

Comparing "osama" and "a thousand splendid suns"



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After years of abuse, Mariam, the protagonist of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, looks back and examines herself: “ What harmful thing had she willfully done to this man to warrant his malice, his continual assaults, the relish with which he tormented her?” (Hosseini 346). During the time period of both this novel and the film *Osama*, a woman’s life in Afghanistan was completely shaped by oppression. In this quote, Mariam demonstrates this pervasive sense of subjugation by blaming herself for her own abuse, a weakness that has been with her since she was born. The childhoods of the central characters of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and the film *Osama* determine how they each respond to oppression.

Mariam’s upbringing shaped her in a way that caused her to accept her own oppression, until she realized that she didn’t have to respond in this manner. Throughout her childhood, Mariam is ambitious and dreams for a life outside of her small shack, but grows up ashamed of her existence. Her mother, Nana, encourages this shame with lines like, “ You are a clumsy little harami. This is my reward for everything I have endured. An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little harami” (Hosseini 4). Nana also uses the frightening and difficult circumstances of Mariam’s birth as a way to manipulate her into feeling guilty. Despite Nana’s bitterness, the two women generally get along well. Mariam and Nana work together every morning collecting eggs, feeding the animals, and making bread (Hosseini 15). Although Mariam’s childhood is by no means privileged, it is a simple, routine lifestyle that brings her joy. However, her shame of being illegitimate, combined with the guilt she feels after her mother’s suicide, stays with her for her entire life. This contributes to her tolerance of Rasheed’s abuse. Due to never feeling like she was

wanted and that she was the cause of her mother's death, Mariam is virtually unable to stand up for herself. For example, the first time she confronts Rasheed, Mariam says, " Eighteen years [...] And I never asked you for a thing. Not one thing" (214). She continuously takes Rasheed's physical and verbal assault, and as her mother taught her, she endures it and lives. As the story comes to a close, Mariam realizes that she has done nothing wrong and that her mother's judgments and Rasheed's abuse were completely undeserved. This is the realization that allows her to sacrifice her life to save Laila, whom Mariam loves like her own daughter.

Laila, another of the central characters of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, would never blame herself for other people's actions. She grew up with a much more privileged lifestyle than Mariam does, a lifestyle which impacted her response to oppression. Throughout Laila's childhood, her parents, especially her father, encouraged her education. Babi, her father, proves this in statements like, " Marriage can wait, education cannot [...] You can be anything you want, Laila" (Hosseini 114). Like Mariam, Laila grows up with grand dreams, but unlike Mariam, she has the support and the ability to actually work towards them. When her parents are killed by a rocket, Laila has to marry Rasheed to cover up that she is pregnant with Tariq's child. Throughout all of this turmoil, Laila's life changes drastically. She's forced to wear a burqa, give up all of her values, and accept the role of a mother and wife at fifteen years old. When she becomes a mother, Laila puts her children first, and never gives up hope of a better life. Soon after marrying Rasheed, Laila begins to understand the effect her decisions have on her life: " even though the baby inside her was no bigger than a mulberry, Laila

already saw the sacrifices that a mother had to make” (Hosseini 218).

Despite family tragedies and challenging times, Laila’s childhood was not as bad as the childhoods of those around her. Due to this discrepancy, she is not resigned to Rasheed’s abuse and knows that there is a better life out there for her. In the novel, Laila’s original plans for escape are undermined by her pregnancy. Later, when her daughter is older, she begins stealing money from Rasheed and plans her escape again. The reader finds this out when she says, “ We’re leaving this spring, Aziza and I. Come with us, Mariam” (Hosseini 256). Although the escape plan doesn’t work, Laila maintains hope for survival on account of her upbringing, which gave her the tools she needed to make it through her time of oppression. This set of circumstances also makes Laila significantly different from Mariam, who lacks these tools, and consequently accepts her oppression rather than attempting to change it.

In terms of childhood, Laila and Osama are almost complete opposites. Osama, the main character of Siddiq Barmak’s 2003 film *Osama*, lives with her mother and grandmother in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Osama’s response to oppression is very different than both Mariam’s and Laila’s, due to the circumstances of her childhood. As described in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, some of the rules of the Taliban seem odd and ridiculous: “ You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger,” (Hosseini 278) but some more seriously affect women, like “ Women are forbidden from working” (Hosseini 278). Osama’s father and uncle were both killed in warfare, leaving her relatives with no one to support them. Eventually, Osama’s mother and grandmother decide that their only way to survive is to send Osama out to

work disguised as a boy. This puts her life at risk, and it's clear in the film that Osama is scared of being caught (Barmak). Osama's childhood heavily affects the way she responds to and understands oppression, because she grows up in a time period when she doesn't know anything different. Osama grew up simultaneously fighting for and risking her life, and thus has no understanding of the concept of a better life. This lack of knowledge leaves her without the ability to maintain hope throughout a time of oppression. If Osama's whole life is a struggle and it's all she knows, there is no reason for her to expect anything to change. Towards the end of the film, Osama is shown jumping rope in her jail cell (Barmak), which demonstrates that she was too young to have any knowledge or understanding of a life without the type oppression she is subjected to on a regular basis. In addition, once Osama is revealed as a girl, she runs away, and when she is caught, a man immediately puts a burqa over her head (Barmak). When this happens, Osama stops resisting, because she knows that women have to wear burqas while in public; now that she has been officially marked as a woman, she feels that there is no escape. In Osama's mind, the life of a woman is synonymous with oppression. To draw a final parallel between the two works, Osama is portrayed as most similar to Mariam because they both don't fully understand the concept of a lifestyle that renders women free to go and do whatever they choose.

Overall, if any of the characters had a different childhood than they did, the outcomes of their lives may have been completely different. Their response to oppression was dictated by the ways in which they were raised. Osama is alike Mariam in the sense that they both accept their oppression, although

Mariam's response is due to a childhood of shame, while Osama simply knows nothing else. Since Laila had a more privileged childhood than both of them, she is able to stand up for herself and maintain hope, because she believed that she could again have the freedom she once did. John Henrik Clarke believed that " To hold a people in oppression you have to convince them first that they are supposed to be oppressed" and Osama's and Mariam's acceptance of oppression clearly manifests Clarke's ideas.