

William shakespeare's, hamlet vs. khaled hosseini's, a thousand splendid suns

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A Thousand Splendid Suns takes place in Afghanistan, where the status of women in the home with their family, and also in society, is extremely limited and they have significantly less freedom than their male counterparts. This story depicts the life of Afghan women, and the struggles and thoughts they live with. Mariam, Nana, and Laila are the three main female characters in the book who experience the life as less equals and only meaningfulness in life is motherhood. Shakespeare's work, *Hamlet*, also features sexism against women. Both *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Hamlet* have stood against the test of time, with the former being written in the mid 1900s, and the latter in the early 1600s; despite their powerful effects on societies all around the world, both texts reveal discrimination against women, and the sexist actions perpetrated on females in Afghan and Shakespearean society cannot be overlooked.

One takeaway one may have from reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is that women in Afghan culture are only used to bare children and be servants to men. This is first shown by relating Nana to Jalil. Nana was a servant to Jalil before she was exiled due to becoming pregnant with a child of Jalil. It is uncertain whether Jalil forcefully put himself onto Nana, or charmed Nana, but with her low stature and status of being a woman, he was able to exile her and their child, Mariam, to a small hut outside of Herat. Mariam decides to leave her kolba, or hut, one day and travel into Herat to see Jalil. Once Nana realized Mariam had left, she did not have anything else to live for because her sense of motherhood was lost. This ended with Mariam coming home to see Nana had hung herself. Jalil, being noted as "one of Herat's wealthiest men" (Hosseini 6), did not even help support Nana and Mariam,

even though he is very capable of doing so. Nana states that Jalil told his wives that she forced herself on him, but in their society, the woman is to blame. Nana being a servant to Jalil is a key factor in this story because the belittlement of Nana and her status at Jalil's house as a servant, shows that women are not only taken advantage of, but do not have much to live for. Once Jalil's family finds a husband for Mariam, she gets to experience what being a women is really like in her society. Other than not being able to go to school and get an education, Mariam does not really face the hardships of being a female in her society until she gets forcefully married to Rasheed. Once Rasheed and Mariam get married, Mariam has no power over their relationship. After a week of sorrow, Rasheed finally tells Mariam that it is time she starts behaving like a wife. This entailed servant-like behaviors: washing the house, sweeping the floors, cooking food, and running errands. It also brought about the act of bearing children. With women being financially dependent on their husbands in Afghan society, it shows that women are seen as property and servants, because they cannot provide for themselves.

What women do in their society is not controlled by themselves due to the discrimination and status they hold within the community. They are not only told how to dress, but also told how to live their lives and what to do with them. When Rasheed sees a teacher walking down the street revealing her face and body, he says, " it embaresses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife" (Hosseini 70). Rasheed then goes on to explain how he believes that a woman's face is her husband's business. This portrays

women as property, and shows that when a woman does show control over her own body, it is looked poorly on by other men in the society. Since it is not up to Mariam to decide what she wears, Rasheed eventually tells her that she has to wear a burqa from now on when she leaves the house. Even though Mariam states that "the loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing around her mouth" (Hosseini 72), it did not matter to Rasheed. He did not want to disgrace his honor and pride like the other men who bring their wives into his shop. From Rasheed's standpoint, when a man brings his wife into his shop and they are wearing makeup and skirts, he sees them as soft. This mentality, that men own their women and women are not free to represent themselves on their own, shows that women in Afghan society have very little control over their own bodies.

When looking at similarities between women in Hamlet and A Thousand Splendid Suns, one can note that women are both portrayed as weak, and both lack decision making in their lives. In both writings, it is clear that women are treated significantly less equal than men. In A Thousand Splendid Sun, women are usually covered head to toe so they can not be seen by other men in society. In Hamlet, Hamlet puts on a play, but it is forbidden by the law for women to act in plays; this was common practice in those times. In Hamlet's play, men dress up like women due to women not even been given the opportunity to perform. Women in Hamlet not being able to present themselves in the ways they desire, and not having the same opportunities as men shows the similarity of both societies. Another thing to

look at with both writings, is the portrayal of women being flawed. In Hamlet, Gertrude is always looking to Claudius in regards to Hamlet's behavior, even though Hamlet is Gertrude's son. Also, Gertrude promptly marrying Claudius after her husband's death can be looked at as Gertrude's need for attention. While in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, each woman character is always looked at as flawed by men in their society. When Mariam cooks Rasheed a meal that he does not like, Rasheed goes outside and gets rocks for her to put in her mouth and chew. Just because one meal that Mariam made is not up to par with Rasheed's standards, he abuses her, which shows that there is no room for error or flaws for women in their society. Lastly, a common parallel between both texts show us that men are manipulative. In Hamlet, Claudius covers up his manipulative behaviors by acting like a caring person towards Hamlet to gain Gertrude's trust. Another portrayal of manipulateness in Hamlet is Hamlet manipulating Ophelia's emotions throughout the play. Hamlet always leaves Ophelia guessing throughout the play. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Rasheed threatens to beat Mariam unless Laila has sex with him. Rasheed also manipulates Laila by saying if she did not, he would turn her over to the Taliban for her relations with Tariq. Although the texts take place in totally different time periods, the treatment of women does not seem to change much.

Discrimination towards women in modern-day American society does not compare to the inequalities they faced throughout history, with the perfect example being the treatment of women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. In today's America, there are countless feminist movements that would not

have been tolerated in the past. Women are gaining more rights as time goes on, and a huge factor in this process is the abundance of feminist movements spreading awareness about sexism and discrimination. While women are discriminated against, it is even harder for women of minority groups, who face more sexism and stereotypes than white women in American society. Nowadays, some people regard women wearing hijabs or burqas as being 'oppressed', but it is very different in modern day America. Muslim women today choose to wear their religious garment of choice to express their faith and devotion; nowadays, it is less a symbol of oppression, and more a showing of gratitude and faith.

It is shown in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* that women are not only seen as property, but they also have little to no control over the most basic type of property, their own bodies. Women are manipulated, taken control of, and treated with little to no respect. Through the description of the three main women characters: Mariam, Nana, and Laila, this story shows the reader that women in that society are portrayed as servants and used to bare children. When women can not even forego even those attributes, they are deemed as useless in that society. It is shown by Nana's death, and also through Rasheed taking Laila as a wife because Mariam can not bare children and is presumed worthless. The comparison with women from *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Hamlet* can be looked at through the manipulative aspects of men, and the view of women as flawed. The views of women in some places have changed for the better but sadly, some places such as Afghanistan still may suffer with the belittlement of women.