

# Gender roles— the oppression against women

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Khaled Hosseini's novel "A Thousand Splendid Suns," presents a heart-rending, powerful story told through the perspectives of two young women who were both, both, were raised in Afghanistan, and were brought together in the midst of war. Throughout the novel, the reader is taken through the misfortunate events in which shaped both of the protagonists'—Laila and Mariam— lives. What is brought to the eye of the reader is that the root to Laila and Mariam's unsuccesses is nothing more than their gender itself, being female. The subjugation of women, by means of the men in the Afghan nation, is portrayed through the historical background of the country itself and the individual and intimate lives of both protagonists.

Giving the story a historical context does not only give the reader a stronger understanding of the setting, but also sets a path for struggles the two women were to be faced with. Towards the beginning of the novel, Hosseini has painted a picture of the way Afghanistan used to function before the catastrophes of war. Kabul, in year 1987, "was largely known for peace" and "war might as well have been a rumor"(Hosseini 146). Here, the reader is provided with a vivid description of Afghanistan, but here it differs from how most Westerners perceive it today.

Another example would be the description of Bamiyan village with its "lush farming fields" consisting of winter wheat, alfalfa, potatoes, and "tiny female figures" washing their clothes (Hosseini 146). From this brief illustration, the author gives any reader the impression that Afghanistan was once prospering and that women were working at some point. As the plot progressed, however, so did tensions within Afghanistan. When the Soviets were taken over, and the country was under mujahideen rule, there were no

communist powers to grant the opportunity for women to work and gain education any longer. As for when Afghanistan was under Taliban control, the Shari'a laws were created in an attempt to promote the protection of women's honor, but instead stripped them of their basic rights. Many of the laws encouraged violence against women, considering that the disobedience of laws, such as not being able to "speak unless spoken to," would result in harsh beatings (Hosseini 278).

In Mariam and Laila's household, and most likely in an abundance of other Afghan homes, both physical and mental abuse was legitimized because of Shari'a law. The part where Laila and Mariam were caught by the officer in means of trying to escape truly supports that legitimization: 'If you send us back,' she said instead, slowly, 'there is no saying what he will do to us.' She could see the effort it took him to keep his eyes from shifting. 'What a man does in his home is his business.' 'What about the law, then, Officer Rahman?' Tears of rage stung her eyes. 'Will you be there to maintain order?' 'As a matter of policy, we do not interfere with private family matters, hamshira' 'Of course you don't. When it benefits the man. . . '(Hosseini 266) At that point in the story, it is clear that the girls being upfront about the abuse made the man uncomfortable, which also is an eye opener to how the maltreatment of women was normalized within that society. Both Laila and Mariam have already gone through a lot.

They have witnessed the good and the bad of their country, and later in the novel, the reader sees how much they acknowledge the cruelty of it, as well as how they dealt separately with the country's harsh laws. Throughout the

novel, the reader sees Afghanistan from the perspectives of Mariam and Laila individually. Each of their childhoods differed from one another, but each have both been affected by the oppression against their genders in their own ways. Since she was a kid, Mariam has been taught, by Nana, that the only crucial learning aspect to a woman's life is to "endure" (Hosseini 19). She has only heard from the point of view of someone who, Nana, has been betrayed by a man, being Mariam's father. Up until her own decease, it was Nana's primary goal to protect Mariam from the deceitful and disgusting world Nana has come to know and realize. Sadly enough, and at such a young age, Mariam has decided, herself, the importance of enduring as well, when she was also betrayed by her own father. Since then, and while she was Rasheed's wife, she lived with regret, discovering for herself that Nana was right about there being nothing for her "but rejection and heartache"(Hosseini 19).

Under her new household, she has struggled with discovering she was infertile, in a society where having babies were the only gift women could bring to the world. What, unfortunately, bubbled in Mariam was the fear of Rasheed's "shifting moods, his volatile temperament. . . on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes make amends with polluted apologies and sometimes not"(Hosseini 99). For many years after, Mariam had no choice but to tolerate Rasheeds constant anger and his lack of patience for her. It was not until Laila came along, where Mariam began to see the strength and confidence within herself. Laila, on the other hand, was raised in a much different type of setting than Mariam was.

They both each lived in Afghanistan, but Laila was born from an educated family in Kabul. Even though it was not perfect, she was most definitely born into a more fortunate life. Through her father's words and teachings, she was raised knowing the importance of independence and education for women. While the communists were still in charge, her father—Hakim—encouraged that women are “. . . more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before” (Hosseini 135). Hakim was a constant reminder throughout her life that women were worth more than what they were typically portrayed as.

Later on, when Laila reached adolescence, she is met with the gender norm that regulate and limit the relationships between grown boys and girls. In reference to Laila's relationship with Tariq, Laila's mom, Fariba, states that “It was one thing running around. No harm in that. But now. Now. I notice you're wearing a bra, Laila” and that “The reputation of a girl, especially as pretty as you, is a delicate thing Laila.” (Hosseini 162). It is pretty clear, from this statement, and from the growing changes between Tariq and Laila, that males gain more freedoms while the females just receive more limitations as they get older. Fariba stressed the importance of reputation to a woman's social status to the community.

Growing up, Laila got her on perspective on gender relations based on what people told her and observing those her, rather than directly being discriminated against. She did not have to endure until she was living with Mariam and Rasheed later in the novel. In conclusion, this story referenced to and found many ways to symbolize the harsh inequality women received,

and may still receive, in Afghanistan. Khaled Hosseini has taken the reader on a rollercoaster of emotions with how the oppression was portrayed, being, but not limited to, the history of the nation, the individual life of Mariam, and the life of Laila as well.