INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGINEERING MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (IJEMSS)

e-ISSN : 3139-065X

www.ijemss.com

editor@ijemss.com

Vol. 01, Issue 2, June 2026, pp : 179-183

The Struggles of Afghan Women against Political Conflict and Religious Oppression Portrayed in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns

[1]MEKA VEMAIAH

[1]Research Scholar, Dept. of English, S. V. University, Tirupati,Andhra Pradesh –India, mekavemaiah@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The history of Afghanistan is marked by decades of political instability, foreign invasions, civil wars, and the rise of religious extremism. It has profoundly affected Afghan society and the lives of its people, especially women, whose social, educational, economic, and political rights have frequently been restricted under patriarchal traditions and fundamentalist interpretations of religion. This study examines the portrayal of Afghan women in the fiction of Khaled Hosseini, addressing on how political conflict and religious oppression influence their lives, identities, and struggles. Set against the tumultuous history of Afghanistan, including Soviet occupation, civil war, Taliban rule, and post-war reconstruction, Hosseini's narratives portray women as both victims of systemic oppression and agents of resilience. Afghan women in Hosseini's fiction endure multiple forms of oppression, including forced marriage, domestic abuse, restrictions on education and mobility, and social marginalization. The primary objective of this research article is to analyze the experiences of Afghan women depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* with particular attention to gender discrimination, patriarchal control, religious fundamentalism, violence, and resistance. The study employs a qualitative textual analysis based on feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory. The article significantly provides contemporary discussions on gender, conflict, and human rights by illuminating the lived experiences of Afghan women through literature.

Keywords: Afghan Women, Political Conflict, Religious Oppression, Feminist Literary Criticism, Khaled Hosseini

Introduction:

Literature serves as a powerful medium for reflecting and interpreting socio-political realities. It not only narrates individual experiences but also reveals the cultural, historical, and political forces that shape human lives. Through storytelling, writers expose social injustices, challenge dominant ideologies, and give voice to marginalized communities. According to Georg Lukács, literature reflects the social conditions of a particular historical period, helping readers understand the relationship between personal experiences and broader societal structures. Feminist critics further argue that literature exposes mechanisms of gender oppression and contributes to social awareness and change. Therefore, literary representations of women in conflict-ridden societies provide valuable insights into the intersections of gender, power, religion, and politics.

Among contemporary writers, Khaled Hosseini is recognized for his compelling portrayal of Afghan society and its complex realities. His novels depict the devastating effects of war, displacement, and social inequality on ordinary people while exploring themes of family, identity, memory, and migration. Women occupy a central place in his narratives, as he portrays their struggles against domestic abuse, gender discrimination, and restrictions imposed by patriarchal and conservative religious systems. Through these representations, Hosseini humanizes Afghan women and highlights their resilience, courage, and capacity for survival. By drawing their experiences within the context of political instability and religious control, he demonstrates how personal suffering is deeply connected to larger socio-political structures. His works contribute to global discussions on gender justice, human rights, and the consequences of extremism.

Although considerable scholarship has examined Hosseini's novels, there remains a need for focused research on the portrayal of Afghan women in relation to political conflict and religious oppression. Existing studies have largely explored themes such as identity, trauma, diaspora, and postcolonialism, while the combined impact of war, patriarchy, and religious fundamentalism on women's lives requires further attention. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how Hosseini presents Afghan women as both victims of systemic oppression and agents of resistance. By employing feminist and postcolonial perspectives, the study seeks to demonstrate that Hosseini's narratives function not only as literary works but also as powerful testimonies to the endurance, strength, and humanity of Afghan women.

Research Objectives

This study critically examines the portrayal of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's novel, A Thousand Splendid

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Vol. 01, Issue 2, June 2026, pp : 179-183

Suns focusing on the impact of political conflict and religious oppression. It explores themes of marginalization, resistance, and resilience, while analyzing the socio-cultural and political forces influencing female characters in the story.

Review of Literature

The representation of women in Afghan literature and the broader discourse on gender, conflict, and oppression has received significant scholarly attention. Among contemporary writers, Khaled Hosseini stands out for his portrayal of Afghan society and the experiences of women living under political instability, patriarchal control, and religious extremism. His novels have generated extensive critical discussion on themes such as gender, identity, trauma, resistance, and human rights. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a powerful narrative of female suffering and resilience in Afghanistan. The novel highlights women who endure domestic violence, forced marriage, and social exclusion while resisting patriarchal structures through courage and sacrifice. She contends that Hosseini transforms the personal struggles of Mariam and Laila into a broader critique of gender injustice and a celebration of human dignity.

Drawing on the theories of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Singh (2017) explores the representation of marginalized Afghan women and their ability to voice their experiences within dominant social structures. Such studies suggest that Hosseini creates narrative space for subaltern female voices, enabling readers to recognize the complexities of women's lives shaped by war, historical legacies, and religious conservatism. Trauma scholars such as Balaev (2014) further note that prolonged exposure to war, violence, and displacement leaves deep psychological scars on women. While Hosseini's female characters experience loss, abuse, and instability, they also find healing through relationships, solidarity, and hope.

