narrative repeatedly stages the economy of accusation as a cultural reflex: women learn to modify their gait, their tone, and their appetite for speech in anticipation of censure. The text's attention to these anticipatory forms of governance reveals that domination is often most effective when its subjects reproduce it themselves; the internalised censor becomes as powerful as external force.

The male prerogative over women's bodies is institutionalised through marriage, a structure that converts conjugal relations into legal and symbolic claims of ownership. Within the domestic polity, sexual entitlement and reproductive expectations are central measures of a woman's social value. Infertility, perceived sexual impropriety, or mere visibility can provoke surveillance that escalates into violence; the woman's body becomes the index by which honour is measured and defended. Laws and social customs endorse this arrangement by obscuring the distinction between private obligation and public duty. The narrative thereby refracts how cultural logic transforms bodily function into communal symbol and how the policing of sexual propriety becomes a technique for securing lineage, inheritance, and male prerogative.

Coercion into marriage is configured not as a single violent moment but as a sequence of dispossessions that eliminate alternatives. Mariam's refusal, "I don't want this. Don't make me" (TSS 44), registers the instant of coerced consent as traumatic acquiescence; its force lies in what it forecloses rather than what it accomplishes. The narrative thus treats marriage as an assemblage of moral, economic, and social pressures that together compress agency. In this compressed space, agency reappears unpredictably and often intensely: Laila's resistance is physical as well as verbal, "You duped me. You lied to me" (TSS 300). A line that signals the moment words pierce the cover of imposed narratives and demand restitution.

Physical acts of defence complicate stereotyped notions of passivity. Laila's sudden physical retaliation, "Laila ducked and managed to land a punch across his ear" (TSS 308) and the later scene in which the glass shatters as she strikes Rasheed (TSS 310) disclose violence as a terrain on which women sometimes reclaim bodily initiative. These are not heroic, public gestures of revolt but desperate improvisations that disrupt the immediate field of domination; their meaning is moral and practical rather than political, and they reconfigure relationships in ways that the law or public discourse cannot register.

Mariam's life is shaped from its first line by a language that names, consigns, and excludes. The opening sentence, "Mariam was five years old the first time she heard the word harami" (TSS 1),

does more than narrate an event; it establishes a semiotic economy in which legitimacy functions as a primary form of social capital and illegitimacy as a durable stigma. The word itself serves as both verdict and pedagogy: it instructs the child in her social location and social worth. From that moment onward, every relation Mariam encounters is refracted through a discourse of legitimacy that assigns blame, entitlement, and access. The force of that naming does not dissipate with time; rather, it accumulates, inflecting memory, desire, and the field of possible responses. The narrative's persistent return to this formative utterance demonstrates how language founds social reality: to be called harami is to inhabit an identity that others can police, punish, and dismiss.

The social meaning of illegitimacy is compounded by the asymmetry of responsibility within familial structures. Jalil's behaviour crystallises the ethical rupture at the heart of that asymmetry. His refusal to accept the moral consequences of an extramarital intimacy produces a double wrong: the private abandonment of an offspring and the public refusal to acknowledge responsibility. Jalil's intermittent kindness-visits, marginal indulgences-cannot compensate for the social and juridical absence of paternity. The novel presents Jalil's intermittent care as a demonstration of how social privilege permits evasion: a man's failings, however glaring, leave the social position of the child irreparably damaged because the structures that confer legitimacy remain coded in male actions and in the community's willingness to excuse transgression when performed by men of status.

Nana's harsh utterances toward Mariam are part protective strategy and part necessary pedagogy within a world that will not protect the child. Her declaration that, "A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed. It won't stretch to make room for you" (TSS 26) communicates a bitter realism: where social institutions fail, maternal knowledge must substitute, and the mother's speech becomes a survival manual. Nana's rhetoric is both indictment and inoculation; it inoculates Mariam against the shock of further betrayal by preparing her for emotional desertion. The line is performative in a second sense as well: it participates in constructing a maternal ethic predicated on bodily imagery-womb, bleeding, stretching-which contrasts maternal capacity with masculine insufficiency. The bodily metaphor becomes a rhetorical counterweight to the social and legal impotence surrounding Mariam's childhood.

The transition effected by Nana's death intensifies the structural dynamics of exclusion. Where Nana's voice had offered a wary companionate pedagogy-however harsh-that prepared Mariam for a precarious life, Jalil's house delivers a different pedagogy: indifferent civility that masks an absence of social recognition. The arranged marriage that follows is the institutionalisation of dispossession. The decision to marry a fifteen-year-old girl to a man of forty-five is not only a private moral failure; it is the translation of social hierarchies into intimate practice. The marriage

binds Mariam legally and domesticates her potential claims; what looks like benevolence or provision is in fact a mechanism for removing a social problem by converting the girl into a regulated domestic presence. The narrative's depiction of arrangement underscores how marriage in this context functions as a juridical-ethical instrument: it consolidates male prerogative while erasing female claim-making.

