

**POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND WOMEN'S OPPRESSION IN  
AFGHANISTAN IN KHALED HOSSIENI'S A THOUSAND SPLENDID  
SUNS**

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**Abstract**

*The aim of this research paper is to highlight the sufferings of the nation - Afghanistan. The struggles the nation and its people had to go through - to gain control over their own territory, to establish democracy in the novel. The country has seen rise and fall off many invaders, foreign powers – Macedonians, Sassanians, Arab, Mongols, Soviet and even US. Therefore, it is also known as the 'Graveyard of Empires'. If this wasn't enough, the country had many internal conflicts too. The Taliban, ISIS, various warlords and the Afghan government all fighting with each other. The condition of the woman in Afghanistan was pitiable under the strict 'Sharia' law during the Taliban regime. The woman couldn't even step out of their own house without a veil covering them and a man along them. Like this, several other restrictions were laid on them and their life is shown by both the main protagonists - Laila and Mariam, two women separated by a generation but united by an unbreakable bond of friendship. Both share a mother-daughter bond with each other despite being married to the same man – Rasheed. These two not only had to endure the appalling atrocities of the Taliban but were also the victims of the domestic abuse by their own husband yet they remained resilient and true to themselves.*

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**Keywords:** *Afghanistan, Taliban, Women, Patriarchy*

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## Introduction

### About the Author –

**Khaled Hosseini** born in Kabul, moved to the United States in 1980. Despite the fact that he moved to the US, he shares a deep connection and a sense of attachment with his homeland which one can assume as his most famous novels of all the times are set up, and revolve around Afghanistan only. He is also constantly working to improve the lives of Afghan refugees under the United Nation Programme. His first novel- The Kite Runner, published across the globe is an international bestseller. Hosseini decided to write about A Thousand Splendid Suns while putting the final edits of The Kite Runner. This time he wanted to write a story about a mother and daughter, representing the struggles of an Afghan women.

Afghanistan is a land locked country located in the heart of south-central Asia. The history of Afghanistan has been marked with political instability, wars and conflict. The novel covers the period of Afghanistan under the Soviet Union to America bombing the country to find Bin Laden. It follows two main protagonists- Laila and Mariam, their survival in a patriarchal society, difficult times during the Taliban regime and starvation. People in Afghanistan lived in a fear due to the unstable system and no democracy under the Taliban. There were constant bombing and firing, women were kidnapped and raped. There was a complete lawlessness, it was only after America intervened again, this time to get revenge rather than to supply the weapons, that the conditions begin to improve and terrorism began to shrink.

### THE SOCIAL ASPECT IN THE NOVEL

Though Afghanistan has always been a patriarchal society, but the condition of the women wasn't always as deteriorating as under the Taliban. In Kabul, the capital of the country, women used to practice medicine and law and held high government offices. They were allowed to wear makeup and heels. Under the Soviet Union, women were free to gain access to education and were encouraged to work and earn themselves. But when Taliban took over, basic and fundamental rights such as 'right to education' and even 'liberty' were snatched from them. Severe punishment was given for not only adultery, but also for laughing in public and painting nails too. Majority of the women struggled at their homes too, they were often subjected to

domestic abuse and gender based abused, were tortured and beaten. Overall life became unbearable for them.

## **THE LEGAL ASPECT IN THE NOVEL**

In the novel, we can see that the whole legal system crumbles under the Taliban. When Mariam's trial takes place, there were no means for her to defend herself, she was just supposed to surrender herself and take the punishment. The Supreme Court was filled with 'mullahs' who passed rulings based on Sharia Law. Basic and fundamental rights were violated over and over again. One didn't have freedom of religion. People not belonging to Islam, couldn't worship anywhere, where they could be seen by the Muslim community otherwise, they would be severely beaten or imprisoned. The Justice System was unjust, the punishments were rather harsh compared to the degree of crime committed. The women prison was filled with women who ran away from their homes rather than those who committed serious crime.

