



# Subversion of Socially and Historically Constructed Patriarchal Norms and Reconstruction of Female Identity in Khaled Hosseini's, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-SPL4-Jan26-MD-066

Subject: English

Received : 01.09.2025

Accepted : 22.01.2026

Published : 31.01.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si4.26.Jan066

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## Abstract

*This paper argues how, since ages, women's identities has been constructed historically and socially and are destined to be subservient or secondary to men and how in the modern time women in contrary emerge stronger and more determined to break the socially constructed gender identity by subverting it and reconstructing a female identity. The paper aims to take up the case of Afghanistan women exclusively and study their attempt to construct their identity and space, not by crossing the social norms but by staying in the same place and creating their space and identity through their silence, courage and human bond. Simon De Beauvoir states that a woman needs beyond protection and providence to be treated with respect and love and view her beyond her biological aspects. As well as they demand that women should not be force to a monotonous role of having children, caring the house and being the sexual repositories of male libido. She disclaims woman being categorised as "Other" and advocates to leave space for her development and emancipation. This paper explores this theme through the journey of two Afghanistan female characters Mariam and Leila in A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini. Despite living in a rigid social environment and social condition they both find ways by being interconnected and subverting the Patriarchal burden thrust upon them in the form of forced marriage, domestic violence and social silence. Despite many challenges, they find identity through female solidarity, courage and sacrifice. Through the lens of Simon De Beauvoir's feminism- this paper endeavours to highlight how women are oppressed overtly and subtly by the male domination and how the modern women subvert and reconstructs her identity.*

**Keywords:** gender, resistance, repression, patriarchy, religious prejudice

Persian-speaking linguistic affiliation and literary tradition have served as the foundation for contemporary Afghan literature. Afghans have been greatly impacted by the sense of belonging and have been inspired by the Persian-speaking cultural and traditional heritage. These days, a multifarious identity that is receptive to the basic inquiries of writing and art is reflected and encouraged by this new and obscure literature. Intercultural and intertextual references abound in literature and language,

especially that of authors living abroad. Afghan civilization is now split up into distinct, autonomous groups. This nation of twelve ethnic groups has been the target of invasions, disputes, and battles for centuries. Language and literature became the only viable barricade of resistance, cultural continuity, and identity survival while the people of this region endured political and military unrest. A woman particularly faces two significant challenges in midst of chaos and life-threatening situation. The first



challenge is they lose their autonomy in the social sphere and their education is denied, thus causing a barrier to their growth and self-development. Secondly, they also lose their economic and social liberation within their family and their role is limited to child bearing and care taker. However, there are evidence that during the political shift and before the Taliban assumed power women were given opportunities to work outside the home, but this only altered women's standing a little. Women's suppression continued despite political and social development. It this is the case of an urban women than in the plight of women in rural areas was even more pitiful. Women from capital city Kabul had freedom in many aspects from their way of life to work culture but after Taliban took power regardless of women either from capital city Kabul or rural areas their condition worsened day by day. In the present scenario women cannot be seen in the public places and their participation in social and economic sphere have been continually overlooked.

The majority of modern Afghan researchers have not considered the repressive social norms that limit women's potential for societal advancement, as well as the submissive status of women in both home and society. According to these scholars, despite the fact that women in Afghanistan have experienced atrocities such as murder, self-immolation, unimaginable domestic violence, and abuse, they still proudly assert that the wife is the mistress of the home in modern Afghan society, typically having significant influence over her husband and the children. They say that "They maintain that women are not seen as inferior to men and are treated with respect" (Emadi 15). "Women are no longer viewed as less than males. In a very friendly setting, the husband and wife talk about family issues and come to conclusions together." (Emadi 15). Very few writers and social activists have dared to voice out the through their writings and campaigns the challenging and miserable situation of women in Afghanistan. Their political, economic and religious frame work is against woman. Their participation in civil live and in the work, place is looked upon as something that ought not to be.

Hosseini, a foremost modern writer has craved the struggle of women in his own land in its true light. He does not fail to show the tacit struggle of his eponymous heroine for freedom and independence in a totally male favoured country with its unjust political conditions in his second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The novel depicts a heart-rendering tale of two Afghan Women Mariam and Laila and the manner in which they sought to liberate themselves and give a meaning to their lives. Hosseini in this novel highlights the Afghan history and life, which is immensely different from the conventional narratives encountered. Hosseini thus depicts the slow transition which takes place among his women amid the factions caused by the Russians mainly and Mujahideen fighting in return the male domination and in addition the sharia laws that are being followed. In Afghanistan before the Taliban rule, girls were permitted to work and carry on their studies under communistic control. Babi, the father of Laila, was an enlightened rationalist, who urged his daughter Laila to take advantage of this privilege and to mingle with her fellow citizens through education and know the culture of the land, and to make her way in it. Girls however even then are discouraged from, spending too much time with the opposite sex in company. For example, Mariam was given sound and strict advice before the wearing of the hijab became a compulsory law by Rasheed, not to go about in the street without a burqa. During times of war, their movements were completely restricted, must always stay in the house and regularly suffer from war experiences, whilst males, like Laila's brethren went forth to war. After the Communistic rule, came the Mujahideen and the Taliban are at last in full control, so the relatively progressive gender rules of communism are rapidly working through a far greater revolution. These restrictions tend to operate to prevent women from having every freedom of education and every right to freedom of expression, and every right to go about the world without a male relative, such male either father or some close relative.