Rasheed's role in this arrangement reveals the ideological and practical stakes of patriarchal entitlement. He is not merely personally cruel; he embodies an economic and symbolic logic that treats wives as consumable assets. His valuation of Mariam is instrumental-she is judged by her capacity to supply male-defined goods: domestic service, sexual availability, and reproductive function. This instrumental valuation is culturally enforced by norms that equate womanhood with reproductive labour. When Mariam's body fails to produce the socially desired signifier-a male heir-Rasheed's contempt and punitive practices intensify. Infertility becomes not a personal misfortune but a cultural justification for exclusionary humiliation. The pebbles episode-though already thematised elsewhere in the commentary-is part of a larger pattern in which bodily function becomes the metric of moral worth. That pattern recurs across characters and generations, making reproductive capacity a central axis of moral evaluation.

The story of Laila's displacement and coerced marriage to Rasheed exhibits a different configuration of structural violence. Laila emerges from a family that values modern education and the intellectual advancement of girls, only to have those values violently eroded by war and social collapse. Her coerced union with Rasheed is presented as an outcome of constrained choice rather than willing submission-the narrative carefully stages the moral arithmetic of survival. Deception and manipulation are instrumental to Rasheed's acquisition of Laila as a second wife; the manufacture of false news about Tariq's death exemplifies the social processes that render deception credible within environments of uncertainty. The mechanics of that deception are instructive: information scarcity, the breakdown of communal verification, and the instrumentalization of fear all collaborate to make marital coercion feasible. The episode thereby maps how political rupture reconfigures private contracts by re-allocating moral and informational authority toward those who can exploit uncertainty.

The failed escape attempt and the subsequent recapture highlight how public governance and private cruelty intersect. The woman who attempts to flee is punished not only by a brutal husband but also by a public order that has internalised patriarchal policing under the guise of moral discipline. The militia or Taliban- like actors who intercept the women perform the role of social enforcers, and their complicity in thwarting escape dramatizes the permeability between private violence and

public authority. The narrative's account of their transfer back to Jalil's house-an ironic return to the site of prior abandonment-exposes a social geography in which female mobility is not only constrained but actively policed by multiple institutions. The law's absence as a protective presence is complemented by its presence as a punitive instrument when women transgress male expectations. The response to the escape-Rasheed's escalation of cruelty-illustrates how private punishment is legitimised by the social conventions that justify male control and by a legal culture that either endorses or refuses to check such practices.

Rasheed's threat:

> You try this again and I will find you. I swear on the Prophet's name that I will find you. And, when I do, there isn't a court in this godforsaken country that will hold me accountable for what I will do. To Mariam first, then to her, and you last. I'll make you watch. (TSS 243)

is worth close reading. The invocation of religious authority in the same breath as a declaration of impunity reveals a dissonant moral logic: sacred invocation becomes the veneer for terror. Reference to the Prophet's name functions rhetorically to sacralise the threat, positioning violent retribution as a form of divinely authorised discipline. Yet the threat simultaneously recognises the weakness of institutional accountability, "there isn't a court … that will hold me accountable" and therefore signals that male violence can be exercised with social endorsement precisely because public institutions fail to serve as protective intermediaries. The juxtaposition of sacred rhetoric and legal impunity encapsulates the novel's broader critique of how moral vocabularies are appropriated to legitimate coercion.

The Taliban-era edicts that the narrative reproduces are an institutional amplification of such private logics. The litany of prohibitions, "Attention women: You will stay inside your homes at all times… You will not, under any circumstance, show your face… You will not laugh in public… If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death" (TSS 248–49), moves the grammar of private shame into the realm of law. The passage's procedural tone and catalogue form make visible how a systematised code transforms everyday gestures into objects of criminal regulation. The rhetorical force of the decree lies in its ordinary diction; the litany's seriality teaches that the regulation of trivial acts-laughter, nail polish, eye contact-aggregates into a totality that denies women even the most elementary forms of public being. The apparatus of moral policing thereby extends from household norms into codified punishment, converting private propriety into juridical obligation and making transgression both socially and legally perilous.

The novel's juxtaposition of Rasheed's private cruelty and the state's public brutality invites an analysis of how modalities of domination circulate between scales. The domestic tyrant borrows

rhetoric and methods from public forms of coercion, while public authorities draw on domestic conceptions of honour to legitimise punitive practices. In both domains, women's bodies and behaviours become regulatory foci; harm becomes legible through the same symbolic categories-honour, shame, and propriety-that justify domination in both private and public spheres. The structural consequence is that women cannot seek refuge in either sphere: the home is unsafe because of male violence; the public sphere is unsafe because of institutionalised prohibition and surveillance.

