

# The effect on women in afghan society in a thousand splendid suns

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Khaled Hosseini is one of the most admired Afghani authors of the 21st century. He is best known for works such as *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* that explore the hardships of living in Afghanistan during the Soviet Invasion and Taliban regime. This paper will discuss the life and work of Khaled Hosseini with special emphasis on the effect on women in Afghan society in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Khaled Hosseini was born on March 4, 1965. He is the eldest of five children, and was born in Kabul, Afghanistan where his father worked for the foreign ministry and his mother taught Persian literature.

Hosseini's father was relocated to work in Tehran, where Hosseini's passion for Persian literature grew and inspired him to write short stories of his own. In 1973 the Afghan King, Zahir Shah was overthrown by his own cousin, Daoud Khan, in a bloodless coup. In 1976, Hosseini's father was again relocated to Paris where Khaled and his family moved. Only two years after Daoud Khan's reign, he was overthrown by a communist faction, and killed. Hosseini's family, now wary of the Soviet impact in Afghanistan, were granted political asylum in the United States.

Although Hosseini struggled with English in his first year of high school, he was greatly inspired by John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, to continue his passion for writing. Determined to make ends meet for him and his family, after graduating high school in 1984 he enrolled in Santa Clara University to study biology, and later earn his bachelor's degree in 1988. Hosseini became a practicing internist after he gained his Medical degree at the University of California.

Hosseini joined the Kaiser Permanente Health Maintenance Organization and settled in Mountain View, California with his wife, Roya, to start a family. Throughout Hosseini's medical studies he felt it was his responsibility to tell the world about the country he knew, before it was consumed with war, so he published his first novel *The Kite Runner*. He told the story of two Afghan boys whose lives undertake different paths with the events of the war. " *The Kite Runner* spent more than two years on the New York Times bestseller list, and returned to the list five years after its initial appearance" (Khaled Hosseini Biography). In 2003, following the success of his first novel, Hosseini returned to Afghanistan after twenty seven years. Where he felt devastated and shocked the remains of his country. In 2006 he joined the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees, from war zones around the world. Since 2003 Hosseini had been working on his second novel which focuses on the effect of women during the Soviet Invasion and under the Taliban dictatorship. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, like the first novel became an international bestseller, while *The Kite Runner* became a highly acclaimed motion picture.

Khaled Hosseini gave up his medical practice to write and continue his work for the United Nations. (Khaled Hosseini Biography; " Khaled Hosseini | Biography) *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is divided into four parts. In part one we meet Mariam. Mariam lives with her Nana in a kolba and is the illegitimate child of a wealthy cinema owner from Herat. Mariam praised the ground her father, Jalil walked on. But when her mother kills herself and she's sent to live with her father, she realizes that she's the personification of shame to her him.

Jalil marries Mariam off to Rasheed, a shoe maker from Kabul who turns out to be an abusive husband. In part two of the novel we meet Laila. She was born on the same day the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Due to the fact that her older brothers are off at war with the Soviets, Laila's mother is in deep depression. Laila tells about her best friend Tariq, who she later falls in love with, and about her days during and after the Soviet Invasion. The day Tariq tells Laila that he's leaving Kabul due to the bombs raining down on the city, they spontaneously end up having sex.

Then two weeks after Tariq's departure, Laila's family also decides to leave, but a bomb hits her house and kills her parents. In part three Mariam and Rasheed take Laila in and nurse her back to health. When Laila finds out she is pregnant with Tariq's child she decides to marry Rasheed so that he believes the child is his. Mariam and Laila are enemies at first, but Rasheed's abusive behavior manages to bring them together. In an extreme act of self-sacrifice Mariam kills Rasheed in order to save Laila's life, and turns herself in to the authorities.

In part four Laila runs away with Tariq, who comes back after so many years where they manage to make a living in a hotel where they also work at. In order to pay tribute to Mariam, Laila decides to visit Herat where she sees the kolba that Mariam and her mother lived in, she reads the letter Mariam's father had left her, and when she finds out that she's pregnant with her third child, she decides that if it's a girl she'll name her Mariam. A Thousand Splendid Suns tells of the relationship of two unlikely women who are brought together by the events taking place in their country. It's our lot in

life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have" (19). Mariam didn't heed the words of her mother back then in the kolba, but she did learn throughout her life that women in general had to endure the many hardships that life presented. The Soviet Invasion and Taliban regime has had a lasting effect on the women of Afghanistan. They have struggled with the Taliban's political reign in government as well as the "cultural constraints...of tradition and religion"(Women in Afghanistan: Pawns in men's power struggles).

Through the lives of Mariam and Laila one sees the disastrous events that have taken place in Afghanistan as well as the struggle that women have endured to gain independence. One can see where the "notions of honour and shame...emphasise female modesty and purity"(Women in Afghanistan: Pawns in men's power struggles) through Mariam's birth. Mariam's mother was cast out of the house she lived in as a servant for having a passing affair with the owner of the house who was wealthy and of high class. Mariam thus considered herself "an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had..."(4).

