

## **Women as Nation in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate Khaled Hosseini's use of the analogy of women as nation in his novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Afghanistan has witnessed political interference from 1970 to 2001 – a ruler overthrown, coup d'état, soviet invasion, civil war, the Taliban and an invasion by America and NATO forces. Under such tumultuous circumstances, Afghanistan has been striving to form an identity of its own. The predicament of Afghan people finds voice in their literature. Hosseini, through his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, tries to provide the physical and mental geography of his nation. The endurance of Afghanistan and its women can be traced out in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Hosseini interrogates the patriarchal hierarchies that encompass the identity of women. The endurance of women and the endurance of Afghanistan amid hostile and oppressive circumstances become equally imperative for Hosseini. Hosseini correlates the suffering of woman to the suffering of the nation. He employs the apparent symbol of woman as nation and links the two in a reciprocally describing metaphor which problematizes the relationship.

**Keywords:** Khaled Hosseini, nation, nationalism, Afghanistan, women

### **Introduction: Nation and Nationalism**

A nation can be conceived as having political implications suggesting a sovereign and defined territory that ties up the heterogeneous people having a common identity. R C Young defines nation as “a larger corporation to which its citizens necessarily belong without choice, the nation becomes an empty space in which all forms of potential identification can be filled: race, religion, language, culture, history, the land ...” (2003: 60). For Benedict Anderson, nation is “an imagined political community” (2006: 6) and imagination unites the fellow-members of a nation without meeting or hearing about each other and regardless of inequality and exploitation through “a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 2006: 6). This sense of comradeship accomplishes the idea of nation and encourages the natives to struggle for nation and hence instills the spirit of nationalism into them. “A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future” (Anderson 2006: 19). Nationalism, thus, expresses faithfulness and devotion to the culture that unites the members of a nation together.

The dominant discourse on the concept of nationalism has been discussed and represented as in relation to men and women's representation and participation in, advocacy of and conceptualization as nationalism has been largely undermined and ignored. It is irrespective of

the fact that nationalist involvements have shaped and posited women as the citadel of culture and tradition of the nation: “The ideal of the nation is often imaged as a woman, and the ideology of nationalism often invests the nation’s core identity upon an idealized, patriarchal image of ideal womanhood” (Young 2003: 63-64). The symbolic portrayal of women as nation has unquestionably been productive as both women and nation perform a procreative function and along this, women are regarded as the guardians of traditions and culture of a nation and epitomize nation itself. The sense of nationalism heightens in times of conflict with other nations to achieve national sovereignty. More than often colonizing processes involve colonization of women’s bodies. When a nation faces conflict, the marker of nation’s ideal- its women are targeted. As Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias write in *Women-Nation-State*, “Women do not only teach and transfer the cultural and ideological traditions of ethnic and national groups. Very often they constitute their actual symbolic configuration. The nation as a loved woman in danger or as a mother who lost her sons in battle is a frequent part of the particular nationalist discourse in nationalist liberation struggles or other forms of nationalist conflicts...” (Yuval-Davis 1989: 9-10). Women, thus, become the signifiers for the nation and men become the protectors who protect women and nation from outside invasion.

Perhaps the history of no other nation has affected women as the history of Afghanistan. The upheavals in it are the upheavals of its women. Afghanistan, a “landlocked country” (Dupree 1977), has a long history of invasions and has seen the arrival of Darius of Persia, Alexander, Huns, Kushans, Turks, Arabs, Persians, Mongols, the Soviets and most recently the coalition of US and NATO forces. Rosemarie Skaine notes that “the great Game” was played between the then superpowers – Britain and Russia from 1826 to 1919 and both endeavored to have power over Afghanistan to acquire authority over northern route to India (Skaine 2002). Besides, Afghanistan has witnessed political interference from 1970 to 2001 – a ruler overthrown, coup d’etat, civil war and the rule of the Taliban.

Modern Afghanistan was born during the reign of Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901), who tried to create a centralized state (Rostami-Povey 2007) and institutionalized many reforms to uplift the conditions of women like rising the age of marriage, women’s share in inheritance, opening of schools and giving women right to divorce under special circumstances. But his efforts were thwarted by rural and traditional Afghan people. His son Amanullah succeeded him after his death. Afghanistan got independence on 19 August 1919 under Amanullah, who instituted rapid and sweeping reforms in the conditions of women including monogamy, advocating the unveiling, invalidating concubines, compulsory education for girls, increasing minimum age of marriage and limiting bride price. However, his modernizing efforts enraged mullahs and tribesmen and he was overthrown by Habibullah Ghazi in 1929. Habibullah was succeeded by Nadir Shah after a brief period of nine months. Nadir Shah cautiously made efforts to bring reforms to avoid clash with mullahs. He was assassinated in 1933 and his 19 years old son, Zahir Shah ascended the throne.