## **Research Methodology**

The methodology that has been undertaken herein in order to conduct this research will be Qualitative in nature, primarily, analytical and descriptive. The reference material that will be used in the research is going to be mainly secondary in nature; examination of reports, research papers, articles and the books related to the novel and the author of the novel. The objectives of the research are-

- To study the changing political scenario in Afghanistan and the impact it had on people.
- To analyse the condition of the women under the Taliban rule.
- The impact the invasions had on people and their lives before that.

## **Review of Literature**

- 1) *Courageous Women: A Study of Resilience of Women in Khaled Hosseini's Novel A Thousand Splendid Suns* (Muhammad Imran, 2017)

This research paper focuses on the female characters introduced in the book who had to face prejudice and atrocities and through their struggles, we get a view of the patriarchal society of Afghanistan. The researcher through these female characters and their stories, wanted to convey

a message that women are just as strong as men and are very much capable of revolting back and raise their voices against any kind of oppression.

2) *A Thousand Splendid Suns: Sanctuary and Resistance* (Stuhr, 2013)

The researcher through this research paper compares the Nation Afghanistan to its women. Explains how they are similar in a way that both are exploited again and again by the invaders and people of its own. Like the nation had to face both foreign and internal conflicts, women too were subjected to abuse by outside and societal forces and how they resisted the abuse.

3) *Reasons behind Spousal Aggression in A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini* (Khanal, Reasons behind Spousal Aggression in A Thousand Splendid, 2017)

The researcher through this study tries to find the reasons behind the Spousal Aggression, reasons behind the anger of the antagonist- Rasheed who vents out his frustration on both the protagonists and his wives Mariam and Laila. The reasons concluded for his aggression is thought to be his loss of son in past, second one is poverty he has to face as he lost his job and couldn't provide the family with food and other resources. Third one is his patriarchal views towards the society which provides space to aggress against women as a wife. The researcher here has applied various theories and psychological approach for this study.

4) *The role of women in A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini* (Nongmaithem, 2017)

Obvious from the title of the research paper, the paper focuses on the role of the women, all the female characters introduced in the novel and their role in shaping the story, as daughters and wives and how it affects them, how they affect each other lives. The researcher has put emphasis on the importance of sisterhood and believes that women can achieve everything, if they come together.

5) *A thousand Splendid Suns: Reimagined through a legal Lens* (Shreya Kapoor, 2020)

The research paper here put emphasis on women and their treatment under the Sharia law. It explores various concepts like marriage, polygamy, contractual marriage under a violent regime, domestic violence, law, morality etc. The researchers here also try to analyse these various themes in the research paper.

6) *The Empire Stopper* (Nordland, 2017)

This article from the New York Times gives us information of those foreign nations which tried to took Afghanistan under control. From British to America to its own people- warlords and gangs, together they've made Afghanistan a "Graveyards of Empires" as the country gives a

geographical advantage making trade easy but despite their numerous efforts and attempts, they've never been fully able to regain control and have come to regret their decision to invade the nation.

7) *A crucial moment for women's rights in Afghanistan* (Barr, 2020)

After US-Taliban deal to make way for peace and after the US decided to withdraw troops, this brings both a ray of hope and fear for Women. This article shares the concerns related to this decision and how it might impact women. Afghanistan which has seemingly progressed for women compared to the past, there still might be some agitation related to US's decision as Taliban has always been misogynist and don't believe in giving women equal rights. They continue to threaten and carry out attack on schools, colleges etc. to stop women/girls to get access to education. Therefore, negotiations are important, it's important to back women up and let them take part in negotiations too to express themselves.

8) *Afghan women under Taliban repression published* (Afghan women under Taliban repression published, 1998)

This report published by International Federation for Human Rights gives us glimpses of all the atrocities that happened under the Taliban regime, all the strict regulations that the women needed to follow and all their fundamental rights violated. Beside this, it also throws light on those individual attempts which have helped women to get freedom and the access to education.