Furthermore, in a poor excuse to rid himself of the shame and dishonor he brought upon his family, Mariam's father marries her off. [He] "didn't have the [heart] either...to stand up to his family, to his wives and in-laws, and accept responsibility for what he had done"(7). When Laila was rescued from the remains of her house and Rasheed claimed that her living in his house would "look dishonorable"(214) shows that a woman's honor and purity means everything in Afghan society, and to ruin those things means bringing shame upon oneself and one's family.

That is why Laila agreed to marry him, because she knew that if anyone were to find out she was pregnant and unmarried, she would be thrown out into the streets, and plenty of unimaginable things were to happen to her then. Sura 4: 34 " Men stand superior to women in that God hath preferred the one over the other ... Those whose perverseness you fear, admonish them and remove them into bed chambers and beat them, but if they submit to you then do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great. " (qtd. in Legacy of the Prophet)

This quote suggests that male relatives have the authority to beat their wives if they disobey them. There are many incidents in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* where Mariam and Laila are beaten into submission. Mariam is forced to chew on pebbles as a demonstration of how her food tastes to her husband, and is left spitting " out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars"(104). The Quran also states that women are to be beaten if they deny their husbands bed; Mariam is threatened to be beaten because Rasheed (her husband) claims that she is influencing Laila to not sleep with him.

Mariam and Laila were tortured after they tried to escape Rasheed's home by being locked in separate rooms, where they went without water and food for days. Laila is severely beaten, almost to the point of death, when Rasheed finds out that she allowed Tariq into his home and allowed him to see her without a burqa. Male relatives in Afghanistan also have a right to honor killings, if a woman is not a virgin on her wedding night her male relatives have the right to kill her in order to avenge the family honor.

If a wife is accused of adultery she is stoned to death, and if a woman is caught with a man who is not a relative, she is given a hundred lashes and a year in prison (Islam and Women's Rights). Men are not greatly punished for the same "crime" that women commit since many of them can have multiple wives and concubines. This shows the injustice between men and women in Afghanistan and how tradition and religion is used to control their everyday lives. The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1978 gave woman a better sense of independence.

This new governmental reform encouraged woman to a better education, teach in schools, work in hospitals, and permitted them to not wear a burqa. This reform also included the prohibition of forced marriages and also raised the marriage age to sixteen. "Women have always had it hard in this country...but they're probably more free now, under the communist, and have more rights than they've ever had before"(135). According to the Commission on the Status of Women one must fight against the use of tradition in order to eliminate the discrimination of women (Women in Afghanistan).

But such reforms were not taken lightly and were deemed un-Islamic, and thrust Afghanistan into a civil war between Soviet troops and the Mujahideen. "Of course, women's freedom is also one of the reasons people out there took up arms in the first place" (135) The next ten years resulted in millions of Afghans leaving the country due to the fighting in many rural areas where men, women, and children became targets of the war at their doorstep. After

the Soviet retreat in 1989, the Mujahideen were in a political power struggle that resulted in mass hysteria and the rise of the Taliban.

Before the Soviet Invasion and Taliban regime, men and women were declared equal through God. They were given the right to vote, choose their own partners, and a right to an inheritance. But under the Taliban all of these rights were taken away, and many of their laws favored men over women (The Plight of the Afghan Woman). “ Attention Women: You will stay in your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a male relative.

If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home... Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately. Women are forbidden from working. If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death”(278) Although female health professionals were still given the liberty to work under strict rules, they had harsh working conditions. Many hospitals weren't provided with the necessary tools in order to work on patients. “ They had no clean water,...no oxygen, no medication, no electricity”(286).

Women were segregated from men in every aspects of life, but wouldn't it be fair to provide them with the necessities they needed in order for survival? Not only did these hospitals not have the equipment needed, they were probably too far to travel to if someone was at risk of dieing. It is because of these reason's that Afghanistan has the “ second highest infant mortality rate as well maternal mortality rate in the world”(Afghanistan: Mortality



Rates Remain High For Mothers, Newborns). The Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law has reduced women to poverty, worsened their health, and deprived them to an education.

Even though they have taken away basic individual rights, the Taliban's laws against women were particularly inhumane. [Mariam] remembered Nana saying once that each snowflake was a sigh heaved by an aggrieved woman somewhere in the world. That all the sighs drifted up the sky, gathered into clouds, then broke into tiny pieces that fell silently on the people below. "As a reminder of how women like us suffer...How quietly we endure all that falls upon us" (91). The women of Afghanistan have endured a lot in these past 33 years. They have struggled between life and death, poverty, and hopelessness.

Through the connection of two unlikely friends one learns of the hopes and despairs people face in times of war and dictatorship. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini has managed to portray the events that have taken place in Afghanistan and the injustice, suffering, and endurance that women face in everyday life. Works Cited Esfandiari, Golnaz. "Afghanistan: Mortality Rates Remain High For Mothers, Newborns - Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty." Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty - Free Media in Unfree Societies. Web. 14 Mar. 2010. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1068295.html/content/article/1068295.html>. Freeman, John. "A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini | Book Reviews | Chron.com - Houston Chronicle." Houston News, Entertainment, Search and Shopping | Chron.com - Houston Chronicle. Web. 14 Mar. 2010. <http://www.chron.com/dispatch/story>.

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