Zahir Shah (1933-1973) and his Prime minister, Daoud Khan (1953-63) made great efforts to modernize the nation and centralize the government. Afghanistan witnessed a golden period during his regime. He promoted women’s right to education and voluntary unveiling. During his reign, women were given prominent role in society and in different job sectors such as medical, education, industry, radio, media, airlines, etc. However his efforts had little effect in rural areas

and he was despised by mullahs for his cultural reforms and for conferring less importance to *sharia* law. He was overthrown by Daoud Khan in a bloodless coup with the help of People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Under Daoud Khan's regime, women held jobs as teachers, scientists and civil servants but greater part of women were excluded from these opportunities (Rostami-Povey 2007). Daoud was assassinated in a coup in 1978 and Noor Muhammad Taraki became the President and Prime Minister of Afghanistan. The PDPA attempted a number of reforms ranging from land reform to reform of family law as well as the provision of healthcare and education of women (Rostami-Povey 2007). The PDPA banned burqa and raised minimum age of marriage. These social reforms angered tribal leaders and an armed revolt began in rural Afghanistan and the Afghan government signed a treaty for the deployment of Soviet army in Afghanistan. President Taraki was killed in 1979 and Hafizullah Amin succeeded him.

The Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and executed Amin and replaced Babrak Karmal. During the Communist regime, women got access to education and employment and got important positions in government offices, army and police departments. But majority of women remained estranged from these facilities. Several women protested against the foreign occupation of the country. The Soviet soldiers molested rural Afghan women, and this aggravated the flames of resistance against the Soviets. The Soviets failed to subjugate the Afghan people during their nine years of occupation and decided to withdraw its troops in 1989 (Emadi 2002). After the fall of the Soviets, the Soviet backed Mohammed Najibullah led the country and was overthrown by the Mujahideens in 1992.

Under the Mujahideens, the rights of women were curtailed, and they were ordered to wear burqa in public places. The constitution was abolished. The country witnessed civil war as different ethnic groups fought for power. Women resisted the regressive policies of the Mujahideen. The Taliban came into power in 1996 and imposed their harsh interpretation of *Sharia* law in the country. Education, health services, access to work and movement were denied to women in Afghanistan. Wearing burqa was made mandatory for women. They were abducted, raped, married forcefully and stoned to death. They had to endure dislocation (Skaine 2002). However, women participated actively in political ring during the Taliban reign. They protested against the Taliban through rallies and demonstrations and ran secret schools to educate the women and children despite having life threat on being caught.

After 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, the US forces, with the help of Northern Alliance, overthrew the Taliban and installed Hamid Karzai as its President. The US installed International Security Assistance Force (INSAF) to maintain peace and order in Afghanistan and started rebuilding process in Afghanistan. Presently, the Afghan assembly incorporates women members. Women have access to education and work again. They are no longer forced to wear burqa again. However, only a few can go to school and to work owing to the fear of warlords and tribal leaders who are in the position of power in Afghan government. This socio political overview clearly indicates the history of a nation where men controlled and hence represented the sociopolitical ideologies of the nation.

“Afghanistan is a mosaic of various ethnic and linguistic communities. Despite their cultural and linguistic differences, their attitude towards women, to a large extent, is similar. The

perception of women's role in society is largely determined by a combination of tribal cultural mores and religious percepts as understood by men" (Emadi 2002: 29). However, women have participated in social movements and have fought for their rights in various periods which disclose their power of resistance and their capability to endure war. The most outstanding feature of women's life in Afghanistan is that their position has changed along with the change in political environment. The history of Afghanistan is engraved in the life and experiences of its women. Their fate is intertwined with and determined by internal tensions and international forces. Afghanistan like its women is struggling to free itself from the remnants of three decades of war and oppression and to create an identity of its own. The predicament of Afghanistan and its women finds voice in their literature. Khaled Hosseini's second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* can be accessed as a meaningful case study.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini weaves the story of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, with the historical events from the reign of King Zahir Shah to the US invasion in 2001 covering almost 44 years of Afghan history. These historical events play a significant role in the development of the narrative as their story moves analogous to the story of Afghanistan. The story is told from the perspectives of two women representing traditional and modern women of Afghanistan and these perspectives merge within that of the author. Hosseini, through his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, tries to provide the physical and mental geography of his nation. The endurance of Afghanistan and its women is poignantly represented in this novel. Hosseini interrogates the patriarchal hierarchies that encompass/ eclipse the identity of women. Women emerge as a key signifier of the nation's odyssey as Hosseini compares the suffering of woman to the suffering of the nation. Articulating the life and struggles of women reflects the articulation of the life and struggle of the nation. Respectively, unfolding each other, each becomes the other, constantly making it a challenge to dissociate the two. He employs the apparent symbol of woman as nation and links the two in a reciprocally describing metaphor which problematizes the relationship.