9) *Women in Afghanistan: the back story* (Women in Afghanistan: the back story, 2014)

The political turmoil in Afghanistan severely impacted the women. This article shows how condition of women started to worsen in the last 50 years throughout the changing political landscape. It talks about the condition of women before 1979 which was good especially in the capital and how unbearable it became under the Taliban in the 1990's.

10) *Afghan War* (Britannica, 2010)

The Afghan War (1978-1992) is a war between the anti-communist Islamic guerrillas and communist Afghan government aided by USSR troops due to their internal conflicts. This article tells how fatal this war was, even though Afghanistan never did a census, it is estimated that 1.5 million Afghans lost their lives, were killed before 1992 and how this led to formation of the Taliban group and other terrorist groups to like the Al-Qaeda group.

## Analysis

Afghanistan has a turmoil past- a history of abuse and exploitation. First when USSR invaded Afghanistan, men were sent to fight for jihad (holy war) as they felt their culture and country is in danger. To free the country from communist rule, US helped a lot by supplying weapons to groups fighting against the communist regime. Such powerful weapons which can take down an entire helicopter from distance. It was not only the Afghan men who were fighting but they were also joined by Muslims all around the world especially from Pakistan and by Afghan-Arabs (Bin Laden being one). The Soviet at last had to surrender and leave, because of their crumbling economy and disintegration, USSR couldn't handle more losses. However, after them, the government formed was of communist regime only but it was short lived and was overthrown by the opposition. There was political disturbance yet against as those who were once the heroes for the countries who fought against USSR, soon became the warlords. Bombing and killing became a frequent site in Afghanistan. This led to many Afghans taking refuge in countries like Iran and Pakistan. This all stopped when Taliban took control in Kabul and then slowly on the entire nation.

Taliban, a group of Islam extremists made life a living hell especially for women. The punishments for breaking rules were harsh and varied from beating, cutting of limbs to being stoned to death (depends upon the severity of the crime). However, even the Taliban was driven away from power when 9/11 attacks in America took place and Taliban too played a part in it, which led to US intervention in Afghanistan. It was not until 2004 when a country saw a sense of political control as a republic government came in power in 2004.

Women were the worse sufferers of all in this political chaos. In 1970's women did have freedom to wear clothes of their will instead of being forced to wear burqa. They used to wear heels and makeup and as the protagonist Laila recalls, women do held positions at higher governments offices and universities and were well educated. Though this was mainly in Kabul only which is the capital of Afghanistan. It was observed that in certain parts of the country, especially rural, the conditions of the women were same like it was under the Taliban regime. Under the USSR, women were pretty much free to educate themselves and to work too. Why Taliban rule made it difficult to survive for women was because of the patriarchal setup. It wasn't only the strict rules but the fact that their freedom was snatched. Most women were



victim of domestic abuse which means beside not allowed to go outside without a veil and a man alongside, they were trapped inside too. Education which is referred to as the strongest tool against oppression, was denied to them too and even painting and reading a book was forbidden for all. Art which gives oneself a sense of liberation, was forbidden, strictly banned. Though conditions for women do begin to improve after Taliban but still even now there are some areas in Afghanistan controlled by Taliban and women are denied access to their rights. However, individual incentives and equal uproar against the oppression has been proven powerful as it is observed that some Taliban commanders has permitted girls to attend schools in response to community pressure.

### Conclusion

Afghanistan still has a lot of progress to make when it comes to women rights. Though some commanders have given permission to girls to attend schools, Taliban still continue to attack those educational institutes which provide education to girls and those who raise their voices against this oppression. In 2011, Afghanistan was voted as the worst country to live in as a woman. Women being denied their basic rights needs attention of international media and organisation. There is also a need for peace among the communities especially the Tajiks and the Pashtuns community. Communal disharmony was also the reason why Afghanistan couldn't really establish a stable rule for a long time. Together the Afghan government and internationals partners can solve the problem of insurgency and participation of women can also bring a change especially in changing the narrow-minded society and ensuring women have equal rights and they get to represent the country in all spheres.

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