Building on these perspectives, the present study examines Afghan women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It investigates how political conflict and religious oppression intersect with gender discrimination, arguing that Hosseini's fiction not only documents women's hardships but also celebrates their resilience, agency, and enduring struggle for dignity and freedom.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns (2007), examining themes, characterization, and narrative strategies to explore the portrayal of Afghan women.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Feminist Literary Theory and Postcolonial Theory to examine the portrayal of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. These frameworks explore the intersections of gender, power, religion, culture, and conflict, highlighting both the oppression faced by women and their resilience, agency, and resistance.

Feminist Literary Theory provides the primary framework for analyzing women's experiences in Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It examines how literature reflects and challenges patriarchal structures that marginalize women. Elaine Showalter emphasizes the study of women's representation in literature, while Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* (1949) that women have historically been treated as the "Other" in male-dominated societies. In Afghanistan, patriarchal traditions often limit women's access to education, employment, mobility, and independence. Hosseini portrays these realities through characters such as Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, who endure forced marriages, domestic violence, and social exclusion. Feminist theory helps explore both the oppression they face and their acts of resistance, resilience, and self-determination.

Postcolonial Theory offers a socio-political framework for understanding the historical and cultural realities depicted in Khaled Hosseini's novels. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism challenges stereotypical Western portrayals of Eastern societies, while Hosseini presents nuanced images of Afghan culture and women. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, the study examines how Afghan women are marginalized by gender discrimination and social exclusion. Although often silenced within patriarchal and unstable societies, their voices and experiences gain visibility through Hosseini's narratives. His female characters emerge not merely as victims but as resilient individuals who strive for dignity, agency, freedom, and social recognition.

Discussion

Khaled Hosseini portrays Afghanistan as a nation shaped by decades of political instability, war, and Taliban rule, with women suffering the most severe consequences. In A Thousand Splendid Suns, characters such as Mariam and Laila reveal how conflict intensifies gender inequality and vulnerability. Mariam suffers discrimination from childhood because she is born as a *harami* (illegitimate child). She is denied social acceptance and educational opportunities, while her father avoids acknowledging her publicly. Nana says Mariam, "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman." It is one of the novel's most powerful observations on gender inequality, this line reveals how women become scapegoats during periods of social and political turmoil.

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In contrast, Laila's father, Babi supports saying, "A society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated," which imports the necessity of women education to lead in the society." Through Babi's words, Hosseini accounts political systems and ideologies that marginalize women and deny them educational opportunities. Laila's life is transformed by a rocket attack that kills her parents and forces her into an abusive marriage. The novel demonstrates how war destroys families, restricts education, and deprives women of choice and security.

Hosseini portrays the misuse of religion as a tool of social control, criticizing patriarchal and extremist interpretations rather than Islam itself. In A Thousand Splendid Suns, Taliban restrictions deny women education, employment, mobility, and basic rights. Through Mariam and Laila's experiences, the novel exposes how religious fundamentalism reinforces female subordination and social oppression. The line, "If you are caught alone on the street" reflects Taliban restrictions on women's mobility. It highlights religious oppression, gender discrimination, and the denial of women's freedom, showing how patriarchal authority-controlled women's everyday lives through fear and punishment. One Taliban official announces: "Attention women: You will stay inside your homes at all times."

This declaration symbolizes the systematic exclusion of women from public life. Feminist scholars argue that such restrictions represent institutionalized patriarchy disguised as religious morality. Through his narrative, Hosseini demonstrates how religious authority can be manipulated to legitimize gender inequality and social oppression. The experiences of female characters reveal that religious oppression extends beyond legal restrictions and becomes embedded in everyday life. Women are denied opportunities for self-expression, education, and economic independence. Consequently, their identities are shaped by fear, silence, and dependence.

Patriarchal violence emerges as a recurring theme throughout Hosseini's fiction. The domestic sphere, traditionally regarded as a place of protection, often becomes a site of abuse and control for women. Rasheed's treatment of Mariam and Laila demonstrates the standardization of domestic violence within patriarchal systems. The line, "A woman's face is her husband's business only" reflects patriarchal control over women's bodies and identities. It symbolizes the denial of female autonomy, reducing women to possessions whose appearance and freedom are controlled by men. Mariam's life is characterized by rejection and humiliation from her childhood. As an illegitimate child, she experiences social stigma and internalizes feelings of inferiority. Her forced marriage to Rasheed further subjects her to emotional and physical abuse. Hosseini writes, "She was leaving the world she had known and entering a world where she would be a stranger." This transition symbolizes the loss of agency experienced by many women within patriarchal societies.

Feminist theorists argue that domestic violence is not merely an individual problem but a manifestation of broader social structures that privilege male authority. Hosseini's portrayal of Rasheed illustrates how patriarchal ideology grants men control over women's bodies, choices, and movements. Through Mariam's suffering, the novels expose the normalization of gender-based violence and its psychological consequences.