As the historical review of Afghanistan reveals that liberal as well conservative men acted and re-acted in its history, the male characters in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* too form two polarities as ruling ideologies. Before analyzing the analogy of woman and nation, it is imperative to see how the writer has cartographed the ruling sociopolitical ideologies. Besides presenting strictly conservative male characters, Hosseini has introduced liberal ones too. Through Hakim, Laila's father, Hosseini portrays Afghanistan's rich historical and cultural heritage and liberalist phase. He is a liberal man who vocalized the liberal views of broadminded and reformist Afghan men during the Soviet era. He is concerned with the future of nation as well as the education of its women. He tells Laila, "*Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very, very bright girl. Truly, you are. You can be anything you want, Laila. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance*" (ATSS 114). This is juxtaposed with the gloomy phase of the Afghan history that prevailed during the regime of the Mujahideens and the Taliban. Hosseini portrays fundamental patriarchal elements of Afghan society through Rasheed. Through physical and mental oppression in the name of protecting his "*nang and namoos*" (ATSS 69), Rasheed asserts dominance over his wives. Rasheed imposes burqa on his wives in order to show possession and domination. Jalil, the father

of illegally born Mariam, is the one who is neither a liberal nor a fundamentalist; torn between liberalism and conservatism he gives birth to and nurtures a harami. He loves Mariam but lacks courage to accept her due to his status consciousness. Jalil, who represents Afghan men during the period of King Zahir Shah, does not have the courage to break the social and cultural norms of the class conscious society like Afghanistan.

While men as subjects represent the sociopolitical forces and ideologies, both nation and women are objectified. They are represented as the struggling. Women's struggle reflects the undaunted soul and spirit of the nation. Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* deals explicitly with the issues of women in Afghanistan expressed through the struggles of Mariam and Laila showing through them not only how their lives change with the changing political scenario but also how the nation writhes under the oppressive forces but never loses hope to emerge as a subjective identity. Freedom, identity and subjectivity both of the nation and the women in it become the points of axis on which he conceives the story and materializes his narrative. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini has described the events from the era of political stability to the upheaval of 2003. During the reign of Zahir Shah and Daoud Khan, the condition of Afghanistan and its women was much better, especially in urban areas. There are scenes where women are depicted without burqa.

On her return journey from the Shar-e-Nau Park, Mariam's sees "modern Afghan women...walked among strangers with makeup on their faces and nothing on their heads...swinging handbags and rustling skirts... They walked in high heels...wore sunglasses...they all had university degrees, that they worked in office buildings ..." (ATSS 74). The writer's equation of women under different periods of rule is represented through male characters. The symbolic representation of the rebirth of the nation becomes complex as Mariam's miscarriages. Mariam's peace is disturbed by her repeated miscarriages. Rasheed becomes more and more aggressive with each successive miscarriage and tortures Mariam physically as well as psychologically. Inversely miscarriage or failure to bear a child is suggestive of the resistance of woman's body to carry the seed of the patriarchy to fruition. Rasheed, who represents the oppressive forces of Taliban, is, thus, presented as facing resistances from within the nation. His failure to father a child is further reinforced as the story unfolds the truth about Laila's daughter biologically belonging to Laila's lover, Tariq and is suggestive of Nature stigmatizing the patriarchal forces.

