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'A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS' BY KHALED HOSSEINI-
A STORY OF FEMALE SUFFERING AND SACRIFICE

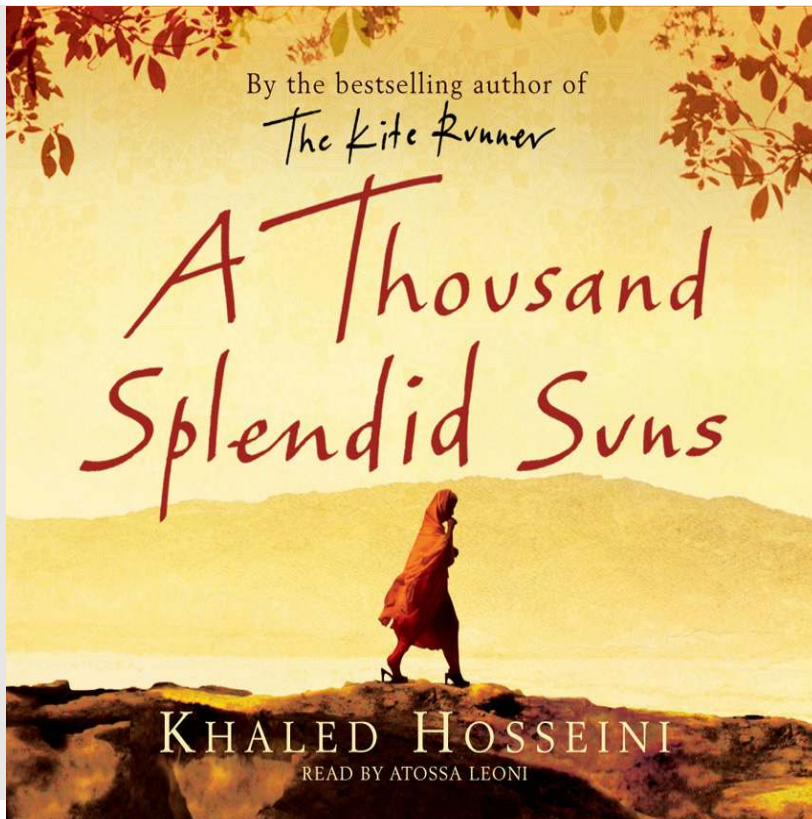


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Short Profile

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ABSTRACT:

'A Thousand Splendid Suns' by Khaled Hosseini is a heartbreaking story of two women, Mariam and Laila. It is both the tale of two women, and a tale of two cities - Herat and Kabul. A story set against the terrifying background of Afghanistan is a powerful portrait of female suffering and endurance. It attempts to show the fallout that Afghanistan's violent history has had on a handful of individuals, ending in death at the hands of the Taliban for one character, and the promise of a new life for another. . Looking at the story from the feministic perspective it can be said that the women in Afghanistan are not at all respected. Rather they are not even treated as human beings. Their condition is not better than

dumb slaves. The gender apartheid that has been forced on Afghan women has been one of the great unresolved injustices of the modern world.

KEYWORDS

Afganistan, suffering, enduarance, marriage, Taliban rule.

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INTRODUCTION

Khaled Hosseini's reputation as an accomplished novelist has been established with 'The Kite Runner', his celebrated debut novel. The Kite Runner was the tale of two Afghan boys struggling to live decent lives amid the warfare and ethnic rivalries of contemporary Afghanistan. With his first novel he wanted to give a western public assailed with media images of war-torn Afghanistan, firstly during the Soviet Occupation and then under the Taliban, a glimpse of the country he remembered from childhood and to dispel some of the misconceptions that some of his countrymen had about it. Many of those misconceptions were about women who had not suffered repression before the Taliban seized power, contrary to popular Western belief. During 1960s and 70, the period called 'Golden years' by many, women actively contributed to Afghan society as teachers, doctors and professors and their rights had been confirmed in a new constitution in the mid 1970s. This is the role of women that Hosseini has chosen to explore in his second novel 'A Thousand Splendid Suns'. He has described writing the novel as "an even more satisfying experience for me than the writing of 'The Kite Runner', because it was more complex and ultimately unexpected journey".

'A Thousand Splendid Suns' by Khaled Hosseini is a heartbreaking story of two women, Mariam and Laila. It is both the tale of two women, and a tale of two cities - Herat and Kabul. A story set against the terrifying background of Afghanistan is a powerful portrait of female suffering and endurance. It attempts to show the fallout that Afghanistan's violent history has had on a handful of individuals, ending in death at the hands of the Taliban for one character, and the promise of a new life for another.

The story opens with a five years old Mariam. She lives with her unmarried, spiteful and stubborn mother, Nana on the outskirts of Herat. At the age of five she hears the word 'harami' for the first time and her entire life revolves round this word. It fills her life with innumerable sufferings. Poor Mariam is bullied by her epileptic mother. The only thing that makes her happy for a while is her father Jalil's weekly visits. Jalil is charming and successful businessman who runs Herat's cinema. She desperately wants to join his real family. On her fifteenth birthday she requests her father to take her to his cinema. She wants to see it with Jalil's children. Unwillingly he promises to take her on the next day but doesn't turn up. She herself starts for Herat to meet her father who refuses to take her in. Her mother cannot bear her departure and commits suicide. After her mother's death her unfeeling father marries her off to forty year's old Rasheed, an acquaintance from Kabul. Rasheed is, a brute of a man who says it embarrasses him "to see a man who's lost control of his wife."

