



Reframing Resilience: Gendered Agency and Narrative Ethics in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Dr. Sanjay

Associate Professor, Department of English, Pt. NRS Government College, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

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Abstract— Actually, Khaled Hosseini's 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' (2007) has frequently been read as a narrative of female suffering within war-torn Afghanistan. While such interpretations foreground the novel's depiction of systemic oppression, they often understate the complexity of agency embedded in its narrative structure. This paper argues that Hosseini reconfigures female agency as a gradual, relational, and ethically grounded process rather than an overt act of resistance. Through a close reading of Mariam and Laila's evolving relationship, the study demonstrates how domestic space becomes a contested site where power is both enforced and subverted. Drawing on postcolonial feminist thought, the analysis highlights how resilience operates not as passive endurance but as a form of narrative and moral agency. Ultimately, the novel challenges reductive representations of Afghan women by presenting resistance as embedded within care, sacrifice, and interdependence.



Keywords— Afghan fiction, feminist literary criticism, postcolonial studies, narrative ethics, gendered agency.

I. INTRODUCTION

A number of scholars agree with the fact that critical responses to 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' have largely emphasized its portrayal of violence, patriarchy, and the suffering of Afghan women. Such readings, while important, risk flattening the novel into a singular narrative of victimhood. As Al-Dagameh and Golubeva (2017) note, Hosseini's work operates within a complex interplay of representation and reception, often shaped by global expectations of Afghan narratives.

This essay proposes a different emphasis: rather than asking how the novel depicts oppression, it asks how it constructs agency within constraint. In doing so, it shifts attention from what happens to the characters to how they respond, adapt, and ultimately redefine their circumstances.

The central argument advanced here is that Hosseini reimagines agency not as immediate resistance but as a process that unfolds through relationships, moral decisions, and acts of care. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of both character development and thematic structure.

II. GENDERED SPACES AND THE POLITICS OF THE DOMESTIC

One of the novel's most striking features is its treatment of domestic space. Rasheed's household functions as a microcosm of patriarchal authority, where control is maintained through routine practices rather than constant overt violence.

Mariam's early acceptance of her role reflects the internalization of social norms. Her belief that "a woman's lot is to endure" (Hosseini, 2007) is not simply imposed but absorbed, illustrating how power operates through ideology as much as force. Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of "patriarchal bargaining" is particularly relevant here, as it explains the strategic compliance that characterizes Mariam's initial behavior.

However, the domestic space is not static. With Laila's arrival, it becomes a site of negotiation and, eventually, resistance. The shift from isolation to shared experience marks a turning point in the narrative.

III. FROM ISOLATION TO SOLIDARITY: REWRITING FEMALE RELATIONS

At the outset, Mariam and Laila are positioned as rivals, reflecting a patriarchal logic that pits women against one another. Yet this dynamic gradually dissolves, giving way to a relationship defined by mutual dependence.

This transformation is central to the novel's reconfiguration of agency. As hooks (2000) argues, solidarity among women is a necessary condition for resisting systemic domination. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, this solidarity is not immediate but develops through shared suffering and recognition.

Their eventual alliance disrupts the power structure of the household. The act of defiance that follows is significant not only for its outcome but for the process leading up to it—a process rooted in trust, empathy, and collective strength.

IV. WAR, TRAUMA, AND THE LIMITS OF AUTONOMY

The broader context of war intensifies the characters' lack of control over their lives. Laila's sudden displacement following the destruction of her family home underscores how quickly autonomy can be erased.

As Tickner (2001) observes, conflict often exacerbates gender inequalities, placing women in increasingly vulnerable positions. Hosseini reflects this reality by showing how external violence reinforces internal oppression.

Yet, the novel resists portraying its characters as entirely powerless. Instead, it suggests that agency persists even in constrained circumstances, though it may take less visible forms.

V. MOTHERHOOD AND ETHICAL AGENCY

Motherhood in the novel operates as a key site of transformation. Mariam's inability to bear children initially defines her marginalization, aligning her value with reproductive capacity.

However, her later actions complicate this framework. Her care for Laila's children—and her final decision—recast motherhood as an ethical stance rather than a biological condition. In this sense, motherhood becomes a means of asserting agency rather than a marker of limitation.

Laila's experience complements this perspective. Her maternal role motivates her decisions and shapes her vision of the future, suggesting that care can function as both responsibility and resistance.

VI. NARRATIVE ETHICS AND THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATION

Hosseini's narrative raises important questions about representation, particularly in relation to global audiences. Critics such as Whitlock (2007) have noted the potential for such texts to reinforce certain stereotypes, even as they seek to challenge them.

However, the novel's emphasis on relational agency complicates this critique. By foregrounding the characters' inner lives and moral choices, Hosseini moves beyond reductive portrayals, offering a more layered depiction of Afghan women.

In this context, the novel can be read as engaging in what might be termed narrative ethics—an exploration of how stories shape understanding and empathy.

VII. CONCLUSION

A Thousand Splendid Suns resists simplistic categorization as a narrative of suffering. Instead, it offers a complex portrayal of how agency can emerge within conditions of constraint.

By focusing on relationships, ethical choices, and gradual transformation, Hosseini redefines resilience as an active and evolving process. This perspective not only enriches our understanding of the novel but also contributes to broader discussions in feminist and postcolonial literary criticism.

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