Afghanistan's peace was disturbed by the Soviet invasion. Although women got equal job opportunities and were appointed as teachers, scientists, doctors and civil servants, yet only a handful of women got these opportunities and majority of women remained excluded. The reforms under the communist regime were limited to urban areas only and the rural population remained isolated from reforms. The analogy becomes fore grounded as *A Thousand Splendid Suns* presents Laila as being born on the same day when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. She gets the opportunity to study in a school as she is born to liberal parents. The problematic persists as Laila's mother represents those ladies who resist the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and support the Mujahideens. However, Laila's father praises the communists for the reforms in the field of education. "Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they're probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before, it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that, Laila" (ATSS 133). The

aggression and invasion affects men too. The limping of the boy represents the amputation of the liberal males under colonial rule. There are references to disaster brought by the Soviets in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The loss of sons makes Laila's mother prefer domestic colonization to the external one. Laila's friend Tariq is a victim of land mine campaign of the Soviets. "...the Soviets also liked to hide explosives inside brightly colored toys. If a child picked it up, the toy exploded, tore off fingers or an entire hand" (ATSS 121). Laila's life is also affected by the Soviet occupation. As her brothers, Noor and Ahmad join the Mujahideen in their *jihad* against the Soviets; her mother remains preoccupied with the thoughts of them and completely ignores Laila's existence. The writer thus does not advocate substitution of one hegemony for the other. The story, therefore, is taken to its logical ending with the affected parties colluding to assert their subjectivities, to fight for themselves in an effort to redefine their nation. The story is thus a movement from the atmosphere of ambivalence to the gloomy phase of Taliban regime and the fall of the Taliban.

The darkest chapter of history of Afghanistan and its women started under the Mujahideen who "began a series of programs intended to Islamicize an already Muslim society. Their policies adversely affected women's lives and liberties" (Emadi 2002: 124). Various Mujahideen faction fought against each other for power and the nation descended into civil war. The women were the worst victims of civil war as they were abducted and raped. "The shelling knocked down powerlines, pulverized entire blocks of shops and homes... Every day, bodies were found tied to trees, sometimes burned beyond recognition. Often, they'd been shot in the head, had had their eyes gouged out, their tongues cut out" (ATSS 173). The living conditions in Afghanistan are presented as getting worse and the nation witnesses the displacement/ migration of its people. Laila's childhood friend and now his beloved, Tariq leaves Afghanistan with his family to find a sanctuary in Pakistan owing to the deteriorating living conditions. Laila refuses Tariq's requests to accompany them as she doesn't want to leave her parents alone. But in an emotionally charged moment, they make love. Laila's parents are killed by a stray rocket while they are planning to leave the country. Laila has to marry Rasheed, the man who rescued her as she is aware of her pregnancy. As under the Mujahideen, the living conditions in Afghanistan deteriorate, so does the condition of Mariam and Laila under the fundamentalist patriarch, Rasheed. "Rasheed's demands and judgments rained down on them like the rockets on Kabul" (ATSS 218). She tries to run away along with Mariam and Aziza but her venture fails and Rasheed becomes more violent.

The situation of Afghanistan and its women worsened with the advent of the Taliban who imposed their version of strict *Shari'a* law on Afghan people, particularly on women. Hosseini recreates this historical phase in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*:

*Attention women:*

*You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative.*

*If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home.*

*You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you don't, you will be severely beaten.*

*... Girls are forbidden from attending schools. All schools of girls will be closed immediately.*

*Women are forbidden from working.  
If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death.  
Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar (ATSS 270-271)*

Women were denied health services and they were allowed to be treated only by female doctors who were ordered by the Taliban to wear burqa while treating their patients, however, the doctors sought a way out. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the doctor treating Laila removes her burqa while operating Laila and appoints a nurse to keep watch to avoid being caught by the Taliban. The writer understands the problematic of the sign and shows how the women used this oppression as their tool to survive atrocities. This veiling under the Taliban represents both the resistance and resilience of the Afghan women under adverse circumstances for the survival of the nation. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, burqa becomes a symbol of Taliban. As burqa was imposed on women, Taliban imposed itself on Afghanistan. Burqa, thus, signified oppression symptomatically hampering the growth of woman and nation. However, Afghan women used burqa to subvert the oppressing forces as they transported messages, weapons and banned publications hidden under their burqa during the Taliban regime (Whitlock, 2005).