Mariam's sacrificial act-her decisive intervention that results in the killing of Rasheed to protect Laila-must be understood within this network of symbolic and institutional violences. Her action is not a simple legal transgression but an ethical rupture in which the imperative to preserve another human life overrides the symbolic injunctions that have governed her existence. The narrative frames her act as morally seismic: it contravenes the legal order, but it also affirms a different register of obligation-the responsibility to protect vulnerable life at any cost. Her subsequent execution is the state's ultimate assertion of authority: it reasserts the rule of law in a form that punishes the act of rescue itself, thereby exposing the ambivalence of any legal system that prosecutes those whose morality contradicts its official strictures.

Mariam's death by hanging transforms private sacrifice into public spectacle. The execution is a juridical finality that consolidates the social logic which has long administered her life: the state's violence closes the narrative loop by formalising what has been informally enacted for years. Yet the narrative's ethical framing of Mariam's sacrifice resists a reductive reading of her as merely victim; rather, her finality operates as a re-inscription of personhood. In her last acts, she claims moral agency in a world that had persistently denied her such recognition. The story thereby stages a paradox: the legal order that has sanctioned multiple violences against women now disciplines the woman who refused to accept that order's ethical priorities. Her execution is both the culmination of patriarchal justice and the site of an irreversible moral testimony.

The figure of Rasheed functions as a concentrated emblem of multiple logics of domination: commodity logic that instrumentalises women, patriarchal entitlement that links masculine identity to control over others, and rhetorical recourse to sacred language to mask coercion. The narrative's insistence on treating him as a social type rather than an idiosyncratic villain emphasises structural causality: his violences make sense only within a cultural system that permits and normalises them. Mariam, by contrast, represents the moral interiority that resists instrumental calculation. Her affective capacities-her attention to small duties, her commitment to the personhood of others-

constitute a counter-economy of value that refuses commodification. The juxtaposition of these two figures dramatizes the conflict between logics of possession and logics of care.

The novel's representation of cruelty and compassion as coexistent rather than opposites compel readers to interrogate social complicity. Cruelty is not merely individual pathology; it is enacted through social practices, legal omissions, and cultural narratives that authorise harm. Compassion, likewise, is not only private feeling; it manifests in practices-keeping a child warm, sharing scarce food, risking one's life for another-that have social consequences. By foregrounding the relational forms through which dignity is enacted, the narrative asks readers to consider ethical accountability beyond formal institutions: to whom does one owe care in a social world that has redefined value in hierarchical and utilitarian terms?

The legal and social absence that enables cruelty also generates particular forms of grief and moral imagination. The novel is attentive to how characters absorb illegibility-how they make moral sense of a world that refuses to acknowledge their suffering. The grief Mariam carries is not only personal sorrow; it is testimony to a social order that refuses to register certain losses as losses at all. Her hanging therefore becomes a testimonial shibboleth: it records a history of unchallenged violence's while simultaneously asserting that the ethical life refuses to be wholly consumed by legality.

Finally, the narrative's arc asks a persistent question about social change. If patriarchal systems are reproduced through cultural narratives, legal frameworks, and economic structures, then what grounds remain for transformation? The novel suggests that transformation cannot be reduced to single acts of legal reform or symbolic gestures; it requires changes at multiple levels-language, law, household practice, and affective valuation. The stories of Mariam and Laila thus become a diagnostic archive: by tracing the circuits through which shame, entitlement, and institutional failure operate, the narrative furnishes the raw materials for imagining alternative configurations of responsibility and recognition. The moral labour recorded in their lives-small acts of care, sustained loyalty, and courageous refusal-offers a groundwork for the patient and relational reweaving of social fabrics even when immediate institutional change seems unlikely.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that Khaled Hosseini's novel functions as a powerful literary testimony to the systematically silenced lives of Afghan women. Read through the lens of postcolonial feminism, the text reveals that women's suffering is not the result of individual cruelty alone but is produced and sustained by intersecting structures of patriarchy, political instability, cultural conditioning, and institutional failure. Mariam and Laila's experiences expose how gendered oppression is historically and socially constructed, making endurance and silence necessary strategies for survival rather than signs of innate passivity.

The novel underscores the convergence of private and public forms of domination, where domestic tyranny mirrors authoritarian state power. Marriage, motherhood, and honour emerge as ideological tools through which women's bodies and identities are regulated. Hosseini's portrayal challenges reductive or universalist readings of women's oppression by situating Afghan women's lives within specific cultural and historical realities, thereby affirming a central concern of postcolonial feminism. The narrative resists viewing Afghan culture as inherently oppressive; instead, it foregrounds how prolonged war, misappropriated religious discourse, and patriarchal norms collectively intensify women's marginalisation.

Mariam's final act of sacrifice and Laila's survival signal not romanticised heroism but ethical resistance within severely constrained circumstances. Their choices reclaim moral agency in a social order that persistently denies women recognition and justice. Ultimately, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* emerges as a critique of systems that legitimise women's suffering while silencing their voices. By restoring narrative attention to these "silent cries," the novel invites readers to acknowledge women's lived realities and to question the cultural, political, and ideological structures that continue to normalise their oppression.

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