In Kabul, the capital, where Laila used to be like a free bird and enjoy calling on friends and going wherever she liked, going about alone without a male



escort was completely to be restricted with the establishment of the Taliban regime. However, the heroines succeed in breaking these norms: Laila goes secretly across town to the orphanage to see her daughter who is being schooled in a hostel, and she and Mariam plotted daringly to escape from Rasheed's influence forever. As a result, they suffer violence and physical beating with sharp and dangerous tools. They have little or no rights or freedom of any kind in a country which has male domination of every kind, with Sharia law in full play. Such laws are always in favour of males, women being the victims under this law.

According to Simon de Beauvoir, women's state can be transcended only through the medium of a change of the laws, custom, and education to allow of an equality for them with men. In an age like the present, when women are grievously discriminated against and their part in public affairs is curtailed their development and liberty are affected adversely. As far as India is concerned, women's status has undergone a revolutionary and astounding change. To-day they are entering into every walk of life on an equality with men. They have their representation in business, trade, professions in Medicine, in banks, in science and in the Army. Even like in the primitive ages, behaviour tells us in her critical work that women went out hunting with men and carried heavy logs, even so, in India women to-day are the bread winners and they are now taking a walk and supporting men on an equality. They possess property and they want their money invested in necessary things. Even the Muslim women are gradually feeling the importance of their position in India and under the Sharia Laws they are tolerably enjoying their rights, public as well as private. But this is not the state of things as pertains to the millions of women in Afghanistan for instance or Sudan. The state of women in Afghanistan is indeed different. They do not have this sort of freedom; the laws are rather strong against them. They are punished by sentence without a trial. Their liberties even in the public field are curtailed to a vast extent, even such a thing as they access to medical help is denied. Most of the commercial prosperity of the country is gradually fading away, tourism has died a death; it has become

impossible for the commercial men to do business with the natives. The NGOs are at a loose end as they are discouraged from running any matters of help owing to grave conditions of panic in Afghanistan.

According to UNAMA's most recent human rights report, published in the first quarter of 2025, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan has imposed regulations that appear to target the complete removal of women from any visible aspect of public life and restrict their freedom. In the health sector, Afghanistan is fighting against malnutrition and the reported child mortality rates are staggering. BBC News cites an interview about a poor mother who lost six children—one of whom is currently battling for her life. None of them lived past three successful years due to malnutrition and hunger. They are dying out of poverty. This is the unfortunate and sobering state of the rest of Afghanistan's children and mothers.

Further the analysis demonstrates that women and girls have been systematically denied from equal participation in society since the Taliban overthrew the democratically elected government in August 2021. While this being the real situation the Afghan man boasts that they have granted freedom for education, but in reality, she is not permitted to be seen in public with a male partner, even at times of crisis and physical illness. She is also required to wear the hijab and is not permitted to participate in school. Male doctors are not permitted to treat or deliver babies. Does it not violate human rights? The facts of women's lives in contemporary Afghanistan are therefore unrelated to such an answer. Additionally, women are viewed as property than anything else.

Women are still subservient to men despite the fact that they may assumed to be powerful in the home and even run the family business. Emadi in her work *Repression and Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan* opines that “women’s liberation and their achievement of equality with men cannot be accomplished through mechanical application of technology or capital, or through the imposition of cultural values of the developed nations on the developing countries (Emadi xviii).” According to her this subjugation of women can be reversed only by destroying this very ideology of class society and by



the active and dedicated participation by the women themselves. Women's status in Afghanistan is reflected in their ability to access or lack thereof economic, political, educational, and organizational resources inside the household. In Afghanistan, women's independence frequently declines, particularly as a result of opposition from feudal landlords and conservative tribal leaders. Although local traditions and customs differ from tribe to tribe, women's subjugation to men is a widespread occurrence in Afghanistan.

In the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* both the female characters are time and time abused, terrorized and violently beaten by Rasheed yet, at certain point of time both Mariam and Laila give away their prejudice and subvert the atrocities of men by standing and fighting together with courage. According, to them they have learnt and understood that women are neither subservient nor merely shadows. They challenge the societal norms by fighting their battle by themselves to safe guard their loved ones and live a purposeful life. Mariam grows stronger with the warmth and companionship provided by Laila and her child. On the other had Laila through her confidence and motherly affection from Mariam enables her to face the challenges of life and finally she is reunited with her lover Pareek and starts a new life of emancipation and attains self-identity. This knowledge must have unconsciously reflected to her from her liberal father and her education she had. She values the power of education so highly that she makes it a point to educate Mariam, and endures hardship in sending her to a hostel when this was very difficult and dangerous. She does not stop here, she reforms the orphanage with the money left her by Mariam, and educates the children when to the end of the novel, at last, Afghanistan becomes an independent nation, free from civil war and turmoil. Hosseini brings out the narrow world of men, and their prejudices through the character of Jalil. He shows clearly that to a man in Afghanistan, beyond love and relation, his prestige is of more moment. So, the love which sprang into existence between Jalil and Nana at the first has turned cold in later years. Nana had good reasons for forbidding Mariam to indulge in her