Female solidarity is a powerful force through which women challenge patriarchal authority and reclaim their dignity. The Nana's words to Mariam, "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter" highlights the transmission of female experience across generations. It reflects women's awareness of patriarchal oppression while emphasizing resilience, survival, and the strength needed to endure social injustice. The relationship between Mariam and Laila develops from mutual tussles to sincere sisterhood. Together, they create a supportive bond that enables them to endure abuse and envision alternative futures. Their friendship demonstrates the transformative potential of female solidarity in oppressive environments. Mariam's decision to kill Rasheed to save Laila represents the climax of her personal transformation. Once passive and submissive, she becomes an active representative who sacrifices herself for another woman's freedom and delighted future. Her final act challenges patriarchal expectations and affirms her moral autonomy. The line, "She was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back" signifies Mariam's emotional fulfillment and personal transformation. Despite a life marked by suffering and oppression, she finds love, belonging, and dignity, making her final sacrifice an act of empowerment, resilience, and self-worth. Feminist criticism interprets this moment as an assertion of agency within a system designed to suppress women's voices.

Similarly, Laila's commitment to education and social reconstruction symbolizes hope for future generations. By returning to Afghanistan and participating in rebuilding efforts, she embodies the possibility of social change through female empowerment.

The portrayal of women in Khaled Hosseini's fiction can be understood through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern. Afghan women such as Mariam and Nana occupy marginalized positions where their voices are often silenced by patriarchal and social structures. Their experiences reveal the effects of gender discrimination, poverty, and limited access to education, economic resources, and political power. However, Hosseini creates narrative space for these marginalized voices, bringing their struggles into public awareness. The novels highlight violations of fundamental human rights, including restrictions on education, mobility, healthcare, and personal freedom. Rather than presenting women as passive victims, Hosseini emphasizes their emotional depth, resilience, and capacity for resistance.

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By focusing on personal stories, he transforms political and social issues into relatable human experiences. His fiction exposes the harmful effects of political conflict and religious oppression while celebrating women's strength and determination. Consequently, the novel serves as both literary works and social commentaries that promote dignity, equality, justice, and human rights.

The analysis shows that Hosseini portrays Afghan women as profoundly affected by war, patriarchy, and religious oppression. Through feminist and postcolonial perspectives, his novels highlight women's resilience, resistance, and agency. By depicting their struggles and strengths, he promotes discussions on women's rights, social justice, and human dignity.

Findings of the Study

The present study examined the portrayal of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns through the perspectives of Feminist Literary Theory and Postcolonial Theory. The analysis reveals that political conflict, religious oppression, and patriarchal traditions profoundly shape women's lives in Afghanistan. A major finding is that prolonged political instability, including the Soviet invasion, civil war, and Taliban rule, worsens women's social and economic conditions. War exposes women to poverty, displacement, violence, and insecurity while destroying families, educational opportunities, and support systems. Hosseini illustrates that women suffer not only as citizens but also as mothers, daughters, and wives whose lives are disrupted by conflict. The study also finds that patriarchy is a central source of oppression. Women are often denied autonomy and subjected to forced marriages, domestic violence, restricted mobility, and social exclusion. Through characters such as Mariam and Laila, Hosseini demonstrates how gender inequality is embedded within social and cultural structures.

Another significant finding is that religious doctrines are frequently manipulated by patriarchal authorities to justify women's subordination. Under Taliban rule, women are denied access to education, employment, healthcare, and participation in public life. Religious oppression thus functions as a mechanism that reinforces gender discrimination and unequal power relations. At the same time, Hosseini provides narrative space for women whose voices are often absent from historical and political discourse. His novels portray Afghan women not merely as victims but as individuals who display resilience, courage, and determination in the face of adversity. By highlighting their experiences, Hosseini critiques social injustice and raises awareness of issues related to gender inequality, war, and human rights. Ultimately, his fiction encourages readers to reflect on equality, freedom, dignity, and social responsibility.

Conclusion

This study examines the portrayal of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through Feminist and Postcolonial theories. It explores how political conflict, patriarchy, and religious oppression shape women's lives while emphasizing their resilience and agency. The analysis shows that women are deeply affected by war, social inequality, and patriarchal structures. Political instability intensifies gender-based hardships, resulting in displacement, poverty, and limited opportunities. Through characters such as Mariam and Laila, Hosseini illustrates the severe impact of conflict on women. The study also finds that Hosseini critiques the misuse of religion as a tool of patriarchal control, particularly under Taliban rule, where women's rights and freedoms are restricted. At the same time, his novels highlight women's courage, solidarity, and resistance against oppression. Using a postcolonial perspective, the research demonstrates how Hosseini gives voice to marginalized women often excluded from dominant narratives.

Overall, Hosseini's novel presents Afghan women as both victims of oppression and agents of change, contributing to discussions on gender equality, human rights, dignity, and social justice.

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