He forces Mariam to wear a burqa and treats her with ill-disguised contempt, subjecting her to scorn, ridicule and insults. Talking about Fariba, his neighbor's wife he says, "I see his wife Fariba all the time walking the streets alone with nothing on her head but a scarf. It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife." And he describes himself to Mariam as, "But I'm a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's, business only. I want you to remember that." She feels a tentative hopefulness that she may be able to win some affection from her husband, especially when she becomes pregnant. Unfortunately her baby cannot survive. Once she has suffered a series of miscarriages, Mariam's marriage becomes a prison. Her husband's hopes to father a son are shattered and he became even more torturous: "There was always something, some minor thing that would infuriate him, because no matter what she did to please him, no matter how thoroughly she submitted to his wants and demands, it wasn't enough. She could not give him his son back. In the most essential

way, she had failed him-seven times she had failed him-and now she was nothing but a burden to him."p.98 Here Hosseini vividly presents what life is like for women in a society in which they are valued only for reproduction, that too reproduction of a male child.

In part two the story shifts from Mariam's life to that of a neighbour, the young Laila, who is growing up in a liberal family with a father who believes in her education. Laila's father, Hakim is an educated man who supports women empowerment through education. He says to Laila, 'Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're very, very bright girl. Truly you are. You can be anything you want, Laila. I also know that this war is over, Afganistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more."p 114 Laila even has a respectful and intelligent boyfriend, Tariq, who goes with her to the cinema and on a trip to see the Buddhas of Bamiyan. After the Soviets' defeat her secured childhood comes to an end. Once the Soviets are ousted, the Mujahideen turn from idealised freedom fighters to oppressors. Laila's life is literally shattered when a rocket, after the Soviet Union's departure lands on her house and kills her parents. Laila is badly injured. Rasheed takes her in, narrates her false story of Tariq's death and creates a situation in which she is forced to become his second wife. Laila pregnant with Tariq's child agrees to marry Rasheed as she is convinced that she and her baby will never survive alone on the streets of Kabul.

Mariam initially is threatened by Laila's presence and is not ready to accept her. However, after Laila gives birth to a daughter, Aziza, Mariam's attitude towards her softens. Rasheed is disappointed by the bith of a girl. He feels disgusted by the smells and sounds that fill the house. Rasheed soon neglects the baby and implies that he knows the baby is not his. In the face of the horrific abuse from their shared husband, a bond of friendship begins to grow between Laila and Mariam.

Laila plans to run away from Rasheed soon after Aziza is born. She invites Mariam to run away with them. Unfortunately their plan fails. They are taken to a police station and are returned home. Rasheed, mad with anger threatens to kill them if they attempt to run away again.

A few years later, Laila gives birth to a son, Zalmai. Rasheed is on the seventh heaven to have a son. He is so proud being a father of a boy that he tolerates all his tantrums with patience. Rasheed's shop burns down, and the family goes further into debt. Rasheed gets a job in a hotel but is soon fired due to his rude behavior. The family comes close to starvation. Laila is forced to put Aziza into an orphanage so that she can be fed.

Then, one afternoon, Laila is pleasantly shocked to see Tariq standing at her door. She realizes that it was Rasheed's plan to give her the news of Tariq's death so that she should marry him. Tariq and Laila spend the afternoon together while Rasheed is at work.. When Rasheed comes to know about Tariq's visit, he beats Laila and tries to suffocate her. Mariam comes to her rescue and kills Rasheed with a shovel. After Rasheed's death, Laila is determined to leave Kabul. She asks Mariam to come with her and Tariq to Pakistan. But Mariam refuses her request as she knows that the Talibans would know about the murder sooner or later. She says, "For me, it ends here. There's nothing more I want. Everything I'd ever wished for as a little girl you've already given me. You and your children have made me so very happy. It's all right, Laila jo. This is all right. Don't be sad'. P.350 She sacrifices her life for the future of Laila and her children. The next day, Mariam turns herself over to the Taliban in an effort to clear the way for Laila to find sanctuary for herself and her children in Pakistan with Tariq.

Mariam eventually is caught and put into a prison run by the Taliban.. While in prison Mariam listened to the stories of her fellow prisoners and remembers what her mother had told her about women's lot: ' Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman.

Always. You remember that, Mariam.' P 354 She tries to explain that she was defending herself when she killed Rasheed, but the judge sentences Mariam to death.

Laila and Tariq marry and start a new life in Pakistan. After the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 and the collapse of the Taliban, Laila hears that conditions in Kabul are improving. Laila insists that her family move back home so they can help rebuild their city. Laila, Tariq, Aziza, and Zalmai move into a townhouse in Kabul. Laila teaches at the orphanage. Tariq works for an NGO. Lalila never forgets Mariam. And when she becomes pregnant, she decides that if she has a girl, she'll name her Mariam.

Both Mariam and Laila suffer unimaginable hardships at the hands of their husband and the Taliban rule. They are forced into accepting a marriage to Rasheed, who requires them to wear a burqa before it is implemented by law under The Taliban. The sufferings that these two women undergo cannot even be imagined by the people living in democratic countries. Looking at the story from the feministic perspective it can be said that they are not at all respected. Rather they are not even treated as human beings. Their condition is not better than dumb slaves. The gender apartheid that has been forced on Afgan women has been one of the great unresolved injustices of the modern world.

A Riverhead Trades Weekly review states that the novel consistently shows the "patriarchal despotism where women are agonizingly dependent on fathers, husbands and especially sons, the bearing of male children being their sole path to social status."

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