affection for Jalil her father. For as Beauvoir says, the woman has no self-identity, her identity is through man, she plays a passive role and is but an "object" in the eyes of the Male. Although Nana rumbles against Jalil when he is absent, yet he evidently continues to have some hold over her. Women are impotent notwithstanding their ability.

Nana's relationship to Jalil is complex. However, amidst this complex atmosphere Mariam is linked to the wider world through Jalil and Mullah Faizulla. The political upheavals and national affairs at the outset seemed to be at distance, yet it affects her more personally later in the novel when she gets married to Rasheed. Jalil avoids to visit Mariam when she comes in search of him for the first time to his house. She is not even allowed to enter his house in spite of his love for her. It is because for a man his pride comes first, his reputation matters a lot than love and family. The city Herat is densely populated city not far from the Kolba but sadly, Mariam was not lucky to enjoy the pleasure of her siblings only because she was an illegitimate child, such life was simply unavailable to Mariam.

Mariam's suffering is not just because of being born as a woman but mainly because she is born out of wedlock to a wealthy trader and a maid servant. She experiences adversity at an early age. From an early age, she experiences violence, neglect, and abandonment until Laila and her daughter enter her gloomy and lonely world. Leila, in contrast to Mariam, cherishes her early years spent with her parents and friends. Her father was progressive, so she was not denied anything. Her parents' deaths in a bombing of their home drastically changed her life, and she was soon compelled to wed Rasheed, Miriam's violent husband. The narrator chronicles the lives of these two women, who, after beginning as rivals, become mothers and daughters. Throughout the entire book, this was the most amazing event. Through these women, the narrator illustrates the oppression, defiance, and perseverance. The narrator through these women presents the suppression and confrontation and endurance against the highly male-controlled country. Laila gets trained from Mariam regarding how to get along with Rasheed and be



unharmful. In spite of Mariam herself being a childless woman volunteered to take care of Laila and nurture the baby, such an outstanding character that she develops into - as the story in the novel progress. However, Laila's mother was indifferent to her daughter compared to her sons.

The life of woman in Afghanistan undoubtedly provokes a moment of overwhelming anguish. Women in male-dominated society are condemned to silence, arranged and forced marriage and death. In the novel what moves the reader beyond the pain they endured was the resilience they together built in this pain. It is this strength of unity and bond makes them to break the silence and begin to act. "Women like us," the quote says. We persevere. "It's all we have" (TSS 8) serves as an example of the value of courage, strength, and hope. Mariam who spent all her time in her room within the four walls becomes strong enough to strike Rasheed when he was almost about to choke Laila to death.

Hosseini's writing is marked by a silence, a silent cry, a cry muted within the being. He represents the cry of his people from his land Afghanistan. It's a proclamation of torment, and a proclamation of silent resistance. The feminine compassioned lives of Mariam and Laila, though they suffered layers of unknown suffering, injustice, and violence day in and day out, nevertheless ended their journey in a triumph of happiness. Mariam, though she began her life with shame, ended her story with a level of unheard-of heroism, self-sacrificial love and love. Laila, long desiring to live the existence of her own expectations of a free woman, ultimately finds happiness in achieving her embodied desire through any kind of relationship with Mariam and she ultimately envisions herself and her life different as a result of undermining and reclaiming life within a patriarchal and male power. Their living journey is neither loud nor excessive, even still there are instances of saving life, and enjoying sweet competition. The story of Mariam and Laila is set against the backdrop of the turmoil history of Afghanistan. Laila, a brilliant, aspirational girl from a more progressive family in Kabul, and Mariam, an illegitimate child nurtured in isolation and humiliation come together in spur of fate. Their

disparate paths shifts when they team up together to fight against the atrocities of the male dominated society. The closeness between Mariam and Laila is a silent protest against the brutality that surrounds them. As per Beauvoir opines that woman can be submissive but not subjugated. Submission is something that an individual chose to obey and submit under the care of an authority. Woman's willingness to submit depends on how a man treats her, she cannot be coerced. Subjugation refers, dictation a woman has to submit herself to the patriarchal authority, by doing this she will look always as subservient. Women are not subservient, they cannot be threatening or harmed. As Beauvoir says that they are not the 'other' but an equal counterpart of a man, she is the half of the man, as presented in Holy Scripture. She deserves respect and honour. Denying of which would affect the entire social structure. Hosseini, shows the power of women rather than only depicting their sufferings in his novel. Thus, enabling his character to subvert the conservative social and religious frame work by confronting it either through silence or through resilience and resistance to construct a space in the worlds where they live freely and emancipated.

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