The devastated nation is represented in the form of grave absence of health care facilities. Hospitals were in a poor condition as is evident when Laila is taken to hospital in labor pains and the doctor tells Mariam, “They won’t give me what I need. I have no X-ray either, no suction, no oxygen, not even simple antibiotics. When NGOs offer money, the Taliban turn them away. Or they funnel the money to the places that cater to men” (ATSS 283). The nightmare of undergoing surgery without anesthesia is the nadir. Laila has to undergo c-section delivery without anesthesia. The violence of the birth of the child represents the violence the mothers faced for the national freedom from the Soviets but only to be subjected to more violence at the hands of their men. The conditions exacerbate by three years of drought compelling Afghans to sell their belongings and leave the nation. Laila’s words reflect her hopelessness when she talks about Afghan people’s fascination for the movie *Titanic*, “Everybody wants Jack. That’s what it is. Everybody wants Jack to rescue them from disaster. But there is no Jack. Jack is not coming back. Jack is dead” (ATSS 296-97). Laila is forced to leave Aziza, her daughter in an orphanage on Rasheed’s insistence as she hopes that at least Aziza will get something to eat there, although the orphanage is also in a dilapidated condition. She visits Aziza alone to the orphanage as Rasheed refuses to accompany her despite Taliban’s restriction on women’s movement without a *mahram*. As she is caught frequently and receives harsh beating by Talibs, she devises a way out and starts wearing extra layer of clothes concealed by her burqa to minimize the effects of beating. The words of a Talib who beats Laila reflects the cruelty “I see you again, I’ll beat you until your mother’s milk leaks out of your bones” (ATSS 313). Laila’s beating by the Taliban official, her determination to meet Aziza and the strength to survive symbolizes the strength of the women in Afghanistan who suffered during the years of war and turmoil but would not deter to struggle for the survival of their child (nation). Her fate becomes one with the fate of Afghanistan, a suffering nation still standing and surviving. The thousand splendid suns of the title represent all those who did not let hope die even amidst the most hopeless conditions for the personal and national survival.

A ray of hope came in the lives of Afghan people when the Taliban was ousted by the coalition of the US and NATO forces after 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon

in the USA. They started rebuilding process in Afghanistan. With the beginning of reconstruction process, many displaced persons returned to Afghanistan to be a part of it. Being an Afghan diaspora in the US, Hosseini looks at this reconstruction period under American influence with mixed reactions. Although he seems worried over the loss of innocent lives due to night raids and air strikes, yet he sees the US presence as a stabilizing force and feels hopeful as he describes in his interview with *goodreads*, “I see a young nation, 55 percent or so of the country is under the age of 25; I see technology booming everywhere; I see the start of telecommunication, 12 million cell phone subscribers; I see young people engaged with the world through education, through technology; I see a relatively free press” (Interview with Hosseini, June, 2013). Hosseini mentions in *A Thousand splendid Suns* that Laila “hears of schools built in Kabul, roads repaved, women returning to work...she has started hearing Babi’s voice in her head. *You can be anything you want, Laila*, he says. *I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you*” (ATSS 378). Laila feels an urge to be a part in the process of reconstruction of her nation and decides to return to her country from her sanctuary in Pakistan where she is living a peaceful life with Tariq and her children. Laila’s spirit for women welfare intermingles with her spirit of nationalism, the concern for her distressed nation. Hosseini has given hints of the presence of the warlords in the position of power, regrouping of the Taliban and the slow pace of development. “...the warlords have been allowed back ...they have been appointed ministers of this and deputy minister of that, that they ride with impunity in shiny, bulletproof SUVs through neighborhoods that they demolished” (Hosseini 2013: 398). But his heroine, Laila decides that “she will not be crippled by resentment” (Hosseini 2013: 398) and chooses to move on with her mission of educating the children as it’s a long way to pave. Reconstruction of Laila’s life, her exile, and return parallels reconstruction of Afghanistan under America-lead forces. Laila represents all those women in Afghanistan who struggled for their nation and their struggle reveals their capability to fight against all odds, to survive and to encourage other women to contribute to nation’s progress.

To conclude, Hosseini’s women characters come out as quintessence of strength and hope who resist and endure, assume subjectivity and stand up to take charge of their lives despite distressing circumstances. As they do not collapse in the time of adversity and no one can subdue their spirit, so does the nation; Afghanistan faces political turmoil, aggression both from within and without but never loses its capacity for resistance and reconstruction. Education is the prop on which the axis of reconstruction both of personal and national life rests. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini, through the words of Babi to Laila, throws light on the importance of education of Afghan people, particularly its women: “Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance” (ATSS 114). Hosseini gives hints of schools running secretly during the Taliban reign. In the last section, Hosseini gives an optimistic message by presenting Afghanistan engaged in the renewing process, with its women going for education and work again. Laila, the representative of women in Afghanistan, is portrayed as engaged in the process of rebuilding the nation by educating the children in the orphanage. Her return and the hope it carries are both personal and national.

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